Definition: **sustainability** from *Processing Water, Wastewater, Residuals, and Excreta for Health and Environmental Protection: An Encyclopedic Dictionary*

Characteristic of a sustainable project or action. Sustainability implies a process that can continue indefinitely, e.g., the "use of resources by our generation in a manner that will not diminish the ability of future generations to meet their needs" (quotation in Bloetscher and Muniz, 2006). See *also* water resources sustainability.

Summary Article: **SUSTAINABILITY**
From *The Dictionary of Alternatives*

Although the term had been used within the ENVIRONMENTAL movement before, it acquired popular appeal following the publication of the Brundtland Report to the UN Commission on Environment and Development in 1987. The report defined sustainability in terms of meeting ‘the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs’. Another definition commonly deployed is that offered by the World Conservation Union in *Caring for the Earth* (1991), which sees sustainability as ‘improving the quality of life while living within the carrying capacity of supporting ecosystems’. So sustainability involves ensuring both human and ecological well-being, finding ways of organizing human activities so that societies, now and in the future, can provide for themselves whilst preserving ecosystems. The idea of sustainability is based on the premise that the earth has finite capacity, and that the rate of economic growth pursued in the second half of the twentieth century, particularly in the West, will inflict irreversible damage on the planet, or reach ‘natural limits’.

But beyond this broad agreement, sustainability is a highly contested term that has different priorities and implications for different groups. One of the controversial issues concerns the relationship between sustainability and economic MANAGEMENT. For some, sustainability entails finding ways of reconciling economic growth with the Earth’s capacity by, for example, switching to green technologies (renewable sources of energy, recycling), establishing and enforcing environmental standards (as in the Kyoto agreement), introducing green taxes, developing more environmentally friendly transport policies, or simply relying on the forces of the MARKET (such as consumer pressures) to ‘green businesses’. This ‘weak’ conceptualization has been captured under the notion of sustainable development, a term popularized by the Brundtland report as a framework within which environmental protection and economic development could be integrated. It has since become a key principle in national and international economic and environmental policy, as exemplified in Agenda 21, the global action plan for sustainable development signed by 173 national governments at the Rio Earth Summit in 1992.

Whilst the notion of sustainable development has done much to raise public debate and attention on environmental issues, many feel that it does not go far enough in challenging the practices that have led to environmental degradation. A ‘strong’ view of sustainability would hold that economic growth is incompatible with the earth’s finite resources. From this perspective, the notion of sustainable development is a contradiction in terms, a smokescreen used by government and business to pay lip service to environmental issues whilst maintaining their commitment to economic development. This is the view adopted at the radical end of ENVIRONMENTALISM, for example by SOCIAL ECOLOGY and...
DEEP ECOLOGY, and it is based on a more radical critique of global capitalism. For proponents of this view, sustainability entails a radical transformation of the economy, replacing the pursuit of material goods by focusing on equality, justice, human and ecological health, cultural and biological diversity, and participation. It has informed alternative models of economic and social organization with principles of LOCALIZATION, SMALLNESS or SELF-SUFFICIENCY, and is represented in practices such as ECOVILLAGES or PERMACULTURE.

Another controversial issue within sustainability relates to population growth and control. Some suggest that the current population of over 6 billion is already more than the planet can support and that action should be taken to limit the world population. However this raises concerns about human rights violation – in sterilization programmes, for example. At the heart of these controversies are questions about what is to be sustained. Sustainability relates to the interconnections between economic, social and ecological systems; but different perspectives privilege different dimensions. For example, many insist that addressing the problems of global poverty and injustice is a precondition for environmental sustainability, as evidence suggests that the world's poor bear the brunt of environmental degradation, and may be forced into further spoiling of the environment by eking out a living on marginal lands. By opening these issues for public debate, the concept of sustainability has called into question the economic policies of infinite growth characteristic of the industrial world for much of the twentieth century, and has encouraged thought about alternatives.


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