

Sustainability Tour

Sustainability, development towards sustainability and progress of societies

Hi everyone! Welcome to this sustainability tour. My name is Peter. Today I will be your guide on this tour. I will show you some of the most interesting items about sustainability. This tour takes about 15 minutes. However, you can drop off at any stop you wish and have a closer look at the items you are interested in. When you are done, just jump back on the bus and continue the tour. It is up to you how much time you wish to spend at each stop.

OK, here we go. Everything I'm going to show you today has to do with sustainability. To be more precise, with sustainable development. Do you know what sustainable development means?

Of course, I do. Sustainability has to do with the rapid depletion of our natural resources.

For me, there is just one big problem and that is climate change.

That's right, but what do you think of how we are exploiting our one and only planet? Not only causing the depletion of resources, as he said, but maybe even worse, the destruction of nature, the deforestation, worldwide cutting the forests at an unbelievable speed of 26 ha every minute, the loss of biodiversity, the irreversible degradation of agricultural land, while we have to feed over 9 billion people in just a few decades?

For me sustainability ultimately has to do with human beings. How can we ever achieve a sustainable world, while over 20% of the world population lives in extreme poverty and lacks even the basic needs? Do you think that is fair, that that is sustainable?

Well, those are all good points. Thank you. In fact, there are hundreds of definitions of sustainability and sustainable development. The most well-known definition is the one the Brundtland Commission put forward in 1987 over twenty years ago. It says:

Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

Don't you think that's clear enough? I would say so. Nevertheless, even this clear definition has been interpreted in some 200 ways, which shows how clever humans are.

If we want to ensure that humans can continue to live on planet earth for many many more generations, all elements of wellbeing must be taken care of: Human Wellbeing, Environmental Wellbeing and Economic Wellbeing.

That sounds reasonable, Peter. But please, can you explain why this is?

I'd be happy to. Human Wellbeing without Environmental Wellbeing is pointless. It is a dead end. Mankind would not be able to survive very long. And Environmental Wellbeing without Human Wellbeing makes no sense, at least not from an anthropocentric point of view.

And what about Economic Wellbeing, Peter?

Economic Wellbeing is not a goal in itself. Why should it be? However, Economic Wellbeing is necessary to help everyone to make progress towards the ultimate goal of full sustainability. So all three dimensions of wellbeing have to be considered.

To avoid any misunderstanding and to make it very clear that we are talking about both Human Wellbeing and Environmental Wellbeing when talking about sustainability and sustainable development, the Brundtland definition could be extended with a third sentence, so it runs as follows:

A sustainable society is a society

- *that meets the needs of the present generation,*
- *that does not compromise the ability of future generations to meet their own needs,*
- *in which each human being has the opportunity to develop itself in freedom, within a well-balanced society and in harmony with the environment.*

Don't worry, this will not be definition 201. It is just an extension of the best definition ever.

Sustainability a fad?

Though I certainly recognize the importance of sustainability, every now and then I have the feeling that sustainability is not much more than just a fad. What do you think, Peter?

My answer to your question is definitely NO, it isn't. Look around. How many sustainable situations do you see? Not many, I'm afraid. But that's not because it hasn't been given any attention. In fact, it has been touched on in many international agreements and treaties, even if only implicitly. Think of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, agreed upon in 1948, which ensures all people without any exception, the right for many basic needs. Or of the Convention on Biodiversity of 1992. Or of the Millennium Development Goals, agreed upon in 1998. Many, many countries have signed and ratified these treaties, so they are legally binding. That creates obligations. Thus sustainability is not just a fad, it is something to take seriously. Once I met a politician who said: "Sustainability will be the guide as well as the touchstone for our policy." I wish there would be more politicians like her.

Actual level of sustainability

Now I presume all of us agree that sustainability is not just a fad or something for unworldly people.

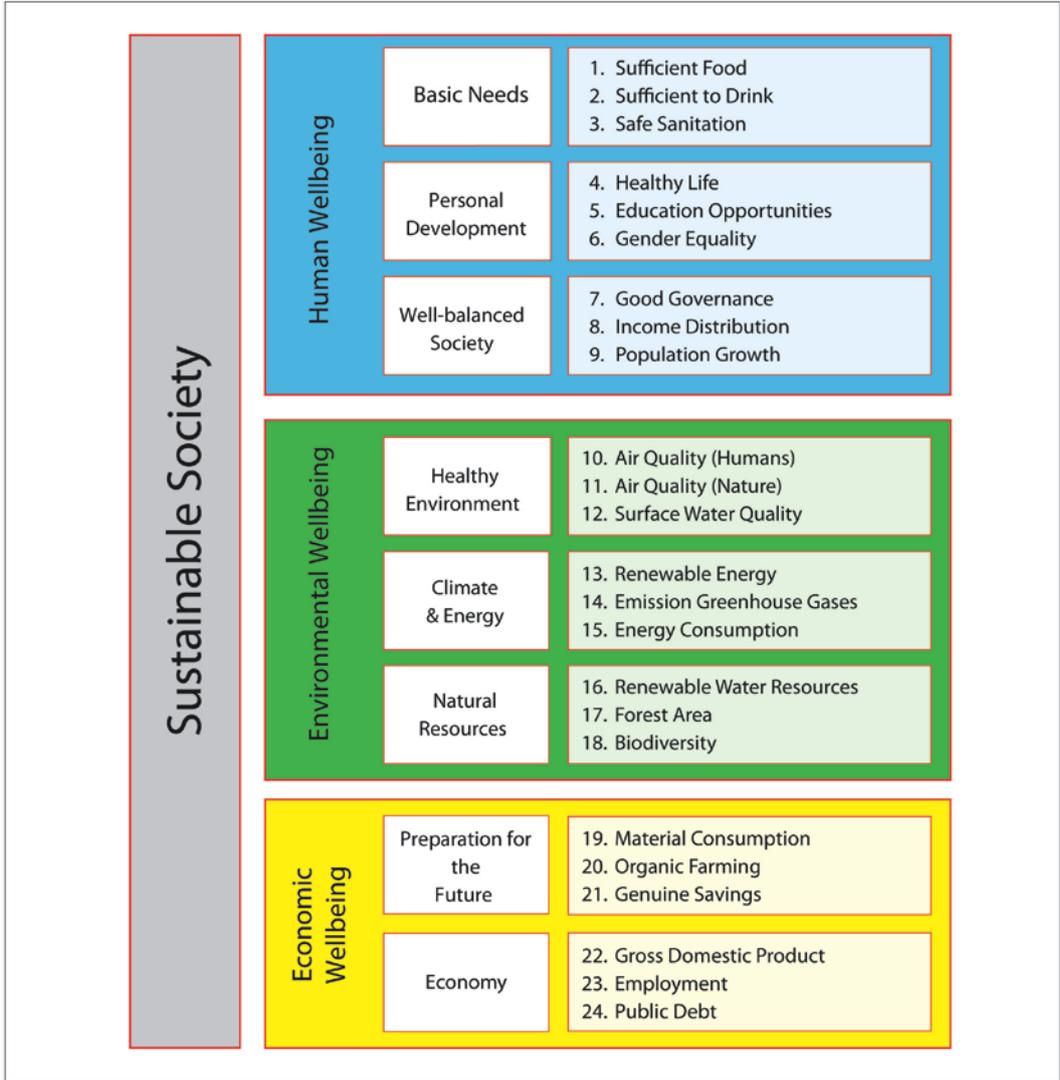
Thank you for clarifying this point, Peter. I am from Australia and want to know how far my country has gotten on the road to sustainability. And I would also like to know how sustainable the whole world is.

Good question. To answer your question, we have to measure the level of sustainability of your country. That requires a good measurement tool. When you type 'sustainability index' in Google and ask for the exact combination of words, you get 263,000 hits in 0.20 seconds. If you just search for any combination of the two words, you will receive 2,480,000 hits in only 0.06 seconds. So, this does not really help.

When you search the web in more detail, as well as relevant literature, there appear to be quite a number of relevant indexes that have to do with sustainability in one way or another. However, many of these only include partial aspects of sustainability. The best one that covers all main aspects of sustainability used to be the *Wellbeing of Nations*, published in 2001. Alas, it has not been updated since then. So that doesn't help you any further. Fortunately, a new index was published in 2006 – a simple and transparent one, understandable for everyone. It is called the Sustainable Society Index, SSI. The SSI shows at a glance the level of sustainability of 151 countries, comprising 99.2% of the world's population in 2010.

Sorry for interrupting you, Peter, but it looks like you are the man behind the SSI.

Oh no, don't blame me, though I do happen to know these people, so I am more or less familiar with the SSI. As I said, the SSI was published in 2006 and two years later the first update was released, SSI-2008. Using the many comments and suggestions that were received as well as recent developments in 'sustainability knowledge', a thorough evaluation of the original setup of the SSI has been made. This resulted in a new framework, explicitly comprising the three elements of wellbeing (Human, Environmental and Economic Wellbeing). The SSI now comprises 24 indicators, clustered into 8 categories, 3 wellbeing dimensions and finally, one overall index.



In December 2010 the second of the biennial updates, the SSI-2010, was published, based on the redesigned framework. The previous editions, SSI-2006 and SSI-2008 have been recalculated using the same framework in order to enable comparisons over time.

Very interesting Peter, but you still owe me the answer to my question of how sustainable my country is.

You're right. Let's see, here I have the results of the SSI-2010. You said you are Australian? Well, the overall score of your country is 6.2, on a scale of 0 to 10. That is slightly higher than the world's average score, which is 5.9.

I am glad to hear so. We're not doing bad in Australia.

Comparatively speaking, you are right. But I have to limit your enthusiasm a bit. Australia is ranked 49 out of the 151 countries included in the SSI, one place above the United States of America. Moreover, be aware that a score of 6.2 is way below full sustainability; 38% below to be precise. Full sustainability requires a score of 10.

There is another thing I want to emphasize. An overall score shows you, at a quick glance, the actual level of sustainability. But it is an average of the scores of the underlying indicators. Thus it levels out the extremes to some extent. It is important to see how each indicator is doing. Well, that might be something to have a closer look at when you are back home. And remember, full sustainability requires a score of 10, thus a score of 10 for each of the 24 indicators. So always take a look at the underlying figures.

And if you do so for Australia?

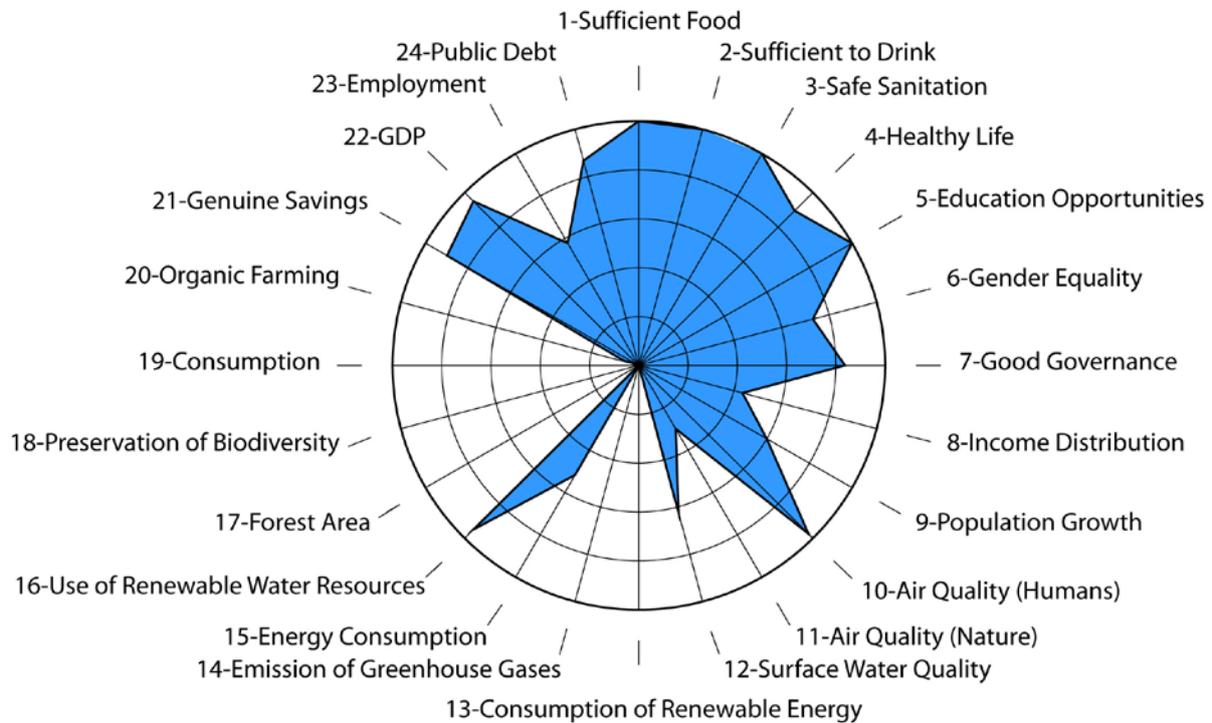
The score for Human Wellbeing is rather high: 8.3, compared to the world average score of 6.7. But the score for Environmental Wellbeing is very low, no more than 4.5, way below the world average of 6.1. On the other hand, on Economic Wellbeing, Australia is – not surprisingly – doing better than the world average: 5.7 versus 4.6. And since I am not here just to make friends, it must be said that a score of 5.7 is way below full sustainability, as we have learned just now.

An easy measurement tool

I have another question, Peter. You were saying the SSI shows at a glance the level of sustainability of each country. And the underlying figures? Can you also show those at a glance?

Of course. Look here. You see this spider web:

Sustainable Society Index 2010 - Australia



The colour in the spider web shows the scores for each of the 24 indicators for Australia. The outer circle represents full sustainability, the centre of the web means no sustainability at all. Now you can see for yourselves that the indicators for Human Wellbeing, numbers 1 to 9, score relatively high; that indicators 10 to 18, Environmental Wellbeing, score very low; and that the indicators for Economic Wellbeing, 19 to 24, show very varying scores. Overall, I would say there is room for improvement, to express it in a positive way.

I presume the 24 indicators in the spider web are the same 24 you showed us in the framework of the SSI. How can I learn more about each indicator?

That's easy enough. Detailed descriptions and explanations of each indicator are available. See for yourself. And if you wish to see all data, you can decide to drop off at the bus stop Data.

That is really interesting. But what if I want to know more about another country, say for example Mexico?

You can go to Maps and study all information about any country at your leisure, including Mexico. And don't forget to play with all available information, as much as you wish.

Development towards sustainability

Wonderful, Peter. If we stick to the example of Australia, you say there is plenty of room for improvement. And you have shown it quite convincingly. But who cares? All I hear when talking about sustainability is: Don't worry, they will find good solutions in time.

Yes, and that is exactly the attitude that worries me. Not too many people are concerned about this very important issue. Today, the common opinion is that certainly there are problems to be solved with respect to sustainability. However, most are quite sure that 'they' will find adequate solutions in time, like 'they' have always done. But most never say who 'they' are and how 'they' are going to do this. That is a very comfortable attitude, since it keeps you from taking full responsibility yourself.

However – there always seems to be a however – is it realistic to tell yourself that technological solutions will be found for the unbelievable rate of deforestation? Or for the on-going loss of biodiversity? Or for the rapid depletion of natural resources, among these our beloved fossil fuels? I would definitely say no, that is quite unrealistic. Thus we shouldn't only rely on technological solutions. We have to take action ourselves.

I completely agree with you. But what does it help if I do something, while my neighbour doesn't? It will be just a tiny little drop in the ocean. So why should I bother?

Well, whenever I hear this excuse, I remember what Mahatma Gandhi said regarding this: Whatever you do may seem insignificant, but it is important that you do it.

OK, OK. And what will happen when emerging countries, most of all China and India with about one third of the world population, achieve the same level of wealth and consumption as rich countries have nowadays? That would be disastrous, so why bother? Nothing can be done to stop this unavoidable development. So let's be happy and not worry about things that will happen anyway.

Are you sure that an increase of Human Wellbeing unavoidably results in a decrease of Environmental Wellbeing? That would mean we will never be able to achieve a sustainable world. That is a rather uninviting prospect.

I invite you to have a look yourself. When you look at the SSI data, you can study the correlations between the wellbeing dimensions. I did this. My – very preliminary – conclusion is that it seems to be mainly a matter of policy whether Human Wellbeing and Environmental Wellbeing are on a collision course. If this conclusion stands after further research, it will be up to us to urge our politicians to make the right policy choices in order to achieve a sustainable world. On short notice.

The idea that it is up to us is quite frightening, Peter.

Sure it is. But it is also reassuring. We don't have to be fatalistic, just waiting for things to come. You and me, we can make the change. It is an opportunity that all of us should seize this very day.

So what are we supposed to do now?

I see two main tracks: the first one is to convince our politicians that a change of the actual policy is necessary. Immediately. In general, policy measures and implementation plans must be directed to development towards sustainability. Our contribution to this change is to put pressure on our politicians.

The second track is what we can do in our daily life, alone or together with others. There is a wide range of opportunities in this respect. When you are back home, start your computer and search for

'sustainability action'. You receive 42 million hits in 0.24 seconds. Some are rather high brow, many are very down to earth, ready for immediate implementation.

Using the SSI

I'm afraid the tour took a bit more than just 15 minutes. Nevertheless, I really appreciated it, Peter. You have been a wonderful guide. If I am permitted, I have just one more question. What can you do with the SSI? Or what can we do with it?

Just speaking for myself, I use the SSI as an interesting source of information and inspiration, as far as sustainability is concerned. If I want to know something about a particular country, or a region or whatever, I have a look at the SSI data. Or if I want to know how rich countries are performing, compared to poor countries, I can retrieve that information from the data. And since already three editions of the SSI are available, you can start making comparisons over time. Have a look at the previous editions of the SSI, if you wish to see the developments over time. Just a sideline: Australia's score is in decline. In 2006 the overall SSI-score was 6.4, in 2008 it was 6.3 and in 2010 it went further down to 6.2.

Others may use the SSI in quite a different way, depending on their role and position in society, and of course depending on their interest, time and ambitions. If you are a politician, you will use the SSI in a different way than if you are a scientist or a student or an interested citizen like me, or a business woman or man.

Well, this is our last stop. We all have to exit the bus. I hope you have enjoyed the tour. I thank you very much for your interest and for your good questions. You have been an excellent group.

And should you have any further question, please send an email to the Sustainable Society Foundation.



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