

The Spectrum of Sustainability: Why Environmental Sustainability Matters Most

Spektrum zrównoważoności rozwoju: dlaczego zrównoważoność środowiskowa jest najważniejsza

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Abstract

Sustainability has emerged as a guiding principle in addressing the complex challenges of modern development. It encompasses a wide spectrum, including environmental, economic, and social dimensions, all of which are interconnected and essential for long-term global well-being. This paper explores the various types of sustainability, with a primary focus on environmental sustainability as the foundational pillar of sustainable development. Environmental sustainability ensures the preservation of natural ecosystems, biodiversity, and resources that support all life on Earth. Without maintaining ecological balance, economic growth and social equity become unsustainable. The paper argues that among the various forms of sustainability, environmental sustainability is the most critical, as it provides the natural foundation upon which human progress and societal well-being rest. By emphasizing the need for a shift in values and practices, this study underlines how prioritizing environmental sustainability can lead to a more resilient and equitable future.

Key words: sustainability, environmental sustainability, sustainable development, natural resources, social sustainability, economic sustainability

Streszczenie

Zrównoważoność wyłoniła się jako zasada przewodnia w rozwiązywaniu złożonych wyzwań współczesnego rozwoju. Obejmuje szerokie spektrum, w tym wymiar środowiskowy, ekonomiczny i społeczny, z których wszystkie są ze sobą powiązane i niezbędne dla długoterminowego globalnego dobrobytu. Niniejsza praca bada różne wymiary zrównoważoności, ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem zrównoważoności środowiskowej jako podstawowego filaru zrównoważonego rozwoju. Zrównoważoność środowiskowa zapewnia zachowanie naturalnych ekosystemów, różnorodności biologicznej i zasobów, które podtrzymują całe życie na Ziemi. Bez utrzymania równowagi ekologicznej wzrost gospodarczy i równość społeczna stają się niezrównoważone. W artykule argumentuje się, że spośród różnych form zrównoważoności, zrównoważoność środowiskowa jest najważniejsza, ponieważ zapewnia naturalny fundament, na którym opiera się postęp ludzkości i dobrobyt społeczny. Podkreślając potrzebę zmiany wartości i praktyk, niniejsze badanie podkreśla, w jaki sposób priorytetowe traktowanie zrównoważoności środowiskowej może prowadzić do bardziej odpornej i sprawiedliwej przyszłości.

Słowa kluczowe: zrównoważoność, zrównoważoność środowiskowa, zrównoważony rozwój, zasoby naturalne, zrównoważoność społeczna, zrównoważoność ekonomiczna

1. Introduction

The idea of sustainability has drawn a lot of interest in the last few decades from academic, governmental, and business sectors. It developed as a reaction to the urgent worldwide issues of social injustice, environmental deterioration, and unstable economies (Meadows et al., 1972; WCED, 1987). The Brundtland Commission's 1987

definition, which serves as the foundation, places a strong emphasis on addressing *the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs* (WCED, 1987, p. 43). The intergenerational responsibility ingrained in the sustainability discourse is shown by this generally acknowledged formulation.

The traditional understanding of sustainability is based on three interrelated dimensions: social, economic and environmental (Elkington, 1997; Gibson, 2006). Nevertheless, despite this triadic approach, environmental scientists and intellectuals are increasingly in agreement that environmental sustainability needs to be acknowledged as the most important pillar (Rockström et al., 2009; Steffen et al., 2015). The environmental domain includes the biophysical processes that support all life on Earth, in contrast to the economic and social aspects, which are man-made (Costanza et al., 1997). In addition to endangering biodiversity, the deterioration of natural ecosystems threatens the fundamental basis upon which human societies and economies rely (Sala et al., 2000; Díaz et al., 2019).

It is clear from the worsening of climate change, the startling decline in biodiversity, and the unsustainable use of natural resources that environmental sustainability is not merely one of the pillars but the foundation upon which the others are built (IPCC, 2021; Ceballos et al., 2015). Environmental concerns have frequently been overlooked by current development paradigms, which are strongly biased toward financial gain and consumerist lifestyles (Jackson, 2009). This mismatch has increased the vulnerability of both human and non-human systems and caused lasting ecological degradation (Steffen et al., 2018).

The goal of this research is to critically analyze the range of sustainability and make the case that environmental sustainability should come first in the hierarchy of sustainable development. While highlighting the scientific imperative of preserving ecological balance, it will examine the precise definition, theoretical foundations, and empirical significance of diverse forms of sustainability. Using this perspective, the study will examine whether maintaining the health of our planet's ecosystems is a prerequisite for a sustainable future.

2. Understanding Sustainability

From a rather obscure ecological notion, the term *sustainability* has become a dominant framework in environmental research, ethics, and worldwide politics. Fundamentally, sustainability is the ability of ecological, economic, and social systems to persist and regenerate throughout time without exhausting the resources and environmental conditions required for their continuous existence (Kates et al., 2005). Despite the term's frequent ambiguity in political and business contexts, its conceptual underpinnings are intricate and multifaceted.

The World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) introduced sustainability into the mainstream with its seminal report *Our Common Future* (1987), which defined sustainable development as *development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs* (WCED, 1987). The two imperatives of ecological stewardship and intergenerational justice were presented by this formulation. Though frequently quoted, it has also drawn criticism for being ambiguous and vulnerable to being appropriated by agendas pushed by the market (Redclift, 2005).

Most often, the three-pillar model – environmental, economic, and social – is used to illustrate sustainability. A balanced approach to growth that preserves environmental integrity, fosters economic viability, and guarantees social equality is suggested by this three-part paradigm (Elkington, 1997). Yet, this approach has drawbacks when viewed critically. It ignores the biophysical dependence of the social and economic systems on environmental systems and suggests that each pillar has equal weight (Gibson, 2006). Social institutions cannot be sustained and economic systems fall apart in the absence of a healthy biosphere. Accordingly, detractors support a nested model of sustainability, where society and the economy coexist with and are influenced by the environment (Folke et al., 2016).

According to science, sustainability necessitates the maintenance of biodiversity, ecological processes, and ecosystems' long-term carrying capacity (Daily and Ehrlich, 1992). Planetary boundaries, as proposed by Rockström et al. (2009), further illustrate this concept by identifying limits within which humanity can operate safely. Crossing these boundaries – such as those related to climate change, nitrogen cycles, or biodiversity loss – threatens Earth's systemic stability.

Furthermore, sustainability is a philosophical and ethical objective in addition to a technical one. It brings up important issues of accountability, justice, and future generations' rights (Norton, 2005). It opposes the anthropocentric viewpoint, which puts human interests ahead of the planet's long-term health. In this regard, sustainability necessitates a shift in worldviews and values in addition to policies and technologies (Barry, 1999).

There is more to comprehending sustainability than just identifying its component elements. It necessitates a careful examination of the relationships between these dimensions, the guiding principles of sustainable action, and the reasons that environmental sustainability ought to be prioritized. The only way sustainability can be a useful framework for human behavior in the Anthropocene era is by taking a scientifically informed and morally conscious approach (Steffen et al., 2015).

3. Types of Sustainability

Sustainability is sometimes thought of as a comprehensive framework made up of several interconnected areas that promote human growth while honoring the boundaries of the planet. Among these, the *three pillars* of sustainability – environmental, economic and social sustainability – make up the fundamental typology (Elkington, 1997). A critical and scientific investigation exposes conflicts, inequalities, and hierarchies both within and between these dimensions, even if this tripartite paradigm offers an approachable framework. Examining each kind as an interdependent part of a complicated system rather than as a separate component is necessary for an integrated understanding (Gibson, 2006).

3.1. Environmental Sustainability

The ability of natural systems to continue being diversified, robust, and productive over time is referred to as environmental sustainability. It places a strong emphasis on protecting biodiversity, using natural resources responsibly, and maintaining ecosystem services that are essential to both human and non-human existence (Daily and Ehrlich, 1992). Scientific consensus, including findings from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), asserts that the Earth's systems are under significant stress due to anthropogenic activities such as deforestation, fossil fuel combustion, and industrial agriculture (IPCC, 2021). These activities endanger the stability of important planetary boundaries in addition to surpassing Earth's capacity for regeneration (Rockström et al., 2009).

Therefore, structural changes in energy use, land management, waste creation, and consumption patterns are necessary for environmental sustainability. It is fundamental: social and economic development cannot be maintained in the absence of a stable environment. This understanding contradicts the three-pillar model's equal-weight premise and favors a hierarchical or nested model where environmental systems serve as the foundation for all other domains (Folke et al., 2016).

3.2. Economic Sustainability

The goal of economic sustainability is to preserve economic capital and allow for ongoing improvements in living standards without compromising the social and ecological structures that support economies (Daly, 1996). It includes equal wealth distribution, innovation, job creation, and financial stability. Critical examination, however, shows that growth-centric models that run counter to ecological boundaries are frequently used to frame economic sustainability (Jackson, 2009). The prevailing neoliberal worldview externalizes environmental and social costs in favor of short-term profits and commercial expansion (Kallis, 2011).

Moving from quantitative growth to qualitative development, where economic policies are guided by efficiency, equality, and ecological constraints, is necessary for a truly sustainable economy. Though their application is still unequal and frequently manipulated by corporate interests, ideas like the circular economy, green economy, and doughnut economics (Raworth, 2017) seek to balance economic objectives with ecological realities (Spash, 2012).

3.3. Social Sustainability

Social cohesiveness, equity, and well-being are all aspects of social sustainability. Human rights, healthcare, education, social justice, cultural preservation, and democratic governance are all included (Colantonio, 2009). In theory, social sustainability fosters resilience against structural injustices and guarantees that progress benefits every member of society. But when it comes to implementing policies, social sustainability is frequently the most overlooked and least clearly defined (Vallance, Perkins and Dixon, 2011).

Critical academics contend that in order to overcome systemic disparities based on gender, race, class, and geopolitical power, social sustainability must transcend minimal welfare standards (Agyeman, Bullard and Evans, 2002). In order to guarantee that future generations inherit the social conditions required for a dignified life, it must also take intergenerational justice into account. Therefore, social sustainability is a political and moral requirement that must guide economic and environmental choices.

3.4. Beyond the Three Pillars: Emerging Dimensions

Other aspects of sustainability, such as *cultural, institutional, and ethical sustainability*, have been suggested by academics in recent years (Soini and Birkeland, 2014). The importance of indigenous knowledge systems, spiritual traditions, and regional customs that foster harmony with environment are highlighted by cultural sustainability (Mebratu, 1998). The focus of institutional sustainability is on governance frameworks and their ability to successfully implement, develop, and adapt sustainability policies (Meadowcroft, 2007). These emerging categories reinforce the view that sustainability is not merely a technical or managerial goal but a *multi-layered ethical and civilizational challenge*.

Although categorizing sustainability into several forms makes analysis easier, it also runs the risk of creating compartmentalization. An integrated strategy is necessary for a truly sustainable society, with social sustainability as the end goal, economic sustainability as the tool, and environmental sustainability as the prerequisite. In the

face of ecological collapse and societal fragmentation, developing cogent and scientifically sound sustainability plans requires an understanding of this dynamic interplay.

4. Environmental Sustainability: The Foundational Pillar

In the end, environmental sustainability serves as the ecological foundation for all other aspects of sustainability, including social and economic. The environment is made up of non-replaceable natural systems that sustain life-supporting processes, as opposed to social institutions that are culturally dependent or economic systems that are human-made. These include biodiversity, freshwater supply, photosynthesis, nitrogen cycling, and climate regulation. The stability of ecosystems and the survival of human civilization are both at risk due to the deterioration of these systems (Steffen et al., 2015).

4.1. Defining Environmental Sustainability

According to science, environmental sustainability is the ability of Earth's natural systems to persist, recover, and maintain life without suffering permanent harm from human activity. It entails preserving ecosystems' carrying capacity, safeguarding biodiversity, and guaranteeing the continuous availability of vital natural resources like potable water, fertile soil, and clean air (Meadows et al., 2004). Crucially, it also stipulates that emissions and waste from human activity must not surpass the environment's capacity for assimilation, as this might set off irreversible tipping points.

The Planetary Boundaries Framework (Rockström et al., 2009; Steffen et al., 2015) supports this viewpoint by identifying critical thresholds in Earth system processes, such as climate change, biosphere integrity, and biochemical flows, beyond which the planet may become less hospitable. It is concerning to note that a number of these thresholds have already been crossed, suggesting a high-risk course for global sustainability.

4.2. The Interdependence of Environmental Systems and Human Well-being

Human health, economic resilience, and societal well-being are all closely related to environmental sustainability, making it more than just a standalone ecological issue (UNEP, 2021). Food security, public health, and disaster susceptibility are all directly impacted by air and water pollution, biodiversity loss, and land degradation. Additionally, as a result of environmental unsustainability, climate change exacerbates social inequality and threatens economic systems by causing resource disputes, infrastructure failure, and displacement (IPCC, 2023).

Therefore, it is necessary to consider environmental sustainability as a prerequisite for attaining the other aspects of sustainable development. Particularly in susceptible areas, the loss of natural systems has a domino impact on a variety of industries, including agriculture, energy, healthcare, and education (Rockström and Sukhdev, 2016).

4.3. Environmental Limits to Economic Growth

Environmental resources have always been viewed as limitless and outside the framework of market trade in mainstream economic theories. The overuse of natural capital has been made possible by this neoclassical fallacy, which creates the false impression that technology advancement can take the place of ecosystem functions (Daly, 1996). Ecological economists contend, however, that the economy is a subsystem of the biosphere and that environmental limitations essentially restrict its growth.

This criticism gives rise to the idea of *degrowth* or *post-growth* economies, which promote a change from quantitative economic growth to qualitative enhancement of well-being while maintaining ecological constraints (Latouche, 2009). These models acknowledge that continuous growth on a finite world cannot coexist with environmental sustainability.

4.4. Reorienting Values and Ethics

A paradigm shift in human values and ethics is necessary to achieve environmental sustainability, which calls for more than just technological advancement or legislative change. Ecocentric viewpoints that acknowledge the inherent worth of all living species must replace the dominant anthropocentric worldview, which views nature as a resource to be controlled and commercialized (Naess, 1989). Alternative perspectives based on connection, respect, and restraints are provided by philosophical frameworks like Arne Naess's Deep Ecology and the traditional ecological knowledge of indigenous civilizations (Berkes, 2012).

Environmental sustainability also represents an ethical obligation to future generations, opposing consumerism and short-termism with the moral requirement of long-term ecological management (Gardiner, 2011). Education, cultural change, and spiritual involvement are all crucial in this situation.

Environmental sustainability is the cornerstone upon which social justice and economic stability are based, not merely one element of a tripartite paradigm. The goals of sustainable development cannot be realized in the absence of a robust and stable natural environment. Environmental sustainability must be given top priority as both a practical requirement and a moral obligation, according to both scientific data and ethical reasoning. It is now necessary for civilization to reposition human systems within ecological bounds; it is no longer an option.

5. Why Environmental Sustainability Matters Most

Although the balanced triangle of environmental, social, and economic factors is commonly used to symbolize sustainability, this representation typically fails to capture the structural interdependencies between them. In actuality, environmental sustainability is the ecological foundation that supports societal structures and economic systems, not just one pillar among many. To say otherwise would be to misunderstand our planet's biophysical boundaries and the scientifically proven effects of ecological overshoot (Steffen et al., 2015; Rockström et al., 2009).

5.1. Biophysical Foundations: Ecology as the Prerequisite for Human Systems

According to science, human society is a part of nature rather than being outside of it. Pollination, fertile soils, clean air, drinkable water, and climate regulation are all examples of basic life-supporting systems that are the result of intricate ecological interactions. At a systemic level, they are non-replaceable functions that cannot be artificially duplicated or replaced (Costanza et al., 1997; Folke et al., 2011).

Research from Earth system science (Steffen et al., 2015) and ecological economics (Daly, 1996) illustrates that exceeding planetary boundaries – such as those related to climate change, biodiversity loss, and nitrogen-phosphorus cycles – directly undermines the conditions necessary for human prosperity. Therefore, environmental sustainability is not only a component of progress but also its primary limitation. On a dead world, no social progress or economic policies can be successful (Raworth, 2017).

5.2. The Illusion of Equal Pillars: Deconstructing the Tripartite Model

Despite its educational value, the *three pillars* paradigm frequently obscures how social and economic activities are ecologically grounded. For example, stable environmental conditions are absolutely necessary for economic sustainability: agriculture needs a predictable climate; industrial systems need energy and raw materials; infrastructure needs a livable biosphere (Daly, 1996; Jackson, 2009).

In a similar vein, environmental factors have a significant impact on social sustainability, which includes equity, health, and education. Pollution, climate disasters, and resource depletion disproportionately harm disadvantaged areas, demonstrating how environmental degradation exacerbates social injustice (UNEP, 2021; IPCC, 2023). The idea of environmental sustainability as a *separate but equal* component is theoretically incorrect and factually unworkable due to this interdependence.

5.3. Environmental Decline as the Root of Systemic Instability

Environmental disruption is increasingly being linked to current global challenges, including pandemics, mass migrations, growing food insecurity, and geopolitical wars. Specifically, climate change is a threat multiplier that exacerbates preexisting vulnerabilities and destabilizes socioeconomic systems (IPCC, 2023). Ecosystem degradation raises the risk of interstate conflicts over finite resources, reduces agricultural yields, and speeds up the spread of zoonotic diseases (WWF, 2022; Myers, 2009).

These crises stem from a development paradigm that, motivated by anthropocentric worldviews, extractivist economies, and consumer habits, undervalues ecological constraints (Foster, 2009; Naess, 1989). Therefore, addressing these problems calls for an ecological reorientation of our entire value system in addition to economic adjustment.

5.4. Moral and Intergenerational Imperatives

Beyond scientific urgency, there is also a compelling ethical argument for prioritizing environmental sustainability. Future generations will bear the repercussions of environmental deterioration even though they have no say in the decisions made today. This calls into serious doubt the morality of current practices as well as intergenerational fairness (Gardiner, 2011).

Ecocentric ethics and philosophical frameworks like Deep Ecology (Naess, 1973) support the inherent worth of non-human organisms and ecosystems. These viewpoints support a relationship founded on respect, identification, and long-term thriving rather than the instrumental valuation of nature (Devall and Sessions, 1985). Short-term human interests will continue to take precedence over environmental sustainability in the absence of this ethical change.

5.5. Towards a Hierarchy of Sustainability

The concept of co-equal pillars must give way to a hierarchical model of sustainability in light of ethical considerations and scientific data. In this model:

- Environmental sustainability forms the base – necessary for survival and continuity.
- Social sustainability is the next layer – dependent on environmental stability.
- Economic sustainability sits at the top – as a means to support the well-being of humans within ecological boundaries.

This reorganization questions the anthropocentric reasoning that now dominates discussions of global development and recognizes the unidirectional dependence of social and economic systems on environmental health (Rath, 2017; Daly, 1996).

The primary reason environmental sustainability is important is that it is a prerequisite for all living forms and human well-being. It is the biophysical, ethical, and existential cornerstone that any meaningful concept of sustainability must be constructed upon, not just one aspect among many. For a society on the verge of ecological collapse, acknowledging and operationalizing this priority is not just a theoretical undertaking; it is an urgent necessity.

6. Challenges and Barriers

Despite being recognized as essential, environmental sustainability is nevertheless difficult to achieve in reality. Significant advancement is nevertheless hampered by a number of scientific, sociopolitical, economic, and cultural obstacles. These issues are not discrete; rather, they are intricately linked and represent ingrained structural constraints in knowledge systems, governance, value systems, and international power relations. The most important barriers to sustainability, particularly in its environmental aspect, are critically examined in this section.

6.1. Anthropocentrism and the Crisis of Environmental Ethics

The continuance of anthropocentric worldviews – a human-centered perspective that perceives nature as an item of usefulness rather than a subject of value – is one of the fundamental obstacles to environmental sustainability. This perspective, which is ingrained in contemporary Western philosophy and capitalist growth, justifies the use of natural systems for profit. Because of this, non-human life forms' inherent worth is frequently overlooked while making decisions (Naess, 1984; Madsen, 2023).

Philosophical criticisms like those from Deep Ecology and Ecocentric Environmental Ethics show how prevailing ethical frameworks need to change in order to promote an identity-based, reciprocity-based relationship with nature. Sustainability initiatives run the risk of being superficial or technocratic until this ethical shift takes place, failing to address the underlying causes of environmental degradation (Purser et al., 1995).

6.2. Economic Growth Paradigm and Market-Centric Models

The goal of continual economic expansion, which is the foundation of the modern global economy, is in direct opposition to the limited capacity of Earth's ecosystems. Economic systems continue to place a higher priority on GDP increase despite appeals for *green growth* and *sustainable development*, frequently at the expense of biodiversity loss, carbon emissions, and ecological collapse (Paech, 2025).

Environmental costs are not sufficiently internalized by mainstream market systems. For example, market calculations continue to undervalue or completely ignore the economic value of ecosystem services like pollination, soil fertility, and carbon sequestration. Even attempts to *price nature* – for example, by using natural capital accounting or carbon trading – have come under fire for commodifying ecosystems rather than preserving them (Eco-Business, 2023).

Environmental sustainability will continue to be limited by short-term economic interests until there is a transition toward post-growth or degrowth models that are based on ecological economics and systemic resilience.

6.3. Political Inertia and Weak Environmental Governance

Environmental sustainability is still significantly hampered by political obstacles. Even with global frameworks like the UN Sustainable Development Goals or the Paris Agreement, local and national implementation is frequently sluggish, disjointed, and hampered by conflicting interests (Srivastav & Rafaty, 2023).

Factors contributing to political inertia include:

- Short electoral cycles, which discourage long-term planning.
- Lobbying by powerful corporate actors, especially in extractive and fossil fuel industries.
- Lack of enforcement mechanisms for international environmental agreements.
- Insufficient decentralization in environmental decision-making.

Additionally, environmental governance frequently overlooks community involvement and indigenous knowledge systems, resulting in top-down, technocratic, and inappropriately contextualized solutions (Wikipedia, 2025).

6.4. Knowledge Gaps and Scientific Miscommunication

There is frequently a gap between scientific understanding and public or governmental action, despite the fact that scientific knowledge regarding climate change, biodiversity loss, and ecological thresholds is well-established. This disparity is made worse by:

- Misinformation and denialism, often propagated by vested interests.
- Complexity and uncertainty in scientific models, which make communication difficult.

- Lack of interdisciplinary collaboration, leading to siloed approaches in sustainability research. Transdisciplinary science, science communication literacy, and collaborative knowledge creation that incorporates ecological, social, and cultural perspectives are necessary to close this gap (Wikipedia, 2025).

6.5. Cultural Attitudes and Unsustainable Consumption

A significant obstacle to sustainability at the cultural level is the profoundly ingrained tendencies of materialism, consumerism, and convenience culture. Global advertising, digital media, and lifestyle goals originating in the Global North that are being increasingly imitated in the Global South all serve to support these.

Ecological overshoot is caused by high-consumption cultures' ecological footprints, which greatly exceed their biocapacity. The structural elements that influence consumer choices, such as infrastructure, business practices, and socioeconomic inequalities, are sometimes overlooked in favor of focusing only on changing individual behavior in the name of environmental sustainability (Wikipedia, 2025).

A cultural shift away from the logic of accumulation and toward the principles of sufficiency, awareness, and ecological responsibility is necessary for real change.

A complicated network of institutional, ideological, and structural obstacles stands in the way of environmental sustainability. More than small-scale changes are needed to address these issues; paradigm adjustments in government, economics, ethics, and culture are required. Sustainability will remain a theoretical goal rather than a reality unless these underlying challenges are addressed head-on.

7. Towards a Sustainable Future

More than reactive environmental policy or disjointed developmental initiatives are needed to envision and realize a sustainable future; instead, a systemic change based on ecological wisdom, ethical reorientation, and socio-political restructuring is needed. The need to shift from unsustainable ways of living to ecologically conscious paradigms is becoming an existential necessity due to the rapid deterioration of Earth's life-support systems. The fundamental ideas, tactical routes, and revolutionary frameworks necessary to guide mankind toward a genuinely sustainable future are crucially outlined in this section.

7.1. Reconceptualizing Human-Nature Relationships

Redefining the interaction between humans and nature is essential to sustainable futures. Ecocentric and relational worldviews that recognize the inherent worth and interdependence of all living forms must replace the prevalent anthropocentric perspective, which largely views nature as a resource pool. This rethinking is not only philosophical; it has real-world applications in the areas of behavior, education, legislation, and governance.

Deep insights into sustainable cohabitation can be gained from frameworks like Arne Naess's Ecosophy (Naess, 1986), indigenous ecological knowledge, and Eastern philosophies like Advaita Vedānta and the idea of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam (the world as one family) (Maha Upanishad, VI.71–73). The ethical foundation for long-term sustainability is formed by these viewpoints, which place an emphasis on harmony, self-control, and identification with the Earth as a part of one's own Self.

7.2. Redesigning Economic Systems within Ecological Limits

The current growth-centric economic model, which aims for infinite expansion on a finite planet, is incompatible with a sustainable future. New models – like steady-state economies (Daly, 1996), degrowth movements, and Doughnut Economics (Raworth, 2017) – offer a rethink of prosperity that ensures human well-being while respecting natural limits.

These models advocate for:

- Reducing material throughput and ecological footprints.
- Prioritizing well-being over GDP.
- Redistributing wealth to address ecological and social inequalities.
- Investing in regenerative economies – such as circular production, renewable energy, and local agriculture.

Since natural wealth is the basis of human prosperity rather than a consequence, a sustainable economic system must yield to ecological restrictions.

7.3. Strengthening Environmental Governance and Policy Integration

Establishing sustainability requires efficient environmental governance. This comprises:

- Integrating environmental objectives across all sectors – energy, transportation, health, education, and finance.
- Establishing ecological constitutionalism, where environmental rights are embedded in national constitutions (Collins, 2021).

- Strengthening international cooperation to enforce climate and biodiversity agreements with accountability mechanisms.
- Promoting participatory governance, where local communities and indigenous peoples are central decision-makers, not peripheral stakeholders.

In order to implement such institutional restructuring, technocratic policy must give way to inclusive, adaptable governance that is based on real-time ecological data.

7.4. *Fostering Environmental Education and Ecological Literacy*

It is impossible to have a sustainable future without a broad ecological consciousness. Awareness-based approaches to environmental education must give way to transformative pedagogy that fosters:

- Systems thinking and complexity literacy.
- Critical reflection on consumption patterns and ethics.
- Emotional and spiritual connection to the natural world.

This entails encouraging lifelong learning in sustainability for people, professionals, and policymakers as well as incorporating sustainability education into all educational levels. Institutions of higher learning must become places where ecological change occurs in addition to the dissemination of information.

7.5. *Catalyzing Cultural and Behavioral Transformation*

Economics and politics are important, but cultural change is just as important. The ideals of sufficiency, community, awareness, and stewardship must take the place of consumerism, individualism, and convenience culture. This change comprises:

- Challenging aspirational lifestyles modeled on overconsumption.
- Reviving cultural traditions that promote ecological balance.
- Supporting movements rooted in environmental justice, frugality, and ethical living.

The communal imagination and values can be reshaped toward sustainability through the powerful channels of art, literature, media, and religion. Long-term behavior change is only possible when culture is in line with ecological principles.

A sustainable future requires a shift in society rather than a technical solution. Restoring ecological links, reframing prosperity, and rethinking institutions are all necessary. Sustainability in the environment must be seen as a moral and spiritual imperative in addition to a biophysical one. Whether we remain on the path of ecological overshoot or change course and move toward a regenerative, inclusive, and life-affirming world will depend on the paradigms we choose now.

8. Conclusion

The complex character of sustainability has been rigorously studied in this study, with a focus on the fundamental role that environmental sustainability plays within the larger sustainability spectrum. Thorough scientific and philosophical research makes it clear that environmental sustainability is not only one aspect of sustainability, but also the fundamental building block that allows all other types of sustainability to exist and thrive. The hierarchical and interdependent relationships between the environmental, social, and economic spheres are frequently not well represented by traditional frameworks, especially the widely used *three pillars* paradigm. The idea that ecological processes and boundaries provide the parameters within which human systems must function is firmly supported by scientific data from ecological economics and Earth system science.

The examination of different forms of sustainability emphasizes the intricacy and variety of sustainability issues while reaffirming the importance of maintaining environmental integrity. Social justice and economic sustainability are directly threatened by environmental deterioration, highlighting how vital it is to preserve a robust and healthy ecosystem. Human life, social justice, and economic prosperity are all dependent on the preservation of natural systems, as the integration of biophysical truths with ethical imperatives emphasizes.

Environmental sustainability is obviously necessary, yet there are still significant obstacles to overcome. These include cultural resistance, growth-oriented economic models, political lethargy, and deeply ingrained anthropocentric worldviews. These obstacles indicate systemic obstacles that cannot be resolved by gradual improvements alone; they are not only technical; they are also profoundly structural and ideological. A thorough and systematic change that reorients institutional arrangements, socioeconomic practices, and human values is necessary to overcome these challenges.

A major paradigm shift is essential to the path toward a sustainable future. This change entails adopting ecocentric ethics, which acknowledge the inherent worth of all living things, redefining economic objectives to function within the confines of the planet, fortifying governance structures with legally binding environmental regulations, and encouraging cultural changes in the direction of ecological stewardship. For human society and Earth's ecosystems to be viable over the long term, a comprehensive rethinking of how humans interact with nature is necessary.

This study emphasizes the value of interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary techniques that connect indigenous knowledge systems, social sciences, ecological sciences, and ethics in academic research. Future studies should concentrate on creating novel governance systems that can handle intricate, systemic issues and operationalizing a hierarchical model of sustainability. From a policy standpoint, the results highlight how vital it is to incorporate environmental sustainability into all decision-making procedures, going beyond empty promises to develop legally binding, flexible frameworks that take into account the planet's biophysical reality.

All human and non-human populations rely on environmental sustainability as their life-support system, which is why it is so important. In order to guide global society away from ecological collapse and toward a regenerative and just future, it is not only an academic exercise but also a practical and moral requirement to acknowledge this primacy. Despite the enormous obstacles, there is a pressing and attainable chance to radically rethink humanity's place on the planet.

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