

Module I Summary Student Example

Since the late 1800's, human civilization has had a general concept of nature being something of value. A century later, the Brundtland Commission led us to realize the extent to which all living things rely upon each other. And more importantly, that human activity has had a negative impact on the natural world on which we ultimately depend. Thus the definition of sustainability as we know it was born.

We can use three theoretical pillars to understand the concept of sustainability as it pertains to humans: Society, Economy, and the Environment. In an ideal system these pillars interact and draw from one another in a way that is ultimately beneficial to all of these, not dissimilar to the natural ecosystems around us. Different kinds of organisms depend on each other and each gets just what it needs to thrive. In reality of course, human enterprises have drawn so heavily on the Earth's natural resources that the depletion and misuse of these resources has thrown the Earth's systems out of balance and now poses a threat to the survival of humans themselves.

Paramount to understanding the infinitely broad challenge of sustainability is a strong grasp of systems thinking. Systems thinking has to do with learning how to identify a system and break it down to analyze its parts. It also has to do with widening one's perspective and realizing that in many cases these systems are part of much larger systems. Sometimes their parts also interact with other systems or contain systems of their own. We can take the example of the three pillars; each pillar is a complex system made of a myriad of other systems, but all three pillars also form a system of its own, exponentially more complex, and which serves many purposes. For centuries the majority of the human race has pursued short-term goals with little thought for the long-term consequences. We operate within the walls of our own lives without considering our impact on all of the systems around us. It is only through being able to see the bigger picture, that we will be able to save the future of the planet.

The understanding that life on Earth cannot exist as we know it without the interactions within and between these many systems, and not just human enterprises, is fundamental to beginning to tackle the issue sustainability, as there is no one answer that will fix everything. One must simultaneously grasp the complexity of the issue as a whole, and also break it down into workable, actionable pieces. The UN's 17 Sustainable Development Goals were created with this in mind, with the goal of

improving future prospects for all living things. They address a broad range of environmental, humanitarian, and social issues.

It has become very clear that climate change and the loss of biodiversity are not only a product of human activities, but are also now endangering the well being of humans themselves, and indeed all life on our planet. Already, populations in less developed countries are feeling the impacts of these negative changes. Even in developed countries some communities are already being affected by climate change and pollution. Even with this knowledge, historically, humans have not adjusted our actions accordingly to the degree that would be necessary to prevent further harm to the Earth's living systems. Hopefully, in light of the recent elevation in awareness, and in light of the urgency of the issues now facing us, we humans can make the necessary changes to our behavior before it's too late.