

# What is sustainability?



Sustainability means meeting our own needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. In addition to natural resources, we also need social and economic resources. Sustainability is not just environmentalism. Embedded in most definitions of sustainability we also find concerns for social equity and economic development.

## Where does the term come from?

While the concept of sustainability is a relatively new idea, the movement as a whole has roots in social justice, conservationism, internationalism and other past movements with rich histories. By the end of the twentieth centuries, many of these ideas had come together in the call for ‘sustainable development.’

### The Brundtland Commission

In 1983, the United Nations tapped former Norwegian prime minister Gro Harlem Brundtland to run the new *World Commission on Environment and Development*<sup>1</sup>. After decades of effort to raise living standards through industrialization, many countries were still dealing with extreme poverty. It seemed that economic development at the cost of ecological health and social equity did not lead to long-lasting prosperity. It was clear that the world needed to find a way to harmonize ecology with prosperity.

After four years, the “Brundtland Commission” released its final report, *Our Common Future*. It famously defines sustainable development as:

***development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.***<sup>1</sup>

The Commission successfully unified environmentalism with social and economic concerns on the world’s development agenda.

Sustainability is a holistic approach that considers ecological, social and economic dimensions, recognizing that all must be considered together to find lasting prosperity.

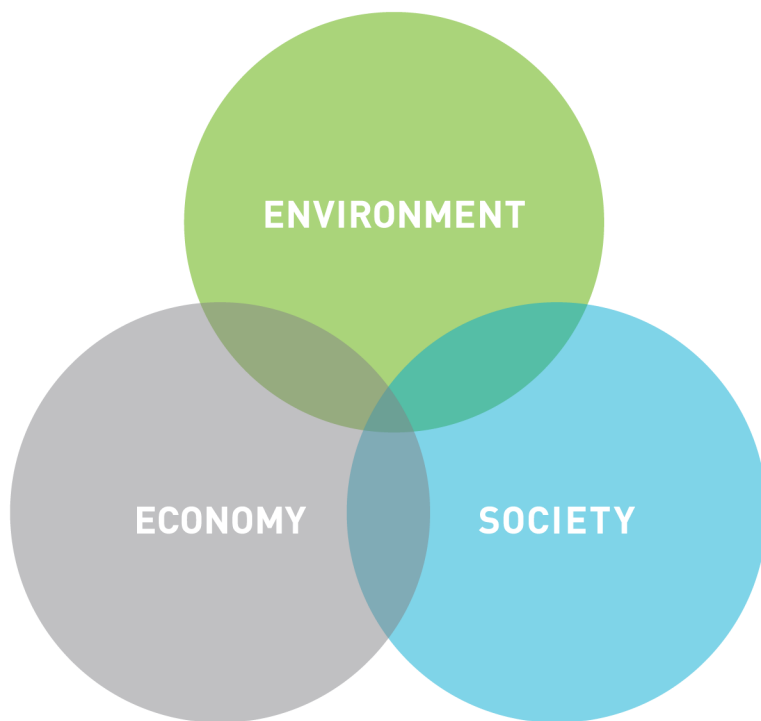
## Did you know?

Adopting sustainable practices, whether large or small, can have significant impacts in the long run.

If every office worker in the United Kingdom used one less staple a day by using a reusable paper clip, 120 tonnes of steel would be saved in one year.<sup>2</sup>

# Three pillars of sustainability<sup>3</sup>

What would a sustainable world look like?



## Environmental Sustainability

Ecological integrity is maintained, all of earth's environmental systems are kept in balance while natural resources within them are consumed by humans at a rate where they are able to replenish themselves.

## Economic Sustainability

Human communities across the globe are able to maintain their independence and have access to the resources that they require, financial and other, to meet their needs. Economic systems are intact and activities are available to everyone, such as secure sources of livelihood.

## Social Sustainability

Universal human rights and basic necessities are attainable by all people, who have access to enough resources in order to keep their families and communities healthy and secure. Healthy communities have just leaders who ensure personal, labour and cultural rights are respected and all people are protected from discrimination.

## The world community adopts sustainable development

**1979**

First World Climate Conference opens up the science of climate change

**1987**

Brundtland Report consolidates decades of work on sustainable development

**1992**

Rio Earth Summit rallies the world to take action and adopt Agenda 21

**1993**

Convention on Biological Diversity puts the precautionary principle to work

**1997**

Kyoto Protocol takes the first step toward stopping dangerous climate change

**2000**

With Millennium Development Goals, social justice meets public health & environmentalism

**2006**

Al Gore brings climate change to the mainstream with *An Inconvenient Truth*

**2012**

Rio+20 takes stock on 2+ decades of efforts at sustainable development

## Sustainability at the University of Alberta

The definition of sustainability is broad, and the world is a big, diverse places. For sustainability to remain a relevant, useful tool, it is important that it adapt to the local context. In 2010, the Academic Advisory Committee for the Office of Sustainability at the University of Alberta put together a working definition of sustainability for our institution.

***Sustainability is the process of living within the limits of available physical, natural and social resources in ways that allow the living systems in which humans are embedded to thrive in perpetuity.***

The University of Alberta is committed to a continuous effort to instill sustainability into the many aspects of university life, on our campuses, in our institutions, and in the larger community of which we are part. Sustainability is rapidly making its way into teaching and learning, research, outreach, and the operations that support them.



### UAlberta's Sustainability Plan

In 2012, the university crossed a major milestone by approving its first Sustainability Plan. It collates the many strategic goals, initiatives and practices that will guide the university toward sustainability leadership. A variety of different processes and people contributed to the development of the Sustainability Plan, including student, staff and faculty engagement at many levels. For example, the plan followed an award-winning student-initiated public deliberation with all stakeholders on campus called Deliberation on Campus Sustainability. The document itself is a comprehensive guide, but also an engine for discussion to drive sustainability forward into the future.

### Why sustainability?

The motivations behind sustainability are often complex, personal and diverse. It is unrealistic to create a list of reasons why so many individuals, groups and communities are working towards this goal. Yet, for most people, sustainability comes down to the kind of future we are leaving for the next generation.

Sustainability as a value is shared by many individuals and organizations who demonstrate this value in their policies, everyday activities and behaviours. Individuals have played a major role in developing our current environmental and social circumstances. The people of today along with future generations must create solutions and adapt.

**“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed people can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.”**

**– Margaret Mead**

**Sources:**

1. "Our Common Future: Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development". UN Documents. n.d. Web. Retrieved 27 June 2013. < <http://www.un-documents.net/ocf-02.htm>>
2. Horton, Jocelyn ed. "Mad About ... Tropical Rainforests." Friends of the Earth. Jan 2003. Web. Retrieved 27 June 2013. < [http://www.foe.co.uk/resource/factsheets/rainforest\\_mad\\_about.pdf](http://www.foe.co.uk/resource/factsheets/rainforest_mad_about.pdf)>
3. United Nations General Assembly "48. Sustainable development: managing and protecting our common environment "2005 World Summit Outcome. 24 October 2005. Web. Retrieved 27 June 2013. < <http://daccess-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N05/487/60/PDF/N0548760.pdf?OpenElement>>