

What is sustainability?

There are many meanings and contexts for the use of the term sustainability in scientific and public discourse, it is a term in common use which leads to linguistic blurring, the overgeneralization of the concept or using it to cover an unreasonable number of phenomena (Roostaie et al., 2019; Takeuchi, 2018). The most commonly used definition, which will also be adopted in this educational guide, is that derived from the 1987 Brundtland Commission which in turn was inspired by the Stockholm Declaration. **Sustainability is the development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.** The different approaches to understanding this concept and the context in which it occurs are contained in the scheme below.

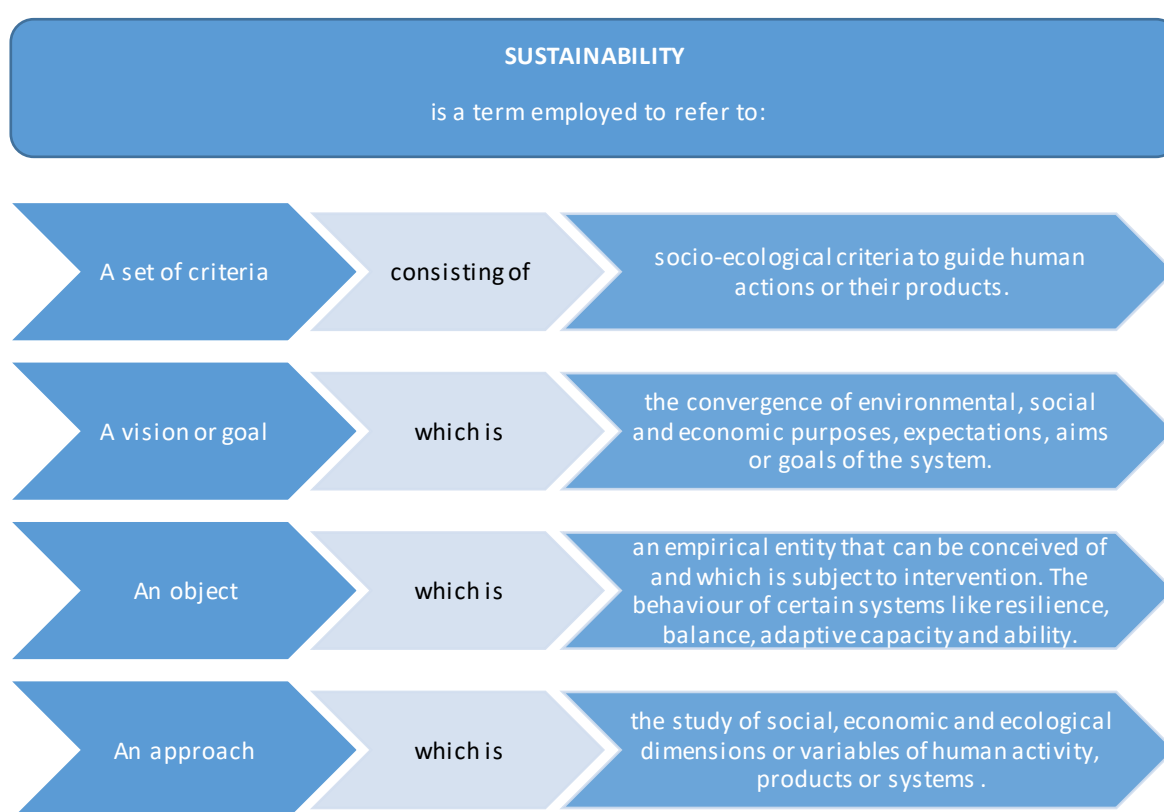


Figure 1. Uses and meanings of the concept of sustainability among the scientific community

Source: Salas-Zapata & Ortiz-Muñoz, 2019, p. 3.

The multiple interpretations of the concept are always based on drawing attention to the four foundations of sustainability and responsibility for the future. This requires long-term thinking and planning which considers the interconnectedness of economic, social, and ecological systems, and strives to achieve a balance between them.

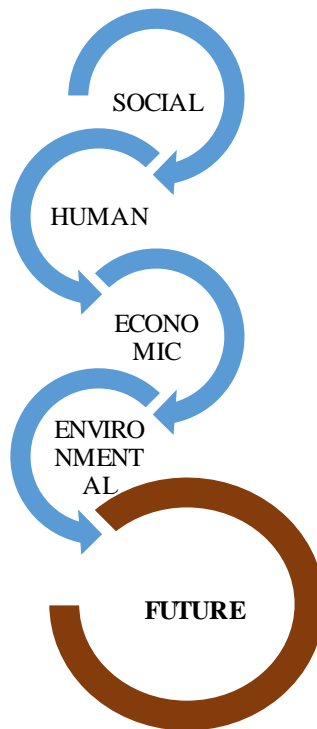


Figure 2. The four fundamentals of sustainability

Source: Own study.

The term *sustainable development* was first used on 14 June 1972 at the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm. The result of this conference, which was organized under the motto "We have but one Earth", was the establishment of The Stockholm Declaration, which included a key provision for developing the meaning of sustainability:

Man has a fundamental right to freedom, equality and adequate conditions of life, in an environment of a quality that permits a life of dignity and well-being, and he bears a solemn responsibility to protect and improve the environment for present and future generations. (...)

(United Nations, 1972, p. 4)

The high quality of the environment and of the standard of living was recognized as a fundamental human right and caring for and preserving such a state of affairs for the future as each one's duty and responsibility. Sustainability may be defined as the manifestation of the rights and responsibilities of individuals to each other and their environment.

Central to the world's recognition of the importance of introducing sustainability was the 1992 Rio de Janeiro Conference, which produced the Sustainability Action Plan: Agenda 21. The 2030 Agenda is the current World Development Strategy for 2030

which was adopted by all 193 UN member states in 2015. It includes 17 Sustainable Development Goals. Sustainability may be understood through the implementation of these goals (see Figure 3). They affect every social, economic, and political activity of human beings. Their comprehensiveness reflects an important principle in guiding the world towards sustainability: the idea of sustainability must be applied to all human activities. Consequently, it is not sufficient to introduce it only at the level of strategies for public entities (associations of states, states, state administrative units). It must also apply to business activities and thus be expressed in the strategies of companies and in the everyday lives of individual citizens.



Figure 3. Sustainable Development Goals according to Agenda 2030

Source: www.un.org.pl.



Figure 4. European Commission Priorities in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals

Source: <https://commission.europa.eu/>.

