

A Primer on Sustainability

This is one of many interpretations of sustainability. If you wish to comment, please email sustainability@hamline.edu

* There is no single definition of sustainability or definitive list of sustainability topics. Example definitions:

“Sustainability is improving the quality of human life while living within the carrying capacity of supporting ecosystems.”¹

“A sustainable global society [is] founded on respect for nature, universal human rights, economic justice, and a culture of peace.”²

* Sustainability has three components, often called the pillars of sustainability:

Social sustainability

Environmental sustainability

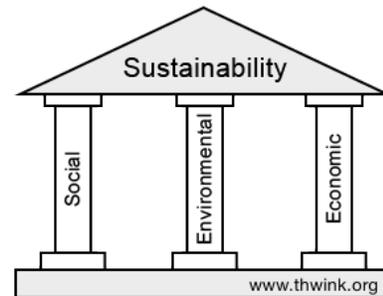
Economic sustainability

* Sustainable systems are said to be:

Socially just

Environmentally sound

Economically prosperous



* The sustainability of a system can be measured by benchmarks.

Benchmarks of Socially Just systems include:

Human well-being

Universal human rights and equity

Democratic government

Democratic civil society

Benchmarks of Environmentally Sound systems include:

Wise use of renewable biological and physical resources

Minimal use of non-renewable resources

Effective waste management

Benchmarks of Economically Prosperous systems include:

Efficient use of natural, human, physical, and intangible capital

Equitable distribution of wealth and resources

Generalized capacity to create well-being

Efficient markets

* The time span in which sustainability is evaluated is not fixed or infinite, but should span multiple human generations.

* Sustainability may be studied at different spatial scales:

Institutional → Local → Regional → National → Global

* A system is not truly sustainable unless all three components are sustainable. The interactions among the three components of sustainability are of crucial importance.

* The crucial question in the study of sustainability:

How does the issue being studied affect the long term sustainability of the environmental, economic, or social system(s) in question, as measured by benchmarks?

Examples:

- How does integrating external costs into pricing structures affect the long term market efficiency of the economic system in question?
- How does species diversity affect the long term stability of the environmental system in question?
- How does cultural preservation affect the long term social well-being in the society in question?
- How does water pollution affect the long term environmental stability and economic viability of the system in question?

¹ Caring for the Earth: A Strategy for Sustainable Living (<https://portals.iucn.org/library/efiles/documents/CFE-003.pdf>)

² The Earth Charter (<http://www.earthcharterinaction.org/content/pages/Read-the-Charter.html>)