

Understanding Sustainability

“Sustainability” is a popular word, but many people don’t truly understand what it means or encompasses. The following content was excerpted from the website of the Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education (AASHE). COCC is a current AASHE member.



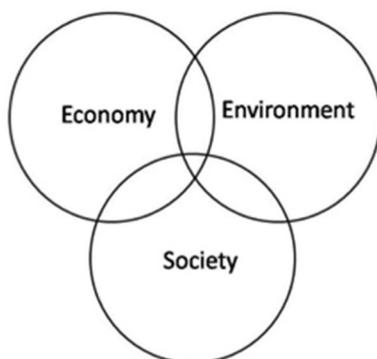
One of the most popular definitions of sustainability is actually a definition of sustainable development. It is from *Our Common Future: The Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development*, commonly known as the Brundtland Commission Report:

Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. It contains within it two key concepts:

1. the concept of 'needs', in particular the essential needs of the world's poor, to which overriding priority should be given; and
2. the idea of limitations imposed by the state of technology and social organization on the environment's ability to meet present and future needs.

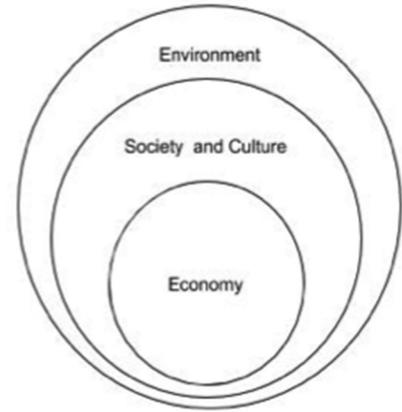
The interconnectedness and interdependence of the social, environmental, and economic components of sustainability are included throughout *Our Common Future*. The Brundtland Commission writes, “Our inability to promote the common interest in sustainable development is often a product of the relative neglect of economic and social justice.” The report continues, “A world in which poverty and inequity are endemic will always be prone to ecological and other crises. Sustainable development requires meeting the basic needs of all and extending to all the opportunity to satisfy their aspirations for a better life.”

Today most uses of and references to sustainability emphasize the concept’s simultaneous economic, environmental, and social dimensions. For example, businesses talk about the triple bottom line: people, planet, and profits (or, alternately, human capital, natural capital, and financial capital). Likewise, sustainability educators commonly refer to the Three E’s of sustainability: economy, ecology, and equity.



Popular representations of sustainability also underscore the concept’s three dimensions. Sustainability experts often use a three-legged stool as a symbol for sustainability. The social, economic, and environmental components each represent one of the stool’s legs. If one of the legs is missing, the sustainability stool can’t balance or function. A common illustration of sustainability is the diagram at left depicting three overlapping circles representing environmental needs, economic needs, and social needs. The area where the circles overlap and all three needs are met is the area of sustainability.

Another popular representation is the diagram at right in which sustainability is depicted as three concentric circles to further emphasize the interdependence of the three dimensions - the economic existing within the social/cultural, and both existing within the environment.



In 2015, the United Nations published "[Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#)", a "plan of action for people, planet and prosperity". The publication outlines 17 [Sustainable Development Goals](#) and 169 targets, and seeks to build on previous efforts by outlining a 15-year agenda that balances "the three dimensions of sustainable development: the economic, social and environmental".



For more information, visit AASHE's website:

<https://stars.aashe.org/pages/about/understanding-sustainability.html>