

What is Sustainability?

Sustainability is far from a new concept. Indigenous peoples have practiced elements of sustainable living for generations by being in tune with the natural environment and its limits, cycles, and changes. This understanding is usually referred to as traditional ecological knowledge, or the deep knowledge and beliefs about relationships between people, plants, animals, natural phenomena, landscapes, and timing of events in a specific ecosystem.

Our Common Future

In October 1987, Our Common Future, also known as the Brundtland Report, was published by the World Commission on Environment and Development. In that report, the term "sustainable development" was officially defined as:

“Meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.”

Some notable aspects of this definition are that it is **global** in scope, **timeless**, reflects an **ongoing** process, and includes a **moral responsibility for equity and justice**.

Three Dimensions of Sustainability

Although sustainability is linked to the environmental movement, the notion that it is only focused on the environment is a misconception. Sustainability is based on three dimensions:

- **Environmental sustainability** occurs when humanity's rate of consumption does not exceed nature's rate of replenishment and when humanity's rate of generating pollution and emitting greenhouse gases does not exceed nature's rate of restoration.
- **Social sustainability** is the ability of a society to uphold universal human rights and meet people's basic needs, such as healthcare, education, and transportation. Healthy communities ensure personal, labour, and cultural rights are respected and all people are protected from discrimination.
- **Economic sustainability** is the ability of human communities around the world to maintain their independence and have access to the resources required to meet their needs, meaning that secure sources of livelihood are available to everyone.

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals identify 17 different goal categories and demonstrate a breadth of topics where sustainability can be applied.



End poverty in all its forms everywhere.



End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition, and promote sustainable agriculture.



Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages.



Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.



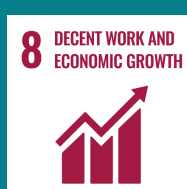
Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls.



Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all.



Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable, and modern energy for all.



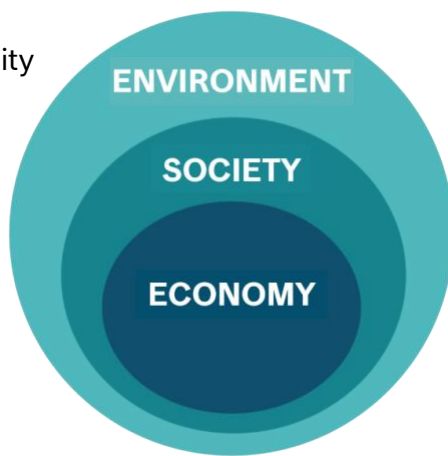
Promote sustained, inclusive, and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment, and decent work for all.



Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization, and foster innovation.

The three dimensions of sustainability can be visualized in different ways.

The nested model (right) shows how each dimension is dependent on the next. The economy is dependent on society, and both are dependent on the environment.



United Nations Sustainable Development Goals

One framework for incorporating sustainability into daily actions is the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Adopted unanimously by all United Nations member states in 2015, the 17 SDGs set out a plan of action to achieve a greener, more prosperous, and more equitable world by 2030.

The SDGs were designed to be a practical implementation guide for sustainability, consisting of 169 specific targets and 231 measurable indicators. While this approach is not perfect, it can be a useful way to think about sustainability.

Sustainability at McGill University

As a member of the global community, it is McGill's responsibility to do what it can to help mitigate climate change and foster a community of sustainability-minded citizens.

From academics to operations, the McGill community is exploring and implementing sustainable solutions to address local and global challenges at all levels of the University. The McGill University Climate & Sustainability Strategy 2020-2025 unifies these initiatives under shared objectives.

McGill's long-term targets include attaining a platinum sustainability rating by 2030, becoming zero-waste by 2035, and achieving carbon neutrality by 2040.

Regardless of their area of study, research, or work, there are plenty of opportunities for students, faculty, and staff members to incorporate sustainability into their McGill experience.

Learn more by visiting the [McGill Office of Sustainability website](#).



Reduce inequality within and among countries.



Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable.



Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns.



Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts.



Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas, and marine resources for sustainable development.



Protect, restore, and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss.



Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all, and build effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions at all levels.



Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development.

Visit the [UN website](#) to learn more about the SDG goals, their targets, and how the attainment of each goal is measured by different indicators.