Sustainability and Sustainable Development

"Our task must be to free ourselves by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature and its beauty"

- Albert Einstein

What Sustainability Means

Sustainability is the capacity to endure. The word "sustainability" is derived from the Latin *sustinere* (*tenere*, to hold; *sus*, up). Dictionaries provide more than ten meanings

for *sustain*, the main ones being to "maintain", "support", or "endure".

In ecology the word describes how biological systems remain diverse and productive over time. For humans it is the potential for long-term maintenance of well being, which in turn depends on the well being of the natural world and the responsible use of natural resources. From a corporate perspective, "sustainability" can refer to a variety of different initiatives - from corporate social responsibility (CSR) programs to environmental compliance.

Brundtland Report

After the toxic release disaster in Bhopal (India) and amidst the turmoil over apartheid (racial segregation) in South Africa, the United Nations formed the *Brundtland* Commission to propose strategies for improving human well-being without

threatening the environment. In 1987 the Commission published its landmark report (*Brundtland Report)* providing a key statement on sustainable development (SD) defining it as:

"development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" Sustainability according to *Brundtland Commission* includes not only economic and social development, but also a commitment to the needs of the poor and recognizing the physical limitations of the earth.

The key issue in the Brundlandt Declaration is: "*A better life for everyone without destroying our natural resources for future generations*". In the years that followed the declaration, government and business organizations have worked on its translation into laws, rules as well as their codes of conduct.

This has resulted in a number of developments, in practice as well as in theory.

Fundamental Components

The Report highlighted three fundamental components to sustainable development: *environmental protection, economic growth and social equity*. The environment should be conserved and our resource base enhanced, by gradually changing the ways in which we develop and use technologies. Developing nations must be allowed to meet their basic needs of employment, food, energy, water and sanitation. If this is to be done in a sustainable manner, then there is a definite need for a sustainable level of population. Economic growth should be revived and developing nations should be allowed a growth of equal quality to the developed nations.

Earth Summit

Five years later, the concept was fleshed out in 27 principles at the 'Earth Summit' held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. Earth Summit also known as *Rio Summit, Rio Conference* was the first major United Nations Conference on sustainable development wherein delegations from 180 countries participated. The declaration recited the economic and environmental concerns that had been the main focus of sustainability, but added social topics like peace, poverty and the role of women and indigenous people. The summit also recommended that all countries should produce national sustainable development strategies.

The Earth Summit led to the establishment of various UN bodies like the UN Commission on Sustainable Development, the Framework Convention on Climate Change and the Convention on Biological Diversity.

Triple Bottom Line

In 1997 Briton John Elkington introduced a term drawn from financial accounting: the *triple bottom line (TBL).* The phrase **Triple Bottom Line** stands *for People; Planet and Profit*. By this he meant that for a company (or other organization) to help society achieve sustainable development while securing its own long-term wellbeing, it must meet not only the economic "bottom line" performance expected by shareholders and other organizational owners, but fulfill the important environmental and social expectations of other key stakeholders as well. Elkington used the shorthand term "*sustainability*" for this concept. When the global reporting initiative (GRI) issued its draft Sustainability Reporting Guidelines for organizations, it too assumed sustainability entailed all three TBL elements.

Various subsequent conferences and protocols addressed the issues of sustainable development, environmental improvement, climate change, ethical governance and corporate social responsibility. In many of these, role of corporate sector was emphasized.

"Action is the foundational key to all success."

Pablo Picasso