

ecologic

CREATING A SUSTAINABLE FUTURE



Ecologically sustainable development

What is it?

Ecologically sustainable development (ESD) is an ideal like justice or freedom. Ideals are hard to define because their definition depends on values – people’s beliefs and ideas about what is important. Ideals can also be hard to implement. They can sometimes be dismissed as vague, impractical or too complex. Therefore there are many definitions of ESD, depending on the beliefs and interests of the person or institution that developed it.

One common definition is:

‘... to meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.’

– *Our Common Future*, World Commission of Environment and Development, 1987

Other definitions include:

‘... using, conserving and enhancing the community’s resources so that ecological processes, on which life depends are maintained and the total quality of life, now and in the future, can be increased.’

– Australian Commonwealth Government, 1990

‘Sustainable futures result from economic and social development which protects and enhances the natural environment and social equity.’

– Professor Mark Diesendorf of The Institute for Sustainable Futures, University of Technology, Sydney, 1999

The economic concepts of capital and income can be helpful in defining and understanding ESD. There are three types of capital:

- **Natural capital** is any stock or flow of energy and matter that yields valuable goods and service. It includes *resources*, some of which are renewable (timber, grain, fish and water), while others are not (fossil fuels); *sinks* which absorb, neutralise or recycle wastes; and *processes*, such as climate regulation.
- **Human capital** comprises human health, knowledge, skills and motivation, all of which are required for productive work.
- **Social capital** is the value added to any activity or economic process by human relationships and cooperation. It takes the form of structures or institutions that enable individuals to maintain and develop their human capital in partnership with others, and includes families, communities, businesses, trade unions, schools, and voluntary organisations.

Our society is currently depleting its assets, ie stocks of natural, human and social capital, faster than it is replacing them. Natural capital is the most important because without it the other types of capital cannot be produced or maintained. ESD encourages the renewal of all capital.

How is it used?

There is a growing awareness that we face major environmental problems of global dimensions and that economic activity is the cause. At the same time there is a growing gap between the rich and poor peoples of the world resulting in social unrest and unhappiness.

While social and environmental groups protest over this situation, western societies such as Australia, Great Britain and the United States

of America have a philosophic dependence on economic growth.

ESD offers the promise that the needs of the economy, environment and society can be treated within one framework, rather than as discrete and competing areas. ESD can be used as an organising framework for consensus.

This framework:

- recognises the primacy of ecological considerations
- adopts a cautious approach to assessing risks
- ensures social equity within and between generations
- cultivates a long-term global orientation
- maximises efficiency of resources and energy use
- encourages public participation in decision-making

ESD needs:

- guiding vision, goals and scenarios
- sustainability policy development in all sectors, at all levels, with all types of instruments
- social environments that support sustainability
- well developed personal and organisational skills
- indicators that measure how technology and resources are used, distributed and maintained
- systems that are re-orientated – not simply business as usual

Why is it important?

According to many credible scientific studies and models, humans are depleting the Earth's natural capital at an alarming rate. Nature is suffering and so, too, are the world's poorest people. Creative action is needed to steer humanity in a new direction. ESD establishes this direction or framework for action.

Want to know more?

The following publications are useful for understanding ESD:

Mark Diesendorf, 'Sustainability and sustainable development' in *Sustainability: the corporate challenge of the 21st century*, eds Dunphy, Benveniste, Griffiths, and Sutton, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, date, pp 19–37.

I Lowe, 'What is sustainable development?' in *Education for a sustainable society*, J Anderson ed, Australian College of Education, Canberra, 1992, pp 12–19.

Alan AtKisson, *Believing Cassandra*, Scribe Publications, Australia, 2000.

Activities for students at home and at school

1. First the word

- Find as many definitions of the noun 'sustainability' as you can.
- Look also for the verb 'to sustain'. Explore where the word came from.
- Consider the term 'needs'. What do people 'need' both now and in the future. What do plants need? What do animals need?
- Explore the concept of the 'future'. First look at how old the Earth is before considering this concept.

After discussing these key words, develop a class definition of ecological sustainable development.

2. Literature

Choose a children's book with an ecological theme for the class to read. Some suggestions are:

Title: *Belonging*
Author: Jeannie Baker
Publisher: Walker Books Ltd

Title: *The Lorax*
Author: Dr Seuss
Publisher: Harper Collins

Title: *The giving tree*
Author: Shel Silverstein
Publisher: Harper Collins

Title: *Children of the Earth... remember*
Author: Schim Schimmel
Publisher: Northwood Press

Title: *The lost thing*
Author: Shaun Tan
Publisher: Lothian (in Melbourne)

Title: *The wonder thing*
Author: Libby Hathorn
Publisher: Puffin

Title: *The fisherman and the theefyspray*
Author: Paul Jennings & Jane Tanner
Publisher: Viking or Puffin Books

Title: *Second childhood*
Author: Morris Gleitzman
Publisher: Puffin

Ask the students to discuss the main messages of the book. How does the book relate to the class definition of 'ecological sustainable development'. Does the book make you feel like doing things differently in your own life?