



What is sustainable development?

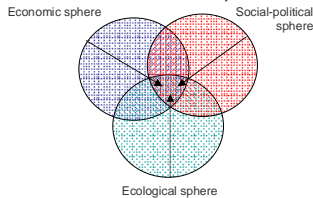
A support document developed for the SADC REEP consultative process to develop guidelines for participation in the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development. SADC REEP, August 2005.



“Sustainability and sustainable development itself are about *collective values* and related *choices*, and are therefore *a political issue*, almost certainly the supreme political issue of our century” (Prugh & Assadourian, 2003: 11). Consider the values, choices and the politics embedded in these different explanations of sustainable development:

[Weak sustainability]

The classical model of sustainable development: treats economics, environment and society essentially as three separate spheres, with only some overlap



(Hattingh, 2004)

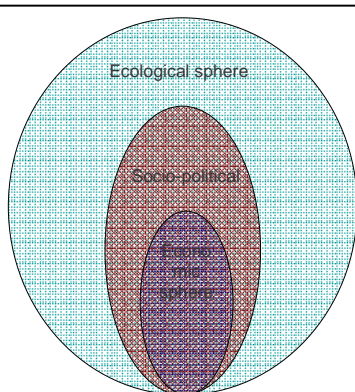
Emphasising inter-generational equity: The World Commission on Environment and Development (1987) explain: “Sustainable development is *development* that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs”

Emphasising equity (social justice), and limits to growth: Herman Daly (1996) suggests that sustainable development is “*development without growth beyond the environmental carrying capacity*, where development means qualitative improvement and growth means quantitative increase”. He advocates an approach to sustainability that “strives for sufficient per capita wealth – efficiently maintained and allocated and *equitably distributed* – for the maximum number of people that can be sustained under these conditions.”

Emphasising ecosystems: Rist (1999:192) describes sustainability to be the ability of an **ecosystem** to continue levels of production borne by the system over a long period of time (ecological explanation).

Emphasising morality: Hattingh (2002) argues that the meaning and interpretation of sustainable development is informed by various philosophical and ethical interpretations. He says that sustainable development is strongly associated with “*a moral imperative* that apparently no one can ignore or reject, without having to provide a very good reason for dissent ... even though there is ... little consensus about the content, interpretation and the implementation of this imperative”.

Emphasising economic development: An Energy Company slogan reads: “Sustainable Development: We’re growing with the planet” which gives the impression that there are no limits to growth. As long as business grows, development will be sustainable (*unlimited growth*).



An alternative model of sustainable development in which economy is embedded in society, society and economy are embedded in the ecological sphere. Society and economy are interdependent with ecology, and cannot function without a healthy ecological sphere
[Strong sustainability]

What kind of values and politics have guided development in southern Africa in the past? What kind of values and politics are needed to guide development in southern Africa in the present and future? What kind of development choices need to be made? In what way can thinking about sustainable development assist? Daniel Babikwa (pers comm. 2005) argues that before we can think about sustainable development, we need to change our thinking about development. Do you agree?

References: WCED, 1987. *Our Common Future*. / Prugh, T & Assadourain, E. 2003. *What is Sustainability Anyway?* World Watch Institute. / Daly, H. 1996. *Beyond Growth: The Economics of Sustainable Development*. Boston: Beacon Press. / Hattingh, J. 2002. On the imperative of sustainable development. A philosophical and ethical appraisal. In Janse van Rensburg et. al. 2002. *Environmental Education, Ethics and Action*. Pretoria: EEASA & HSRC. / Rist, G. 1999. *The history of development from western origins to global faith*. London: Zed Books. Babikwa, D. (pers com, 2005). / Hattingh, J. 2004. *Southern African Journal of Environmental Education*. Vol 21.



What is *Education* for Sustainable Development?



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“Education for sustainable development implies a shift from viewing education as a delivery mechanism, to the recognition that we are all learners as well as teachers. ESD must happen in the villages and cities, schools and universities, corporate offices and assembly lines, and in the offices of ministers and civil servants. All must struggle with how to live and work in a way that protects the environment, advances social justice, and promotes economic fairness for present and future generations. We must learn how to resolve conflicts, create a caring society and live in peace”
(Ahmedabad Declaration, 2005)

Education for sustainable development emphasizes the important role of education in shaping future development options and choices. If *sustainable* development is about values and choices, and if sustainable development is the ‘supreme political issue of the century’, then it would follow that education *for sustainable development* is learning about new value orientations, new choices and new political decisions (including those we make in the home and community). ESD would seem to be about ethical and equitable ways of caring for, using and distributing the Earth’s finite resources.

The BIG question for educators is how does one educate about values, choices and politics in ways that don’t narrow educational options or simply indoctrinate? Is it a case of simply ‘transferring the message’? Some educators have argued that as soon as you have education *for* anything, then education becomes narrow and can change to indoctrination as educators try to ‘push a point or a particular message (eg. SD)’. Other educators would argue that this is the role of education – to induct learners into a particular set of ideas / culture. Education has the potential to be more than just cultural induction – it can also foster critical deliberation. When educational opportunities are narrowed to ‘induction’ only, opportunities for deliberation, for critical thinking and locally situated action can be ‘cut short’. Lets look at this example of some ESD training materials developed for staff training by an Energy company:

Think three times before you act!
Social – Economic – Environmental

Sustainable Development means always thinking of three things – social, economic and environmental impacts. Think of an electrification project:

- **Environmental impact:** The reduction of coal fires and smoke in the air
- **Economic impact:** Kick starts the local economy and provides jobs
- **Social impact:** Reduces the time spent collecting alternative fuels and improves education and health when schools and clinics are electrified

Electrification is therefore a good example of a sustainable project as all three aspects are addressed!

Look critically at these ESD training materials:

What about the longer term environmental impacts associated with the production of electricity (from coal) i.e. air pollution and global warming? What about alternative energy production processes? Why are these questions not addressed here?

*What opportunities could be created for deliberation, critical thinking and action for change?
How have these been ‘cut short’ in the example of the ESD training materials?*

The question for the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development would seem to be:

How do we include environment and sustainability questions in educational processes? *Can we develop open, reflexive educational processes* that allow learners the space to investigate issues, and to deliberate critically on the causes and consequences. Can we develop educational methods and approaches that foster informed decision making and actions, and that allow for critical deliberations on value orientations and the creation of a new politics. In this process will learners also be encouraged and allowed to critique sustainable development thinking?