



Understanding sustainable development

Introduction

This module explores the emerging concept of ‘**sustainable development**’ which is now central to the programmes of many governments, businesses, educational institutions and non-government organisations around the world. The module takes an historical approach tracing the widening understanding of sustainable development from the 1980s up to the present day. This history includes landmark international events such as: the 1987 Brundtland Report, the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, the 1997 Rio+5 Conference and the 2000 Millennium Summit in New York, and the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg.

Much has been written in academic terms about the meaning of sustainable development and the need to integrate ecological and economic principles into personal and public decision-making. However, there is no agreed definition of the concept and perhaps there is no

need for one. This is because sustainable development concerns a process of change and is heavily reliant upon local contexts, needs and interests. Thus, sustainable development is an 'emerging concept' in two ways, first, because it is relatively new and evolves as we learn to grasp its wide implications for all aspects of our lives, and, second, because its meanings emerge and evolve according to local contexts.

Objectives

- To develop an understanding of the emerging concept of sustainable development;
- To analyse the value base behind a range of different interpretations of sustainable development;
- To appreciate the differences of approach to sustainable development in countries of the North and the South; and
- To develop your own definition of sustainable development.

Activities

1. [What is sustainable development?](#)
2. [Dimensions of sustainable development](#)
3. [The Millennium Development Goals](#)
4. [The World Summit on Sustainable Development](#)
5. [The Earth Charter](#)
6. [Reflection](#)

References

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Orr, D. (1992) *Ecological Literacy: Education and the Transition to a Postmodern World*, State University of New York Press, Albany, Ch. 2.

Soubotina, T.P. with Sheram, K.A. (2000) [Beyond Economic Growth: Meeting the Challenges of Global Development](#), World Bank Development Education Programme, Washington.

Wackernagel, M. and Rees, W. (1996) *Our Ecological Footprint: Reducing Human Impact on the Earth*, New Society Publishers, Gabriola Island BC, Canada.

World Commission on Environment and Development (1987) *Our Common Future*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Internet Sites

There are literally thousands of Internet sites about sustainable development. Many sites also provide links to other useful ones. The following sites have many very useful links:

[International Institute for Sustainable Development](#)

[Second Nature](#)

[Sustainability Web Ring](#)

[Sustainable Development Gateway](#)

[United Nations Commission for Sustainable Development](#)

[United Nations Food and Agricultural Organisation](#)

[World Resources Institute](#)

[Worldwatch Institute](#)

Credits

This module was written for UNESCO by John Fien and uses some materials and activities prepared by Hilary Macleod for *Teaching for a Sustainable World* (UNESCO – UNEP International Environmental Education Programme).

http://www.unesco.org/education/tlsf/mods/theme_a/mod02.html?panel=1#top