



Sustainability and sustainable development

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SUSTAINABILITY, SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AND CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY



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Abstract: The aim of current chapter is to present the genesis of 2 related phenomena: the sustainability and sustainable development concept, as well as the range of definitions in order to suggest a definition that can be applied in the whole e-book. The other objective is to present the Corporate Social Responsibility concept which, nowadays, is recognised as the process through which business contributes to sustainable development implementation. It was highlighted, however, that in the current situation, sustainable development may be achieved by new types of businesses built on the principles of saving resources (by recycling or reuse). For traditional businesses, based on non-renewable resources, CSR leading to sustainable development is a real challenge as it requires re-shaping business models.

Keywords: Corporate Social Responsibility, economic sustainability, environmental sustainability, social sustainability, sustainability, sustainable development.

2.1. The origin and meaning of sustainability and sustainable development as a concept

At present, sustainability has become one of the most popular issues; both from theoretical and practical perspectives. At the same time, it poses, perhaps, the most demanding challenge for contemporary civilisation. Increasing consumption of products and services leads to the predatory usage of water, energy, land and generally, all resources. In 2019, by July 29, humanity had already used up nature's resource budget for the entire year according to the Global Footprint Network—an international sustainability organisation that has pioneered the Ecological Footprint. It is Earth Overshoot Day. Its date has moved up 2 months over the past 20 years to the 29th of July 2019, the earliest date ever (Global Footprint Network).

In 2020, a pandemic year, Earth Overshoot Day fell on August 22. People travelled much less that year and it helped to push the date a little bit further. Nevertheless, the growing usage of resources is one of the most important reasons from catastrophic climate changes considered to be the main factor hindering sustainability (Khoshnevis Yazdi & Dariani, 2019).

The concept of sustainability was originally coined in forestry, where it means never harvesting more than what the forest yields in new growth (Wiersum, 1995). The word *Nachhaltigkeit* (the German term for sustainability) was first used with this meaning in 1713 (Wilderer, 2007). The concept of sustainability and sustainable society was brought to mainstream politics by the Brundtland Commission report: *Our common future*, published in 1987 (Dixon & Fallon, 1989). However, the definition presented in the report is relatively vague, underlying the complexities of sustainability. The vagueness of this concept, combined with its growing level of importance in national and international policy-making, has led to an extensive debate and a wide variety of definitions. The name sustainability is derived from the Latin *sustinere* (withstand, hold out). Sustain can mean 'maintain,' 'support,' 'uphold' or 'endure'. Such an explanation, however, does not make the term itself very clear or understandable. This is partly connected with the fact that there is another term: sustainable development, the meaning of which is very close (in Polish, for example, both sustainability and sustainable developed are translated in the same way). Thus, 2 approaches may be distinguished:

- sustainability and sustainable development are used interchangeably (Chang et al., 2017);
- due to the "growth" associations, sustainable development refers to development goals, although based on seeking balance between present and future access to resources (Sherren, 2006).

Basically, the first approach dominates in papers and books.

Some of the typical definitions of sustainability are summarised below (Chang et al., 2017):

- sustainability is the ability of a human, natural or mixed system to indefinitely withstand or adapt to endogenous or exogenous change;
- sustainability is the relationship between dynamic human economic systems and larger dynamic, but normally slower, changing ecological systems, in which (a) human life can continue indefinitely, (b) human individuals can flourish, and (c) human cultures can develop;
- sustainability is an economic state in which the demands placed upon the environment by people and business to provide for future generations can be met without reducing the capacity of the environment;
- sustainability may be defined as the ability of anything, such as energy, environment, society, economy, water, or any technology, that can constantly remain sustained.

In the current e-book, we suggest accepting the very basic (and, at the same time, simple) definition, which says:

Sustainability is the search for balance between the present and future use of resources (Smith, 2015).

In other words it can be expressed as the principle that our (of humanity) obligation is to use what we need (but no more) so that our descendants shall not be deprived of what they need. This means that sustainability is a concept directly leading to another one—sustainable development, which, in turn, sheds more light on the needs of future generations.

Historically, SD—as a concept, is derived from economics as a discipline. The discussion regarding whether the capacity of limited natural resources would be able to continually support the existence of the increasing human population gained prominence with the Malthusian population theory in the early 1800s. In this theory, it was stated that the human population tended to grow in geometric progression, while subsistence could grow only in arithmetic progression, and for this reason, population growth was likely to outstrip the capacity of the natural resources to support the needs of the increasing population. However, later on, technological progress was recognised as a solution to the problem of the highly growing demand for resources. With time, global concerns heightened the discussion about non-renewability of some natural resources which threaten production and long-term economic growth, resulting from environmental degradation and pollution (Mensah & Ricart Casadevall, 2019). And we should not forget that a community, according to a Nigerian tribal chief, consists of “many dead, few living and countless others unborn” (Kuhlman & Farrington, 2010), which leads to the basic assumption of sustainable development—to think about future ones as expecting no less than we do and facing new challenges. According to the Brundtland Commission report:

Sustainable development can be expressed as that meeting the needs of the current generation, without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (Mensah & Ricart Casadevall, 2019).

Thus, environmental concern is important, but the basic argument is one of welfare, viewed within a context of inter-generational equity. We should care for the natural environment not because of its intrinsic value and beauty, but in order to preserve resources for future generations—our children.

The Brundtland Commission report highlights 2 concerns that should be reconciled: development and environment. They can also be interpreted as needs versus resources, or as short- versus the long-term. Today, however, sustainability is almost always seen in terms of 3 dimensions: social, economic and environmental (Robert, Parris, & Leiserowitz, 2005). This is embodied in the definition of sustainable development adopted by the United Nations in its Agenda for Development:

Development is a multidimensional undertaking to achieve a higher quality of life for all people. Economic and social development, as well as environmental protection are interdependent and mutually reinforcing components of sustainable development (Kuhlman & Farrington, 2010).

Have you heard about it?

Switzerland was the first country to add the term sustainability to its constitution in Article 2 (since January 1, 2000): “The Swiss Confederation supports the common welfare, the sustainable development, the internal cohesion and the cultural diversity of the country” (Spindler, 2013).

2.2. From sustainable development to Corporate Social Responsibility

Whereas the term “sustainable development” mainly started to be used in the 1980s, the framework of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) had already been established in the 1950s and 60s. Bowen defined CSR in 1953 as an obligation to pursue policies for making decisions and following lines of action, compatible with the objectives and values of society (Douglas, Doris, & Johnson, 2004). In general terms, Corporate Social Responsibility encompasses the responsibilities that businesses have towards the societies within which these businesses operate. The European Commission uses the following definition:

CSR is “a concept whereby companies decide voluntarily to contribute to a better society and a cleaner environment”.

Specifically, CSR suggests that a business identifies its stakeholder groups and incorporates its needs and values within its strategic and operational decision-making process (Hartman, Rubin, & Dhanda, 2007).

A useful working approach to CSR and sustainability is to identify CSR as the process through which sustainable development, as defined by Brundtland Commission report, is the goal (Hopkins, 2006). However, while sustainable development is a global postulate, addressed to all entities whose decisions have impact on resource management, including the state, corporations, non-profit organisations, other institutions and associations (including those international such as the European Union) and consumers, CSR describes the expected postulates addressed mainly to business entities. There is still a discussion on what aspects of business responsibility should be taken into account. According to Carroll (2016), there are 4 obligations that create a foundation or infrastructure for the business's responsibilities towards society:

- economic responsibility—the obligation of a business organisation to make money;
- legal responsibility—corporations must respect laws and regulations;
- ethical responsibility—corporations must behave as a good citizen in its society;
- philanthropic responsibility which is a voluntary activity guided by the business's desire to participate in social activities that are not mandated.

Nowadays, it is necessary to highlight environmental responsibility, which in face of the current climate catastrophic situation, must be considered.

The application of the CSR concept is a great challenge for enterprises due to the principle of profit maximisation, generally applicable in business, which results in increasing the scale of operations on the one hand, thus—bigger resource usage, and looking for cost decreases on the other; by the implementation of outsourcing, off-shoring and global supply chains. For this reason, in many corporations, CSR is only a kind of public relations technique. Nevertheless, there are some businesses in which CSR is embedded into their DNA, alike enterprises operating in circular economy based businesses, i.e., recycling and reuse.

Questions / tasks

1. Find examples (as many as possible) of predatory resource usage.
2. Explore data concerning the rate of resource usage by humankind. What countries are leading in this competition? What sectors are the most resource-consuming?
3. How does people's behaviour support the predatory usage of resources?

4. What can be done to prevent people from predatory usage of natural resources (give as many examples as possible)?
5. What resources are running out the fastest? Find data to support and illustrate your answer.
6. Find out your Ecological Footprint and personal Earth Overshoot Day and learn about solutions to help us all survive on Earth.
7. Discuss the presented definitions of sustainability. What, from your point of view, is the core element of sustainability?
8. Organise an Oxford debate on the subject: Can needs be distinguished into those justified and unjustified?
9. Organise an Oxford debate on the subject: Can the present needs be met without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs?
10. What is/are differences (if any) between sustainability and sustainable development?
11. How can sustainable development be achieved?
12. What are the most important obstacles of implementing the sustainable development concept?
13. Does sustainable development implementation mean that we should seek to manage our environment in order to restore prior conditions, to stabilise our current use, or to plan for anticipated needs of future generations?
14. Please, specify business stakeholder groups and their needs.

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