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# Sustainable Development Introduction

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by Anup Shah | This Page [Last Updated Wednesday, November 18, 2009](#)

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## What is Sustainable Development?

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The idea of sustainable development grew from numerous environmental movements in earlier decades and was defined in 1987 by the World Commission on Environment and Development (*Brundtland Commission 1987*) as:

**Sustainable Development**

Development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

This contributed to the understanding that [sustainable development encompasses a number of areas](#) and highlights sustainability as the idea of environmental, economic and social progress and equity, all within the limits of the world's natural resources.

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## Little Progress So Far

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However, the record on moving towards sustainability so far appears to have been quite poor.

Though we might not always hear about it, sustainable development (and all the inter-related issues associated

with it) is an urgent issue, and has been for many years, though political will has been slow-paced at best. For example, there are

- 1.3 billion without access to clean water;
- about half of humanity lacking access to adequate sanitation and living on less than 2 dollars a day;
- approximately 2 billion without access to electricity;
- [Sources](#) »

And this is in an age of immense wealth in increasingly fewer hands. The inequality of consumption (and therefore, use of resources, which affects the environment) is terribly skewed: “20% of the world’s people in the highest-income countries account for 86% of total private consumption expenditures — the poorest 20% a minuscule 1.3%” according to the [1998 United Nations Human Development Report](#).

## The Earth Summit in 1992 Attempted to Highlight the Importance of Sustainability

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The 1992 Rio Earth Summit was attended by 152 world leaders, and sustainability was enshrined in Agenda 21, a plan of action, and a recommendation that all countries should produce national sustainable development strategies. Despite binding conventions and numerous detailed reports, there seems to have been little known about the details to ordinary citizens around the world.

[In the 10+ years since Rio, there has been little change](#) in poverty levels, inequality or sustainable development, as the World Development Movement notes. “Despite thousands of fine words the last decade has joined the 1980’s as another ‘lost decade for sustainable development’ with deepening poverty, global inequality and environmental destruction”.

As *LEAD* and *Panos* highlight, “In the ten years since Rio, sustainable development hasn’t been very high on international agendas” and criticizes both rich and poor nations alike:

In many countries — rich and poor — this is often because of a perception that sustainability is expensive to implement and ultimately a brake on development. Poor countries for their part usually lack the physical infrastructure, ideas and human capacity to integrate sustainability into their development planning. Besides, they are often quite skeptical about rich countries’ real commitment to sustainable development and demand a more equitable sharing of environmental costs and responsibilities. Many people also believe that environmental problems can wait until developing countries are richer.

... Ten years on, there is still no widely shared vision of what sustainable development might mean in practice. India sees the idea of a light ecological footprint as part of its cultural heritage. Japan, on the other hand, is debating whether the emphasis should be on the “sustainable” or on the “development” half of the equation.

— [Roads to the Summit](#), *LEAD International and Panos London*, 30 August 2002 (Link is to a news report, which has a link to a Microsoft Word formatted document from which this was quoted.)

## The Millennium Ecosystem Assessment: Bleak Future

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In March 2005, the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (MA) was released. This 2,500-page report was four years in the making, drawn up by 1,300 researchers from 95 nations over four years, and funded by the Global Environment Facility, the United Nations Foundation, the World Bank and various others.

Surveying the planet, it made a number of conclusions that many have stressed for years. The key messages from the report included the following points:

- Everyone in the world depends on nature and ecosystem services to provide the conditions for a decent, healthy, and secure life.
- Humans have made unprecedented changes to ecosystems in recent decades to meet growing demands for food, fresh water, fiber, and energy [which has] helped to improve the lives of billions, but at the same time they weakened nature's ability to deliver other key services such as purification of air and water, protection from disasters, and the provision of medicines....
- Human activities have taken the planet to the edge of a massive wave of species extinctions, further threatening our own well-being.
- The loss of services derived from ecosystems is a significant barrier to the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals to reduce poverty, hunger, and disease.
- The pressures on ecosystems will increase globally in coming decades unless human attitudes and actions change.
- Measures to conserve natural resources are more likely to succeed if local communities are given ownership of them, share the benefits, and are involved in decisions.
- Even today's technology and knowledge can reduce considerably the human impact on ecosystems. They are unlikely to be deployed fully, however, until ecosystem services cease to be perceived as free and limitless, and their full value is taken into account.
- Better protection of natural assets will require coordinated efforts across all sections of governments, businesses, and international institutions. The productivity of ecosystems depends on policy choices on investment, trade, subsidy, taxation, and regulation, among others.

— [\*Living Beyond Our Means: Natural Assets and Human Well-being\*](#) , An interpretation of the key messages to emerge from the assessment, from the Board of Directors governing the MA process, March 2005

To the mainstream, this Assessment draws attention to the notion of the environment as having an economic value associated with it far greater than what is currently assigned (if anything).

The economic challenge is a complex one then. It requires proper accounting of resource use, as well as addressing purposes of consumption. What is normally counted economically as an “externality” needs to be internalized instead.

A *BBC* summary of the Assessment gives the following example:

- Airlines do not pay for the carbon dioxide they put into the atmosphere;
- The price of food does not reflect the cost of cleaning waterways that have been polluted by run-off of agrochemicals from the land.

There are countless other examples. Some vivid examples from this site include the following:

- [Beef consumption](#), highlighting enormous and severe environmental degradation around the world; many health problems; no positive nutritional value; and how it is largely wasteful in an economic sense;
- [Tobacco consumption](#) highlights how areas of land are used for a product that is costly to the environment, to people's personal health and to society's resources to provide health care;
- Treating [food as a commodity](#) has led to lots of food being grown, but by diverting land use to non-productive uses;
- Other parts of the [consumption](#) section show various other examples.
- The [Trade, Economy, & Related Issues](#) section on this site has a number of articles that show how economic and political decisions ultimately have an enormous impact on determining how the world's resources are used (and wasted).

More fundamentally, which the BBC, and much of mainstream fail to recognize, our main economic measurement, Gross Domestic Product (GDP), or Gross National Income (GNI), generally fails to measure environmental impacts because they are "external costs" borne by society instead.

If the cost of production included environmental impacts, the cost of safe disposal of many products and their waste, etc, that may help businesses think more about environmental factors in their products and services. In market-based economies (and with globalization always spreading, this increasingly implies most of us), this would be crucial.

For further information:

- [Millennium Economic Assessment](#) web site, where you can order the full report, see summaries (from where the above key points are presented)
- [Study highlights global decline](#), BBC, March 30, 2005, provides a summary of the report.

## Putting an economic value on the environment

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As noted in the [biodiversity](#) section, ecosystems provide many services to us, for free.

Despite these free benefits, it has long been recognized that we tend to ignore or underestimate the value of those services. So much so that economic measures such as GDP often ignores environmental costs, as also mentioned earlier.

[The Economics of Ecosystems and Biodiversity \(TEEB\)](#) is an organization — backed by the UN and various European governments — attempting to compile, build and make a compelling economics case for the conservation of ecosystems and biodiversity and notes the economic benefits of protecting the environment are well-understood, even if seemingly rarely practiced:

Numerous studies also show that investments in protected areas generate a cost-benefit ratio of

one to 25 and even one to 100 in some cases, [Pavan Sukhdev, from TEEB] said. Planting and protecting nearly 12,000 hectares of mangroves in Vietnam costs just over a million dollars but saved annual expenditures on dyke maintenance of well over seven million dollars.

— *Stephen Leahy, [Environment: Save At Least Half the Planet, or Lose It All](#), Inter Press Service, November 17, 2009*

It has perhaps taken about a decade or so — and a severe enough [global financial crisis](#) that has hit the heart of this way of thinking — to change this mentality (in which time, more greenhouse gases have been emitted — inefficiently).

Economists talk of the price signal that is fundamental to capitalism; the ability for prices to indicate when a resource is becoming scarcer. At such a time, markets mobilize automatically to address this by looking for ways to bring down costs. As a result, resources are supposedly infinite. For example, if energy costs go up, businesses will look for a way to minimize such costs for themselves, and it is in such a time that alternatives come about and/or existing resources last longer because they are used more efficiently. “Running out of resources” should therefore be averted.

However, it has long been argued that prices don't truly reflect the full cost of things, so either the signal is incorrect, or comes too late. The price signal also implies the poorest often pay the heaviest costs. For example, commercially over-fishing a region may mean fish from that area becomes harder to catch and more expensive, possibly allowing that ecosystem time to recover (though that is not guaranteed, either). However, while commercial entities can exploit resources elsewhere, local fishermen will go out of business and the poorer will likely go hungry (as also detailed on this site's section on [biodiversity](#)). This then has an impact on various local social, political and economic issues.

In addition to that, other related measurements, such as GNP are therefore flawed, and even reward unproductive or inefficient behavior (e.g. “Efficiently” producing unhealthy food — and the unhealthy consumer culture to go with it — may profit the food industry *and* a private health sector that has to deal with it, all of which require more use of resources. More examples are discussed on this site's section on [consumption and consumerism](#)).

Our continued inefficient pumping of greenhouse gases into the environment without factoring the enormous cost as the climate already begins to change is perhaps an example where price signals may come too late, or at a time when there is already significant impact to many people. Resources that could be available more indefinitely, become finite because of our inability or unwillingness to change.

**Markets fail to capture most ecosystem service values.** Existing price signals only reflect - at best - the share of total value that relates to provisioning services like food, fuel or water and their prices may be distorted. Even these services often bypass markets where carried out as part of community management of shared resources. The values of other ecosystem services are generally not reflected in markets apart from a few exceptions (such as tourism).

This is mainly explained by the fact that many ecosystem services are ‘public goods’ or ‘common goods’: they are often open access in character and non-rival in their consumption. In addition, their benefits are felt differently by people in different places and over different timescales. Private

and public decisions affecting biodiversity rarely consider benefits beyond the immediate geographical area.... They can also overlook local public benefits ... in favor of private benefits ..., even when local livelihoods are at stake, or focus on short-term gains to the detriment of the sustained supply of benefits over time....

Benefits that are felt with a long-term horizon (e.g. from climate regulation) are frequently ignored. This **systematic under-valuation of ecosystem services** and failure to capture the values is one of the main causes underlying today's biodiversity crisis. Values that are not overtly part of a financial equation are too often ignored.

— [The Economics of Ecosystems and Biodiversity for National and International Policy Makers 2009](#) , p.10  
(Emphasis original)

In effect, as *TEEB*, and many others before have argued, a key challenge will be adapting our economic systems to integrate sustainability and human well-being as well as other environmental factors to give us truer costs (after all, market systems are successful when there is *full* availability of information).

Think of some of the effects this could have:

- Some [industrial meat production](#), which is very harmful for the environment, may become more expensive
  - For example, as mentioned in the previous link, if water used by the meat industry in the United States were not subsidized by taxpayers, common hamburger meat would cost \$35 a pound.
  - Instead of regulation to change people's habits, markets would automatically reflect these true costs; consumers can then make better informed choices about what to consume, e.g. by reducing their meat consumption or demand more ecologically sustainable alternatives at reasonable cost.
- A reduction in meat production could protect forests or help reduce clearance of forests for cattle ranches, which would have a knock-on benefit for climate change concerns.
- Appropriate investment in [renewable energy](#) could threaten the fossil fuel industry though they are trying to adapt to that (perhaps slowly, and after initial resistance). But at the same time, governments that are able to use renewable sources are less likely to find themselves spending so many resources in geopolitical areas (e.g. politics, military, terrorist response to Western presence in Middle East, etc) to protect or secure access to fossil fuels.
- “Cradle to cradle” type of design — where products are *designed* to be produced and recycled or disposed of more sustainably — could considerably reduce costs for producers and consumers alike, and possibly reduce stress on associated ecosystems.
- Land that is used to produce unhealthy or marginally nutritious items (e.g. [tobacco](#), [sugar](#), possibly [tea and coffee](#)) could be used for more useful or healthier alternatives, possibly even helping address [obesity](#) and other issues. (For example, while factoring in environmental costs could make healthy produce more expensive too, expanding production of healthier foods could help contain costs rises to some extent.)
- etc.

Naturally, those who benefit from the current system may be hostile to such changes, especially if it may mean they might lose out. so, as well as being a pressing economic challenge, this is a crucial political challenge.

## The Political Challenge

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As hinted to above, how sustainability is viewed is itself a factor, as it has different meanings to different people. And this impacts how policies may or may not be pursued, and who may participate, who may be affected, and who may benefit.

Consider for example, the following:

[The late Anil Agarwal, founder editor of *Down To Earth Magazine*], made us understand that economists often missed the real measure of poverty. We needed to understand poverty not as a lack of cash, but as a lack of access to natural resources. This was because millions of people lived within what he called the biomass-based subsistence economy. For these millions, the Gross Nature Product was more important than the Gross National Product. For them, environmental degradation was not a matter of luxury, but a matter of survival. Development was not possible without environmental management. In fact, what was needed was to regenerate the environment for development. He made us look beyond “pretty trees and tigers” to see environmental issues not as people versus nature — a conservation perspective — but as people versus people.

... Sustainable development was, therefore, not about technology but about a political framework, which developed power and gave people — the victims of environmental degradation — rights over natural resources. The involvement of local communities in environmental management was a prerequisite for sustainable development.

... We have not made environment into a development challenge. Because we have still not learned how to use it sustainably. Therefore, environmental protection becomes an invariable conflict with development. A conflict between nature and jobs. Instead, what we need is policies and practices to use the environment for the greater enterprise of jobs and prosperity. Build green futures from the use of forests, land, water and fisheries. But we don't know how.

We don't know how because we refuse to learn the most basic lesson. We have to really trust people and communities. As yet, all we have done is use bureaucratic tricks to stall and obfuscate. We will have to make changes — effective and earnest — to devolve powers in the practice of managing the environment.

— Sunita Narain, [\*Devolution has to happen. It will\*](#), *Down To Earth Magazine*, January 31, 2003

The above highlights the need to consider multiple angles and perspectives.

More focus is needed on developing technologies that are “environment friendly.” Advances in such technologies would have a profound impact on all manner of society. Yet, achieving sustainable development seems primarily a political task not a technological one, though technology may be one of the many factors that could play an important part in moving towards more sustainable development. Without the political will to overcome special interests, it will prove difficult and those without voices to be heard, such as the poor that make up the majority of the planet, would be impacted the most.

The rest of the pages on this site's section on sustainable development hopes to introduce some of these challenges and look at primarily the political aspects affecting the issue of sustainability. (Over time this section is expected to grow.)

## Where next?

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### Related articles

1. Sustainable Development Introduction
2. [Addressing Biodiversity Loss](#)
3. [Rio+20 UN Conference on Sustainable Development](#)
4. [Poverty and the Environment](#)
5. [Non-governmental Organizations on Development Issues](#)
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“When I give food to the poor, they call me a saint. When I ask why the poor have no food, they call me a communist.” — *Dom Hélder Câmara*

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