



RESOURCE 1.6: Definitions of sustainability

Numerous definitions of sustainability, sustainable development, and ecologically sustainable development, abound. All three expressions are often used interchangeably. However, perhaps the simplest way to differentiate the terms is to say that sustainability is the destination while sustainable development, or more specifically, *ecologically sustainable development*, is the path we need to take to get there.

One of the most commonly encountered definitions of sustainable development comes from the 1987 World Commission on Environment and Development Report *Our Common Future* (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987), also known as *The Brundtland Report* after Gro Harlem Brundtland, the Norwegian Prime Minister who chaired the Commission. This report defines sustainable development as:

"...development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs".



In Australia, the Commonwealth and State and Territory governments adopted a common definition of ecologically sustainable development (ESD) in the *National Strategy for Ecologically Sustainable Development* (1992). This defines ESD as:

"using, conserving and enhancing the community's resources so that ecological processes, on which life depends, are maintained and the total quality of life, now and in the future, can be increased".

Alan AtKisson, an international consultant on sustainability, says of sustainability:

"[i]n scientific terms, it means a system state that can endure indefinitely"

(2001, p. 8)

To illustrate this, he gives the example of a forest. A forest is able to survive by virtue of not losing trees any faster than they grow back, despite (and sometimes because of) fires and other natural disturbances, and is therefore sustainable.

AtKisson goes on to explain that in more popular terms, sustainability "...has come to mean long-term survival and well-being in general, both for human civilization and the rest of nature" (2001, pp. 8-9).

Numerous other definitions of sustainability are available at www.sustreport.org/background/definitions/html

But what does sustainability mean in practice?

It is acknowledged that one of the barriers to greater uptake of sustainable practices in business is a lack of a clear understanding of what is required (Mays, 2003). This may be the case to some extent, or it may simply reflect a lack of creative thought about the problems. More cynically, it could also be argued that it is easier to justify inaction by





claiming not to understand what is required if there is a strong desire to stick with a “business-as-usual” approach.

In attempting to explain the concepts of sustainability and sustainable development, the concept of the ‘triple-bottom line’ is often used. This means that sustainability cannot be achieved without giving due consideration to the social, environmental and economic dimensions. That is, there cannot be a focus on one or two of these areas to the detriment of another. For example, economic growth and social stability cannot be pursued without regard for protecting the environment, as eventually environmental degradation will adversely impact on the economy and cause social pressures.

To illustrate this idea further, variations of the diagram in Figure 10 are commonly used. The overlapping point in the centre embodies a state of sustainable practice where the economy, environment and society exist in harmony with each other.

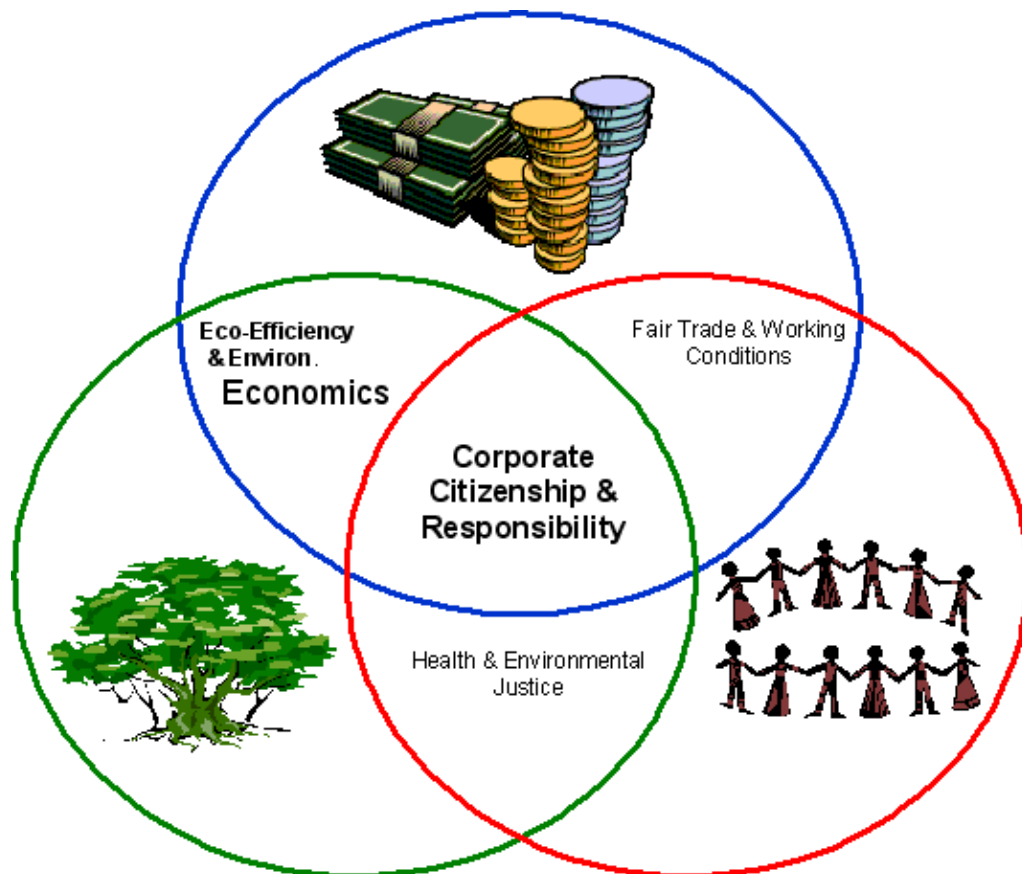


Figure 10: Sustainable Practice





However, this diagram is now criticised by some who claim that it is a nonsense to suggest that the economy or society can exist in isolation from the natural environment. It is proposed that a more realistic illustration of the underlying principles of sustainability is as shown in Figure 11:

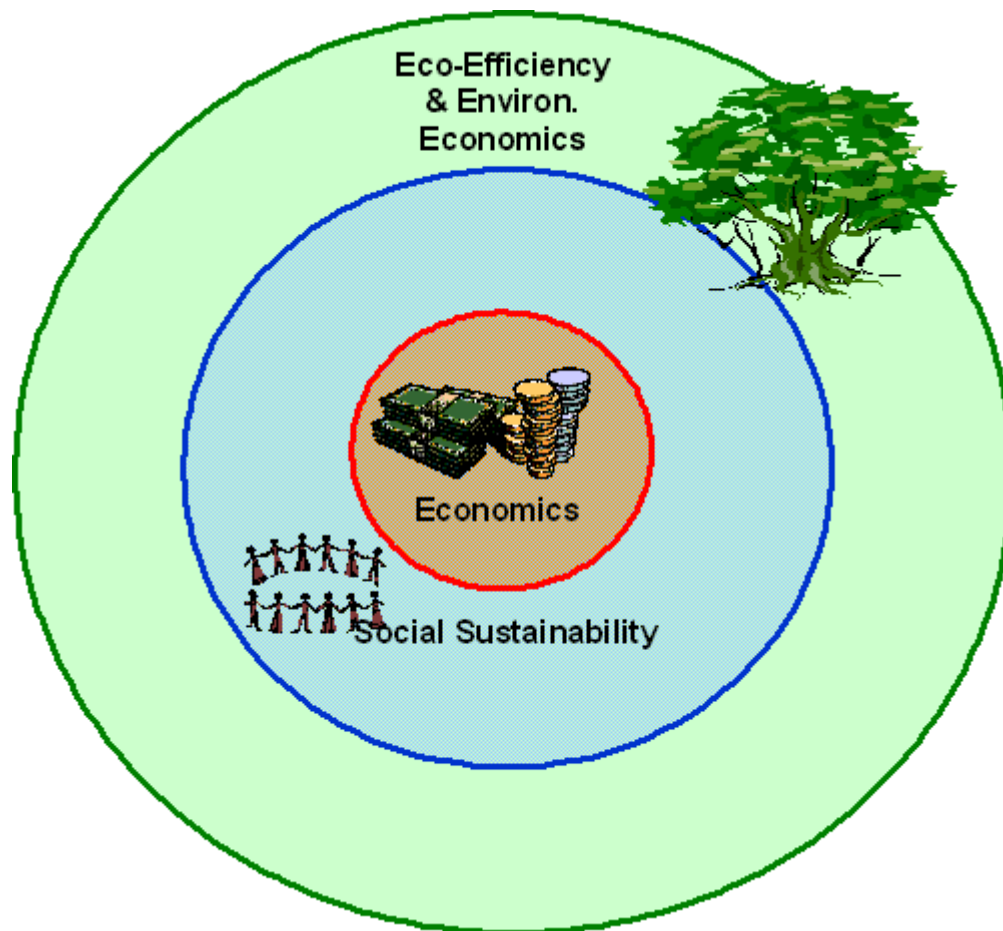


Figure 11: Alternative conceptual approach

The above diagram shows that the economy clearly sits within, and is bounded by, the social sphere, which in turn, is only a sub-set of the natural environment. The term *ecologically* sustainable development was created to make clear that the sustainable development had to be sustainable in an ecological, as opposed to economic or social, context. However, it can be argued that if something is not sustainable in an ecological context, it is simply not sustainable, as no activity takes place in a void of the natural environment. 'Sustainable' in the true meaning of the word should not be confused with 'temporarily sustainable'.

It is important to understand the interrelationship that exists between the social, environmental and economic aspects. This is illustrated in Figure 12.



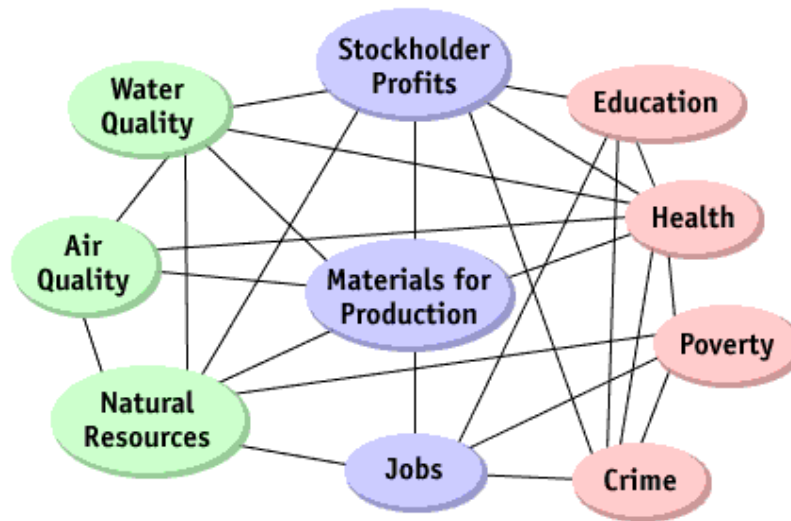


Figure 12: Interrelationship between social, environmental and economic aspects.

Source: <http://www.redefiningprogress.org/programs/sustainabilityindicators/publications/>

There is an important distinction between sustainable development and sustainable growth (AtKisson, 1999). While development is often assumed in the current economy to equal growth, this is not the case. AtKisson takes growth to mean "...the increase in human population, resource use, and the emission of waste. 'Development,' in contrast, refers to improvements in human technology and advances in the human condition, including health, education, intelligence, wisdom, freedom, and the capacity to love." (1999, p. 24)

One of the criticisms frequently levelled against the common definitions of sustainability and sustainable development is that they are too vague or used too glibly to have any real meaning. Sir Martin Holdgate, President of the Zoological Society of London, observed:

"'Sustainable development' has become one of the politically-correct theses of our era. Everybody is in favour of it - and everybody defines the term, on Humpty Dumpty's principle, to mean what they want it to mean".

(cited in Ball, 2002, p. 425)

AtKisson is more pointed about this problem, stating that:

"[s]ustainable development – a term so misapplied as to be nearly beyond rescue – is not development-as-usual with a few green-looking additions or nods to social equity; but that is what it has often been reduced to in practice" (2001, p. 9).

As for 'sustainability', he notes that "...as a word, 'sustainability' bores some people and frustrates others" (2001, p. 9). For this reason "...sustainability, as a word, is dying. It is not, as some would claim, that there is too much vagueness in its definition. A process can either continue (sustainable), or it cannot (unsustainable)...[it] is dying because of misuse, and dryness, and reduction to buzzword. It is dying because it is attached to too many initiatives that are failing to achieve their stated goals – or even, in many cases, to make any significant progress in that direction." (2001, p. 9)





Resource 1.7 outlines a number of related concepts that have been developed to help apply the principles of a sustainable practice in a more meaningful way. Resource 3.1 also gives further information about the principles of sustainability.

