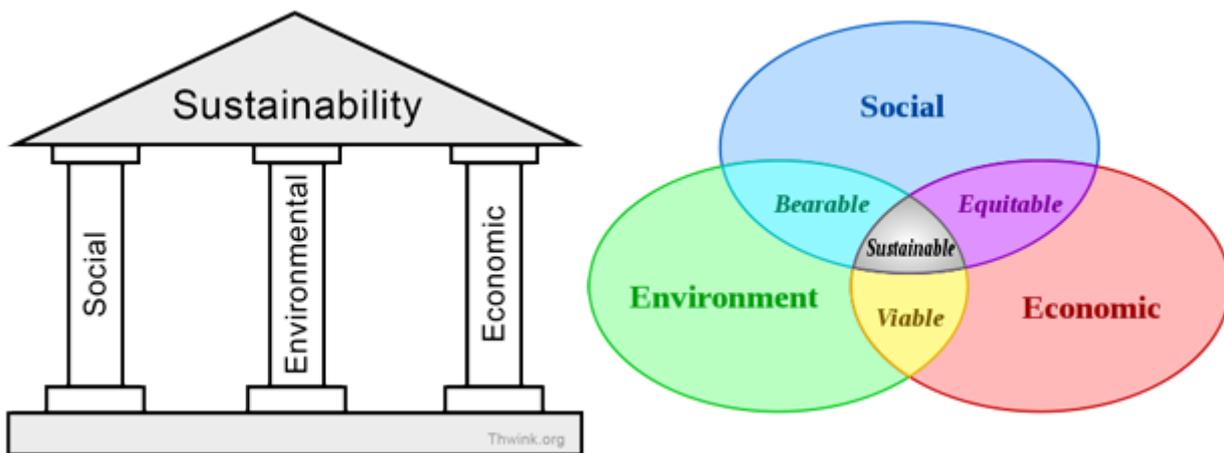


Going back to basics – Just in case you are new to this way of thinking, here are the foundations on which the ‘movement’ is based.

The Three Pillars of Sustainability

The *three pillars of sustainability* are a powerful tool for defining the *complete* sustainability problem. This consists of at least the economic, social, and environmental pillars. If anyone pillar is weak then the system as a whole is unsustainable. Two popular ways to visualize the three pillars are shown. ¹



Why this is important

Most national and international problem solving efforts focus on only one pillar at a time. For example, the United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP), the environmental protection agencies (EPA) of many nations, and environmental NGOs focus on the environmental pillar. The World Trade Organization (WTO) and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) focus mostly on economic growth, though the OECD gives some attention to social sustainability, like war reduction and justice. The United Nations attempts to strengthen all three pillars, but due to its consensual decision making process and small budget has minor impact. The United Nations focuses mostly on the economic pillar, since economic growth is what most of its members want most, especially developing nations.

This leaves a void. No powerful international organization is working on the sustainability problem as a whole, which would include all three pillars.

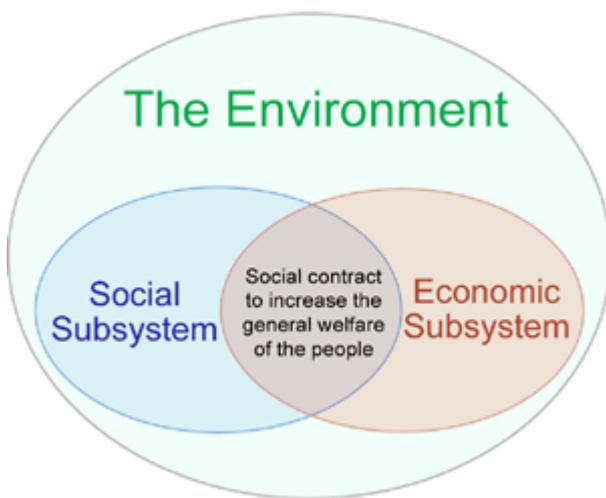
However, as the Great Recession of 2008 demonstrated, weakness in the other pillars can directly weaken the environmental pillar. Many nations and states are cutting back or postponing stricter environmental laws or investment, since their budgets are running deficits. Many environmental NGOs are seeing their income fall. If the

Great Recession grew substantially worse and morphed into another Great Depression, you would expect the environmental pillar would get severely less attention, since eating now is a priority over saving the environment.

The social pillar is critical too. Once a war breaks out environmental sustainability has zero priority. If a nation lives in dire poverty, the environment is pillaged with little thought for the future.

Therefore solutions to the sustainability problem must include making all three pillars sustainable.

Thinking deeply in terms of the three pillars of sustainability requires systems thinking. You start seeing the world as a collection of interconnected systems.



The largest system of them all is the biosphere we live in. It contains the human system, which has two main systems: social and economic. When groups of people, from a tribe to a nation, agree to form a government they form a social contract to increase their general welfare. This contract binds the social and economic systems of the group of individuals together. The people (the social subsystem) are working together under a central government to maximize their economic system's output.

Seeing the overall system this way makes it clear that environmental sustainability must have the highest priority, because the lower the carrying capacity of the environment, the lower the common good delivered by the social system and the less output the economic system can produce.

How do you analyse something as complex as all three pillars of the sustainability problem? Can the problem be solved?

- 1. The shortage of food problem** - This was solved ten thousand years ago by the invention of agriculture.
- 2. The short lifespan problem** - Prior to the Industrial Revolution in 1800, the average lifespan of (for example) British people was 40 years. Today it's 78 for men and 82 for women. The problem was solved by the incremental invention of practices like sewage works, clean water sources, and better housing, along with inventions like germ theory and antibiotics.

3. The autocratic ruler problem - It was not so long ago that kings, warlords, chieftains, dictators, and the like ruled the world. Might made right. The vast majority of the population lived at the subsistence level. There was no middle class. The upper class aligned themselves with whoever was in control at the top. It was a system as old as human history. But it changed nearly overnight with the birth of modern democracy in the late 16th century.

4. The Cold War problem - From the end of World War II to the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the free world held its breath in fear that nuclear war could erupt anytime. School children cowered under their desks during nuclear attack drills, as the arms race caused both sides to accumulate massive quantities of bombs. Mutually assured destruction (aptly abbreviated MAD) seemed like the only way to achieve detente. The Cuban missile crisis of 1962 brought the US and the USSR to the brink of launching missiles to protect their interests. But one side blinked and a holocaust was averted.

So, get thinking about simple, cost-effective ways of creating sustainable systems.

Why not look at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0xF27ROVrbg> and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p-terQL6RO0>

Yours,

John