Sustainable development

DEFINITION

Development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

World Commission on Environment and Development 1987[1]

KEY POINTS

- The term “sustainable development” dates to the 1987 Brundtland Commissions’ report “Our Common Future”. The concept was a key driver behind the Rio Earth Summit in 1992.
- New sustainable development goals will be developed and take effect as of 2015, as was decided during the Rio+20 summit (2012), held to review the progress of implementation of agreements taken during the first Rio Earth Summit (1992).
- Sustainable development is an overarching theme of the three Rio Conventions: The Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), the UN Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) and the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC).
- Sustainable development has recently been identified as one of five key priorities by the United Nations (UN) Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon in the UN Secretary-General’s five year action agenda.

INTRODUCTION

Sustainable development is a core concept within global environmental policy. It provides a mechanism through which society can interact with the environment while not risking damaging the resource for the future.

FIRST UNITED NATIONS ENVIRONMENT CONFERENCE

The history of sustainable development in the UN can be traced back to 1972 with the United Nations (UN) Conference on the Human Environment (CHE), the first UN conference to focus on environmental issues. At this conference the Stockholm Declaration and Principles were developed, which incorporate

the idea of sustainable development although the phrase itself was not included [2].

BRUNDTLAND COMMISSION

Following on from this conference, the UN General Assembly established the World Commission on Environment and Development in 1983 (WCED). This commission was chaired by the former prime-minister of Norway, Gro Harlum Brundtland, earning it the name “Brundtland Commission”. In 1987 the commission submitted their report entitled “Our Common Future” [1]. This report is considered a landmark publication which popularised the definition of sustainable development given here [3]. Central points of the Brundtland Commission were that sustainable development contains within it two key concepts: the concept of needs, in particular the essential needs of the world's poor (to which overriding priority should be given); and the idea of limitations imposed by the state of technology and social organisation on the environment's ability to meet present and future needs.

RIO EARTH SUMMIT

The report, Our Common Future, is considered to have been a key driver behind the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), known as the Rio Earth Summit, in 1992. The recommendations of the report, including the issue of economic growth and how it could be sustainable formed the primary topics of debate at the UNCED [4]. The UNCED had several key outcomes for sustainable development articulated in the conference outcome document, Agenda 21. It states that “sustainable development should become a priority item on the agenda of the international community” and goes on to recommend that national strategies be developed to address economic, social and environmental aspects of sustainable development [5].

RIO CONVENTIONS

Three major conventions, called the Rio Conventions, have come to be seen under the umbrella of UNCED: the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) and the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). Each convention structures a framework around sustainable development in the context of their respective themes of biodiversity, land management and climate change In 2002 the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD), known as Rio+10, was held in Johannesburg to review progress in implementing the outcomes from the Rio Earth Summit. WSSD developed a plan of implementation for the actions set out in Agenda 21, known as the Johannesburg Plan [8], and also launched a number of multi-stakeholder partnerships for sustainable development.

RIO +20 AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

In 2012, 20 years after the first Rio Earth Summit, the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (UNCSD) or Rio+ 20 was held. The conference focused on two themes in the context of sustainable development: green economy and an institutional framework [9]. A reaffirmed commitment to sustainable development is key to the conference outcome document, 'The Future We Want’ to such an extent that the phrase ‘sustainable development’ appears 238 times within the 49 pages [10]. Outcomes from Rio +20 included a process for developing new sustainable development goals, to take affect from 2015 and to encourage focused and coherent action on sustainable development in all sectors, and the formation of an intergovernmental high-level political forum on sustainable development [11]. In 2012, sustainable development was identified as one of five key priorities by the United Nations (UN) Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon in the UN Secretary-General’s five year action agenda [13], highlighting the key role sustainable development takes in current international policy.

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