

ABSTRACT

CONCEPTS OF SUSTAINABILITY

SUSTAINABILITY VERSUS GROWTH

The Brundtland commission kicked off the global agenda of sustainability (1978), and therefore we base our concept in their definition of sustainability, which is: “Development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” This is of course a general and unspecified approach – what are the needs of the present? How far do future generations reach?

One of the big factors driving the influence of the Brundtland commission was the coupling of concerns for global development with environmental conservation, especially with regard to alleviating poverty in developing countries. Social sustainability was an important component, and a major reason why the definition of sustainability had a quite positive view on economic growth.

An intrinsic problem in this approach is assigning weights both over time but also to categories such as biodiversity, wealth and income distribution. Can environmental depletion be offset by economic growth? Later definitions of sustainability have differing views on what weights should be put on economic and environmental concerns, and assigning these is always a political positioning.

STRONG OR WEAK SUSTAINABILITY

Sustainability concepts can be classified as expressions of either strong or weak sustainability.

Weak sustainability posits that depletion of resources, degradation of ecosystems and extinction of species can principally be offset by sufficient economic growth. In this view, nature is a form of capital that can be substituted by other types. Development is sustainable, if it doesn't limit the ability to meet ongoing economic needs. Examples are the UN's Human Development Index or the World Bank's Genuine Savings Indicator.

Strong sustainability on the other hand only allows economic growth that doesn't lead to irreversible loss of resources. Nature has value in itself, and not only as inputs in the economy. Examples are the Genuine Progress Indicator and the Ecological Footprint. These two approaches weigh economy and ecology very different, and as such provide very different policy recommendations.

