

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT PRINCIPLES

FOUNDATIONS OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

The term 'sustainable development' first came into widespread use in a 1980 report on a Strategy for World Conservation jointly issued by the IUCN (International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources), UNEP (United Nations, Environmental Programme), and WWF (World Wide Fund for Nature). The phrase later achieved prominence as the theme of a 1987 report titled 'Our Common Future' by the World Commission on Environment and Development, commonly known as the Brundtland Report after the Commission's Chair, Grö Harlem Brundtland, who was the Prime Minister of Norway at the time. The Commission was established to formulate 'a global agenda for change' by reviewing critical environmental, economic, and social problems in a series of public forums held around the world.

Definition of Sustainable Development

In spite of widespread use of the term, sustainable development is a concept for which it is difficult to nail down a clear, concise, concrete explanation. For advocates of economic growth and prosperity, sustainable development reflects an optimism that human ingenuity and goodwill will overcome barriers as they arise. For sceptics, the phrase is merely cynical camouflage for 'business as usual' while humans plunge headlong towards destroying the earth's resources.

The most often used definition of sustainable development, from the Brundtland Report, is inspirational but not especially helpful in planning strategies or setting goals.

Sustainable Development Themes

More practical in content, though still largely in the realm of vision and policy development, are 27 principles for sustainable development contained in an action plan widely known as Agenda 21 (from the title 'Agenda for the Twenty-first Century'), which was drawn up for ratification at The Earth Summit, a 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in Rio de Janeiro. All of the principles apply to some degree to the problems of the Mekong River Basin (MRB), but the following topics are of special relevance:

- Poverty alleviation
- Human consumption patterns
- Demographics and human settlements
- Human health
- Biodiversity
- Freshwater and coastal water resources
- Mountainous areas
- Agriculture and rural development
- Hazardous chemicals and wastes
- Protecting the atmosphere
- Women, children, and youth
- Indigenous people
- Institutional and legal frameworks.

Sustainable Development Definition

Development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs

Brundtland Commission 'Our Common Future'

Sustainable Development Goal

To enable each individual to live life to their full potential physical, mental, and spiritual development

Agenda 21, The Earth Summit

Sustainable Development Principle

A sustainable society enables its members to achieve a high quality of life in ways that are ecologically sustainable

United Nations

The inseparable threads that join economic development, alleviation of poverty, population growth, human nutrition and health, human rights, and conservation of the environment are woven through Agenda 21 principles. None can be fully resolved unless all are attended to, since each is an integral part of the human socio-economic system. So, for example, construction of a dam in northern Lao PDR to generate revenue from power sales to neighbouring countries can result in unforeseen and unwanted costs through the removal of communities, forests, and cultivated land in the area of the dam and reservoir; and downstream effects on river flow, fisheries, wetlands, and saltwater incursion in the Mekong Delta, which can result in impoverishment and ill-health of people who rely on these resources for their livelihood.

Technological methods of reasoning tend to solve problems by dividing them into ever smaller pieces. The interdependence of each piece of a

problem can be lost in this approach, and a solution to one part of an issue may create new problems elsewhere. Externalising the costs of 'collateral damage' from dam development illustrates the consequences of narrowing the scope of thought to only the immediate issue. Systems thinking, and an adaptive implementation process are needed to move out of the industrial-era mode of engineering fixes. Placing people at the centre of concern is a core requirement also, as the Mekong River Commission (MRC) has done in its Strategic Plan. Managing the earth's resources and other major problems such as poverty, nutrition, and health by segregating them into compartments fails to recognize their mutual connectedness.

Poverty, Hunger, Environment, and Development

According to UNEP, a key criterion for sustainable development is whether it meets the needs of the least advantaged and most vulnerable members of society. These are usually

low income people, children, women, and indigenous peoples. Poor people are concerned primarily with day-to-day survival, not with long-term conservation of resources. If a development removes their immediate sources of food and shelter without adequate compensation, poor people naturally will resort to the most readily available new source of food, without regard for the environmental impacts of their actions.

Ironically, poor people tend to be hurt the most by environmental degradation, through contaminated water supplies and inadequate sanitation, and by being obliged to live where the more affluent do not want to, in areas that are vulnerable to erosion or flooding, in overcrowded conditions, or where they are exposed to toxic industrial emissions. Because they must rely on locally available food and fuel, poor people are more vulnerable if these sources of supply are removed as a result of development. The wealthier members of a society can afford to buy produce imported from other areas, so are not as badly affected. In this way, the gap between rich and poor is increased as the spiral of economic development and prosperity for some, worsening poverty for others, and environmental degradation is repeated.

On the other hand, preventing or restricting economic development merely to conserve environmental resources while ignoring the persistence of poverty is unconscionable. A key is to use natural resources efficiently, i.e., with minimum waste; to ensure that those who benefit from development pay the costs, and those who are required to make sacrifices or pay a price (e.g., loss of land and traditions) share in decision

making and the benefits. For economic development to be sustainable, it must be equitable, that is, shared fairly by all. Exploitation of the environment or poor people through economic development driven by powerful elites is short-sighted and contains the seeds of ultimate self-destruction.

Environmental Components of Sustainable Development

Water resources in the MRB are even more obviously inter-linked. Sustainable development, poverty relief, and advances in public health cannot be achieved without adequate supplies of good quality freshwater. To ensure such supplies, the hydrology of the MRB must be managed as a complete system, not just within individual national boundaries or watersheds. The health of aquatic ecosystems depends on a Basin-wide framework of objectives, planning and implementation. The role of the MRC is vital to this goal.

Environmental Awareness

An essential first step when introducing the widespread behavioural change needed for sustainable development is to raise the level of awareness in government representatives, development proponents, the general public, and communities targeted for specific development initiatives. Information, education, and public participation in decisions regarding a development and its projected effects on the environment and local community lifestyles are crucial to arriving at satisfactory, equitable choices for action. Input from experts on specific subjects is needed, but just as important are contributions to the process from community representatives and individuals likely to

be affected by the planned development. These people are experts on local circumstances, and their own lives, needs, and wishes. Illustration of the importance of awareness and understanding of resource management issues may be seen in the Nam Ngum reservoir fishery case study in Lao PDR.

Precautionary Principle

When trying to predict or estimate future environmental or economic effects of proposed developments or other changes, a level of caution is necessary, commensurate with the potential risks. The Precautionary Principle, described in Agenda 21, states:

“Where there are threats of serious or irreversible damage, lack of full scientific certainty shall not be used as a reason for postponing cost-effective measures to prevent environmental degradation.”

The current debate on the seriousness of the threat of global warming is an example where the Precautionary Principle applies. If the warnings are valid, the consequences of inaction could be far more expensive than the costs of prompt remedial actions to reduce the risks. Human decency and the law of due diligence require that individuals, communities, and national governments use reasonable care to prevent harm to themselves and others.

The Future for Sustainable Development

As we consider the diverse, complex issues attendant to sustainable development, it is clear that achieving progress towards it is probably one of the most challenging tasks facing

humanity now or at any time in history. The concept of sustainable development is not a static goal or destination, but a moving, metamorphosing vision that we must journey towards. Traveling the road will demand imagination, persistence, goodwill, compassion, patience, co-operation, knowledge, adaptability, and creativity. The future well-being of all people depends on the willingness of today's residents of the earth to commit ourselves to the journey.

SUMMARY OF KEY POINTS

- For development to be sustainable it must respect the rights and dignity of all human beings and the environment.
- Some core themes of sustainable development are prevention of pollution, conservation, equitable sharing of benefits and costs, and input by stakeholders to decisions on matters that will affect them.
- Sustainable development can succeed only if it reduces poverty, hunger, and disease – the most disadvantaged members of society must be beneficiaries.
- Sustainable development is a web of economic, social, and environmental concerns that must all be resolved.
- Environmental factors in sustainable development include conservation of ecosystems, biodiversity, water and land resources.
- We do not inherit the earth from our ancestors; we are borrowing it from our children.