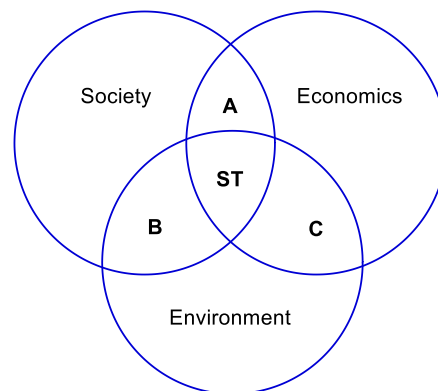


Sustainability: What does it mean to me?

David Kennedy

Sustainability is a word we often hear in the media and our daily conversations, sometimes associated with recycling everyday materials (e.g., metals, plastics, water and clothing), but also including more generic constructs, such as sustainable farming practices, business models, social structures, land use, etc. A model commonly used to show the relationships is shown below, with sustainability (ST) seen as the intersection between the Environment (our planet), Society (people), and the Economy (living/ working standards/ profit) with ST being the sweet spot of sustainability of life on Earth.



Traditionally, this Venn diagram has Society and Economics as the base, with Environment above. However, we now recognise that the environmental 'sphere' underpins the other two, as the impact of climate change ravages the Economic component (e.g., the rising insurance costs in Australia due to fires and floods) and the Society component (e.g., recent ruling by the UN that the Australian government should compensate Torres Strait Islanders, having "failed to take adequate action to cut emissions"). The Environment is also under stress with loss of animal and plant diversity, increased desertification and rising ocean temperatures. The pressures on all elements of the sustainability model creates challenges for us all. It is at the intersection of these domains that we can make personal life decisions about what we can do to support sustainability. Without a healthy Environment, both Society and Economics are unlikely to be in a form we would be content to live in, even in the short term. There is no Planet B. Developing a sustainable approach to the intersections of the three domains identified above is in our best interests, and those of our children and grandchildren.

Area A: Society and Economics

My personal choices are guided by the quote attributed to David Attenborough, "Live the way you want to live but just don't waste anything". In our home we don't waste:

- Electricity (how many devices are left on 'standby mode' in your home, when a simple flick of the switch would save that energy?).
- Food (each year Victorians throw away 250,000 tonnes of food which costs each household more than most power bills). We shop for what we need when we need it, and recycle any food waste into our Bokashi bin, then into

the compost bin, and onto the garden, contributing to home-made pickles and chutneys. Yum.

- Water. We have rainwater storage tanks that allow us to flush our toilets and water the garden.

Area B: Society and Environment

This is a complex issue as the population of the Earth has risen from less than 2 billion people around 1900, to over 8 billion last month. This puts enormous pressures on the very ecosystems we, and all other species, rely upon. We need to keep hazardous materials out of our environment. Most local councils have very extensive 'How and what to recycle' websites. Following those guidelines and separating the forms of household rubbish is one way we can contribute to sustainability. We have boxes at home labelled E-waste, old Paints, Polystyrene (a 'forever chemical'), etc. We accumulate our waste over time and then make one trip to dispose of it at various repositories. We all pay rates. Making use of them seems sensible.

Area C: Environment and Economics

Traditional economics has treated assets such as air and water as externalities: that is, things for which the consumer does not pay the true cost of because those costs are not included in the costs of goods and services. This can be seen very clearly in who pays for cleaning up old mines, large coal mines in particular. Mostly, it is us, the taxpayer, providing yet more subsidies to companies that have already taken their profits, and gone elsewhere. Air pollution results in higher incidences of respiratory problems and health costs. Also ensuring that our drinking water is potable is non-trivial and expensive. Supporting political policies that will reduce pollution of air and water may be more expensive in the short term but not in the longer term. As a society we cannot continue to use the environment as a convenient un-costed externality.

On a personal level, we recognise that we have been borrowing from our grandchildren and we now make political decisions in that light. We try to contribute to community-led initiatives that oppose further pollution of our environment. Some activities include writing Letters to the Editor calling out non-scientific disinformation regarding the impact of climate change on the environment, and contributing to government environmental reviews on proposed projects which involve significant pollution threats. Individually, protecting the impact of Economics on the Environment is challenging, but collectively we can make a difference.

A key factor involves energy, where do we generate it and what can we do with it to live a good life? Unlike many other components in the Venn diagram, changing our economies to use renewable energy is entirely sustainable. The sun is an input that isn't going away soon. Renewables have been demonstrated to be the cheapest form of energy and could be a source for pollution-free transport, lighting, power, materials processing and even food growing, provided we can wean ourselves off fossil fuels in a strategic and timely manner. We built our home with solar panels and encourage others to make the same investment.

I feel sure that people reading this article could expand the points made to include many more examples. Effecting a more sustainable lifestyle requires our

commitment, energy and developing good habits. This short article is very much a personal view, and not intended to be prescriptive or even comprehensive. Hopefully, it will encourage readers to gather evidence from reputable sources, read more widely on what can be done to make our lives more sustainable, and then make their own personal decisions.

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Some sites for further reading.

Insects: <https://www.abc.net.au/news/science/2020-04-24/insect-apocalypse-new-research-less-severe/12172318>

Business: <https://www.accenture.com/au-en/insights/sustainability/sustainable-organization>

Society: <https://www.statista.com/chart/20613/survey-on-the-importance-of-fighting-climate-change/>

Education: <https://facilitymgmt.humboldt.edu/making-sustainability-designations>

Fishing stocks: <https://www.nature.com/articles/ncomms10244>

Species: <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/blog/2019/05/nature-decline-unprecedented-report/>

Food crops: <https://www.bbc.com/future/bspoke/follow-the-food/why-modern-food-lost-its-nutrients/>

Compensation for climate change: <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2022/sep/23/australia-should-compensate-torres-strait-islanders-for-climate-change-failure-un-says>

Recycling in Boroondara: <https://www.boroondara.vic.gov.au/waste-environment/recycling-and-waste/z-fogo-recycling-and-waste-guide/z-recycling-and-waste-guide/d-e>