

What is Sustainable Development?

What is Sustainable Development?

Prof. dr. Dana Perniu, Prof. dr. Codrina Csesznek,

Transilvania University of Brasov, Romania

Contents

Short history of the sustainable development concept	3
Sustainable development definition.....	3
Sustainable development goals	4
References	5

Short history of the sustainable development concept

The concept of *sustainable development* emerged in the 1980s, when it had become clear that the degradation of the natural environment was a serious threat to life on our planet (Cobianu-Băcanu et al., 2002).

In 1987 the United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) published a report entitled "Our Common Future" which defined *sustainable development* as development that meets the needs of present generations without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. Since then, sustainable development, based on sustained cooperation between the world's governments, has been seen as the only solution to overcome crises in the areas of environmental protection, economic development and energy production (UN, 1987).

In 1992, an important United Nations Summit called the *Earth Summit* was held in Rio de Janeiro, from where a message was sent to the whole world: environmental degradation was a real threat to human health and to the entire planetary eco-system (Shah, 2008). This international meeting also proposed the drafting of several international conventions on reducing air pollution, preserving the planet's biological diversity and stopping massive deforestation (UN, 1992).

In recent decades, many global environmental concerns have been raised and the effects of human activity on the degradation of life-sustaining resources and climate change have been highlighted. At the same time, solutions have been proposed to maintain and even improve living conditions on our planet. These solutions fall under the umbrella of the concept of *sustainability*, which refers to the responsibility of all of us to create societies with a high standard of living, while protecting the natural environment.

Sustainable development definition

The concept of *sustainable development*, as defined at the United Nations Conference in Stockholm in 1987, implies an intergenerational ethic and proposes a vision based on development and well-being, but draws attention to the risk of exceeding the planet's limits. Sustainable development is a generous, broad, complex concept, often referred to as an "umbrella" concept. It is a challenging and controversial concept (Verma & Raghubanshi, 2018), having more of a normative character than a concrete definition (Turcu, 2013), but it creates the framework for action at different levels of the socio-economic system.

The concept is traditionally known as integrating three pillars: these relate to social development and *economic growth*, but without damaging the *quality of the environment*. The literature (Spangenberg, 2004; Turcu, 2013) mentions the need to introduce the fourth element, the *institutional* one, which ensures the formulation of policies and strategies in this field.

The end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century have marked, beyond rapid and accelerated socio-economic development and deteriorating environmental quality, many efforts to develop policies and action programmes for sustainable development.

Sustainable development goals

Nowadays, the fundamental document guiding sustainable development at the international level is the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development developed by the UN, with 17 goals (Sustainable Development Goals - SDGs) on reducing poverty, combating inequality and injustice, regional and global stability, as well as protecting the planet (UN, 2015):

1. *No Poverty* - Eradicate poverty in all its forms and in all contexts.
2. *Zero Hunger* - Eradicate hunger, ensure food security, improve nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture.
3. *Good health and well-being* - Ensuring healthy lives and promoting well-being for all at all ages.
4. *Quality education* - Ensuring quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all.
5. *Gender equality* - Achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls.
6. *Clean water and sanitation* - Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all.
7. *Affordable and clean energy* - Ensure access to affordable energy for all in a secure, sustainable and modern way.
8. *Decent work and economic growth* - Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all.
9. *Industry, innovation and infrastructure* - Building resilient infrastructures, promoting sustainable industrialisation and encouraging innovation.
10. *Reduced inequalities* - Reducing inequality within and between countries.
11. *Sustainable cities and communities* - Develop cities and human settlements to be inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable.
12. *Responsible consumption and production* - Ensuring sustainable consumption and production patterns.
13. *Climate action* - Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts.
14. *Life below water* - Conservation and sustainable use of oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development.
15. *Life on land* - Protecting, restoring and promoting the sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, managing forests sustainably, combating desertification, stopping and repairing soil degradation and stopping biodiversity loss.
16. *Peace, justice and strong institutions* - Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, access to justice for all and the creation of effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels.
17. *Partnerships for the goals* - Strengthening the means of implementation and revitalising the global partnership for sustainable development.

Sustainable development is a strategic objective of the European Union, its policies being oriented towards protecting the environment and ensuring equity, social cohesion and prosperity for its citizens. Sustainable development means progress in the social, economic and environmental fields. It is not a final goal, but a way of acting, operating, requiring appropriate, rigorous design and 'piloting', based on scientific data, aggregated in such a way as to capture both general

elements, which manifest themselves globally, and particular elements of the system under analysis. This type of development has both short- and long-term objectives and is carried out at both global and local levels (EC, 2016).

Among the strategies recently launched (December 2019) by the European Union in the context of sustainable development, we mention the European Green Deal, which brings together the European Commission's long-term priorities for business, producers and consumers, and for the market in general (EC, 2019). In the vision of this document, Europe is to play a leading role in redefining how the world develops sustainably so that by 2050 it achieves greenhouse gas neutrality, decouples the economy from resource use, and leaves no one behind (UE_Green Deal).

Achieving climate neutrality relies on multi-sectoral action (UE_Green Deal):

- in the field of *Energy*, it is proposed to decarbonise the energy sector, as energy production and use currently contributes more than 75% of the European Union's greenhouse gas emissions;
- in the field of *Buildings*, which contribute about 40% of total energy consumption, repair works are proposed so that the population benefits from tariff reductions through reduced energy consumption;
- in the European *Industrial* sector, the focus is on the circular economy, supporting industry to innovate and become world leaders in the green economy, as only 12% of recycled materials are used in Europe;
- in the field of *Mobility*, actions are foreseen to introduce less polluting, cheaper and healthier forms of private and public transport, as current transport contributes 25% of polluting emissions;
- the *Food* sector is identified as a "milestone" of sustainable development at European level and the "farm to fork" strategy foresees the mitigation of the negative environmental impact of this sector and the promotion of organic farming for a fair, healthy and environmentally friendly food system (UE_Green Deal).

In this context, concrete actions and funding mechanisms to implement these concepts are starting to be proposed at EU level.

Romania, as a UN member state as well as a member of the European Union, is committed to formulating policies and actions that lead to the achievement of sustainable development goals. At the national level, *Romania's National Strategy for Sustainable Development 2030* has been formulated, which supports Romania's development on the three pillars: economic, social and environmental, "being citizen-oriented and focused on innovation, optimism, resilience and confidence that the state serves the needs of every citizen in a fair and efficient way and in a clean environment, in a balanced and integrated manner" (Strategia RO, 2018).

References

Cobianu-Băcanu, M., Alexandrescu, P., Cucu-Oancea, O. (2002). *Cultura, identitatea națională și educația în dezvoltarea durabilă a societății românești* (Culture, national identity and education in the sustainable development of Romanian society). Pitești: Editura Paralela 45.

EC, European Commission (2016). *Sustainable development*. Retrieved March 2022 from <https://ec.europa.eu/environment/archives/eussd/index.htm>.

Shah, M.M. (2008). Sustainable Development. In *Encyclopedia of Ecology*. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/topics/earth-and-planetary-sciences/sustainable-development>

Spangenberg, J. (2004). Reconciling sustainability and growth: criteria, indicators, policies. *Sustainable Development*, 12, 74-86.

Strategia RO (2018). *Strategia națională pentru dezvoltarea durabilă a României 2023 (National Strategy for the Sustainable Development of Romania 2023)*. <http://dezvoltaredurabila.gov.ro>

Turcu, C. (2013). Re-thinking sustainability indicators: local perspectives of urban sustainability. *Journal of Environmental Planning and Management*, 56, 695-719.

UE_Green Deal. *A European Green Deal*. <https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/european-green-deal>

UN, United Nations (1987). United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED), *Our Common Future* Report. Retrived September 2021 from [United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development \(WCED\) Our Common Future Report \(1987\) | Encyclopedia.com](https://www.un.org/en/content/dam/secure-dam/un/en/our-common-future-report-1987)

UN, United Nations (1992). United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, 3-14 June 1992. Retrived March 2022 from <https://www.un.org/en/conferences/environment/rio1992>

UN, United Nations (2015). *Transforming our world: the 2030 agenda for sustainable development*, A/RES/70/1. Retrieved September 2021 from https://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/70/1&Lang=E

Verma, P., Raghubanshi, A.S. (2018). Urban sustainability indicators: Challenges and opportunities. *Ecological Indicators*, 93, 282-291.