

# Sustainability

## Suggested Core Principles

Tim Taylor

We often hear that sustainability is a concept that is ‘too hard to pin down’ and that mean different things to different people, thus they are not of much practical use. This reflects the complexity of sustainability as an idea and the fact that thinking about it challenges our current worldview. However, I think that a set of core principles can provide a framework for understanding the idea of sustainability and make it seem tangible, relevant and feasible to pursue. In fact, I believe that the ideas of sustainability and sustainable social progress are vital in giving us a new language and framework to think about where do we want, and need, our societies to go.

Sustainability is actually a pretty simple idea. It means only the ability to sustain something. This of course raises questions of what to sustain, for when and for whom? I find it helpful to think of sustainability as an umbrella idea that encompasses a number of other ideas that relate to these questions.

In this essay I will propose four principles that I see as providing a framework for thinking about and applying the idea of sustainability to discussions on our priorities as a society.

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Firstly, it is vital to understand that sustainability is an idea that describes a process or a journey. Often people ask whether something *is* sustainable. Defining the sustainability of something in a fixed state is implausible in any practical sense, because our frame of reference inevitably keeps changing the answer. Changing the question slightly to ask whether something is becoming *more* sustainable suddenly makes it possible to answer with confidence. Is reducing toxic pollution released into a river making an industry’s activities more sustainable? Sure. Though it might still be some way from being in any truly sustainable balance with the environment it does represent some progress. Of course more progress may very well be required so we also need to ask whether things are sustainable *enough*. It makes sense to consider critical thresholds for different systems, beyond which activities are patently unsustainable.

Thinking of sustainability as a process reflects Amartya Sen’s work on *The Idea of Justice*. Sen critiques attempts to find a ‘transcendental’ or all-encompassing solution for injustice. He argues that it is difficult enough to have reasoned public debate and to create action on single issues of justice, each of which can invoke varied reasonable perspectives from different people. He argues that the imperative is to tackle patent injustice and that the diverse social debate needed on each issue means that a one-size-fits-all approach is implausible. Of course tackling patent injustice issue-by-issue still means that we make progress towards more just societies, without worrying unduly about trying to create a perfectly just world in one hit. I find this approach of great value for thinking about how to put sustainability as an idea in practice as well, especially given the synergies between the ideas of justice and sustainability.

So *principle number one* is that:

**The idea of sustainability describes a process of making our societies more sustainable. We should focus on changing the aspects of our society that are patently unsustainable.**

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The idea of sustainability came out of the environmentalist movement, with the realisation that the size and impact of human society has grown to the extent that we threaten the ecological systems that we rely on for our survival and flourishing. Famously this reality was first presented in the 1972 *Limits to Growth* report. Recent research suggests that today our global society has already exceeded 'safe operating space' thresholds in three of nine key planetary eco-systems. UNEP reported in its 2007 state of the global environment report *GEO4* that the pace of ecological degradation continues to accelerate and threaten human wellbeing. These are just some examples of the wealth of research indicating that we are still pretty far from meaningfully addressing the need to operate within Earth's ecological limits.

In his book *Collapse*, Jared Diamond outlines historical examples of how great societies have crumbled quite quickly once they overstepped too many of their ecological boundaries. So we know our societies today are at risk. While the examples he gives are relatively localised, in a globalised society that is approaching global ecological limits – such as ocean fish stocks or the atmosphere's ability to absorb climate changing gases, it is insufficient to concern ourselves only with local ecological issues. So it is important to maintain a view of ecological limits across different scales.

Our currently unsustainable impact on the world's ecosystems is a mixture of population growth and the impact of our individual lifestyles. It is estimated that each factor has a similar effect in growing humanity's ecological footprint. The challenge for the world's financially wealthy countries is to retain our quality of life, while vastly reducing our ecological impact per person. Tim Jackson frames this ecological reality as the need for societies to achieve prosperity without the material throughput of constant economic growth. More quality needs to be achieved for the same quantity, or less.

Population growth is largely being driven in the demographic transition of poorer societies. Here the challenge is to make progress in a less ecological demanding way, as social progress remains key to the all important elimination of population growth.

Natural systems are fundamental to humanity's prosperity, but they also have an intrinsic value that cannot always be framed in human terms, especially with our limited understanding of the natural world. Recognising this reinforces the need for a precautionary approach to identifying ecological limits.

*Principle two:*

**The idea of sustainability requires a precautionary approach to keeping our natural resource use and pollution within local and global ecological limits.**

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Despite its ecological roots, sustainability is really a very human-centric concept that puts people at the centre of the 'sustain what for whom' question.

The Bruntland Commission famously defined *sustainable development* as meeting the needs of present generations without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. Or in other words, one generation has a duty to leave the next with the means to enjoy *at least* the same quality-of-life. This definition retains its importance nearly 25 years later.

For a number of years the prevailing political assumption has been that sustaining growth of monetary wealth is sufficient to account for the complete 'basket' of people's needs. However, assuming that people's prosperity and quality-of-life is simply dependent on wealth and the consumption of material goods really misses a good chunk of what it is to be human.

In response, the Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress proposed in 2010 that these eight key dimensions of life are the minimum of what is fundamental to people's quality-of-life or wellbeing:

- Material living standards (income, consumption and wealth)
- Health
- Education
- Personal activities including work
- Political voice and governance
- Social connections
- The environment
- Security

Whether this is a sufficient list can be debated further, but it sets the stage. It is immediately clear that today's economy really only provides for some of these, and indeed can be in conflict with some of them as well. The evidence suggests that, beyond a certain level of material living standards, it is social connections, political voice and meaningful work that contribute the most to people's mental health and sense of wellbeing. Sustaining people's wellbeing needs to be across these different dimensions of life.

While sustainability requires people's wellbeing to be sustained, the concept of development, which Bruntland firmly welded to the idea of sustainability, suggests that maintaining the same quality-of-life generation to generation is the bare minimum that we should hope to achieve. It is more desirable to make progress. Progress means improving people's wellbeing over time.

The concept of development has come to be used almost synonymously with economic growth. Thus, I feel that the shift in language used by the Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress is valuable. Social Progress reflects their broader understanding of the need to improve people's wellbeing across a range of different dimensions of life. Sustainable development thus becomes reframed as Sustainable Social Progress.

*Principle three:*

**The idea of sustainability means sustaining people's wellbeing across different dimensions of life, and leads to the goal of making Sustainable Social Progress.**

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The Bruntland definition of sustainability emphasises that we have a responsibility to preserve the means to a decent life for future generations. This of course very much applies to caring about today's youth not just some far off futuristic society. While the idea of sustainability is founded on this moral duty to care about the wellbeing of future generations, to be consistent we must also have at least the same duty to care about the wellbeing of today's generation. And at any rate, the persistent poverty and inequality of people's opportunities to flourish that exists today are hardly things we could wish to sustain for our children.

This means that tackling social injustice today must be entwined with the goal of ensuring justice for the future. Reducing injustice is actually also the lowest hanging fruit when considering social progress. Social progress can be accelerated most by improving the quality-of-life of those who right now are worst off in some key dimensions of life. At the same time, wealth injustice has been shown to correlate to reduced quality-of-life across other dimensions of life for society as a whole. Whichever way you cut it, reducing injustice is inescapably linked to the idea of sustainability and sustainable social progress.

*Principle number four:*

**The idea of sustainability demands that justice today be given equal or greater importance than justice for future generations**

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While the idea of sustainability is complex, these four principles provide a framework that can help us to understand this complexity and put the idea of sustainability into practice in meaningful ways.

The idea of sustainability:

1. Describes a process of making our societies more sustainable. We should focus on changing the aspects of our society that are patently unsustainable.
2. Requires a precautionary approach to keeping our natural resource use and pollution within local and global ecological limits.
3. Means sustaining people's wellbeing across different dimensions of life, and leads to the goal of making Sustainable Social Progress.
4. Demands that justice today be given equal or greater importance than justice for future generations.

Using these principles as a guide can help us to sustain and improve the wellbeing of all people, now and into the future. That is the idea of sustainability.