

Sustainability Definition

Written by: Eric Lemelson, President, The Lemelson Foundation

A sustainable world supports thriving ecosystems and the sentient beings that depend on them for their survival and prosperity, including human societies, animals, and plants. Anthropogenic emissions of CO₂ and other major anthropogenic greenhouse gases (primarily methane, but also N₂O and chlorofluorocarbons) have been largely eliminated, and carbon dioxide levels in the atmosphere have been drawn down to 350 ppm or lower to stabilize global temperatures and limit further ocean acidification and loss of the cryosphere (snow and ice).

Animal and plant habitats, including migration corridors, have been restored for many species, even as urbanization trends continue and marginal (or fully non-productive or damaged) agricultural land is abandoned. Production of toxic chemicals, especially those derived from fossil fuels, has been largely eliminated, and widespread pollution of shared resources including air, water, and land has been curtailed. Agricultural land use continues, with increases in productivity and the nutrient values of food crops based on regenerative and biologically restorative practices. Use of agricultural chemical inputs that destroy soil productivity and damage the health of humans and other species has been phased out.

In a truly sustainable world, human societies have strived to sharply reduce income inequality. This is based on the widespread recognition (and empirical research) demonstrating that extreme income disparity and capital accumulation beyond a certain, measurable level produce outcomes that are both unjust and also do not increase life satisfaction. In addition, extreme inequality serves to reduce societal cohesion and the individual motivation of the many who actually do most of the work. Education, women's rights, and respect for human rights are universal. Human health and happiness are defined broadly, in terms that go well beyond current definitions. Human beings formerly subject to class, gender, racial, or caste-based oppression enjoy the same opportunities as everyone. The profession and science of economics has been reformed to reflect goals focused on healthy and sustainable societies and ecosystems, as well as internalized costs, rather than "acceptable" externalities. And finally, while human conflict continues, the drivers of war and suffering have been greatly reduced.