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Sustainability

Martina Jaskolski and Elena Kavanagh

Sustainability refers to a state or condition that reflects the long-term maintenance of systems and processes. The United Nations defines sustainability as meeting the needs and aspirations of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (WCED 1987).

> The concept can be traced back to an 18th-century forestry concept that limited tree logging to a rate that would allow **forests** to regenerate (Renn et al. 1999). In the context of human-natural resource relationships, sustainability refers to the avoidance of

depletion of **natural resources** to ensure the long-term integrity of ecological systems as well as the social and economic well-being of human populations. The concept is anchored in questions on harmonious human-**environment** relations in the context of exponential population growth, economic growth, and limited global resources (Meadows et al. 1972). Sustainability has slightly differing interpretations across disciplines, such as ecology, economics, and social sciences. Achieving sustainability has been applied to numerous global challenges like **climate change**, **biodiversity** loss, and economic inequality.

In the context of global development, the World Commission on Environment and Development, in its 1987 report *Our Common Future,* coined a new approach to development that incorporates present needs and those of future generations (WCED 1987). (The monumental document is also referred to as "the Brundtland Report.") This definition's future dimension warns against the short-term exploitation of finite natural resources to ensure the long-term sustainability of human well-being and prosperity by promoting balanced development of environmental, economic, and social dimensions, often referred to as the three pillars of sustainability: environmental protection, economic growth, and social equity. The concept of **sustainable development** has since shaped the global development agenda driven by the United Nations, starting with the signing of Agenda 21 at the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, and eventually leading to the Millennium Development and Sustainable Development Goals.

While the terms sustainability and sustainable development are often used interchangeably, they reflect important political differences and deep contestations over the degree and types of transformations and trade-offs required to achieve sustainability. The term sustainable development is often associated with conservative, technocratic, or human-centric approaches to change, while the term sustainability is preferred by those promoting alternative, revolutionary, or ecocentric transformations (Davidson 2000; Hopwood and Mellor 2005; Jacobs 1999). Proponents of the term sustainability point to a potential tension within the terms sustainable and development, with development often being associated with unlimited economic growth, which would be unsustainable. Moreover, postcolonial critiques refer to a lack of integration of local and **Indigenous knowledge** into notions of sustainability, i.e., long-standing practices by Indigenous populations now seen as dominated by northern science and political agendas (Nygren 1999).

Within the field of **environmental peacebuilding**, sustainability is a crucial concept from both the environmental and **conflict** perspectives. When it comes to interdependent **power** relations, a durable **peace** and environmental sustainability are mutually reinforcing (Davis et al. 2023). It is important to manage natural resources in a way that promotes long-term peace, preventing resource-based conflicts and fostering cooperative relationships between communities. As such, the concept is fundamental to creating systems that both protect the environment and contribute to social and economic stability. Examples include transboundary **water cooperation** initiatives that promote peace through shared environmental stewardship, as well as

sustainable **agriculture** practices that lower the risk of conflict by reducing resource scarcity. There are, however, concerns over the "dark side" of environmental peacebuilding (Ide 2020) when some **peacebuilding** efforts result in coordinated resource exploitation (Conca 2001), and other **environmental degradation** resulting from the unsustainable political and economic order (Chandler 2020). In environmental peacebuilding, both the malleability of the term sustainability and the way it is pursued may lead to differential peace outcomes. For example, socio-ecological sustainability as a political and practical goal differs from sustaining natural resources in a way that may exclude or dominate others.

In practical terms, sustainability entails the implementation of policies and programs that reduce the vulnerability of livelihoods to environmental challenges (Barnett 2019), prioritizing **renewable energy**, **conservation** efforts, and equitable resource distribution to prevent future environmental degradation and related conflicts. Institutions and communities are encouraged to adopt sustainable practices to reduce competition over scarce resources, thus serving as a catalyst for peacebuilding. However, **political ecology**, structural inequality, and power dynamics affect and shape the ways in which different social groups can implement sustainable practices.

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