

# 17 Sustainable Bullshits: A Critical Evaluation

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## ABSTRACT

The United Nations Organization (UN) assumes global leadership and strives for a sustainable world. Concurrently, member countries endeavor to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals outlined in 2015. However, there is a pressing need to scrutinize whether these efforts align with truthful and purposeful concepts. Deviating from the right path could lead the world into an irreparable abyss. In this study, we aim to critically evaluate the accuracy of the UN's sustainability definition and the Sustainable Development Goals derived from it. Our examination has been conducted with an open-minded approach, and we encourage utilizing the results for reevaluation rather than contentious debate. In essence, we contend that the UN's sustainability definition and the 17 Sustainable Development Goals are fundamentally flawed, warranting the label of "bullshit." We advocate for those committed to a sustainable world to unite in fostering a society based on simplicity.

**Keywords:** Definition, Sustainability, Bullshit, 17 Sustainable Goals, Simplicity

## INTRODUCTION

The UN defines sustainability as "meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987). The 17 Sustainable Goals are constructed upon this foundation. Approximately 170 countries, united under the United Nations, are dedicated to achieving these sustainability objectives. However, there are valid concerns regarding the comprehensive understanding of this definition. At its core, this definition centers on the concept of "needs."

The question that naturally arises is, what exactly are these "needs"? Different sources offer various definitions: "physiological or psychological requirements for the well-being of an organism" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.), "the essentials for a satisfactory life" (Cambridge.org, n.d.), "to have something, or to want something very much" (Cambridge.org, n.d.), or "something essential, like food, water, and shelter; when lacking them, you're in need" (Vocabulary.com, n.d.). Furthermore, in the context of human relationships, communication is often deemed necessary, as its absence can weaken these connections. Hence, communication should also be included in the list of needs (Tristan Williams, n.d.).

Various synonyms such as "requirements," "essentials," "necessities," and "demands" are often used interchangeably with "needs." However, it is evident that needs are classified into different types, as highlighted by Noltemeyer et al. According to Noltemeyer, needs fall into three categories: primary, secondary, and tertiary. Basic needs, including food, water, clothing, and shelter, are fundamental for survival. Secondary needs extend beyond these basics, such as having furniture in a house or clothing storage. Tertiary needs represent minimum requirements, often encompassing luxury items like branded clothing or upscale housing. While basic needs are essential for survival, secondary and tertiary needs

cannot be considered essential for sustaining life. Additionally, there is a category referred to as “wants,” which, while not essential for survival, contribute to convenience.

Given this diversity of needs, encompassing basic needs, secondary needs, tertiary needs, and wants, the United Nations references the fulfillment of needs in its sustainability definition. However, this vague usage of the term ‘needs’ by the United Nations can lead to misunderstandings within the global community. Hence, it is reasonable to question the justification for this imprecise practice. Against this backdrop, the aim of this study is to critically evaluate the UN’s definition of sustainability and the 17 Sustainable Development Goals built upon it.

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## **METHOD AND MATERIALS**

Numerous research methods have been proposed for use in a study, leading to a fundamental question: if all these methods are deemed equally valid, shouldn’t research unfailingly unveil the absolute truth? Additionally, one might assume that research findings published in reputable journals are inherently truthful. However, the reality is that our endeavors have often confined us within specific frameworks, shaping and molding our approaches to yield desired outcomes for particular groups.

In response to this context, we have embraced an open-minded approach in this study. Recognizing that diverse research methods may lead to varying conclusions, we remain cognizant of the potential for bias and subjectivity. Thus, our commitment is to navigate this research with a genuinely impartial perspective, detached from preconceived notions, and with the intent to foster a more nuanced understanding of the subjects at hand. This approach allows us to critically assess the UN’s definition of sustainability and the 17 Sustainable Development Goals in a manner devoid of undue influence, ultimately contributing to a more objective examination of the issues under scrutiny.

## **ANALYSIS**

**Definition of Sustainability:** The fact that the concept of sustainability has been defined in various ways contributes to its inherent vagueness. However, our focus here centers on the sustainable definition put forth by the United Nations, a widely adopted framework that has significantly influenced the majority of countries worldwide. At its core, this definition underscores the importance of the current generation fulfilling their needs in a manner that ensures future generations can do the same without hindrance. While the surface interpretation of this statement may convey altruism, a more profound examination reveals that the principles of self-interest and resource exploitation, which have been prevalent since 1948 within the sustainable wrapper, persist.

Needs and Wants are two fundamental factors in human life. Needs should be specifically identified as basic needs, which are essential for human survival. These needs encompass four key categories: food, clothing, housing, and medicine. Categorizing everything beyond these four essential needs as wants helps to clarify our understanding. However, it is evident that the community has been misled by the broad application of “Needs” instead of distinguishing between “Basic Needs” and “Wants” within the UN’s definition of sustainability. In general, the term “needs” is used, encompassing all factors from basic needs to wants. Given these facts, one must question the adequacy of the United Nations’ concept of sustainability. This raises the valid question of why it is not perceived as questionable, and I ask how the definition proposed by the United Nations concept of sustainability is not bullshit.

I present additional factors that suggest the concept of sustainability should encompass basic needs. I draw your attention to the foundational definition of sustainable development. However, before delving into the root definition of the term ‘sustainability,’ it’s essential to acquaint oneself with the process of creating a root definition for a term. Linguists have grappled with this challenge for centuries in their pursuit to unveil the essence of word meanings. In their quest, they have made three noteworthy discoveries: 1. The existence of a connection between the sound of a term and its meaning. 2. The recognition that words carry enduring meanings. 3. The belief that the meaning of a verse can be deciphered through Nirukti.

Yet, despite these insights, scholars continue to grapple with the profound nature of word meanings. Their journey is constrained by a Western-centric perspective, and the etymology of the term ‘Nirukti’ has posed a hurdle to linguistic progress. It’s important to note that Nirukti is not mere knowledge; it represents a form of wisdom to be mastered by those who seek to extract the root meaning of a verse.

I am conveying to you the fundamental meaning of the term ‘sustainability’ through the lens of Nirukti wisdom. At its core, this definition takes the most basic form as ‘letting naturally open Ariya’ (Jayantha et al. 2021). To grasp this definition fully, it’s essential to comprehend the nuances of the terms ‘naturally’ and ‘Ariya’ as employed here.

The root meaning of ‘naturally’ involves a complex interplay of six interconnected factors (Jayantha et al. 2021b). In this context, ‘Ariya,’ often translated as the ‘Noble One,’ signifies freedom from unnecessary attachments. To delve deeper into its ‘Pali meaning,’ it can be understood as ‘Ulpechchathawa,’ which can be interpreted simply as ‘little will’—in essence, simplicity. Simplicity, in turn, is defined as dependence on basic needs.

Through this analysis, we arrive at a profound understanding of how sustainability should be defined in its most fundamental sense. According to Nirukti wisdom, sustainability is encapsulated as ‘letting Naturally open Ariya.’ Subsequently, we acquaint ourselves with the term ‘Ariya,’ denoting dependence on basic needs or simplicity. In light of this, sustainability can be envisioned as ‘Letting Naturally Open Simplicity,’ signifying a society that thrives on fulfilling its basic needs.

Considering the root definition of sustainability, the UN’s definition of sustainability should incorporate the term ‘basic needs.’ Otherwise, it is evident that the UN is obscuring the truth from the community by substituting the loosely defined term ‘needs’ into the definition. This prompts the question of why it’s not deemed bullshit to divert people towards other objectives when the truth lies at the heart of the matter.

Goal 1: No poverty: SDG 1 aims to end global poverty by 2023 with no population living below the poverty line. (Goal 1: No poverty). I question how this interesting goal is not bullshit when it comes to matching the definition of sustainability. Sustainability is defined as placing people within a framework that fulfills needs. The people should not only include the poor but also the rich who overconsume. In spite of that, isn’t it bullshit to consider only people living in poverty as the global population under SDG 1? It is questionable how the suggestion that one can find answers to the global resource shortage by continuing to maintain the people’s over-consumptive lifestyle is not bullshit that fools the people.

Goal 2: Zero hunger (No hunger): SDG 2 aims to: ‘End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition, and promote sustainable agriculture.’ (Goal 2: Zero hunger). Since food is considered as a basic need and this objective is presented in an interesting way, it manages to attract people. A missing part can be seen in this objective as well. Food security for all people is acceptable, but it is problematic that the overconsumed community has been forgotten. If sustainability is the fulfillment of needs, I question how allowing the wealthy to fulfill their wants is not bullshit. And if sustainability is about meeting needs, shouldn’t agricultural sustainability be about meeting the needs of agriculture? Otherwise, doesn’t it

contradict the basic definition of sustainability to consider agriculture to be developed as needed to meet human needs?

SDG 3 is defined by the UN as: ‘Ensuring healthy lives and promoting well-being at all ages.’ (Goal 3: Good health and well-being). Medicine is one of the basic necessities. Therefore, it is correct to take medicine as a factor within the concept of sustainability. However, indicators of this target include life expectancy, child and maternal mortality, road traffic deaths, prevalence of current tobacco use, suicide mortality, etc. Such consideration suggests that we should be more careful in this regard. Because if our endeavor is to create a society of simplicity, it cannot be expected that there will be such deaths at the end of it.

Goal 4: Quality education: SDG 4 states: ‘Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all’. (Goal 4: Quality education). However, if sustainability is the fulfillment of needs, this raises questions as to what kind of needs the UN expects. If the needs to be fulfilled by the definition of sustainability are basic needs, they will be limited to food, clothing, housing, and medicine. But it is clear that other needs have been added beyond the basic needs. However, the root definition of sustainability is that only the basic needs should be met (Jayanta et al.), so all additional needs added beyond that would be bullshit.

Goal 5: Gender equality: SDG 5 is defined by the UN as: ‘achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls’. (Goal 5: Gender equality). I ask why this goal is not bullshit. It is the basic need to be fulfilled for human existence. (Jayanta et al.). It means that one cannot live without fulfilling their basic needs. But the UN talks about needs to be fulfilled. I question the difference between needs and wants that they point out in this way. We must clarify here that humans have the ability to survive without fulfilling needs and wants. But it is not possible to survive without fulfilling the basic needs. I question how SDG 5, ‘Achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls’, which is instead a need or a want, is not bullshit, ignoring the assertion that the basic foundation of sustainability is the fulfillment of basic needs.

Goal 6: Clean water and sanitation: SDG 6 is defined by the UN as: ‘Ensure access and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all.’ (Goal 6 Targets). Among the basic needs that must be met for human survival, water and sanitation are not presented separately. It means that water and sanitation are included in the factors of food (Denton, John A. (1990) and medicine. However, I am still wondering how this effort to divert people’s attention to another dimension isn’t bullshit by allowing people who overconsume to behave the same way.

Goal 7: Affordable and clean energy: The UN calls SDG 7: ‘Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all’. (Goal 7: Affordable and clean energy). An interesting glossary can be found here. But it is not clear how energy is a basic need. To carry out the day-to-day activities of man, energy is what he wants. But energy is not essential for human survival. In spite of that, I am questioning how calling energy as a basic need is not bullshit. What is sustainable modern energy is not clear. If sustainability is about meeting basic needs, shouldn’t it be about meeting energy needs when it comes to energy? Here, fulfilling the basic needs should be considered as simplicity. In other words, attention should be paid to the simplicity of energy. I question how statements about energy outside of that framework are not bullshit.

Goal 8: Decent work and economic growth: SDG 8 is defined by the UN as: ‘Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all’. (Goal 8: Decent work and economic growth). People are misled by the words here and their surface meaning. Simplicity and development are opposite terms. Simplicity refers to a simple lifestyle that relies on basic necessities. But development reminds us of a complex existence that satisfies basic needs + wants. At the very beginning of the UN, when the concept of development was imposed on the world and all the people had to experience its

consequences, I question whether it is not the same destructive development policies that have been staged under the guise of sustainable development. I ask how the attempt to connect two opposing concepts is not bullshit.

Goal 9: Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure: SDG 9: 'Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation' is the UN definition. (Goal 9: Industry, innovation, infrastructure). What do they expect to mean by applying the term sustainable before the term industrialization? Sustainable industrialization should mean simple industrialization when the fulfillment of basic needs or simplicity is the basis of sustainability. Is this really what defines the UN? They also expect innovations that lead to industrialization into simplicity. I'm asking how the proposal for every other step isn't bullshit.

Goal 10: Reduced inequality: SDG 10 is defined by the UN as: 'reducing income inequality within and between countries'. (Goal 10: Reduced inequalities). Important indicators for this SDG are income disparities, gender and disability aspects, as well as policies for migration and mobility of people. (United Nations (2020)). It has been seen that this goal has been used as a marketing ploy used to capture the majority of the poor countries in the world. This is a psychological strategy for the poor countries to think that by using the sustainable goals, they will improve their countries to the level of the developed countries. It also appears to have been used. To what extent this goal of theirs fits with the definition of sustainability is questionable. If the basic principle of sustainability should be the location of simplicity for all the people of the world, isn't it bullshit to rely on goals other than that itself?

Goal 11: Sustainable cities and communities: SDG 11 is defined by the UN as: 'Making cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable.' (Goal 11: Sustainable cities and communities). Important indicators for this goal are the number of people living in urban slums, a percentage of the urban population with easy access to public transport, and the amount of built-up area per person. (United Nations Economic and Social Council (2020)). It has been seen that the aim of this goal is to ensure a safe standard of living for the poor people. There is no record here of the people who have taken over the limited resources of the world and are indulging in a pattern of over-consumption. Does it not implicitly say that the traditional development model, which created global problems and was introduced by the UN itself, allows the rich people and countries to maintain the same, while working to achieve some relief for the poor people? Isn't this bullshit to deceive people?

Goal 12: Responsible consumption and production: SDG 12 is defined by the UN as: 'Ensuring sustainable consumption and production patterns.' (Goal 12: Responsible consumption, production). If sustainability means satisfying basic needs or maintaining a simple lifestyle, this goal of the UN should be directly related to simplicity. But in order for that goal to be fulfilled, it must be able to provide a prelude that calls the whole population to simplicity. But, in an environment that maintains marketing and trade strategies that further promote the pattern of overconsumption, aren't the goals proposed by SDG 12 bullshit?

Goal 13: Climate action: SDG 13 is: 'Defines the UN as taking urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts by regulating emissions and promoting developments in renewable energy.' (Goal 13: Climate action). I will try to match this purpose of the UN with their definition. If sustainability is the fulfillment of basic needs, having suitable sources of energy would be sufficient. But is there anything wrong with the view that what they are trying to do is to use renewable energy to further their usual conventional development model? And wouldn't it be bullshit if they try to whitewash the traditional development model?

Goal 14: Life below water: SDG 14 is defined by the UN as: 'Conserving and sustainably using oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development'. (Goal 14: Life below water). Again, I question if sustainability is about meeting basic needs or ensuring a life of simplicity then why bother with resources beyond that. Ocean sustainability is ocean simplicity. It is governed by nature and man has no attachment

for it. How can man-made measurements of the simplicity of the ocean not be bullshit?

Goal 15: Life on land: The UN defines SDG 15 as: ‘protecting, restoring and promoting the sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably managing forests, combating desertification, and halting and reversing land degradation and biodiversity loss’. (Goal 15: Life on land). Actually, there is a misunderstanding here. Sustainability means fulfilling the basic needs or simplicity should be replaced by oneself. That is, the simplicity of man should be built by man and the simplicity of the forest will be built by the forest. Isn’t it bullshit to accept someone else’s work?

Goal 16: Peace, justice and strong institutions: The UN defines SDG 16 as: ‘Promoting peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, providing access to justice for all and building effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels’. (Goal 16: Peace, justice and strong institutions). It includes building a peaceful society when sustainability is the fulfillment of basic needs or simplicity. Therefore, I ask the reasons why it is not bullshit to build separate goals for the sake of building a peaceful mass?

Goal 17: Partnership for the goals: SDG 17 is defined by the UN as: ‘Strengthening the means of implementation and revitalizing global partnerships for sustainable development’. (Goal 17: Partnerships for the goals). Their goal is to convince the entire population for the aforementioned 16 bullshits. I ask how trying to manipulate all countries on the same model is not bullshit?

## DISCUSSION

This criticism comes at a time when all the countries of the world as a whole are pursuing the sustainable goals led by the UN. In this critical analysis, the UN’s definition of sustainability and the 17 sustainable goals were considered. There we first clarified that the UN’s definition of sustainability is flawed. It was revealed that the term “Need” they use is a term with a vague meaning. And in our further analysis, it was further revealed that according to the original definition of the term sustainable, the term basic needs should be used. Therefore, we questioned how the sustainable definition of the UN, which has been presented to the people while hiding the truth, is not bullshit.

After that, we evaluated the 17 sustainable goals of the UN. It was also revealed that all the targets are bullshit built aside from the truth. I suspect that some of its goals may be the personal interests of the founders of the sustainability goals. Because it is questionable how gender-based goals came to the fore when sustainability is about building a society with simplicity. Statements and goals regarding the concept of sustainability often mislead people. Because they are able to paint a pleasant picture in the reader’s mind. But it will take time for people to understand the harsh reality embedded in those beautiful expressions. In this way, the concept of development brought to the fore by the UN in 1948 was full of beautiful stories. But scholars had to spend decades to understand that it is a destructive concept that drags a society into the abyss. There is no doubt that a more in-depth inquiry in this regard will make it clear that what they have sent to the market through sustainable packaging is the same rejected development concept. As the old saying goes, it’s like putting old wine in a new bottle.

## CONCLUSION

Considering this analysis as a whole, I have found no evidence that the UN’s definition of sustainability and the 17 sustainable goals built on it are not bullshit. I don’t think building arguments on this one-sided analysis will help anyone. All that is required is to try to understand the reality by oneself with an open mind. I invite all scholars for that.

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