

Sustainability Factsheet

Sustainability. It's a word we've all heard and it's a word most of us think we understand. But what happens when a four-year-old asks us what it means? What do we say? Do we have a simple definition that even a four-year-old can understand? Because let's be honest, if a four-year-old can't understand it there's a good chance you're not understanding it either.

This is not your fault! The term 'sustainability' has been thrown around and used as a political tool and a marketing tool and a beat-them-over-the-head-til-they-understand tool for so long now that it's a miracle that anyone even knows what it means. But that doesn't mean you shouldn't try. Sustainability is a good word with an even better sentiment. It can help to describe the relationship we should all be having with our precious planet.

The roots of sustainability

So let's go back to the basics: where does the word come? Although the idea of caring for our environment has been around for a long time, the roots of the word sustainability can be linked to the term 'sustainable development', a term explored in the 1987 UN book 'Our Common Future'. The aim of this book was to seek a path for a more sustainable form of development, a development that "meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs".

Nice. We like that. And so did a lot of other people. But for some it was still too simple: it only referred to development. The relationship between humans and our planet is about more than just development.

The three pillars of sustainability

So pretty soon people were dropping the 'development' part and were talking about the 'three pillars of sustainability'. Three pillars? What the...? OK, so imagine you're a temple with three pillars... Hang on a minute; what kind of a temple has three pillars? Who is this loon trying to make a building stand on three pillars??? No, let's ditch the three pillars idea and let's talk about three legs, like the legs of a milking stool. Ever sat on one of those? They can be pretty wobbly.

The milking stool of sustainability has three legs. One of these legs stands for the environment, one leg stands for society, and the last of these legs stands for economy. (You might like to also include other factors such as culture; however, let's just keep things simple for now.)



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Imagine that you're sitting on this stool looking at the plans for a coal mine. Take a look at the coal mine and ask these questions:

- Does it meet the needs of society both now and in the future?
- Does it meet the needs of the economy both now and in the future?
- Does it meet the needs of the environment both now and in the future?

Any wobbling? The aim is to get a stool that doesn't wobble. Plans may need altering and it might cost more money than you were hoping for, or it might create fewer jobs in the long term, but you gotta do what you gotta do to stop the stool wobbling. That is sustainability.

Living sustainably

What about when we talk about living more sustainably on a day-to-day basis? Imagine you're looking for a new car. You want something good for the environment and good for your wallet. The best for the environment is just that bit more expensive, and buying it will mean you're going to miss out on other things (like paying your electricity bill). Buying that car means your personal milking stool of sustainability is going to get very wobbly. NOT sustainable.

Another way of looking at it is with the help of the Venn Diagram, a favourite in our office. Anytime you buy anything or do something bigger than just day-to-day stuff, think of this diagram. If what you're doing isn't positively affecting the centre of the diagram then you may need to make some adjustments.

