

The many dimensions of sustainable development

Sustainable development is one of the most important ideas, and goals, of our time. It is defined as ‘development which meets the needs and aspirations of the current generation without impairing the ability of future generations to meet theirs’.

It is not the goal that makes this idea important, however, but the recognition that current patterns of human activity are unsustainable, and that our economic, social and political institutions seem to be losing the race towards sustainability.

The term ‘development’ implies that things are getting better over time. What this means in practice, however, will always be contested – just as most people agree that ‘fairness’ or ‘freedom’ are good in principle, but have different views of what fairness or freedom mean in a specific situation.

At its most basic, achieving sustainable development involves, first, improving the living standards and quality of life of the current generation – especially those who are currently least well-off – and, second, ensuring that current development patterns do not risk undermining the wellbeing or options of future generations.

Achieving sustainable development will thus involve a vigorous and urgent debate about how and why – even whether – current development patterns might undermine future wellbeing. Different viewpoints on the causes of unsustainability include the following:

Loss of natural capital or other critical capital

Deforestation, pollution and inappropriate natural resource management are all contributing to a loss of ‘natural capital’, which risks undermining the



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These days, everyone seems to be talking about sustainability. But are we all on the same wavelength when we use the term? **Steve Hatfield Dodds** – senior CSIRO researcher and President of the Australia New Zealand Society for Ecological Economics – begins a series examining the meaning behind this often-invoked word.

health and productivity of important ecosystem processes. These natural assets are essential to human wellbeing – underpinning agriculture and food production, for example, or providing adequate supplies of clean water. Policies and institutions that treat these assets as free or limitless risk running them down, rather than conserving or protecting them for future use.

Power imbalances in political decision-making

A lack of transparency and accountability in government and business decision-making allows natural resources, such as forests and fisheries, to be destroyed for short-term gains. Similar processes may undermine other shared assets, such

as a fair and accessible legal system. This impoverishes local people and may undermine social and natural capital that could be used to generate improved living standards.

Wrong world views or values

Some argue that Western thinking is too materialist or human-centred, and that this contributes to unsustainable practices because nature is understood to exist entirely for human use. Achieving sustainability will require new ways of thinking, such as accepting that human activities can affect global environmental processes – as illustrated by global warming. It will also require recognition of the impact of unregulated selfish behaviour, and the introduction of ‘carrots

and sticks’ to manage this. But this does not imply that sustainability can only be achieved through widespread changes in underlying values or ethics.

As you can see, the idea of sustainable development covers a lot of territory, encompassing ideas of the good life, how humans behave, multiple types of interactions between society and nature, and what we can do about all of this.

We at *Ecós* have therefore decided to produce a series on key concepts for achieving sustainable development – beginning with this article. Consistent with the scope of sustainable development outlined above, these concepts can be divided into three:

- wellbeing and development, including capital-based approaches to sustainable development and the happiness–income paradox;
- the dynamics of human and environmental systems, including economic growth and environmental pressure and resilience thinking; and
- specific tools for promoting sustainable development, such as payments for ecosystem services, triple bottom line reporting and corporate social responsibility, and adaptive governance.

We hope that explaining these concepts will help *Ecós* readers to identify opportunities where they can make a difference in practising and promoting sustainable development.

More information:

International Institute for Sustainable Development, www.iisd.org/sd/

International Society for Ecological Economics’ online encyclopaedia, www.ecoeco.org/education_encyclopedia.php