



Sustainability, Society and You

Sustainability – A Historical Perspective

Policy Drivers for Sustainability Sarah Speight

Sustainability is a priority of governments worldwide and of international agencies like the United Nations (UN). Yet it is arguable how successful our leaders are being in meeting these priorities. There is disagreement about carbon reduction targets and how to achieve energy efficiency, there is continuing poverty and social injustice in every corner of the globe. This reading takes a few examples of top-level policy and explores how the sustainability agenda is playing out in international strategy development.

In June 2012, politicians and policy-makers met at Rio de Janeiro in Brazil for the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (known as Rio+20 as it took place 20 years after the 1992 Earth Summit, also in Rio). You can find further information about the Rio+20 conference, including the outcomes document, 'The Future We Want' at the official website: <http://www.uncsd2012.org/rio20/>.

Rio+20 reaffirmed commitments to poverty eradication, sustainable and equitable economic growth and to the support of just and democratic societies. Turning these commitments into practical policy is challenging. Following the conference, the UN launched the Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN) which will work with governments and civil society to find ways of meeting these challenges.

The UN manages a 'Best Practice' database called UN-HABITAT that showcases "approximately 4,000 proven solutions to the common social, economic and environmental problems":

<http://www.unhabitat.org/bp/bp.list.aspx>

The European Commission (EU)

The EU states that it is committed to sustainable development under the terms of the Lisbon Treaty. It has its own Sustainable Development (SD) strategy which has taken the approach of mainstreaming or

integrating SD into all areas of the Commission's work. It routinely publishes progress and monitoring reports on its Environment website: <http://ec.europa.eu/environment/eussd/>. While the EU's seven priority areas include: Public Health, Social inclusion and Global poverty, there is a strong environmental focus which comes through in published indicators, surveys and communications. However, in 2012, the EU issued a communication on "The roots of democracy and sustainable development: Europe's engagement with Civil Society in external relations". In section 1.1 this contains the following:

"An empowered civil society is a crucial component of any democratic system and is an asset in itself. It represents and fosters pluralism and can contribute to more effective policies, equitable and sustainable development and inclusive growth. It is an important player in fostering peace and in conflict resolution. By articulating citizens' concerns, civil society organisations (CSOs) are active in the public arena, engaging in initiatives to further participatory democracy. They embody a growing demand for transparent and accountable governance."

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Civil Society is a term used to refer to the spaces and forms beyond government and big business where people choose to join together to take action or to campaign for change. It is sometimes referred to as the 'third sector' of society where government and business comprise the first and second sectors. Not-for-profit organisations (NPOs) and Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are elements of civil society while volunteering is a characteristic of civil society membership. The EU's engagement with Civil Society is indicative of 21st century ideas about the many directions from which change should emerge if we are to achieve a sustainable society.

The UK Governments

In the UK, the Department of the Environment, Farming and Rural Affairs published 'Mainstreaming sustainable development: The government's vision and what this means in practice' in February 2011 (<http://sd.defra.gov.uk/documents/mainstreaming-sustainable-development.pdf>). This states that 'sustainable development recognises the interconnections between society, the environment, and economy – and aims to use a holistic approach to find solutions that deliver benefits for all of these whilst minimising negative impacts'. The guiding principles, first set out in the 2005 UK government's sustainable development strategy include living within environmental limits, ensuring a strong, healthy and just society, achieving a sustainable economy, using sound science responsibly and promoting good governance. The DEFRA website contains progress reviews and many useful tools and resources for those examining the impact of the sustainability agenda on policy and practice in government and business.

Of the UK devolved governments, the Welsh Assembly government has made a major commitment to legislating for sustainability through its *One Wales: One Planet* initiative for the period 2011-2016:

"Sustainability lies at the heart of the Welsh Government's agenda for Wales; it also lies at the heart of this legislative programme. Taken as a whole, it will promote the economic, social and environmental wellbeing and enhance people's quality of life in Wales. Our approach to sustainable development has been to focus on fairness, social justice and the protection of our outstanding culture and heritage. However, sustainability is more than just a green idea. It is about defining the long term development path for our nation. It means healthy, productive people; vibrant, inclusive communities; a diverse and resilient environment and an advanced and innovative economy" (highlighted text sourced from <http://wales.gov.uk/topics/sustainabledevelopment/sdbill/?lang=en>, available under OpenGov Licence).

One Wales: One Planet recognises that this requires long-term planning, collaboration and a strong evidence-base to back up decisions. The case studies included on the website reinforce the holistic understanding of sustainability. They include a community group in the Brecon Beacons National Park, the steel industry, a local health authority and a city council. The Llangattock Green Valleys initiative in the Brecon Beacons shows how the community can build momentum for change that begins with the environmental but has wider spin offs in terms of community cohesion and engagement. The report describes the setting up of a Community Interest Company that ensures that assets generated locally are invested locally via an 'asset lock' (above text sourced from <http://wales.gov.uk/topics/sustainabledevelopment/casestudies/5631228/?lang=en>, available under OpenGov licence).

The Scottish Government has a similar commitment to the Welsh Assembly and has published its action plan for meeting the goals of the UN Decade for Education for Sustainable Development: <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2010/05/20152453/2>

The USA

In the United States, the Environmental Protection Agency or EPA brings together information on environmental legislation and regulation, government and private initiatives, compliance and best practice guides. Its focus is very much on the protection of natural resources and federal 'stewardship goals'. The EPA uses a holistic definition of Sustainability that resonates with the statements and models we have seen already in this course:

"What is sustainability?"

Sustainability is based on a simple principle: everything that we need for our survival and well-being depends, either directly or indirectly, on our natural environment. Sustainability creates and maintains the conditions under which humans and nature can exist in productive harmony, that permit fulfilling the social, economic and other requirements of present and future generations.

Sustainability is important to making sure that we have and will continue to have, the water, materials, and resources to protect human health and our environment.

What is EPA doing?

Sustainability has emerged as a result of significant concerns about the unintended social, environmental, and economic consequences of rapid population growth, economic growth and consumption of our natural resources.

In its early years, EPA acted primarily as the nation's environmental watchdog, striving to ensure that industries met legal requirements to control pollution. In subsequent years, EPA began to develop theory, tools, and practices that enabled it to move from controlling pollution to preventing it.

Today EPA aims to make sustainability the next level of environmental protection by drawing on advances in science and technology to protect human health and the environment, and promoting innovative green business practices." (above text sourced from

<http://www.epa.gov/sustainability/basicinfo.htm#sustainability>, available under terms of use at <http://www.epa.gov/region1/about/copyright.html>).

The EPA has a research agenda that clearly links environmental concerns to issues of social justice and the impact of poverty upon human health and the ability to live sustainably. There is recognition of the 'social dimensions' of achieving sustainability.

The United Nations (UN)

Sustainability and sustainable development have been on the agenda of the UN for over a generation. It was UNESCO (the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation) that launched the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED). The commission produced the Brundtland Report in 1987 (named after the Prime Minister of Norway, Gro Harlem Brundtland). The report contains the 'classic' definition of sustainable development:

"Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs".

UNESCO is the lead agent for the UN's Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (DESD, 2005-2014): <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/education/themes/leading-the-international-agenda/education-for-sustainable-development/>.

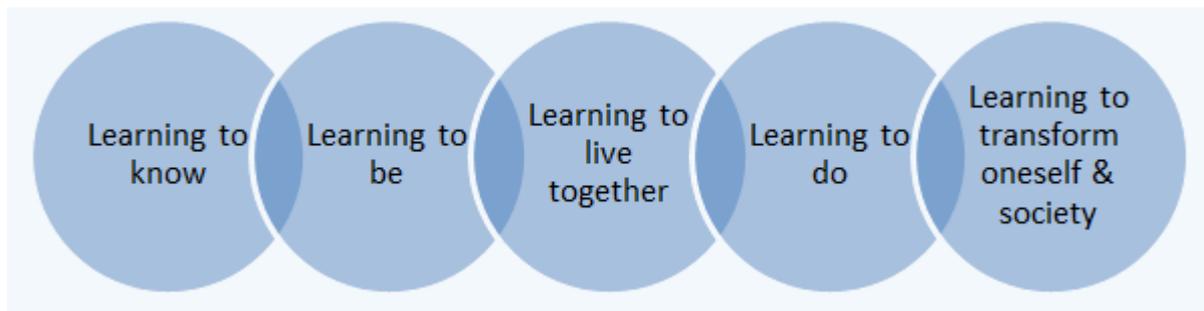
"The overall goal of the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (DESD) is to integrate the principles, values and practices of sustainable development into all aspects of education and learning. This educational effort will encourage changes in behaviour that will create a more sustainable future in terms of environmental integrity, economic viability and a just society for present and future generations".

(above text sourced from <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/education/themes/leading-the-international-agenda/education-for-sustainable-development/mission/>)

The UNESCO website includes a series of short videos that demonstrate the holistic definition of education for sustainable development that the UN works to:

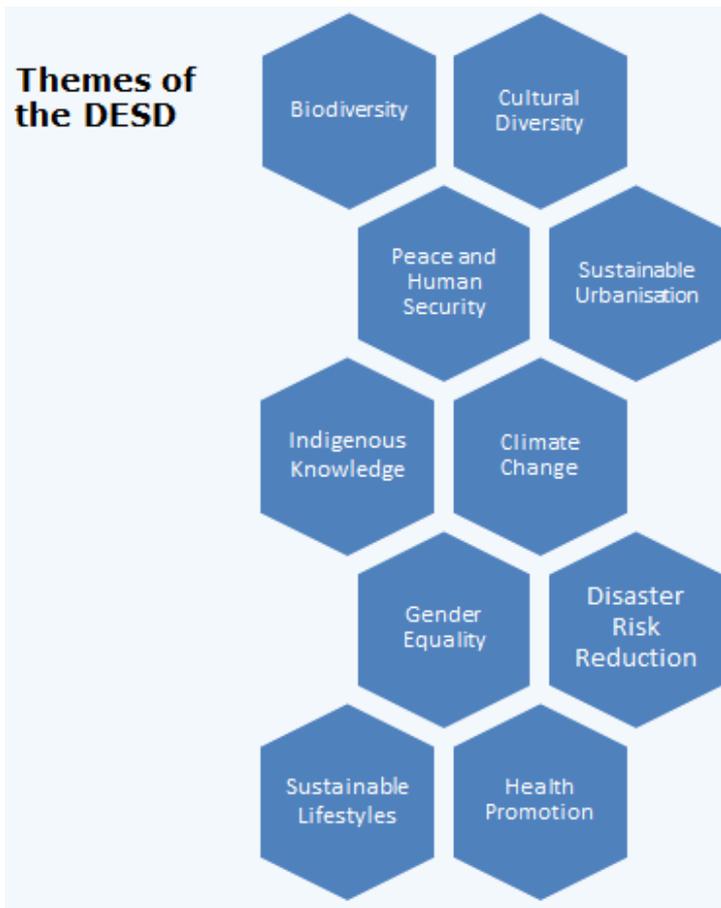
<http://www.unesco.org/new/en/education/themes/leading-the-international-agenda/education-for-sustainable-development/videos/>

The videos capture projects that support the objectives of:



Above image developed at the University of Nottingham

These do not have to be seen in a hierarchy or set sequence although there is a logical progression in the idea that we move from knowledge to action, from a focus on ourselves to a focus upon ourselves and others within communities. The objectives are used to connect us to the themes of the DESD:



Above image developed at the University of Nottingham

The videos are worth looking at as they illustrate the journey towards sustainability as being multi-layered and multi-purposed. For example, '*Art at the service of citizens*' (Philadelphia, USA) under the tag of *Learning to transform oneself and society*, shows how communities can come together to turn what can be seen as anti-social behaviour (graffiti) into respected and appreciated artworks that unite rather than divide and generate income via tourism. In '*Urban waste to agricultural resource*' (Bangladesh), under the tag of *Learning to know*, organic household waste is turned into compost on industrial scale and then supplied to farmers. In the process attitudes towards waste change and human health is improved. The videos show how policy is turned into practical action at a local level that can have long-term impact upon behaviour, attitude, quality of life and relationships.



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