

# The Concept of Sustainable Development

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## The Concept of Sustainable Development

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ANON, JUL 27 2011

Sustainable Development is a concept that at its core is revolutionary, yet unfortunately incredibly difficult to pragmatically define. The history behind sustainable development is one that does not stretch far. Tensions that can be found within the concept of sustainable development are numerous, ranging from its ambiguous and vague definition, to the failure of attaining a universal pragmatic and operational framework. The great challenge that lies ahead with sustainable development is not only the need to educate it to the people, but to first define it in a way people will understand it.

The concept of sustainable development is one that arguably is multi-disciplinary, complex, and systematic, yet defining the concept is without a doubt a great task. Sustainable development was a term first coined in 1980, when the intent of the concept was merely basic. It was in the World Conservation Strategy, a union between three prominent environmental non-governmental organizations IUCN, WWF, and UNEP, where sustainable development took on the meaning of 'conserving the earth's natural resources'[1]. What the World Conservation Strategy had realized is that with the world's economic growth, came the near-sighted exploitation of the world's natural resources. The original, and sole, intent of the World Conservation Strategy was to bring nations together to stop the exploitation of natural resources, which in turn was negatively affecting the environment[2]. Sustainable development was thus merely seen on quite a basic level, at the time of its coinage. Not even a decade later, did the definition take on much more of a multi-disciplinary approach. In 1987 the white paper, named *Our Common Future*[3], was published by the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED). The document set the loose foundation of sustainable development with a widely quoted definition, which states "sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs"[4]. The document, also frequently known as the Brundtland Report, has "since been taken up by almost every international institution, agency and NGO"[5]. The Brundtland Report became the first document to support sustainable development as a multi-disciplinary field, as it explained that the economy, society, and the environment were key to sustainable development[6]. In 1992 the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development devised a program entitled *Agenda 21*, which allegedly "is the blueprint for sustainability in the 21st century"[7]. It is a framework that nations and government strictly can adhere to. Nations that gave their consent to accepting Agenda 21 are monitored by the United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD), who "is responsible for reviewing progress in the implementation of Agenda 21 and the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development; as well as providing policy guidance to follow up the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation (JPOI) at the local, national, regional and international levels"[8]. Both the Agenda 21 as well as the Brundtland Report have proven to be widely used frameworks that nations, agencies, and organizations use in modern times, yet even though they are accepted, a clear definition still is not evident.

The greatest problem with the concept of sustainable development is the sheer amount of definitions that are available. Unfortunately, a clear definition of sustainable development has still not been devised. Although the Brundtland Report's definition is widely-quoted, one can see exactly where it fails. When relooking at the definition "sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs"[9], one can spot two clear issues. Firstly, the 'needs' are not defined. There is a major difference between the needs of a person living in a Third-World country, as opposed to the needs of a person living in Western Europe. Secondly, the definition does not offer any type of time frame, as 'generations' can only be vaguely interpreted. The incredible amount of definitions available for sustainable development, thus

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make it a topic that the common man does not wish to pursue. An interesting way of looking at the issues at hand with sustainable development is to look at the following quote, which states “a combination of uncertainty about what to do, and a feeling of guilt about what is not being done, means that many people seem afraid to expose what they feel is their lack of understanding of sustainable development. Therefore, it is often easier to pretend that it does not need to be addressed”[10]. It is quite clear that because of sustainable development’s uncertain definition people, nations, and governments seem to act on it in varying ways. Yet, for those that have agreed on a definition, the problem of implementation arises.

Countries that have made a conscious effort to understand sustainable development and are willing to make changes, both nationally as well as internationally, face the problem of implementing sustainable development-gear policies. As with *Agenda 21*, the document that gave a framework to countries for sustainable development, there is no ‘enforcer’ of the document. That is to say, countries may claim to understand sustainable development, agree to make changes to their policies, but nobody actually enforces them to do so. As it was stated in the Brundtland report, “our inability to promote the common interest in sustainable development is often a product of the relative neglect of economic and social justice within and amongst nations”[11]; which sheds light on yet another paramount issue in sustainable development, that stretches far beyond simply sustainable development. The problem with the enforcement of sustainable development policies is that countries that are in the greatest need of them have no reason to adhere to the policies. As the North-South dialogue still clearly exists, the North essentially is telling the South the proper way to develop. This seemingly condescending method of saying “you must do it this way”, not only contributes to the hegemonic nature of the West, but simply further will concentrate the interests between both the North and South. As mentioned in an Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) report,

“At the institutional level, the interdependent goals of economic growth, social development and environmental protection are managed today by institutions that tend to be independent and fragmented, and that respond to narrow mandates with closed decision-making bodies. Sustainable development stresses the importance of institutions that are willing to integrate economic, social and environmental objectives at each level of policy development and decision-making”[12].

Unfortunately, the age of individuals is still strongly evident in the world today. It is however in the nature of sustainable development to distinctly outline the issues that not only a nation has with its policies, but also the world has with its tensions. Sustainable development is thus a concept that is revolutionary, yet limited in the scope of its beholder.

Sustainable development has the potential of being a groundbreaking concept that can revolutionize the way nations act on a national level, and more so on an international level. Unfortunately though, due to its multi-disciplinary nature, ideal-oriented goals, and flexible interpretations, a clear definition of the concept has yet to be found. Moreover, its vague interpretation and ambiguity further add to the tensions found within this concept, as any country could state they are following sustainable development policies. The challenge ahead is firstly to devise a concise definition, and secondly to pragmatically be able to apply it to any nation across the world. Due to sustainable development’s potential of further dividing the North and South dialogue, every country must make the necessary changes to their own policies in order to provide for a cleaner, safer, and more efficient environment, economy, and society. What sustainable development essentially calls for is transparency as well as cooperative nations that are willing to work together for the betterment of the world. It is perhaps for this sole reason that sustainable development is quite difficult to define, because every nation has a different view of what a better world is.

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