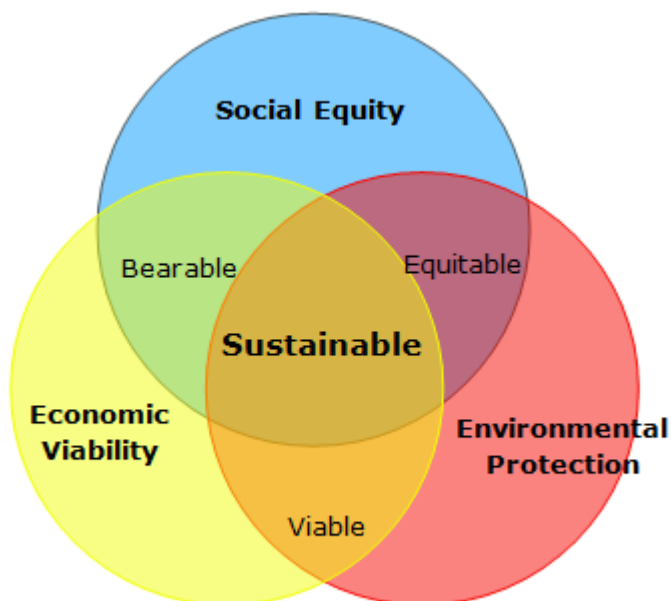# Sustainability, Society and You

The three pillars of Sustainability

Sarah Speight, Naomi Sykes, Mike Clifford and Aran Eales

Sustainability can be represented diagrammatically in many ways. This Figure is one that many people find meaningful, and it implies that there are three pillars of sustainability - economic viability, environmental protection and social equity.

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http://openlearn.open.ac.uk/mod/oucontent/view.php?id=405678&section=4

Other dimensions besides environmental, economic and social could be represented. For instance, in a more developed form of the figure, 'technical feasibility', 'political legitimacy' and 'institutional capacity' could also be included.

However, throughout this course, you will see that these three components of sustainability will be referred to routinely.

It is important to recognise that the concepts of 'environment' and 'development' are used and understood in many ways. The term 'environment' is often understood as that which surrounds and affects an entity. But some people use the term very broadly and others in a much narrower sense. When talking about sustainable development, the term is usually applied when referring only to the 'ecological', 'natural' or 'biophysical' environment. However, the word "environment" may also be used to describe the surrounding vicinity of a person, e.g. the room they are standing in.

Furthermore, the term 'development' is also used in several ways, for instance to describe:

1. 'World' development in the two different ways that Allen and Thomas (1992) identified as (a) a historical process of change and (b) deliberate efforts by all kinds of organisations and social movements as attempts aimed at progress and improvement.

2. Particular site-based infrastructural projects, such as urbanisation, roads and supermarkets, in the sense of new developments or redevelopments.

World Population and Associated Impacts

Global population has just reached 7 billion people. 100 years ago there were about 1.6 billion people in the world and in the 1960's there were about half the people there are today. The population is going to keep on growing although the rate at which it does this is disputed. Each person in the world requires resources to survive and so the strain on the earth to supply these resources will also grow.

Although a bigger population generally means more mouths to feed, there is not an even distribution of consumption patterns throughout the world. One of the biggest indicators of unsustainability is in the misdistribution of wealth. Over a third of the world still live in poverty with limited access to energy, water or food.

In 2006, a team of scholars with the United Nations University's World Institute for Development Economics Research published the first paper to tally, for the entire world, all the major elements of household wealth, everything from financial assets and debts to land, homes, and other tangible property.

This research, based on year 2000 data, found that the richest 1 % of the world's adult population, individuals worth at least $514,512, owned 39.9 % of the world's

household wealth, a total greater than the wealth of the world's poorest 95 %, those adults worth under $150,145 who hold, together, just 29.4 % of the world's wealth.

Personal wealth is distributed so unevenly across the world that the richest two % of adults own more than 50 % of the world's assets while the poorest half hold only 1 % of wealth. The USA consumes 25% of the world's energy with a share of the world population of 4.5%. The figures for material, water and food consumption between the richest nations and the poorest display a similar level of disparity.

Population growth is much higher in developing countries, while resource consumption and pollution is higher in developed countries. The gap between the ends of the spectrum has been increasing in a similar exponential fashion.

The focus of sustainability is as much on humanity (the social corner of the sustainability triangle) as it is on nature (the ecological), and to reduce this inequality and provide a basic standard of living conditions for the earth's inhabitants is paramount to the sustainability challenge.

The Ethics of Sustainability

To conclude this introductory reading, let's just consider Motivations for exploring sustainability - these can be different depending on your world view: logic, emotion or instinct can be the drivers. Generally they are based around concepts of humanity inherently striving for survival. The following are three viewpoints for sustainability:

The Ecologist Doesn't see the human race as a separate entity from the planet and its resources, but part of it. Their motivations for preserving the planet are that nature and humanity have an inherent value and should be protected because of that.

The Environmentalist Sees nature or the planet as separate from the human race. It is there *for* humans, and as such humans should have stewardship over the world. They see the planet as something to be preserved so that humans can survive and evolve.

The Economist Understands the measures of unsustainability arising from a consumer led culture treating finite resources as an income, but has faith that market forces and a "business as usual" approach will result in a natural crisis aversion occurring; that the system will sort itself out through technological advances if left to its own devices.

It is important to consider for yourself what motivations you may have, (if any) on this subject. To assess motivations you first need to place yourself with or in the world, and this is a subjective experience.