

Ethics and Sustainability

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Defining sustainability

- A common word with a new, specialized meaning.
- “sustainable development,” first used in 1980 report by International Union for Conservation of Nature.
- Central to Brundtland report, by a UN commission seeking to protect the environment while simultaneously pursuing economic & social development for poor nations.



Gro Brundtland

Defining Sustainability

- Brundtland commission's definition
- “Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present, without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.”
- Emphasis on meeting basic needs of the poor, acknowledging environmental limits.
- Considers environment as a resource for human well being, does not consider any value it might have itself.

Sustainability & Environment in UN reports

- Continued emphasis on “ecosystem services” (an updated term for “natural resources”). Save nature because we need it!
- Millennium Assessment of Ecosystem Health (MA - 2005) adds *intrinsic value* as a reason for protecting natural environment, biodiversity.
- MA notes that this value would motivate more protection for nature beyond human need for ecosystem services.

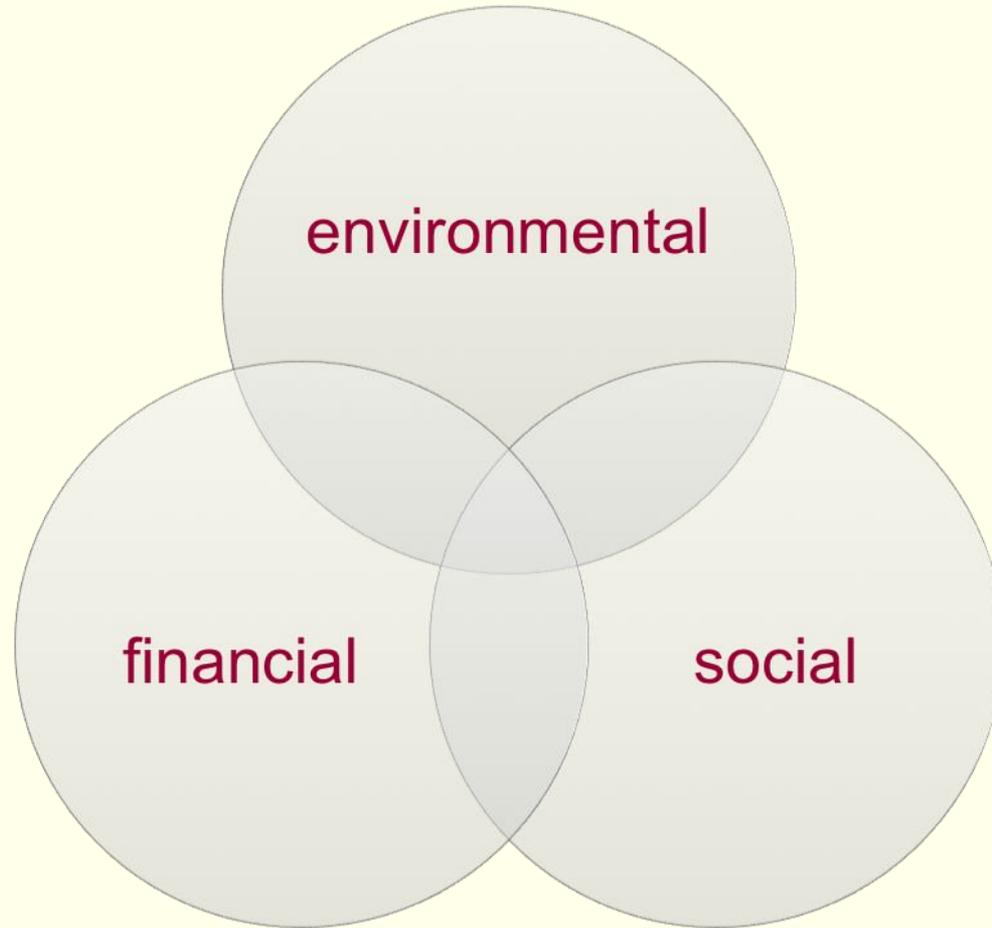
Sustainability in popular use

- Often used as a way to talk about being environmentally responsible, but without much attention to larger framework of rich and poor nations, or global wealth and poverty, or global environmental harm.
- Question of where the environment gets its value, and why we're preserving it, often does not come up explicitly, but people have many different (and not necessarily consistent) ideas about this.

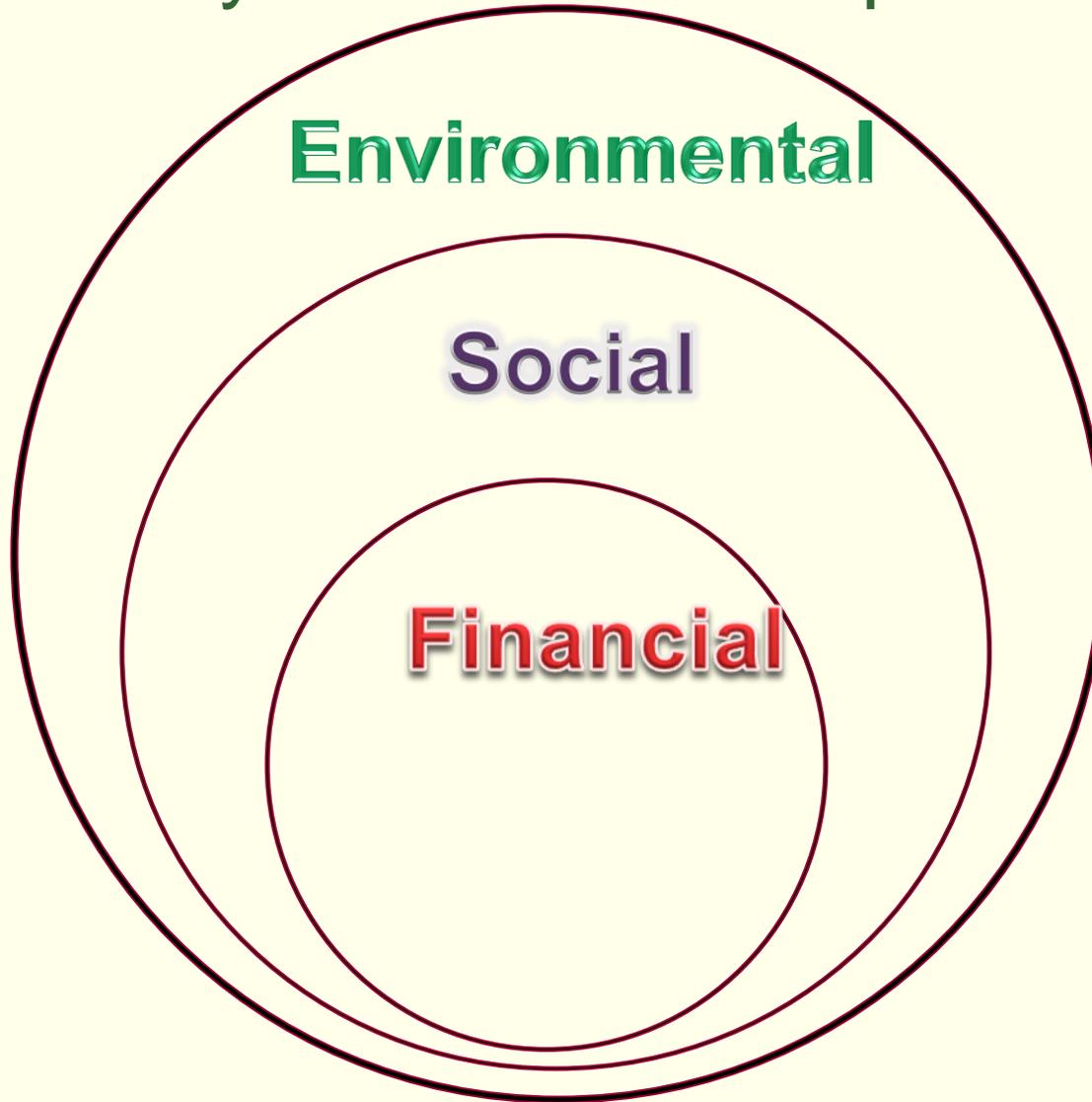
Sustainability in popular use

- Term is used in business (and advertising) to indicate attention to environmental values
- Often paired with so-called “Triple bottom line” – social, environmental, financial
- Note that the first two values mostly come from outside the realm of exchange. Yet without them, financial activities can be destructive, and will eventually collapse.

Triple bottom line – Venn Diagram



A new way to look at the triple bottom line



What are we sustaining?

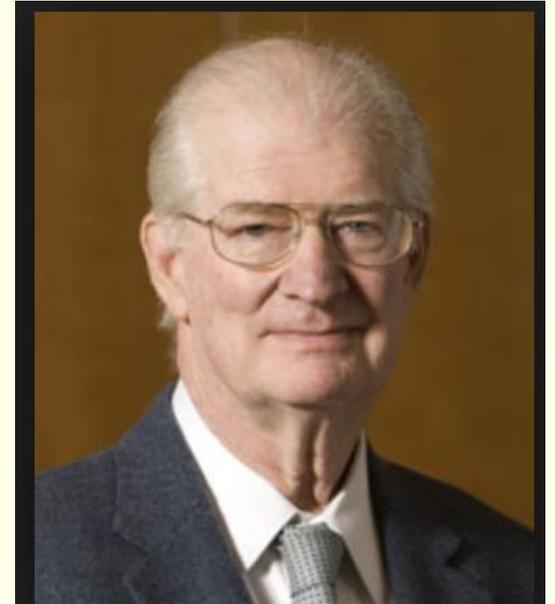
How do we measure it?

- Ecosystem services (MA) – measure by survey of biomes & resources?
- Carrying capacity of the earth (ecological economists, e.g. Robert Costanza) – measure by footprint analysis?
- Resources for future (environmental economists, e.g. Robert Solow) – case by case basis, measured in discounted dollars weighed against current costs.

Critique of sustainability

Herman Daly (ecological economist)

- Worked for World Bank
- Brundtland report caters to developed and developing countries
- Economic growth is not sustainable
- Growth uses **finite** “natural resources,” discharges wastes into **finite** waste sinks.



Herman Daly

Must think in terms of **throughput**. Can't use more than earth can supply, can't discharge more than earth can absorb. Can't exceed earth's **carrying capacity**.

Critique of Sustainability

- Daly contends that sustainable *growth* is impossible at the global level.
- Would take several planets to support even current human population in North American/European style
- If developing nations should grow more, then developed nations must reduce their use and output faster to make room.

Critique of Sustainability (Daly, cont.)

- Sustainable ***development*** may be possible. Change in way of life to promote more fulfilling life for all, using and wasting less. Change in values, change in living patterns, green technology.
- So, no more economic growth? How would that work? How would you sell it?

Critique of Daly

- Does Daly's approach value nature only for its contribution to human well-being?
- Some philosophers (Mark Sagoff, Dale Jamieson, Allan Holland) say yes, and this is a problem
- Sagoff: Imagine a biotechnical world that sustains us, with robot pets and plastic trees. Would that be ok?

Sustainability and Ethics

- What do we value, and why?
- Does nature have inherent worth?
- What do we owe to future generations?
- There are very rich people in very poor nations. If fairness between rich and poor nations matters, what about within each nations?
- In a pluralistic democracy, how do we agree on enough answers to those questions to motivate action?

Sustainability and ethics

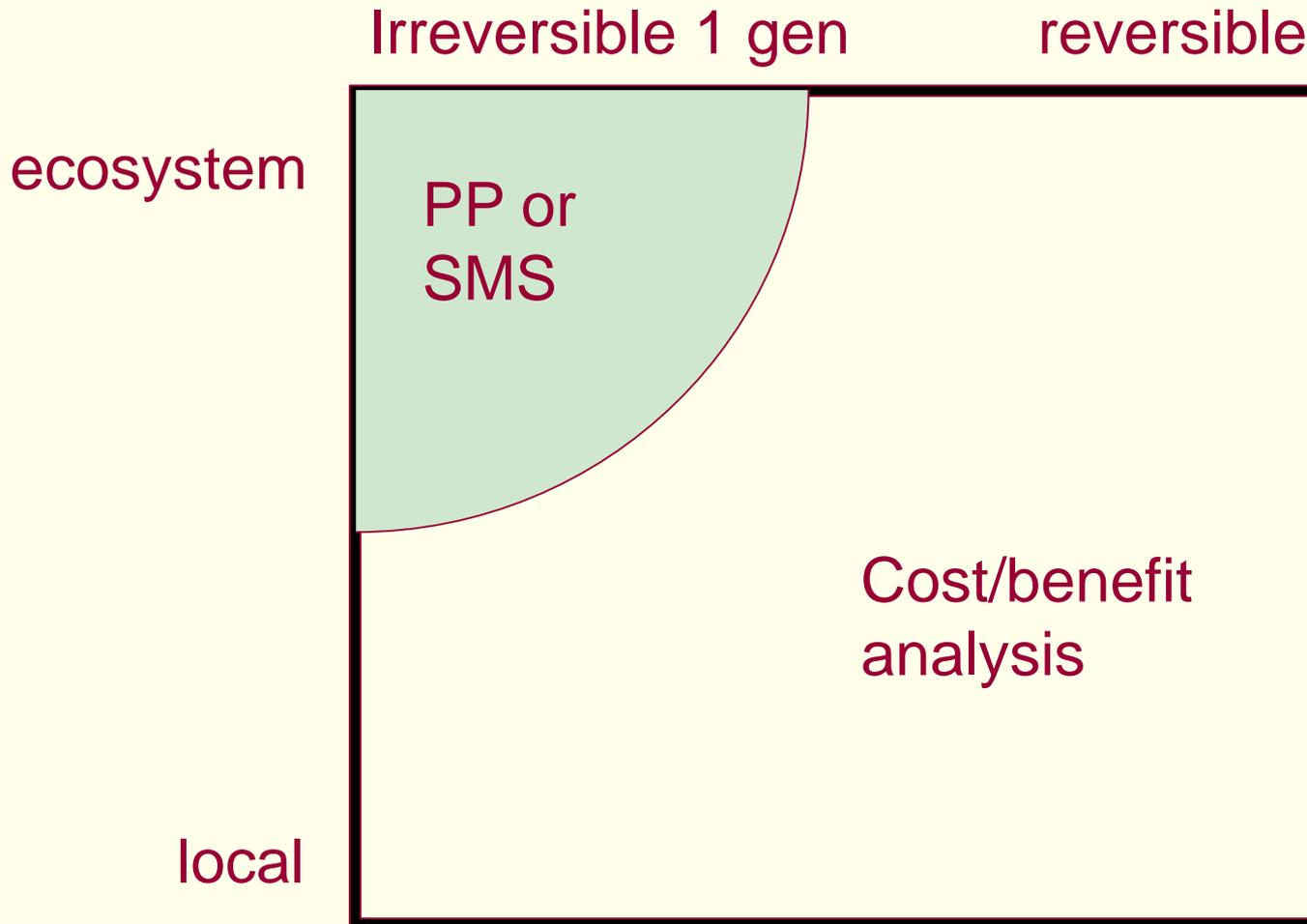
- Three perspectives:
 - Results, benefits and harms to various stakeholders
 - Norms, justice, right and wrong
 - Persons and relationships: motives, self-respect and respect for others, care, presence of the other, character

Sustainability and ethics

- An ecology of values, world-views and ways of life.
 - Pluralism is a foundation of liberal democracy, and a fact of global humanity
 - A contest for dominance of one value system and world view over others is unwinnable
 - Doesn't mean there is no truth; but a rolling set of compromises is the only way forward

Sustainability and ethics

- Bryan Norton's "Decision Square"



KEY:

PP =
precautionary
principle

SMS = safe
minimum
standard

Geographic
scale and
reversibility
determine when
decisions must
be guided by PP
or SMS, and
when traditional
CBA may be
used.

Sustainability and Ethics

Notes on Norton's Decision Square

- *The Precautionary Principle* is foundational in the 1982 United Nations *World Charter for Nature*, as well in the *Montreal Protocol*, the 1992 *Rio Declaration*, the *Kyoto Protocol*, and many other treaties and policies.
- In strongest form, it prohibits unnecessary collective action where risks are uncertain and the action has not been proved safe. Weaker forms allow regulation or prohibition in such cases, but don't insist on it. *Wikipedia* essay on PP is excellent: thorough, clear, and well documented.

Sustainability and Ethics

Notes on Norton's Decision Square (cont.)

- *Safe Minimum Standards* are very like the precautionary principle. They may be taken as an example of one form of it. They say that where risk can't be calculated, but disastrous consequences are possible, safe options should be chosen. The concept is explained in detail here:
- <https://www.frisch.uio.no/publikasjoner/pdf/Safe-minimum-standard-SMS.pdf>

Sustainability and ethics

- The decision square does not decide everything.
- Values are still in competition
- Hardest negotiations occur at the level where they have the most extensive and long lasting consequences.
- We ***negotiate*** about what values we want to leave to our children, what we care about.

Sustainability and ethics

- Role of values in deciding what matters most, best feasible way of preserving, fostering, enabling it.
- Role of science in telling us what our situation is, what can be done, how to do it, what it will cost.
- In negotiations, we define sustainability, set goals for adaptive ecosystem management.
- Role for ***you and me***. Influence, power together, openness. In a functioning pluralistic democracy, minorities are protected, and no voices willing to negotiate are blocked from being heard.