

17.13: What is Sustainability?

Learning Objectives

- Define sustainability
- Describe the benefits of sustainability



The most commonly cited definition of sustainability is the one developed by the United Nations' World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED), which defines sustainability in development terms; specifically, sustainable development is "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." This definition, included in a report titled "Our Common Future,"^[1] is referred to as the Brundtland definition after the commission's chairwoman, Gro Harlem Brundtland. For a scientific description of sustainability, watch Alexandre Magnin's Sustainability Illustrated video (7:43); short version: "sustainability is the capacity of our human society to continue indefinitely within [these] natural cycles."^[2]

Learn More

If you're a visual learner or have an appreciation for art, you may enjoy Lexicon of Sustainability's Information Artworks.

From a practical perspective, sustainability means managing toward a triple bottom line, including social, environmental and economic impacts. The triple bottom line (also referred to as TBL or 3BL) concept was introduced by author and SustainAbility consultancy founder John Elkington in his 1997 book *Cannibals with Forks: The Triple Bottom Line of 21st Century Business*.^[3] By factoring in environmental and social or human impacts, including positive and negative externalities such as building a local economy, the threat of litigation or the cost of environmental remediation, 3BL allows organizations to take into account the full cost of doing business—a perspective grounded in reality rather than accounting.

Sustainability, then, requires adopting a systems or integrative perspective rather than pursuing a linear—take-make-waste—approach—with a focus only on accounting profit or the bottom line, regardless of the social or environmental costs or externalities. This systems perspective is best illustrated in the concept of a circular economy that is "restorative and regenerative by design."^[4] The Ellen Macarthur Foundation's Circular Economy concept integrates a number of sustainability schools of thought including chemist Michael Braungart and architect Bill McDonough's Cradle to Cradle framework^[5] and *Biomimicry: Innovation Inspired by Nature* author Janine Benyus' ideas.^[6]

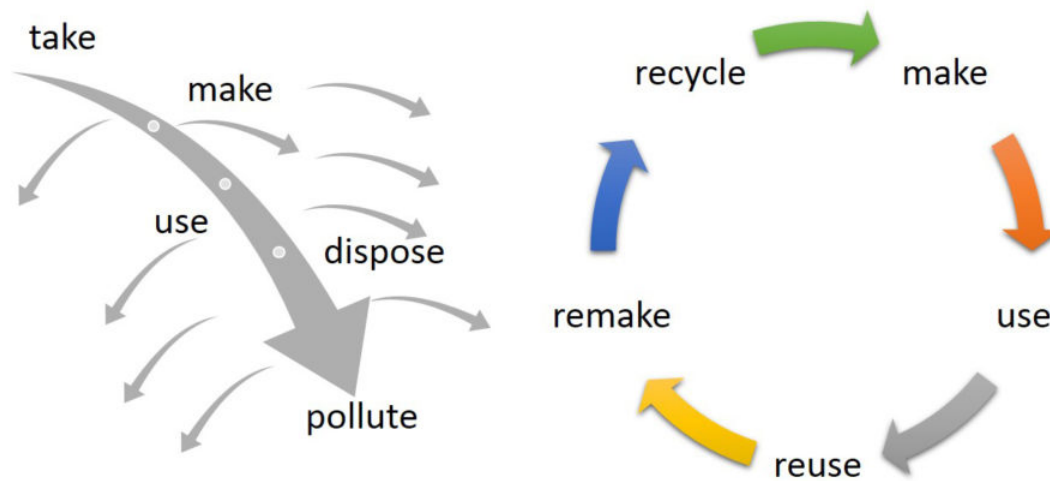


Figure 1. The linear economy (left) versus the circular economy (right). Alternative text for “Figure 1. The Linear Economy vs. The Circular Economy” can be found here.

? Practice Question

<https://assessments.lumenlearning.co...essments/17300>

Benefits of Sustainability

In the Executive Summary of The Millennium Poll on Corporate Social Responsibility, the authors describe a new world order where “business has emerged as the principal engine of growth and development.”^[7] With this broader role comes greater expectations. One of the highlights from the survey is “Two in three citizens want companies to go beyond their historical role of making a profit, paying taxes, employing people and obeying all laws; they want companies to contribute to broader societal goals as well.”

What’s compelling is that those corporations that are rising to the occasion are realizing a financial return on their investment. In an article for Triple Pundit, Jim Witkin reported that a [Centre for Sustainability and Excellence \(CSE\)](#) study^[8] found a “strong correlation between financial performance and sustainability performance.”^[9] Specifically, 73% of the companies identified as having the highest environmental, social and governance (ESG) scores recorded a year-over-year increase in revenues. These results were consistent with the prior year’s research, which showed, in addition, that a majority of the companies with the highest ESG rankings outperformed those with lower ESG ranking from 2014-2016.^[10]



Bosco Verticale in Milan, Italy, (translated as *Vertical Forest*) contains over 900 trees across two towers.

The consistency of these findings—in surveys conducted by CSE and other organizations—debunks the argument that sustainability initiatives and related reporting impair business’ competitiveness and profitability. On the contrary, CSE’s founder and president Nikos Avlonas notes that “Transparency and comprehensive sustainability goals are great business enablers and

support the success of corporate strategies.”^[11] *The Sustainability Advantage* author Bob Willard also views sustainability as an enabling strategy and one that can provide for initiatives spanning design and manufacturing, personnel and waste.^[12]

What’s particularly interesting—and powerful—is that companies that are prioritizing environmental, governance and social issues tend to be better managed and outperform their competitors.

A sustainable approach to business also yields a number of operational and strategic benefits. The following list is based on a list of sustainability benefits identified by authors and sustainability consultants Darcy Hitchcock and Marsha Willard in *The Business Guide to Sustainability*.^[13]

1. **Manage more strategically**—identifying and tracking metrics may make a business more aware of trends and opportunities.
2. **Reduce energy, waste & costs**—redesigning products and systems to eliminate waste and/or work with the community/suppliers and other partners to convert a “waste” stream into a residual product revenue stream
3. **Competitive differentiation**—Listing on the Dow Jones Sustainability Index or other ranking serves as independent validation of sustainability performance and may attract business opportunities and employee and investor interest
4. **Minimize the impact of future regulations**—Anticipating possible regulations and proactively re-engineering processes may allow a business to gain a competitive advantage or avoid negative impacts
5. **Create innovative new products and processes**—Becoming aware of present and future challenges may help an organization develop new products or processes that address those challenges.
6. **Open new markets**—Companies that think beyond industrialized nations may be able to modify their products and processes to tap demand in developing countries, representing 80% of the world population and 99% of global growth.^[14]
7. **Attract and retain the best employees**—Employees want to feel like they’re making a difference and sustainable practices can infuse a job with meaning and shared values.
8. **Improve your image with shareholders and the public**—Sustainability initiatives can build goodwill with customers, the community, NGOs and other stakeholders, and bring the type of positive recognition you can’t buy with PR.
9. **Reduce legal risk and insurance costs**—Sustainability initiatives that address social and environmental practices can help organizations reduce their legal risk and associated cost of insurance.
10. **Provide a higher quality of life**—Applying “smart growth” principles—economically prosperous, socially equitable, and environmentally sustainable—can help cities, towns and neighborhoods maximize quality of life.^[15]

? Practice Question

<https://assessments.lumenlearning.co...essments/17301>

1. "Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development: Our Common Future." Accessed July 18, 2019. ↵
2. Magnin, Alexandre. "Sustainability Definition: Scientific & Simple." YouTube. November 18, 2018. Accessed July 18, 2019. ↵
3. Elkington, John, *Cannibals with Forks: The Triple Bottom Line of 21st Century Business* New Society Publishers. 1998. ↵
4. "What is a Circular Economy?" Ellen Macarthur Foundation. Accessed July 18, 2019. ↵
5. McDonough, William and Michael Braungart. *Cradle to Cradle: Remaking the Way We Make Things*. North Point Press. 2002. ↵
6. Benyus, Janine. "Biomimicry: Innovation Inspired by Nature." HarperCollins. 1997. ↵
7. "The Millennium Poll on Corporate Social Responsibility." Environics. 1999 Accessed July 18, 2019. ↵
8. "Research Links Financial and Corporate Sustainability (ESG) Performance." The Corporate Social Responsibility Newswire. November 8, 2018. Accessed July 18, 2019. ↵
9. Witkin, Jim. "New Study Finds Correlation Between Financial and Sustainable Performance." Triple Pundit. November 15, 2018. Accessed July 18, 2019. ↵
10. Ibid. ↵
11. Waghorn, Terry. "Sustainable Reporting: Lessons from The Fortune 500." *Forbes*. December 4, 2017. Accessed July 18, 2019. ↵
12. Willard, Bob. *The Sustainability Advantage*. New Society Publishers. 2002. ↵
13. Hitchcock, Darcy and Marsha Willard. *The Business Guide to Sustainability*. Earthscan. 2006. ↵
14. "9 Billion World Population by 2050." Population Reference Bureau. Accessed July 18, 2019. ↵
15. *Smart Growth America: Improving Lives by Improving Communities*. Accessed July 18, 2019. ↵

Contributors and Attributions

CC licensed content, Shared previously

- Untitled. **Authored by:** geralt. **Provided by:** Pixabay. **Located at:** pixabay.com/illustrations/sustainability-energy-tree-3295757/. **License:** [CC0: No Rights Reserved](#). **License Terms:** Pixabay License
- Linear versus circular. **Authored by:** Catherine Weetman. **Located at:** https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Linear_versus_circular.jpg. **License:** [CC BY-SA: Attribution-ShareAlike](#)
- Bosco Verticale, Milan. **Authored by:** Victor Garcia. **Provided by:** Unsplash. **Located at:** <https://unsplash.com/photos/0NJ9urGXrIg>. **License:** [CC0: No Rights Reserved](#). **License Terms:** Unsplash License

This page titled [17.13: What is Sustainability?](#) is shared under a [CC BY 4.0](#) license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by [Nina Burokas](#) via [source content](#) that was edited to the style and standards of the LibreTexts platform.