

What's happening in sustainable development?



Overview

This poster is designed to introduce you to the subject of sustainable development by answering the following questions:

- What is Sustainable Development?
- What is the Significance of the Brundtland Report?
- How have Sustainable Development Debates Progressed in the Last Decade?
- What are the Characteristics of Sustainable Development Thinking?
- What are the Basic Stances of Sustainable Development Thinking and Action?
- Is it Possible to Achieve Sustainable Development?

To assist you in consolidating your knowledge on the subject of sustainable development, there is a practical exercise and food for thought, as well as information on opportunities to study sustainable development in the Department of Geography at Lancaster University. Useful websites and references are also provided as additional resources.

What is Sustainable Development?

Sustainable development is not a new idea. This is because over the course of human history, many cultures and societies have recognized the need for harmony between the environment, society and economy. Sustainable development means different things to different people. However, the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) prepared the most frequently quoted definition. In their report, *Our Common Future* (also known as the Brundtland Report), sustainable development is defined as:

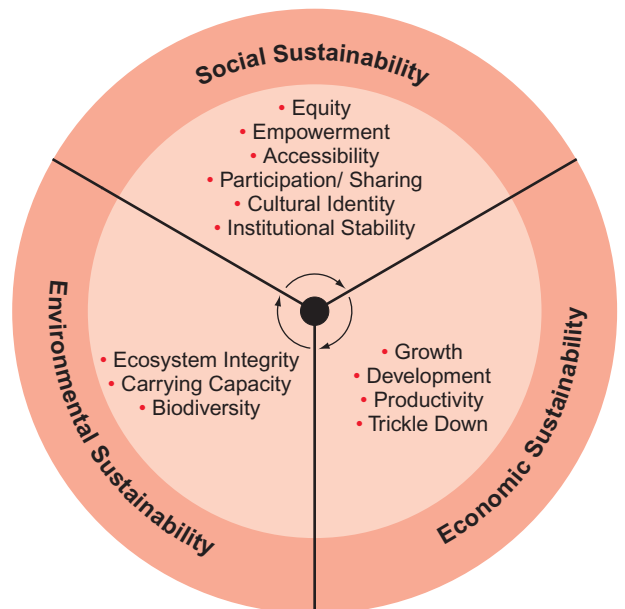
“...Development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. It contains within it two key concepts:

- The concept of needs, in particular the essential needs of the world's poor, to which overriding priority should be given; and
- The idea of limitations imposed by the state of technology and social organisation on the environment's ability to meet present and future needs.”

Source: WCED (1987, p43)

What is the Significance of the Brundtland Report?

- It strategically placed the link between environment and development at the top of the global agenda;
- Sustainable development was seen as a standard for measuring development objectives and performance;
- It stimulated academic debates on the social, economic and environmental principles of sustainable development.



The paradigm of sustainable development

Source: Khan (1995) "Sustainable development: the key concepts, issues and implications." Sustainable Development Vol. 3 p63-9.

How have Sustainable Development Debates Progressed in the Last Decade?

Since the 1980s, there has been rapid progress on developing the concepts of sustainable development. For example:

- In 1992, world leaders who attended the Earth Summit in Rio built upon the framework of the Brundtland Report. They created agreements and conventions on critical issues such as climate change, desertification and deforestation. They also drafted a broad action strategy-Agenda 21-as the workplan for environment and development issues for the coming decades.
- Throughout the rest of the 1990s, regional and

sectoral (e.g. agriculture, mining, healthcare) sustainability plans have been developed.

- A wide variety of groups-ranging from businesses to municipal governments to international organizations such as the World Bank-have adopted the concept and given it their own particular interpretations.

What are the Characteristics of Sustainable Development Thinking?

Sustainable development thinking focuses on three main issues:

- Ensuring the rights of the poor and of future generations (i.e. concern for equity and fairness);
- Applying the precautionary principle (i.e. have a long term-view of all activities); and
- Understanding the interconnections between the environment, economic and society (i.e. systems thinking).



Bananas produced in Kanyang, a tropical forest community in Southeast Nigeria. *Photo: Uwem Ite.*

What are the Basic Stances of Sustainable Development Thinking and Action?

Those who think about and work towards achieving sustainable development can be divided into two main groups. They can be either 'Strong and Deep Greens' or 'Weak and Pale Greens'.

Strong and Deep Greens

- Consider the environment as holding priority over all other goals (e.g. development). They are likely to strongly support environmental conservation activities;
- Tend to design and implement very strict rules and regulations to check rapid reduction in environmental quality (e.g. air pollution);
- Can be collectively termed 'ecodoom pessimists' (i.e. they believe that demand for environmental resources will soon outstrip supply due to population growth and consumption patterns).

Weak and Pale Greens

- Consider the environment as only one of several constraints which adversely affect human welfare (e.g. they consider the environment to be one of several inputs into the development process);
- Tend to use economic tools (such as costs and

benefits analysis) to compare alternative options for development activities (i.e. they feel that a sound knowledge and application of economic principles can help to protect the environment);

- Can be collectively termed 'technological optimists' (i.e. they believe in the power of technology to solve the problems of resource scarcity and environmental degradation).

Is it Possible to Achieve Sustainable Development?

Sustainable development can be achieved by taking appropriate and critical action, changing policy and practice from the individual, local, national to the international level. Therefore:

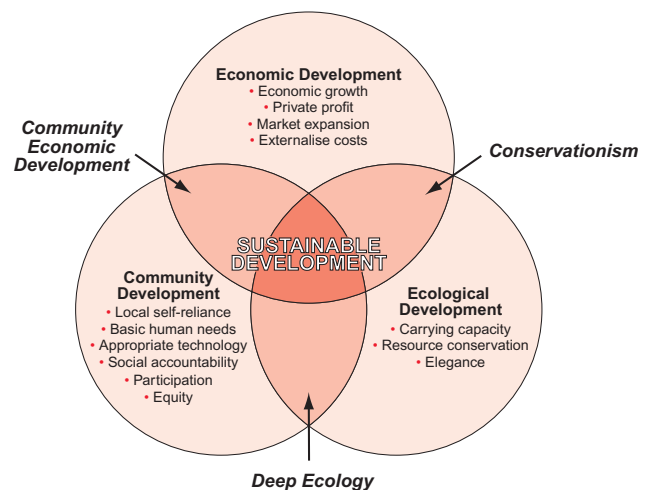
Sustainable Development is about:

- Integrated decision making process;
- Better research and information on environment and development issues;
- Democratic values within the society;
- Community participation in the decision making process;
- Collaboration with all stakeholders and groups;
- Equity, justice, and shared progress in development among people.

Sustainable Development is not about:

- Justification for business-as-usual;
- Economic growth at all costs;
- Heavier command and control systems by governments;
- All things to all people everywhere;
- Static or declining local, national and global economy;
- Quick fixes and ad hoc solutions to environment and development problems.

To be sustainable, development must improve economic efficiency, protect and restore ecological systems, and enhance the well being of all peoples. This is a summary of the recommendations of the World Commission on Environment and Development.



The challenge of sustainable development

Source: Pinfield (1996): "Beyond sustainability indicators" Local Environment. Vol. 1 No. 2 p151-63.

Food for Thought and Practical Exercise

1. What does sustainable development mean to you?
2. Who are you? Strong and Deep Green? Or Weak and Pale Green?
3. What should be sustained and for what period of time?
4. Which region (i.e. developed countries or developing countries) really requires sustainable development?
5. Why is sustainability good?

Are you still interested in learning more about sustainable development and its relevance to you? Then check out:

<http://www.iisd.org/educate/learn/sdpoll.asp>

Sustainable Development in Geography@Lancaster University

The Geography degree at Lancaster offers several and exciting opportunities for a detailed examination of the theory and practice of 'Sustainable Development'. Here is the range of possibilities:

YEAR	Course Number	Course Title
1	GEOG 100	Global Environmental Problems
2	GEOG 271	Ideas and Approaches in Geography
2	GEOG 277	Sustainability and Resource Management
3	GEOG 301/303	Dissertation/Project
3	GEOG 330	Third World Sustainable Development
3	GEOG 356	Environment and Development in South Asia
3	GEOG 364	Developing Africa
3	GEOG 366	Water Resources and Management
3	GEOG 368	Global Patterns of Economic Development
3	GEOG 372	West African Environment and Development Field Course: Conservation and Tourism in Ghana
3	GEOG 374	Approaches to Environmental Management

Geography graduates can pursue further studies on the theme of 'Sustainable Development' by taking the:

- MSc in European Environmental Management;
- MRes in Environment and Development (Overseas Placement); or
- By registering for a research degree (M.Phil/Ph.D) at Lancaster.

Suggested Further Reading

Adams, W.M. (2001) *Green Development: Environment and Sustainability in the Third World*, 2nd Edition, Routledge, London.

World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) (1987) *Our Common Future*. Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Useful Websites

International Institute for Environment and Development: <http://www.ied.org>

International Institute for Sustainable Development: <http://www.iisd.org>

Youth Sourcebook on Sustainable Development: <http://www.iisd.org/youth/ysbk000.htm>



Community self-help building project, Bolakum village, Nigeria.
Photo: Uwem Ite.

Department of Geography
Lancaster University
Lancaster
LA1 4YB

Telephone: (01524) 593736
Fax: (01524) 847099
e-mail: geography@lancaster.ac.uk
web: <http://geog.lancs.ac.uk/>