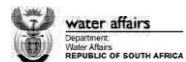




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S A N B I



live on the Earth. Ultimately, the focus of sustainable living and sustainable development is to find a balance between the social, economic and ecological aspects of our existence.

**Agenda 21.** Agenda 21 is a global action plan for socially, economically and environmentally sustainable development. It was adopted at the United Nations Conference on the Environment and Development held in Rio de Janeiro in June 1992 (Earth Summit). The conference proposed that Agenda 21 be implemented at the local authority level, and this came to be known as Local Agenda 21. The principles guiding Local Agenda 21 in South Africa are: people-centred development, meeting basic needs, integrated planning and development. Several South African cities and provinces have developed Local Agenda 21 programmes.

**The Ahmedabad Declaration.** In 2007 the delegates to the 4th International Conference on Environmental Education, although recognising the difficulties facing issues of 'Sustainable Development', nevertheless passed a resolution supporting the concept.

### Further reading

**The New Gaia Atlas of Planet Management.** 2005. N. Myers and J. Kent (eds). University of California Press: Berkeley.

**The Post-Development Reader.** 1997. M. Rahnama and V. Bawtree (eds). David Phillip Publishers: Cape Town.

### Useful addresses

**International Institute for Sustainable Development.**  
Website [www.iisd.org](http://www.iisd.org)

**International Institute for Environment and Development.**  
Website [www.iied.org](http://www.iied.org)



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## Enviro Facts 1

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# Sustainable Development

Historically, development and conservation have been in conflict, because conservation has been understood as the protection of resources, and development as the use, or exploitation of resources. Recognising the need for both, the United Nations appointed, in 1987, a commission on environment and development to advise on development and conservation. In the commission's report called *The Brundtland Report* or *Our Common Future*, the concept of sustainable development was emphasised. The report's definition of sustainable development as "... development which meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs", is one of many definitions of sustainable development, and is the most commonly used. Although there are many definitions, principles and criteria for sustainable development, the concept is seldom explained or deeply understood, and is thus difficult to put into practice.

### Historical perspective

During the Industrial Revolution, development was associated with economic growth through industries such as mining, manufacturing and large-scale farming. Industrialisation began in Britain and spread to mainland Europe, North America and Japan, all of which became known as the First World. Characteristics of First World countries are high economic growth, many, varied job opportunities, and high incomes. The former Soviet Union and its satellite states, governed under the economic system of communism, became known as the Second World. Third World countries (now known as countries from the Developing World) such as those in Africa, South America and parts of Asia, have slow, if any, economic growth, with high levels of unemployment and very low incomes, but often substantial natural resources. In fact, the wealth of many First World countries is founded, in

part on the over-exploitation of resources (natural and human) from the Developing World – something which economists warn does little to encourage developing nations to “live lightly on the land” while finding ways of developing their own economies.

## Environmental problems

The environmental problems of the First World are associated with economic wealth, high resource consumption and industrialization. These have contributed to, for example, ozone depletion (see *Enviro Facts Ozone*) and climate change (see *Enviro Facts Global Warming*). Environmental problems of the Developing World, however, can be associated with poverty, high population growth rates (see *Enviro Facts Human Numbers*), lack of food, shelter and water, and a lack of technical capacity.

## Development as a solution?

'Development' (economic growth through industrialisation and high consumption) is generally seen by the First World as the solution to the devastating poverty and environmental problems of the Developing World. However, people have begun to seriously question the wisdom of this approach. Thabo Mbeki, past president of the South African Republic stated during his term of office that he believed that Africa should use African resources, especially human, in order to achieve a strong, well-developed and competitive continent. He called this process the 'African Renaissance'.

## Our Earth's limited resource base

It is argued that many if not most of the Earth's natural resources are finite (limited in supply), and that they would not be able to support all the world's people if everyone had the high consumption patterns of those living in First World countries. Mahatma Gandhi, when asked if, after independence, India would attain British standards of living, commented that "... it took Britain half the resources of the planet to achieve its prosperity, how many planets will a country like India require?"

## Is a different type of development attainable?

Development is conventionally seen as economic growth, dependant upon 'throughput growth', i.e. growth which depends on ever increasing consumption of energy and natural resources. This type of development is environmentally unsustainable. One alternative being suggested is qualitative development, with minimum inputs and outputs, maximum reuse, recycling and repair, and little or no growth in throughput. Organisations would thus try to deliver the same high

standards of service, but use fewer material resources such as fossil fuels, minerals and water to do so. Development programmes in countries from the Developing World probably need both quantitative growth (to address poverty), and qualitative development (to sustain the environment). The First World also needs to minimise its throughput growth, and enhance its qualitative growth. For example, an industry-oriented economy (high throughput) might be characterized by coal mining and steel manufacture, whereas a service-oriented economy might focus on information technology including the use of fibre optics and electronics (low throughput).

## Who benefits from 'development'?

Developing World programmes that focus on economic growth as a solution to widespread poverty, assume a 'trickle down' effect, i.e. the benefits of economic growth will trickle down to all members of society. However, economic growth does not always benefit the poor in a country. Many development programmes now give special attention to human needs, improved participation in programmes, and the distribution of development benefits, rather than focusing all efforts on economic development. A more people-oriented development should empower people to take greater control over all aspects of their lives: social, political, economic and ecological.

## Indicators of economic performance

If we are to move towards sustainable development, we will need tools with which to measure our performance. At present the performance of an economy is measured in term of its gross domestic product (GDP). The GDP is the total value of all the money transactions that take place, and is a poor measure of the effect of economic policies and practices on people and the environment. The GDP does not differentiate between different kinds of economic activity. For example, if a new prison is built, this amount is added to the GDP - the more prisons built, the better the GDP!

There are no simple answers to how sustainable development can be assessed. Many attempts try to value, or put a price to, the depletion and degradation of natural resources as a way of ensuring that this is taken into account when assessing economic performance. Other approaches argue that valuing the environment is often impossible or undesirable, and maintain that environmental quality should be measured in purely physical terms, which should then be published alongside the GDP as an environmental account.

As situations and conditions change, so will our understanding of sustainable development change. Sustainable development is not a model to be imposed but can be seen as a process of learning how to

