

Sustainability

Condensed History of Sustainability

Although the term “sustainability” was coined only in recent times, the concept of sustainability is by no means new. The Iroquois Confederacy, a native American tribe that once lived in what is now the state of New York, included a principle of sustainability in their constitution, the Great Law: “In our every deliberation, we must consider the impact of our decisions on the next seven generations.”

While the founding fathers of our nation borrowed heavily from the Great Law of the Iroquois when they wrote the Constitution, they omitted the principle of the seventh generation. The effects of that omission are still felt today. In the last few decades, however, the concept of sustainability has come back into our society, but only after a period of glaring unsustainability. Following World War II, the United States was swept up in a period of unprecedented growth and record consumption. With the exception of several forward-thinking critics, few Americans raised doubts that the growth and consumption that they were enjoying would continue indefinitely.

Several events of the 1960s and 1970s brought the reality of ecological limits back into focus. Among these important developments was the 1962 publication of Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring*, which documented the hazards that synthetic chemicals, particularly pesticides, pose to humans and animals. The oil embargoes of the 1970s illustrated that fossil fuels could not only promote but also threaten prosperity and security. Nuclear disasters, chemical spills, toxic pollution at Love Canal, the garbage crisis, ozone depletion, climate change, and biodiversity loss led some citizens toward a realization that something was wrong with the way the U.S. economy and lifestyle were affecting the planet and its ecosystems. Some people began to recognize that our mode of operating was

flawed, that things needed to change. They searched for an alternative vision. Sustainability and sustainable development were the words that later became associated with that vision, but the terms were not yet coined.

The term “sustainable development” was presented in a landmark report by the World Commission on Environment and Development, also known as the Brundtland Commission, entitled *Our Common Future*¹. The definition introduced in this 1987 paper remains a central reference point for discussions about sustainability more than two decades later:

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

While the Brundtland Commission’s definition remains important, it was a starting point for further discussion about sustainability. To some, the definition lacked depth; it was merely a formula for survival based on enlightened self-interest². These critics call for an “ethic of sustainability” grounded in a respect for the inherent value of others, both human and nonhuman – in other words, a values-based, rather than a strictly utilitarian, approach to sustainability.

In the past decade, climate change has become a focal point for sustainability. Many governments, businesses, and individuals now make their policies and choices within a framework of impacts on climate and greenhouse gas emissions.

Putting Sustainability into Practice

Whether gravitating toward a utilitarian vision of sustainability or toward an ethic of sustainability, individuals, communities, and institutions around the world have taken steps to define practices that contribute to a sustainable society. Today, thousands of municipal, regional, and national governments, communities, advocacy groups, universities,



Progress toward a sustainable society is being made right in our own backyard. Thousands of King County residents are composting their organic wastes, caring for their yards more naturally, and taking other steps to reduce their consumption of resources. Collectively, individual actions can make a difference.

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corporations, religious organizations, and trade associations have developed principles of sustainability to guide their actions and decisions. These principles or criteria are based on core values such as ecological health, economic stability, social equity, community development, and intergenerational equity.

The challenge for institutions and communities that have developed principles is implementation – putting their words into action. In many cases, and at many levels, positive changes have already begun. From the halls of Congress, to the aisles of the grocery store, change takes place one vote and one dollar at a time. Sustainability is the outcome of billions of decisions, both small and large, that are made with future generations in mind. At a regional level of government, agencies are working cooperatively to develop plans and implementation strategies for addressing climate change. Both individual changes and policy changes are necessary to meet the challenge of sustainability. For more

information on climate change, please refer to Chapter 7.

Personal Steps toward Sustainability

The limits of the planet require that we move away from a resource-intensive lifestyle, such as we typically lead in North America. An example would be moving toward a “solar-powered, bicycle/rail-centered, reuse/recycle economy.”³ Making daily decisions with future generations in mind may seem daunting. By addressing unsustainable practices one step at a time, however, these decisions become easier and change becomes more comfortable and lasting. For example, buying locally grown produce rather than foods shipped thousands of miles, purchasing recycled-content products instead of products made from virgin materials, and improving the energy efficiency of your home all contribute to sustainability. Rather than selling your car tomorrow, for example, try taking the bus or riding your bike to work one day or more a week. If that works out well, try leaving the car at home two days a week. Whatever practices you choose to address, being sensitive to the “ecological wake” of the decisions you make gradually becomes second nature.

As an MRC you have the opportunity to teach fellow citizens about concrete ways to reduce detrimental impacts on future generations, through waste prevention, resource conservation, reuse, recycling, and composting. These sustainable actions not only conserve resources for future generation, they also help reduce climate change. Your contribution to a sustainable world will ripple throughout society today and for generations to come.

Check It Out Online

Center for a New American Dream – www.newdream.org

Earth Day Network – www.earthday.net

International Institute for Sustainable Development – www.iisd.ca

Redefining Progress – www.rprogress.org

Sustainable Seattle – www.sustainableseattle.org

Toward a Sustainable Washington, Department of Ecology – www.ecy.wa.gov/sustainability

Union of Concerned Scientists – www.ucsusa.org

Endnotes

¹ Gro Brundtland, *Our Common Future* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).

² Stanley R. Euston and William E. Gibson, *iThe Ethic of Sustainability,i Earth Ethics 6, (Summer, 1995): p. 5-7.*

³ Lester R. Brown and Christopher Flavin, *iA New Economy for a New Century,i State of the World: A Worldwatch Institute Report on Progress toward a Sustainable Society, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1999), p. 15.*

