Over the last 30 years sustainable development has grown from a fringe lobby movement to being a major player in many western governments’ planning, economic and societal systems. While many CEOs may still consider it to be a piece of fluffy public relations, the hardline core of the movement – laws, regulations and financial benefits – is growing all the time and will grow much further before it shrinks or changes in any significant way.

What is it?

Gro Harlem Brundtland, chair of the United Nations’ World Commission on Environment and Development, defined sustainable development as ‘development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs’. This definition is important as it highlights the concept of needs, which includes much more than environmental policies and embraces the issue of poverty as well. It also promotes the idea of limitations imposed on technology and society to allow the environment to meet those present and future needs.

At present over a billion people live on less than a dollar a day, more than 800 million are malnourished, and over two and a half billion lack access to adequate sanitation. What should be done? Allow everyone in the world to have access to the same resources as those of us in developed economies? Unfortunately, a recent report from the New Economics Foundation found that if everyone living in the world consumed resources at the same rate as people in the UK, we would require 3.1 planets to sustain us, compared with the equivalent of one planet in 1961. This has already led to climate change, environmental degradation, resource completion and the loss of habitats in far off countries.

The current model of development (societal and economic) is unsustainable. For those of us in developed economies any further advance along the old lines only increases the burden on the developing economies even further.

Differing approaches

Sustainable development was born out of the synergy between the emerging environmental movement of the 1950s and 1960s and the ‘basic need’ advocates of the 1970s. It acknowledged a link between the environment, economic development and poverty but the broadness of the term has legitimated different pressure groups to use the terminology for their own purposes. Thus, environmentalists have weighted more on the word ‘sustainable’ and urged a better use of ecological resources, while corporations and economic lobbies have focused on the word ‘development’, highlighting the need for more economic growth.

Despite initial conflicting interpretations, there is now general agreement that the concept equally weights and combines social, economic and environmental aspects of development.

The term has evolved to encompass what John Elkington referred...
to as the ‘triple bottom line’ approach, which attempts to rationalise development that promotes economic growth, but maintains social inclusion and minimises environmental impact.

It is also worth pointing out that ‘sustainability’ is an end state in which all human activities can be maintained within the existing capacity of the planet, whereas ‘sustainable development’ is the process of moving towards that goal.

**Metrics**

Indicators are fundamental instruments to measure the progress towards sustainability. The UN Commission on Sustainable Development (UNCSD) has developed and tested a set of 30 core indicators, part of a larger set of 98 indicators of sustainable development.

These are not all, however, as there are now over 600 initiatives concerning measurement initiatives worldwide. They differ in terms of geometric scope, initiative type, initiative goal, issue areas and organisation type but over two-thirds concentrate on environmental issues. In addition, the older indices seem to prioritise the basic needs component while more recent metrics emphasise the importance of governance, representation and institutional factors.

**Tools and CSR**

Over the last three decades there has been an increased interest in voluntary sustainability initiatives and corporate self-regulation by private sector businesses. These have evolved and developed into the socially or ethically responsible practices known as corporate social responsibility (CSR). CSR has become the demonstration of a company’s commitment to minimising the negative impacts associated with its business operations and processes.

CSR is characterised by:

- activities concerned with business operations
- going beyond legal requirements and duty to shareholders
- being voluntary in nature
- meeting responsibilities to internal and external stakeholders
- integration of social and environmental concerns into business operations
- optimising positive effects and minimising negative effects of the company’s actions.

At the applied level, CSR has resulted in the adoption of specific activities by corporations, including:

- statements containing an explanation of socially responsible investment in relation to investment activities, together with an outline of actions and objectives
- identifiable staff responsible for CSR products and services
- publication of regular reports of CSR activities/performance
- informing CSR criteria and product development through regular committee meetings (external and internal staff)
- offering a service to institutional investors to target engagement activities in accordance with individual organisations’ preferences
- certification programmes and voluntary standards.

Policy statements and the setting up of advisory committees are normally carried out internally by companies, while reporting and certification programmes are part of a standard compliance exercise often endorsed by third parties. As a result, the amount of corporate non-financial reporting has increased steadily since the 1990s, growing from fewer than 100 companies issuing reports on their environmental and social performance in 1993 to more than 500 in 1999.

Despite this increase, it is worth pointing out that some standards are merely expressions of principles without a formal mechanism for implementation, monitoring or verification of compliance. In addition, CSR reporting and certification often set criteria that go beyond the financial and technical capability of many small and locally-owned businesses. As a consequence, the consideration of certain sustainability issues amongst corporations has frequently been limited to a few larger organisations.

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Since the 1990s, CSR initiatives have been conjoined with the research and consultancy sectors and so have moved from a marginal to mainstream activity, spawning a number of sustainability tools and techniques. Many of these tools assess or measure the sustainability of projects or activities, and have been developed to determine whether capacity exists for further development, whether a development is sustainable, or whether progress is being made towards sustainable development.

It is also important to distinguish between tools that are used for ‘measurement’ (identifying variables measuring sustainable development, and collecting relevant data), and those that are used for ‘assessment’ (involving evaluation of performance against criteria), as well as those tools which can be used to effect a move towards sustainable development by changing practice and procedures.

The main tools developed for the CSR framework include:

- Sustainability Assessment Model (SAM)
- SA 8000
- Equator Principles
- Global Reporting Initiative (GRI)
- Dow Jones Sustainability Index
- FTSE4Good
- The Corporate Responsibility Index
- Sustainability Balanced Score Card
- BRE Sustainability checklist for development
- BREEAM

These relate to a variety of assets and activities in an organisation and a short review of these tools highlights that they mainly consist of reporting, rating, certification and checklisting procedures. If on the one hand, this allows for easy and measurable comparison of performance between companies, then on the other hand, these procedures often do not shed light on the underlying methodologies.
upon which individual results are achieved. Further, several sustain-
ability assessment tools are based on monetisation and financial
accounting techniques, some of which have been considered ethically
inadequate to take into account certain environmental and social
issues. Finally, the majority of these initiatives are grounded on tradi-
tional assessor – client relationship, a process that clearly fails to
include the views of many other actors who have a stake in the develop-
ment project, process or objective been assessed.

It is symptomatic that the ‘s-word’
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lar when it comes to ‘corporate responsi-
bility’ and ‘responsible investment’.

UK’s approach
In the UK, critics of governmental policy have not been slow to high-
light the continued tensions that can occur between the ‘three pillars’
of sustainability (ie economic, environmental and social), especially
in relation to the current UK government’s sustainable communities
plan. In this respect, the drive for economic growth, through housing
and jobs, has important ramifications for the environment, in terms
of land and water use, and waste.

Despite these continued uncertainties over the concept of sustain-
able development, in 1994, the UK became the first government to
produce its national strategy on sustainable development, and this
was followed in 1999 by the outline of how it would deliver this in
the report, A Better Quality of Life. More recently this has been devel-
oped further with policy guidance, which seeks to set a new frame-
work goal for sustainable development and this has also been under-
pinned by revisions to national planning guidance (in particular PPS1)
which seek to strengthen the focus of sustainable development within
the wider, UK planning system.

Indeed, in 2005, the UK government launched its new strategy for
sustainable development, Securing the Future, in conjunction with a
strategic framework. The UK has identified five priority action areas:
• sustainable consumption and production
• climate change and energy
• natural resource protection
• environmental enhancement
• sustainable communities.

Social overlooked
Despite efforts by the government and private sector to understand, meas-
ure and implement sustainable development, the social aspect has not yet
been adequately prioritised and addressed at political, industry and
research levels. Indeed, there have been very few attempts to define social
sustainability as an independent dimension of sustainable development.
At present, the sustainable development agenda remains dominated by cli-
mate change and economic competitiveness, especially in the south-east.

Furthermore, no consensus seems to exist on what criteria and per-
spectives should be adopted in defining social sustainability. Each
author or policy maker derives their own definition according to disci-
pline-specific criteria or their study perspective, making a generalised
definition difficult to achieve. It is symptomatic that the ‘s-word’ seems
to have dropped out of our vocabulary when it comes to ‘corporate
responsibility’ and ‘responsible investment’.

Nonetheless, it seems clear from our ongoing research through the
European Investment Bank’s EIBURS programme that social sustainabil-
ity is vital to consider in urban renewal projects and on other scales. In its
widest sense the term refers to the personal and societal assets, rules and
processes that empower individuals and communities to participate in
the long-term and fair achievement of adequate and economically
achievable standards of life (based on self-expressed needs and aspira-
tions within the physical boundaries of places and the planet).

At a more practical level, social sustainability stems from improve-
ments in key thematic areas encompassing the social realm of individu-
als and societies, ranging from capacity building and skills development
to environmental and spatial inequalities. In this sense, social sustain-
ability blends traditional social objectives and policy areas such as equi-
ity and health, with issues concerning participation, needs, social capital,
the economy, the environment, and more recently, with the notions of
happiness, well-being and quality of life.

The next stage in our EIBURS research is to examine best practice
methods across Europe for measuring the concept of social sustainabil-
ity in particular urban regeneration projects, and to develop guidance
that we hope will help place the social dimension higher up the agenda
in the sustainable development debate. We hope that the research will
reinforce the importance of social sustainability within the realm of
sustainable development.

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