

Sustainability is bad for the developing world

What is Sustainability?

The definition of the word “sustainability” is simply that which is capable of being sustained or kept going. However, current usage usually associates the word with the idea that economic growth and industrialization can be achieved without causing environmental damage. This use of the term dates back to the new mandate adopted by the International Union for Conservation of Nature in 1969 ^[1]. It was a key theme of the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment in 1972 and since then has become more and more central as a guiding principle in national and international politics. There are hundreds of definitions to be found of sustainable development and sustainability, but the most widely quoted comes from the 1987 UN publication *Our Common Future* (also known as the Brundtland Report): “Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs.” This definition is sometimes expanded to the “three pillars” of environmental, social and economic sustainability ^[2]. The idea is that development can be said to be sustainable if the level of satisfaction of needs related to each of the three pillars does not decrease, while the level at least one of them increases. Today, the notion of sustainability is embraced across the political spectrum, and is widely quoted in business and industry, the public and private sectors. Yet it is not an uncontested notion ...

[1] www.cmsdata.iucn.org/downloads/iucn_future_of_sustainability.pdf

[2] www.bath.ac.uk/i-see/research/sustainability/

Arguments against Sustainability

There are a number of different levels of criticism of sustainability from those who think the term is too widely used, and thus meaningless, to those who are completely opposed to the idea. For those broadly in favour of sustainability one common criticism is that it is defined too vaguely, meaning that it is too easy to pay lip service to it without real consequence – thus governments, industry etc. can talk about being sustainable while continuing with “business as usual” ^[3]. There is also the problem how to measure whether sustainability is being achieved ^[4]. Some sustainability advocates consider the trade-offs necessary between the three pillars to be a major problem. Thus some argue for ‘strong sustainability’ in which trade-offs are not allowed. However, one of the most damning criticisms of sustainable development is that it has failed to alleviate any of the problems facing the developing world or, worse, that it condemns the developing world to poverty, inequality and a subsistence existence ^[5]. The notion of appropriate technology ^[6] is cited as one example of this – people in developing countries are encouraged to use technologies such as the hand wheel generator ^[7], the hand water pump and the donkey plough ^[8] rather than modern technologies. Critics of sustainability also point to the way it engenders negative views of rapidly developing countries such as China and India ^{[9], [10]}, blaming them for environmental problems, and leads to suggestions that people in other parts of the world should not aspire to what people have in the developed world. From a more philosophical point of view the very notion of sustainability, can be thought of as perpetuating the present, which is anathema to those who want to change things for the poorest people in the world.

[3] www.triplepundit.com/2010/05/sustainability-as-usual-isnt-good-enough/

[4] www.cmsdata.iucn.org/downloads/iucn_future_of_sustainability.pdf

[5] www.spiked-online.com/articles/00000006DA03.htm

- [6] www.appropedia.org/
[7] www.tinytechindia.com/handwheelgenerator.htm
[8] www.practicalaction.org/donkey-ploughs
[9] <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/08/26/world/asia/26china.html>
[10] www.gits4u.com/envo/envo4.htm

Arguments for Sustainability

Advocates of sustainability argue that the idea is needed to draw attention to the fact that the pattern of development in the West since the industrial revolution has caused serious environmental problems and has greatly depleted the Earth's natural resources. Historically, there were two key elements to pro-sustainability arguments – the finite nature of resources, which was the main topic of the seminal 1972 report to The Club of Rome, *The Limits to Growth*^[11], and pollution. In the last two decades climate change triggered by human activity has become increasingly central to the arguments. Proponents of the three pillars argue that by protecting the environment, promoting social equality and supporting the economy they are taking a view that benefits everyone^[12]. This holistic approach is particularly relevant in relation to discussions about the developing world: many of those in favour of sustainability claim that social justice and equity are at the heart of their agenda, having equal weighting as environmental concerns. The argument is that the developing world simply cannot follow the Western pattern of development since we already have to contend with resource scarcity (peak oil^[13], peak minerals^[14], insufficient fresh water^[15]) and climate change. Some argue that developing countries can leapfrog polluting development using clean, efficient technologies and that this is the great contribution that the idea of sustainability offers^[16]. Others emphasize that, from the outset, the term sustainability encompassed a sense of intergenerational justice that is thus weighted in favour of future generations and the less fortunate^[17].

- [11] www.clubofrome.at/about/limitstogrowth.html
[12] www.rics.org/sustainability
[13] www.wolfatthedoor.org.uk/
[14] www.bravenewleaf.com/environment/2008/03/you-know-peak-o.html
[15] www.webofcreation.org/Earth%20Problems/water.htm
[16] www.bioregional.com/oneplanetliving/faqs/#q2
[17] jan.ucc.nau.edu/~dss4/BARRY1.PDF

Other links:

What is Sustainable Culture? *The Great Debate* Proceedings
www.thegreatdebate.org.uk/SustCult.html

What Future for the Developing World? *The Great Debate* Proceedings
www.thegreatdebate.org.uk/GDDSEs3.html

Keeping Africa Small: *The Great Debate* Video
www.thegreatdebate.org.uk/KeepingAfricaSmall.html

I'm a Subsistence Farmer ... Get Me Out Of Here! *The Great Debate* Video
www.thegreatdebate.org.uk/SubsistenceFarmer.html

What Future for the Developing World? *The Great Debate* Proceedings

www.thegreatdebate.org.uk/GDDSEs3.html

Newcastle Institute for Research on Sustainability: “Enough, For All, Forever”

www.ncl.ac.uk/sustainability/definition/

International Institute for Sustainable Development:

www.iisd.org/sd/

Global Issues – Sustainability Introduction and Discussion

www.globalissues.org/article/408/sustainable-development-introduction

Flush it! Ten minute edit of Worldwrite’s documentary about the flush toilet

www.youtube.com/user/casparhewett#p/a/f/0/yoWGVGF5poA

Flush Toilets Called ‘Environmental Disaster’

www.theplumber.com/toiletsifyoudidnthavetohandlethem.html

Facilitating Sustainable Development in the Developing World

www.cuts-citee.org/pdf/Briefing_Paper10-Facilitating_Sustainable_Development_in_the_Developing_World.pdf

Sustainable Urban Development In India: Some Issues by Basudha Chattopadhyay

http://www.niua.org/Publications/discussion_paper/basudha_paper.pdf

Time to ditch the sustainababble

www.spiked-online.com/articles/00000006DA03.htm

Listening to the Poor: What Western environmentalists could learn from real poor people by Ronald Bailey

www.reason.com/archives/2002/08/27/listening-to-the-poor

Why the World Cannot Be Sustainable

www.5min.com/Video/Why-the-World-Cannot-Be-Sustainable-516926358