

## Sustainable Development: From Brundtland to Rio 2012

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“.....The term, sustainable development, was popularized in *Our Common Future*, a report published by the World Commission on Environment and Development in 1987. Also known as the Brundtland report, *Our Common Future* included the “classic” **definition of sustainable development: “development which meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.”**

Acceptance of the report by the United Nations General Assembly gave the term political salience; and in 1992 leaders set out the principles of sustainable development at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

It is generally accepted that sustainable development calls for a convergence between the three pillars of economic development, social equity, and environmental protection. Sustainable development is a visionary development paradigm; and over the past 20 years governments, businesses, and civil society have accepted sustainable development as a guiding principle, made progress on sustainable development metrics, and improved business and NGO participation in the sustainable development process.

Yet the concept remains elusive and implementation has proven difficult. Unsustainable trends continue and sustainable development has not found the political entry points to make real progress. As a result, climate change has become the de facto proxy for implementation of the sustainable development agenda; but the framework of the climate change negotiations are not always the appropriate forum for broader strategic discussions of sustainable development.

While sustainable development is intended to encompass three pillars, over the past 20 years it has often been compartmentalized as an environmental issue. Added to this, and potentially more limiting for the sustainable development agenda, is the reigning orientation of development as purely economic growth. This has been the framework used by developed countries in attaining their unprecedented levels of wealth, and major and rapidly developing countries are following the same course.

The problem with such an approach is that natural resources are in imminent peril of being exhausted or their quality being compromised to an extent that threatens current biodiversity and natural environments. Addressing this challenge calls for changes at the consumer level in developed countries. Developed countries have the wealth and technical capacity to implement more sustainable policies and measures, yet the required level of political leadership and citizen engagement is still a long way off.

The lack of action in developed countries is compounded by economic growth in developing countries that follows the resource-intensive model of developed countries. Without change and real action to address levels of consumerism and resource use in developed countries, one can hardly expect a receptive audience among developing countries when attempts are made to direct attention to their economic development practices. More sustainable development pathways are needed in both developed and developing countries; which require a level of dialogue, cooperation and, most importantly, trust that simply is not reflected in today’s multilateral institutions or regimes.

There is a huge gap between the multilateral processes, with their broad goals and policies; and national action, which reflects domestic political and economic realities. A huge constituency around the world cares deeply and talks about sustainable development, but has not taken serious on-the-ground action. Deep structural changes are needed in the ways that societies manage their economic, social, and environmental affairs; and hard choices are needed to move from talk to action....”

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