

## **ECONOMIC, SOCIAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY: AN INTEGRATED FRAMEWORK FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT**

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### **Abstract**

*Sustainability is increasingly recognized as a multidimensional concept that integrates economic, social, and environmental dimensions to ensure long term well being for present and future generations. This paper examines the interlinkages among these three pillars, highlighting how economic viability, social equity, and environmental protection are mutually reinforcing rather than isolated goals. The discussion draws on the Brundtland framework of sustainable development and recent empirical work on green growth, social inclusion, and climate resilience. The paper argues that sustainable development requires coordinated policy design, stakeholder participation, and cross sectoral governance mechanisms. Examples from cities, industries, and national development strategies illustrate how an integrated approach can reduce inequality, safeguard ecosystems, and support inclusive economic growth. The study concludes that only through simultaneous advancement on all three pillars can societies achieve meaningful, long term sustainability.*

### **Keywords**

*Economic sustainability, social sustainability, environmental sustainability, sustainable development, three pillars of sustainability, green economy, social equity*

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## 1. Introduction

Sustainability has evolved from a narrow concern about environmental degradation into a comprehensive framework for organizing economies, societies, and ecosystems over time (Brundtland Commission, 1987; United Nations, 2015). The widely adopted three-pillar model of economic, social, and environmental sustainability provides a useful lens to understand sustainable development as a holistic project rather than a set of separate technical fixes (Dresner, 2008; Giddings et al., 2002). Under this model, development must be:

- **Economically viable** (capable of generating long term prosperity and employment),
- **Socially equitable** (inclusive, participatory, and human rights-based), and
- **Sustainability in environmental terms** (functioning within the limits of our planet's capacity and minimizing ecological destruction) (Diesendorf, 2002).

In this paper, we start with brief definitions of each pillar; then explore how they are intertwined and lastly outline governance and policy implications for embedding them into national and local development strategies.

## 2. Economic sustainability

Economic sustainability is often defined as the capacity of an economy to support a defined level of economic production indefinitely (Daly, 1996; UN DESA, 2019). Whereas traditional growth-based models emphasize short-run GDP growth, economically sustainable development centres around resource efficiency, innovation and resilience (Jackson 2009).

**2.1. Dimensions and indicators-** Key dimensions of economic sustainability are:

- Long term productivity and diversification of economic activities. Durable institutions that govern market processes, mitigate speculation and manage systemic risks (e.g., financial crises, climate shocks)
- Invest in human capital (education, health, skills) and productive infrastructure (transport, energy, digital networks).
- Common indicators are the following: adjusted GDP per capita accounting for natural resource degradation (natural resources account in green GDP), employment, income distribution (Gini coefficient), share of renewable to total energy economy (Stiglitz et al., 2009; UNEP,

## 2.2 Green economy and innovation

The rise of the **green economy** reflects attempts to align economic growth with environmental constraints, for example through green technologies, circular business models, and low carbon infrastructure (UNEP, 2011). Studies show that

renewable-energy transitions can create more jobs than fossil-fuel-based growth while reducing emissions and improving energy security (IRENA, 2020). However, economic sustainability also requires attention to **just transitions**, ensuring that displaced workers in carbon intensive sectors are retrained and relocated into decent employment (ILO, 2020).

### **3. Social Sustainability**

Social sustainability focuses on equity, inclusion, participation, and well being across all population groups, including future generations (Giddings et al., 2002; Marsden & Sonnino, 2012). It asks not only how much is produced, but who benefits and who bears the costs.

#### **3.1 Equity and human rights Core elements of social sustainability include:**

- **Poverty reduction** and access to basic needs (food, water, housing, healthcare, education)
- **Gender equality**, social inclusion of marginalized groups, and protection of labor rights.
- **Governance free** from any form of corruption, where communities are involved in decisions impacting their lives (UN, 2015).

These facets are represented in a global policy framework namely the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), with Goal 1 (No Poverty), Goal 3 (Good Health and Well Being) and Goal 10 (Reduced Inequalities) as central goals in this regard, which serves as an anchor point for scholarly literature on these issues (UN, 2015).

#### **3.2 Social capital for building the resilience of communities**

Social sustainability also relies upon social capital — the trust, networks, and norms that together allow communities to respond to shocks of many kinds, including climate change, pandemics, and economic shocks (Putnam 2000). For example, key roles in managing local resources, enabling mutual-support systems and advocating fair development policies for both urban and rural communities have been played by community-based organizations and cooperatives (Pretty, 2003).

### **4. Environmental sustainability**

Environmental sustainability is avoiding irreversible interactions between human societies and natural ecosystems while the development path lies within the perimeters of national ecological carrying capacities (Rockstrom et al., 2009; MA, 2005). The notion is closely tied to the idea of planetary boundaries, which articulate safe operating limits for human activity such as greenhouse gas emissions, land use change, and freshwater use (Steffen et al., 2015).

#### **4.1 Ecological limits and resource use Environmental sustainability invokes:**

- Lower resource extraction and material through put (e.g., minerals, timber, fossil fuels).
- Reducing pollution and waste, and emissions to air, water and soil.
- Safeguarding biodiversity and ecosystem services (e.g., pollination, water purification, climate regulation) that support human livelihoods (MEA, 2005).
- Examples: GDP carbon intensity, ecological footprint, biodiversity loss indices, air/water quality metrics (UNEP, 2019)

#### **4.2 Climate change and adaptation**

One of the major global environmental sustainability challenges is climate change. According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), reducing global warming by 1.5°C to 2°C above pre-industrial levels demands immediate decarbonization of the global economy, especially for the energy, transport, and agriculture sectors (IPCC, 2022). At the same time, adaptation is critical for protecting vulnerable populations and economies (UNDP, 2021).

#### **5. Interlinkages among the three pillars**

The three pillars are not mutually exclusive and are independent of one another. They are rather mutually reinforcing and interdependent (Lorek & Vergragt, 2013).

##### **5.1 Synergies and win–win opportunities**

Renewable energy investments can have positive effects on economic growth, the environment, and social well-being. Specifically, investments in renewable energy can enhance economic growth through job and innovation effects, minimize damage to the environment through reduced emissions and air pollution, and improve social well-being through enhanced access to energy services.

Social protection programs, such as universal health insurance and housing subsidies, can enhance economic stability, minimize inequality, and improve well-being, including the social pillar.

Conservation programs, especially those involving local communities, can enhance the conservation of environmental resources while improving local livelihoods and social cohesion (Berkes, 2004).

##### **5.2 Trade-offs and Governance Challenges**

Not all trade-offs have a positive impact. For instance:

Rapid industrialization can create employment opportunities (economic gain) but also increase pollution and pose health risks (environmental and social costs).

Fiscal measures, such as those associated with an ‘austerity’ policy, can

improve the fiscal balance (economic goal) at the expense of social protection and increased poverty (social costs).

Balancing these trade-offs requires integrated governance, which entails coordinating different ministries and levels of government as well as different stakeholder groups (OECD, 2019). Instruments such as sustainability impact assessments, multi-stakeholder dialogues, and participatory budgeting processes can support the alignment of economic, social, and environmental goals

## **6. Case illustrations**

### **6.1 Urban sustainability: Green cities**

Cities are important areas for the integration of the three pillars. Many cities have developed sustainable urban development plans that include compact urban planning, public transport systems, green buildings, and social housing. For instance, the city of Copenhagen has developed a climate-neutral strategy that encompasses the production and use of renewable energy, energy-efficient housing, and the provision of public transport services. The strategy demonstrates the integration of the three pillars of sustainability: economic, social, and environmental sustainability (City of Copenhagen, 2019).

### **6.2 Industrial Sustainability: Circular economy**

In the industrial sector, the circular economy strategy focuses on the decoupling of economic growth from the depletion of natural resources. The strategy involves the design of products that can be reused, repaired, and recycled (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2015). The case studies demonstrate the circular business model as a strategy for achieving environmental gain, economic benefit, and social benefit.

### **6.3 Rural development and agriculture**

In the agricultural sector, the methods that support the concept of sustainable intensification aim to achieve higher yields without the need to extend agricultural lands into natural habitats, nor to degrade soils and water (Pretty, 2008). These methods, such as integrated pest management, agroforestry, and conservation agriculture, are important to achieve several SDGs, such as SDG 2 (Zero Hunger) and SDG 15 (Life on Land).

## **7. Policy and governance implications**

To achieve integrated sustainability, there is a need to address the following issues at different levels:

- **At the national level**, the integration of the three pillars into national development planning, budgeting, and monitoring (e.g., national sustainable development strategies).

- **Fiscal and financial instruments**, such as green taxes, subsidies to clean technologies, and impact-oriented financial instruments.
- **Regulatory standards**, such as those on emissions, resource depletion, labor rights, and social inclusion.
- **At the local level**, the establishment of decentralized governance that empowers local authorities to find context-specific solutions (OECD, 2019).

Multi-stakeholder platforms, which include government, business, civil society, and knowledge institutions, can be useful to facilitate negotiations and achieve social license to deliver sustainability transitions.

## 8. Conclusion

Economic, social, and environmental sustainability can be best comprehended as not mutually exclusive goals, but as mutually dependent aspects of a unified concept of development. Economic development, as well as social and environmental sustainability, can be best secured by protecting the natural environment, ensuring fair and equitable access to resources and opportunities, and fostering strong and sustainable institutions. The Brundtland definition of sustainable development as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” represents one of the most influential and enduring normative concepts for this integrated approach to development (Brundtland Commission, 1987). The simultaneous and mutually reinforcing advancement of all three dimensions of sustainable development will require political will, creativity, and governance, and it holds the only promise for a more just, prosperous, and sustainable world.

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