

Understanding The Meaning and Pillars of Sustainable Development

Enega Yvan-Al Zangue

University of Buea, Cameroon

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.100600197>

Received: 20 May 2026; Accepted: 25 May 2026; Published: 20 June 2026

ABSTRACT

This article examines the foundational components of sustainable development, a paradigm that has evolved into the cornerstone of modern international discourse, strategic planning, and environmental activism. Despite its widespread adoption as a global catchphrase for aid agencies and development planners, the precise definition and inherent nature of the concept remain elusive to many. To bridge this gap, the study deconstructs the two fundamental pillars upon which the concept is built: sustainability and development. Sustainability is analyzed as a production model that prioritizes intergenerational equity by seeking to balance economic output with environmental integrity. Conversely, the article explores development as the qualitative transformation of economic and social trends within a culture to enhance the overall quality of human life. When these two elements are synthesized, they form a ubiquitous paradigm that addresses the complex relationship between human progress and ecological preservation. The study provides a structured framework for understanding how sustainable development functions and the three main components of sustainability as a production model and a social objective. Ultimately, it seeks to clarify the conceptual ambiguities that persist, offering a more coherent understanding of a paradigm that increasingly defines the trajectory of global society and environmental stewardship.

Keywords: sustainable development, sustainability, development, intergenerational equity

INTRODUCTION

The term "sustainable development" was first used in 1972 at the First World Conference on the Environment¹. In 1987, at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (Rio de Janeiro, Brazil), the term "sustainable development" was introduced as a new concept that saves humanity.² The main emphasis is on combating various environmental threats and dangers facing humanity and the development of human civilization³. Significantly, the conference was held under the motto "Last Chance", which aims to save the planet for human life. The concept of sustainable development was adopted in June 1992 at the UN Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro with the participation of heads of state and government.⁴

There are two fundamental elements of the concept of sustainable development, which preceded the creation of the concept itself; sustainability and development. Sustainability is a production model, which aims at better economic results for both humans and the natural environment; not only in the present but in the indefinite future as well. Therefore, the objective of sustainable processes is to achieve more production with lower cost of raw material, which is why sustainability is usually mentioned with concepts like recycling, renewable energies and bioclimatic design. Development, on the other hand, deals with the changes in economics and social trends in the culture and environment, all in a bid to improve the quality of human life in society.

¹ Stockholm, Sweden

² G. X. Brundtann (Norway) who served as chairman of the UN Commission on Environment and Development in the second half of the 1980s, is recognized as an author of this notion

³ United Nations Conference on the Environment. Rio de Janeiro, 1992 available online at <http://prometeus.nsc.ru/koptuyug/ideas/unrio92/005-023.ssi> last accessed on 25th March 2026.

⁴ Rio de Janeiro Declaration on Environment and Development. 1992. URL: available online at http://www.un.org/ru/documents/decl_conv/declarations/riodecl. Last accessed on 25th March 2026.

Sustainable development has thus become a ubiquitous development paradigm; the catchphrase for international aid agencies, the jargon of development planners, the theme of conferences and academic papers, as well as the slogan of development and environmental activists.⁵ While it cannot be disputed that literature on sustainable development abounds, issues regarding the definition and nature of this concept, remain unclear to many people.

The concept of sustainable development dwells on the concern for not just the present, but also the future generations. Sustainable development encompasses environmental and economic sustenance and sociodemographic and health dimensions. It means development that meets the needs of the present without endangering the ability of future generations to meet their own needs⁶. According to the European Commission's Green paper on the urban environment⁷, Sustainable development is a much broader concept than environmental protection. It implies a concern for future generations and for the long-term health and integrity of the environment. It embraces concern for the quality of life (not just income growth), for equity between people in the present (including prevention of poverty), for inter-generation equity (people in the future deserve an environment which is at least as good as the one we currently enjoy, if not better) and for the social and ethical dimensions of human welfare. It also implies that further development should only take place as long as it is within the carrying capacity of natural systems. Clearly addressing the sustainable development agenda provides new challenges for urban policy integration within holistic frameworks.

As aforementioned, sustainable development relates to the principle of meeting human development goals while at the same time sustaining the ability of natural systems to provide the natural resources and ecosystem services upon which the economy and society depend.⁸ While the concept of sustainable development has been relevant since time immemorial, it can be argued that the relevance deepens with the dawn of every day because the population keeps increasing but the natural resources available to humankind do not. Conscious of this phenomenon, global concerns have always been expressed for judicious use of the available resources. Besides the Brundtland Report, the latest of these concerns translated into the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which can be regarded as its policy descendants turned into measurable agendas.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Regarding the notion of sustainable development, Louis Jacobus⁹ in his work, raises its relevance and attempts to answer the question of whether sustainable development still has a role to play in upholding the rule of law for nature. Using South Africa as a case study, his response is in the positive when considered through a constitutional lens. In South Africa, sustainable development has been an integral part of the legal order since the advent of democracy and transition to a constitutional state in 1994. After many years of racial discrimination and oppression under the apartheid, the wider political and socio-economic changes in the country were accompanied by sweeping reforms of, among others, the environmental governance regime. The country therefore enclosed an environmental right in the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa in 1996. Then, it adopted a comprehensive body of environmental legislation in a bid to give effect to its wider policies and the myriad constitutional objectives of the new environmental right¹⁰. This way, sustainable development has thus become a constitutional concern in the country. However, this has led only to the recognition of sustainable development as an important right. This work goes beyond that to consider it as a factor for the survival of humanity.

⁵ Ukaga, U., Maser., C., & Reichenbach, M. "Sustainable development: principles, frameworks, and case studies." *International Journal of Sustainability in Higher Education*, 12(2), Emerald Group Publishing Limited, 2011.

⁶ World Commission on Environment and Development. *Our common future*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1987.

⁷ Commission of the European Communities. *Green paper on the urban environment*. Brussels, Office for Official Publications of the European Communities, 1990, p. 59 (CB-CO-90-276-EN-C).

⁸ Cerin, P. (2006). "Bringing economic opportunity into line with environmental influence: A discussion on the coase theorem and the Porter and van der Linde hypothesis". *Ecological Economics*, 56, 2006, 209–225.

⁹ Louis J. K., "Sustainable Development and the Rule of Law for Nature: a constitutional reading", *Rule of Law for nature: New dimensions and ideas in environmental law*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, Voigt C ed. 2013, p. 130-145.

¹⁰ Michael A. Kidd, *Environmental Law*, 2nd ed. Capetown: Juta, 2011.

Colin Williams and Andrew Millington¹¹ analyze the issue of what it means to pursue sustainable development from two core schools of thought, more as a spectrum of reflection: the weaker sustainable development and the stronger sustainable development. In their opinion, the weaker sustainable development is human-centered and is based on a relationship between man and nature, and faith is placed in scientific and technological expertise and the aptitude of mankind to solve any problems that may arise concerning resource depletion. Implicit optimism is therefore very important under this head. With the stronger sustainable development, the focus is on changing the demands made on the earth, due to the belief that the earth is finite and no habitable future can be possible unless the demand-side of the equation radically alters by rethinking man's attitude towards nature as well as man's view of economic progress and development¹². To them, the more prominent view nowadays is that of the weaker sustainable development.

They further state that the issue of 'sustainable development' is so exciting because it is the subject that has always had, and will continue to possess, the potential to unite scholars from various fields of study like geography and geographers. For instance, since sustainable development is a discussion about the future of the Earth and its inhabitants, and that geography is a natural breeding ground for many of the core issues to be explored, it would be nothing less than foolish for the geography community to not take on the mantle of the 'holistic' science that is most capable of dealing with this issue. This position is closely connected to the research because it clearly demonstrates that the notion of sustainable development is not the business of the administrative and legal authorities alone, but an issue, which concerns everyone. This thereby fosters the principles of development such as inclusion and participation. On the other hand, this view has been expressed without any real implementation mechanism. This work seeks to be more pragmatic than theoretical.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The researcher employs the qualitative research methodology to carry on with the research.

Qualitative research refers to a range of approaches, which aim to generate an in-depth and interpreted understanding of the social world, by learning about people's social and material circumstances, their experiences, perspectives and histories.¹³ It deals with phenomena that are related to the quality of the topic under investigation. It has to do with issues such as finding out the reasons for a particular behavior, discovering opinions about a particular subject matter and understanding why people do certain things in a certain way. It is based on reason behind various aspects of behavior.

The qualitative research approach is beneficial for this work in several ways. Given the nature of the topic, the researcher is more interested in obtaining information based on opinions and experiences. Sustainable development is a concept that cuts across every sector of life and on a daily basis affecting the wellbeing of the populace in a manner that cannot be sufficiently determined using figures. Thus, qualitative research methodology is more suitable for this research, for it is far more experiential. Qualitative research methodology will better capture the changing attitudes of persons per target group. Also, in cases of ambiguity or where the responses do not meet the expectations of the researcher, especially for a topic as sensitive as sustainable development, there is room for explanation and clarity, which is not the case with quantitative research methodology.

The principal method of research, which is used is the doctrinal research method, based on content analysis of primary and secondary data. Doctrinal research involves theorizing without any particular regard to the practical consequences that may occur. It is also referred to as visionary or conceptual research because it involves enquiry into doctrines. Under this head, legal researchers often go through voluminous texts, statutes, publications, cases, after which they carry out analyses before providing recommendations. Data collection here includes the process of consulting both primary and secondary sources of data. The primary sources of

¹¹ Colin C. W. and Andrew C. M., "The diverse and contested meanings of sustainable development", *The Geographical Journal*, Vol. 170, No. 2, June 2004, pp. 99–104

¹² Warburton D, "Community and sustainable development: participation in the future", Earthscan, London, 1998.

¹³ Umesh Kemparaj et al, Qualitative research: a brief description, Indian J. Med Sci. 2013, available online at <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/24231397/&ved> last accessed on the 27th April 2026.

information refer to those sources from which original information about a particular subject can be gotten. They constitute the main source of data under doctrinal research and for this reason, they are indispensable for any legal research. Some of the primary sources include international conventions, governmental and non-governmental reports, the Constitution, the National Gazette, case reports. Secondary sources, on the other hand, provide information which is derivative of the primary sources and they play a more supportive role during the investigation into the conceptual basis of laid down norms and principles. Some of the secondary sources include treatises, encyclopedias, bibliographies, thesauri, commentaries and computerized sources. Doctrinal research method is convenient for this work because of the possibility to have answers to even difficult problems very quickly through analysis of legal principles and concepts. Information is very much made available at the libraries and bookshops thereby facilitating access.

Furthermore, the literature selection has been done based on the existence of numerous definitions of the concept of sustainable development and how much it has been discussed and debated over time in various sectors including sociology, ecology, economics and political science.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Meaning Of Sustainable Development

“Sustainable development” is a notoriously difficult, slippery and elusive concept to pin down. This is because several authors have provided definitions to this term as there is evidence that more than 80 different definitions exist, which are often competing and sometimes contradictory¹⁴. This implies that sustainable development therefore stands the risk of becoming a cliché like appropriate technology- a fashionable and rhetoric phrase- to which everyone pays homage but nobody seems to define with precision and exactitude.¹⁵

Worthy of note is the fact that the modern debate on sustainable development is led by the United Nations. Having held world summits for more than 40 years, it has released the most elaborated concept of sustainable development. The starting point of this global agenda for a change was the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment (UNCHE)¹⁶. This conference was the first world conference to make the environment a major issue. It was in this conference that, the foundation of the concept of sustainable development was clarified as the alignment of human development and the planet’s environmental limits. In addition, twenty-six principles on the capacity of the Earth, social as well as economic development for a favorable living, and an action plan with over 60 recommendations were worked out¹⁷.

Equally, further elaborating on the concept of sustainable development, the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED), also known as the Brundtland Commission, defined sustainable development as a development “that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs”¹⁸. In other words, in order to fulfill the human needs and to ameliorate the quality of human life, development is of vital importance. Hence, it is the process of continuing growth or development without affecting the environment negatively.

A few years after Brundtland report, more than 300 definitions and interpretations of the concept of sustainable development were traced¹⁹. Note should be taken that the concept of sustainable development may have different meaning depending on the analyzed literature on the concept in which it is used. It is for this reason, that the descriptions of sustainable development mentioned below would include multiple aspects of this concept.

¹⁴ Fowke R and Prasad D, “Sustainable development, cities and local government”, *Australian Planner*, 1996, 33 61–6.

¹⁵ Mensah, J., & Enu-Kwesi, F. “Implication of environmental sanitation management in the catchment area of Benya”, Ghana. *Journal of Integrative Environmental Sciences*, 2018.

¹⁶ The United Nations Conference on the Human Environment (UNCHE) took place in Stockholm in the year 1972.

¹⁷ UNCHE, 1972.

¹⁸ The United Nations General Assembly, “Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development: Our Common Future”, Oxford University Press, 1987.

¹⁹ Dobson A. “Environmental Sustainabilities: An analysis and a typology”, *Environmental Politics*, 5(3), 1996, 401-428.

Pirages in his opinion, stated that sustainable growth means economic growth that is supported by the physical and social environment²⁰. Thus, sustainable development may be understood as the process of economic development and structural changes helping to broaden human possibilities. This development is determined by the power of knowledge about development and is best seen through sustainable and balanced development of human possibilities and ability to assume social responsibility for oneself, the society, and future generations.

IUCN²¹, UNEP²² & WWF²³, refer to sustainable development as a process of improving the quality of human life within the framework of carrying capacity of the sustainable ecosystems. According to the representatives of these international organizations, the term sustainable consumption should be applied only to renewable resources²⁴. The term sustainable development should mean the following: the improvement in the population's quality of life while taking into consideration the ecosystem's regenerating capacity that can be described as the maximal continuous load on the environment²⁵, and the carrying capacity – the greatest number of population that can survive in the presence of ecological balance²⁶. At the same time, it can be stated that in some aspects sustainable development includes the analysis of conditions under which ecosystems may preserve the regenerating ability, which means making choices in the sense of time and space.

Holdgate stated that development is understanding of the potential of resources. He defined sustainable development of renewable natural resources means taking into consideration the limits of the development process, even if those limits are changed by technologies²⁷. Thus, sustainability of technology may be evaluated according to whether it increases productivity at the same time preserving environmental and other boundaries.

Pearce et al. provided a more generalized definition by suggesting that sustainable development implies a conceptual socio-economic system which ensures the sustainability of goals in the form of real income achievement and improvement of educational standards, health care and the overall quality of life²⁸.

The definition of Vare & Scott is to the effect that sustainable development is a process of changes, where resources are raised, the direction of investments is determined, the development of technology is focused and the work of different institutions is harmonized, thus the potential for achieving human needs and desires is increased as well²⁹.

For Meadows, sustainable development is a social construction derived from the long-term evolution of a highly complex system- human population and economic development integrated into ecosystems and biochemical processes of the Earth³⁰. As complex as this may sound, this definition includes a connection between the so-called pillars of sustainability- the environment, the society and the economy.

Vander-Merwe & Van-der-Merwe, consider that sustainable development is a program that changes the economic development process to ensure the basic quality of life, protecting valuable ecosystems and other

²⁰ Pirages, D. C. "A social design for sustainable growth". In: *The Sustainable Society – Implications for Limited Growth*. New York, 1977.

²¹ International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (1948).

²² United Nations Environment Programme (1972).

²³ World Wildlife Fund (1961).

²⁴ IUCN, UNEP, WWF, "Caring for the Earth. A strategy for sustainable living". London: Earthscan, 1991.

²⁵ Catton, W. "Carrying capacity and the limits to freedom". Paper prepared for Social Ecology Session 1, XI World Congress of Sociology, New Delhi, 1986.

²⁶ Sorlin, S. "The road towards sustainability – a historical perspective". Uppsala: Uppsala University, 1997.

²⁷ Holdgate, M. W. "The sustainable use of tropical coastal resources – a key conservation issue". *AMBIO*(22), 1993, 481-482.

²⁸ Pearce D., Barbier E. and Markandya A., "Sustainable Development: *Economics and Environment in the Third World*." Edward Elgar Publishing/Earthscan Publications, 1990.

²⁹ Vare, P. & Scott, W. "Learning for a change exploring the relationship between education and sustainable development". *Journal of Education for Sustainable Development*, 1, 2007, 191-198.

³⁰ Meadows, D.H. "Indicators and Information Systems for Sustainable Development. A report to the Balaton Group", The Sustainability Institute, 1998.

communities at the same time³¹. This goes in line with the definition provided by Lele when he referred to sustainable development as a process of targeted changes that can be repeated forever³². Development that occurs in such a manner must be carried out often to ensure continuous progress and growth.

Another writer known as Sterling defined sustainable development as a reconciliation of the economy and the environment on a new path of development that will enable the long-term sustainable development of humankind³³. This definition suggests a close relationship between both economic and ecological resources for efficiency in development, and consequently for a durable period.

Duran et al., on their part defined sustainable development simply as a development that protects the environment, because a sustainable environment enables sustainable development³⁴.

The definitions above greatly follow the core of the concept set out in the basic definition of the WCED. In those definitions, sustainable development is mostly perceived as a socio-economic system that enables human needs, but also a long-term progress towards well-being and improvement of overall quality of life in accordance with environmental constraints.

Since sustainable development is closely linked to ecological issues, given that nature provides fundamental opportunities and constraints to development, the understanding of the concept of sustainable development in theory is mostly related to ecological sustainability – a development that provides the necessary environmental conditions, which enable life on a certain level of well-being for present and future generations³⁵. This is also a holistic (sustainable) approach which does not observe sustainable development separately from environmental protection and which is placed in a global ecological, socio-economic and political context³⁶. However, in order to achieve the necessary ecological conditions, certain social conditions also have to be achieved considering their influence on ecological sustainability or unsustainability.

Pillars Of Sustainable Development

In 2005, the UN World Summit acknowledged the existence of three components, whose harmonious coexistence forms the basis of sustainability: the economic, environmental and social pillars. Given that the purpose of Sustainable Development is to “meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”, it is expedient to take into account these three main areas of influence, the so-called “Three Pillars of Sustainability” which have emerged as principles without a single point of origin³⁷.

³¹ Vander-Merwe, I. & Van-der-Merwe, J. “Sustainable development at the local level: An introduction to local agenda 21”. Pretoria: Department of environmental affairs and tourism, 1999.

³² Lele, S.M. “Sustainable development: A Critical Review”, *World Development*, 19(6), 1991, 607-621.

³³ Sterling, S. “Learning for resilience, or the resilient learner? Towards a necessary reconciliation in a paradigm of sustainable education”. *Environmental Education Research*, 16, 2010, 511-528.

³⁴ Duran, C.D., Gogan, L.M., Artene, A. & Duran. “The components of sustainable development - a possible approach”. *Procedia Economics and Finance*, 26, 2015, 806-811.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Sharpley, R. “Tourism and Sustainable Development: Exploring the Theoretical Divide”. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, 8(1), 2000, 1-19.

³⁷ Purvis, Ben; Mao Yong, Robinson, Darren, “Three Pillars of Sustainability: in search of conceptual origins”, *Sustainability Science*, 14(3), 2018, 681-695.

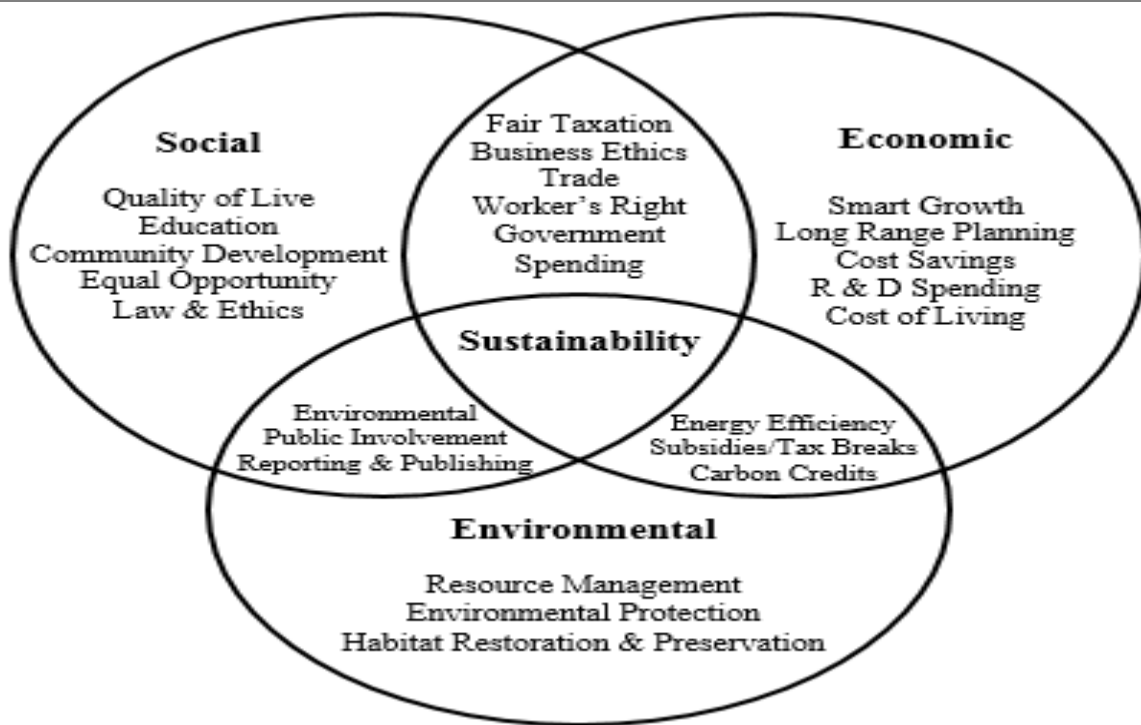


Figure 1 – Social, Economic and Environmental Pillars of Sustainable Development³⁸

These three principles are interconnected and if they are combined and applied in real world situations, they can create a steady base for a sustainable world from which everybody can benefit. The three principles of sustainability as shown on the figure above are discussed in the following lines.

Environmental Sustainability

In order to achieve environmental sustainability, natural environment should retain its total functionality and utility for a long period. It is preferable that actions taken should encourage a balance in our natural environment while simultaneously promoting positive growth rates. Any actions that disrupt the balance of the environment should be avoided but if they occur, they should be limited to a lesser extent. Environmental impacts of any action or decision should be taken into account.

There is a variety of issues related with environmental sustainability from pollution to the management of natural resources. The main purpose of Environmental Sustainability is to minimize the impact of human activities to the environment and furthermore encourage the restoration and preservation of our natural habitat³⁹. Indubitably, Sustainable Development is closely linked to the environment. Since humans have a direct need of the environment for all their activities, its protection and proper management are the most important subjects that occupy the international community's agenda⁴⁰. Henceforth it has become obvious that beyond the big growth of human societies a big destruction of the planet has befallen also.

The importance of prudent management of natural resources, even though it is a factor that seriously influences the human growth, came relatively recently at the limelight. It began to be presented in the bibliography from 1990 although it had been mentioned from Malthus around 1798. For the most part of the human history, the Earth was considered to have inexhaustible natural resources, capable to satisfy the needs of people forever.

The viability of environment concerns the environment (artificial and natural) as ecosystem. Ecosystem is a system that includes the biotic and abiotic factors of a region, as well as the interactions that exist between

³⁸ Hafizyar R. & Dheyaaldin M.H., "Concrete Technology and Sustainable Development From Past to Future" available at, <https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Fig-1-Significant-three-pillars-of-sustainability> last accessed on the 29 April 2026.

³⁹ N.A. Piskuloya, "Sustainable Development: New Challenges: A Textbook for High Schools" ed. V.I.Danilova-Danilyana, Publishing house "Aspect Press", 2015, p. 38

⁴⁰ Bosselmann, K. "Losing the Forest for the Trees: Environmental Reductionism in the Law, 2(8): 2010, 2424-2448.

each other⁴¹. Therefore, the resistance of the ecosystem in changes and his adaptability ought to be studied carefully. Depending on the results of each study, the suitable management plan for the ecosystem would be selected. The resource allocation should be done based on their availability but also with regard to the needs of his members. Attention should be paid not only in the process of production but also in the use of various sources of energy and natural resources.

Apart from the interest for the correct use of environment in order to cover the human needs, sustainable development is also concerned with the protection of environment with the aim to leave it in a good condition for the future generations. The Earth is considered a closed system, that is to say it has a certain number of resources to use, thus the needs of its residents should be covered with caution without wastefulness so that the future ones are also capable to cover theirs. An environmental ecosystem however is more vulnerable to changes than a social or an economic system. So it becomes clear that the economic growth, and consequently the social, has limits that are determined by the finite environment of the planet⁴². Balance is achieved via sustainable development, because it combines these three systems and finds the optimal solution that will give the best possible result without disturbing the balance of each one separately.

Any policy towards sustainable development of the environment is controlled with environmental indicators. The indicators are decided with international collaboration and are widely acceptable. They can be adopted in anyone sector of the state or global level governance. There are indicators concerning water, land, air, various natural resources and waste. They are separated in qualitative, that describe the actions and their results, and quantitative, who deal with the numerical measurements of the involved quantities.

The environment constitutes one of the three pylons of Sustainable Development and perhaps, until some level, the base for the growth of the other two. Hence it is certain that the need of his protection and his prudent management are of critical importance if we want our growth, both social and economic, to lead us to a better future and not to destruction⁴³.

Economic Sustainability

Economic sustainability is the ability of an economy to support a defined level of economic production indefinitely. Economic value can be created out of every project or decision. Economic sustainability refers to decisions that are made in the most prudent way possible with respect to the other aspects of sustainability. True sustainability is not promoted when only the economic aspects are considered. On the large scale the usual approach used to be “business as usual” which meant than profit was the only concern and aim of firms. However, when good business practices are incorporated with the social and environmental aspects of sustainability, the result is significantly more positive.

Economic sustainability consists of many things. From "smart growth" to subsidies or tax breaks for green development. It is important though to reinforce and promote it with education programs, research and informing the public. In addition, much emphasis should be placed on other areas such as reducing unnecessary spending. When the Brundtland Commission defined sustainable development as “the development that meets the needs of the present without compromising future generations to meet their own needs”, it included one of the most crucial and most influential sector in the entire world, the economic one. Economy is a mechanism that surrounds every action we do and facilitates our everyday lives by making transactions easier, more efficient and more direct. Technology’s radical development has contributed the most to the connection of the global economy, as nowadays markets are strictly interconnected with the constant expansion and reaching ability of the Internet.

⁴¹ Ecosystem: Definition, Components and Structure, available at, <https://greenly.earth/en-gb/blog/ecology-news> last accessed on 29 April 2026.

⁴² Louis J, Rakhyun E, et al, “Chapter 6: Planetary Integrity”, *the Political Impact of the Sustainable Development Goals: Transforming Governance Through Global Goals?* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022, pp. 140-171.

⁴³ Bosselmann, K. “Losing the Forest for the Trees: Environmental Reductionism in the Law”, New York: Routledge, 2010, 2424-2448.

Economic theory states that people devote themselves into maximizing their utility deriving from the consumption of products and services (nutrition, clothing, transportation, healthcare, insurance, education, etc.). One of the most fundamental elements of the economy that defines every action is definitely the element of time. Time, not only surrounds every aspect of the global economy, but steadily and gradually makes money to lose its value in the depth of the ages (discount). The major issue with the combination of time, global economy and sustainable development is that economies do not use resources efficiently. Current resources will lose their value in the long-term according to the discount rate of time. On the other hand, by establishing a conveniently low discount rate will eventually result in the provision of equity to future generations to come.

Furthermore, scarcity consists of one of the most essential economic principles of sustainable development. Scarcity of the earth's resources makes it essential for the economies of the world to discover the optimum level of consumption and exploitation of the available resources. As the Italian economist, Vilfredo Pareto stated the concept of the level of optimality, as a state of the allocation of the resources in which it is impossible to make any one individual better off, without making at least one individual worse off, and as a result, the term "Pareto Optimal" was named after the famous economist.

In addition, economic sovereignty at an individual and national level is one vital principle in order to achieve economic sustainability. People and nations must have personal and national economic sovereignty correspondingly and should focus their efforts on not to be entirely dependent to excessive borrowed money, which decreases their economic future fertility⁴⁴.

To achieve global sustainability, economies all around the world should cooperate under the umbrella of sustainable development. Economic growth should be reconsidered at an international level, as countries exceed the carrying capacity of the planet at the time being.

Social Sustainability

Social Sustainability relies on decisions and projects that promote the general improvement of society. Generally, the social aspect of sustainability supports the concept of intragenerational justice, which means that future generations are entitled with the same or greater quality of life as current generations. This concept also encloses many other socially related issues such as environmental law, human and labour rights, health equity, community development via public involvement and participation, social capital, support justice and responsibility, cultural competence, community resilience, and human adaptation.

The social dimension of sustainability is equally important as the other two pillars. Some writers are of the view that all the domains of sustainability are social and so the social aspect should be at the centre of operations⁴⁵. The economic and political aspects of sustainability depend on the relationship between the social and the natural and the ecological sphere includes the activity of human beings. From this perspective, it can be said that social sustainability encompasses every human activity⁴⁶. Thus, if the social component is not taken into serious consideration it can lead to the collapse of the whole process of sustainability as well as the society itself.

Social sustainable development requires in principle the existence of equity and social justice. In this context, the fair redistribution of social goods and life chances is deemed an indispensable need, not only at national and international level, but also at the intergenerational level, in order for all citizens of the world, without discrimination, to have equal opportunities at survival and the development of their personality. This notion of equity comprises a broad spectrum of policy sectors, both in the form of important provisions, such as clean and drinkable water, food, labour, education, shelter, basic medicine and a clean environment, and in the form of relevant legislative reforms, in states where the latter are absent, with the aim of promoting freedom and combatting discrimination based on gender, race, religion and various other factors.

⁴⁴ Berg C. "Sustainable Action: overcoming the barriers", Abingdon, Oxon, 2020, ISBN 978-0-429-57873-1.

⁴⁵ Boyer R. et al, "Five Approaches to Social Sustainability and an Integrated Way Forward" 8(9): 2016, 878.

⁴⁶ James P, Manfred B. et al, "Urban Sustainability in Theory and Practice: Circles of Sustainability", London: Routledge, 2015, ISBN 9781315765747.

Social justice, however, does not seek to eradicate social inequalities solely as a purely social measure, but it also presents certain environmental dimensions, since socially and economically vulnerable groups of people are more prone to environmental problems, while they are unable to respond to sustainable development requirements of environmental nature precisely due to their economic distress. It is worth mentioning indicatively that pollution and the effects of climate change, such as extreme weather conditions, have a disproportionate and stronger impact on people of low income and people living on the threshold of poverty, while they exacerbate inequalities, as economically vulnerable groups tend to live in marginalised regions, and possess fewer means of defence against environmental disasters. Respectively, the fiscal measures imposed as a means of tackling climate change, such as raises in energy prices and energy taxes, may deepen poverty levels, while achieving the opposite result to the one they aim at, since low-income households turn towards fuel resources with higher carbon content, namely to non-environmentally friendly solutions. Therefore, the social dimension of sustainable development, and particularly the principle of equity, stresses the need for providing help to said vulnerable groups, in order for the latter to adjust to the consequences of climate change (e.g. the provision of suitable technology to strongly affected countries and regions), and moreover, for their protection from fiscal measures which aim at tackling climate change, yet bear severe consequences for these groups.

Going back to the definition of sustainable development, we can further observe that the global community is required to safeguard both intra-generational and intergenerational equity. The ancient Indian proverb, according to which “we do not inherit the Earth from our ancestors – we borrow it from our children”, precisely conveys the sentiment of responsibility towards the following generations, which will have to tolerate in the future the impact of the actions of the present generation on the environment and the climate, as a result of the current economic growth. It is therefore deemed necessary that environmental and economic resources be handled in a manner that simultaneously responds to the provision of welfare to the non-privileged members of the present generation, as well as to the commitment towards future generations, through the adoption of measures⁴⁷ such as the dissemination of technological solutions worldwide and the reduction of consumption.

Despite the fact that social justice quite takes up the largest part of the social dimension of sustainable development, it could be held that the realization of this dimension depends on some additional components of the social pillar, which are inextricably linked with each other and whose common denominator is the active role of society. Social cohesion, for instance, has been characterized by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) as a major social index with various meanings and a dominant role in the sustainable development policy of the European Union, while it is also connected to the need for enhancing the participation of individuals and groups in decision-making procedures for the achievement of environmental goals. Furthermore, the realization of social justice and sustainable development requires informing and raising awareness of the public on sustainability issues, through the support of every competent actor, in order for citizens, enterprises and states to shift towards alternative and sustainable forms of consumption, while simultaneously complying with the environmental legislation in force.

CONCLUSION

Sustainable development has become a popular catchphrase in contemporary development discourse. However, in spite of its pervasiveness and the massive popularity it has garnered over the years, the concept still seems unclear as many people continue to ask questions about its meaning as well as what it entails and implies for development theory and practice. Nevertheless, the ultimate aim of sustainable development is to achieve a balance among environmental, economic and social sustainability, thus, making these the pillars on which sustainable development rests. While not assuming a definitive posture, sustainability of society can be said to depend on the availability of proper health systems, peace and respect for human rights, decent work, gender equality, quality education and rule of law. Sustainability of economy, on the other hand, depends on

⁴⁷ Gizatullin H.N., Troitsky V.A. The concept of sustainable development: a new socio-economic paradigm // Social Sciences and the Present 1998 No. 5. P. 124-130. The pace of development of modern technologies should be commensurate with population growth and needs.

adoption of appropriate production, distribution and consumption while sustainability of the environment is driven by proper physical planning and land use as well as conservation of ecology or biodiversity.

Moreover, it is observed that the social pillar of sustainable development is in constant interaction with the other two pillars, the environmental pillar and the economic one, while, at the same time, each of them is underpinned by the need to ensure intragenerational as well as intergenerational development. Therefore, any society that has a high degree of social sustainability is closer to having liveable communities with good life standards. Since the second half of the twentieth century, it has become widely perceived that economic growth, social development and the protection of the environment are in constant interaction with each other, and the global community acknowledged the significance of achieving all three of these aims in a balanced manner, in order to ensure a form of long-term development on international level, whereby all present as well as future generations are to enjoy a decent living. This goal is identical to the essence of the principle of sustainable development. Although ensuring sustainable development is everyone's business, global, regional, national organisations as well as governments and civil society organisations are advised and expected to show ownership, leadership and citizenship.

REFERENCES

1. Berg C. (2020). Sustainable Action: overcoming the barriers, Abingdon, Oxon ISBN 978-0-429-57873-1.
2. Bosselmann, K. (2010). Losing the Forest for the Trees: Environmental Reductionism in the Law, 2(8): 2424-2448.
3. Boyer R. et al, (2016). Five Approaches to Social Sustainability and an Integrated Way Forward 8(9): 878.
4. Catton, W. (1986). Carrying capacity and the limits to freedom. Paper prepared for Social Ecology Session 1, XI World Congress of Sociology, New Delhi.
5. Cerin, P. (2006). Bringing economic opportunity into line with environmental influence: A discussion on the coase theorem and the Porter and van der Linde hypothesis. *Ecological Economics*, 56, 209–225.
6. Colin C. W. and Andrew C. M. (2004). The diverse and contested meanings of sustainable development. *The Geographical Journal*, Vol. 170 , No. 2, pp. 99–104
7. Dobson A. (1996). Environmental Sustainabilities: An analysis and a typology, *Environmental Politics*, 5(3), 401-428.
8. Duran, C.D., Gogan, L.M., Artene, A. & Duran. (2015). The components of sustainable development - a possible approach. *Procedia Economics and Finance*, 26, 806-811.
9. Fowke R and Prasad D, (1996). Sustainable development, cities and local government, *Australian Planner*, 33.
10. Gizatullin H.N., Troitsky V.A. (1998). The concept of sustainable development: a new socio-economic paradigm // *Social Sciences and the Present* No. 5. P. 124-130.
11. Hafizyar R. & Dheyaaldin M.H., "Concrete Technology and Sustainable Development From Past to Future" available at, <https://www.researchgate.net/figure/fig-1-significant-three-pillars-of-sustainability> last accessed on the 29 April 2026.
12. Holdgate, M. W. (1993). The sustainable use of tropical coastal resources – a key conservation issue. *AMBIO* (22), 481-482.
13. James P, Manfred B. et al, (2015). *Urban Sustainability in Theory and Practice: Circles of Sustainability*, London: Routledge, ISBN 9781315765747.
14. Lele, S.M. (1991). Sustainable development: A Critical Review, *World Development*, 19(6), 607-621.
15. Louis J. K., (2013). *Sustainable Development and the Rule of Law for Nature: a constitutional reading, Rule of Law for nature: New dimensions and ideas in environmental law*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, Voigt C ed., p. 130-145.
16. Louis J, Rakhyun E, et al, (2022). Chapter 6: Planetary Integrity, In, *the Political Impact of the Sustainable Development Goals: Transforming Governance Through Global Goals?* pp. 140-171, Cambridge University Press.
17. Meadows, D.H. (1998). *Indicators and Information Systems for Sustainable Development. A report to the Balaton Group*, The Sustainability Institute.

18. Mensah, J., & Enu-Kwesi, F. (2018). Implication of environmental sanitation management in the catchment area of Benya, Ghana. *Journal of Integrative Environmental Sciences*.
19. Michael A. Kidd, (2011) *Environmental Law*, 2nd ed. Capetown: Juta.
20. Pearce D., Barbier E. and Markandya A., (1990). *Sustainable Development: Economics and Environment in the Third World*, Edward Elgar Publishing/Earthscan Publications.
21. Pirages, D. C. (1977). A social design for sustainable growth. In: *The Sustainable Society – Implications for Limited Growth*. New York.
22. Piskuloya N. A., (2015). *Sustainable Development: New Challenges: A Textbook for High Schools* ed. V.I.Danilova-Danilyana, p. 38, Publishing house Aspect Press.
23. Purvis, Ben; Mao Yong, Robinson, Darren, (2018). Three Pillars of Sustainability: in search of conceptual origins, *Sustainability Science*, 14(3), 681-695.
24. Rio de Janeiro Declaration on Environment and Development. 1992. URL: available online at http://www.un.org/ru/documents/decl_conv/declarations/riodecl. Last accessed on 25th March 2026.
25. Sharpley, R. (2000). Tourism and Sustainable Development: Exploring the Theoretical Divide. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, 8(1), 1-19.
26. Sorlin, S. (1997). *The road towards sustainability – a historical perspective*. Uppsala: Uppsala University.
27. Sterling, S. (2010). Learning for resilience, or the resilient learner? Towards a necessary reconciliation in a paradigm of sustainable education. *Environmental Education Research*, 16, 511-528.
28. Ukaga, U., Maser., C., & Reichenbach, M. (2011). *Sustainable development: principles, frameworks, and case studies*. International Journal of Sustainability in Higher Education, 12(2), Emerald Group Publishing Limited.
29. United Nations Conference on the Environment. Rio de Janeiro, 1992 available online at <http://prometeus.nsc.ru/koptyug/ideas/unrio92/005-023.ssi> last accessed on 25th March 2026.
30. United Nations General Assembly, (1987). *Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development: Our Common Future*, Oxford University Press.
31. Vander-Merwe, I. & Van-der-Merwe, J. (1999). *Sustainable development at the local level: An introduction to local agenda 21*. Pretoria: Department of environmental affairs and tourism.
32. Vare, P. & Scott, W. (2007) Learning for a change exploring the relationship between education and sustainable development. *Journal of Education for Sustainable Development*, 1, 191-198.
33. Warburton D, (1998) *Community and sustainable development: participation in the future*, Earthscan, London.