



1. Building a sustainable society

This is a strategy for a kind of development that provides real improvements in the quality of human life and at the same time conserves the vitality and diversity of the Earth. The goal is development that meets these needs in a sustainable way. Today it may seem visionary, but it is attainable. To more and more people it also appears our only rational option.

Most current development fails because it meets human needs incompletely and often destroys or degrades its resource base (see pp. 4-5: Gambling with survival or living sustainably). We need development that is both people-centred, concentrating on improving the human condition, and conservation-based, maintaining the variety and productivity of nature. We have to stop talking about conservation and development as if they were in opposition, and recognize that they are essential parts of one indispensable process.

Caring for the Earth sets out a broad and explicit world strategy for the changes needed to build a sustainable society. We need such a strategy because:

- the most important issues we face are strongly interlinked, and therefore our actions must be mutually supportive and aimed at a common goal;
- the changes we must make in the ways in which we live and develop will be fundamental and far-reaching: they will demand our full dedication. The task will be easier if we work together;
- no single group can succeed by acting alone.

Any strategy has to be a guide rather than a prescription. It cannot be followed slavishly. Human societies differ greatly in culture, history, religion, politics, institutions and traditions. They also differ importantly in wealth, quality of life and environmental conditions, and in their awareness of the significance of these differences. Nor are these features fixed in time: change is continual. For these reasons, the principles and actions in this Strategy are described in broad terms. They are meant to be interpreted and adapted by each community. The world needs a variety of sustainable societies, achieved by many different paths.

Principles of a sustainable society

Living sustainably depends on accepting a duty to seek harmony with other people and with nature. The guiding rules are that people must share with each other and care for the Earth. Humanity must take no more from nature than nature can replenish. This in turn means adopting life-styles and development paths that respect and work within nature's limits. It can be done without rejecting the many benefits that modern technology has brought, provided that technology also works within those limits. This Strategy is about a new approach to the future, not a return to the past.

The principles of a sustainable society are interrelated and mutually supporting. Of those listed below, the first is the founding principle providing the ethical base for the others. The next four define the criteria that should be met, and the last four directions to be taken in working towards a sustainable society at the individual, local, national and international levels.

The principles are:

Respect and care for the community of life.

This principle reflects the duty of care for other people and other forms of life, now and in the future. It is an ethical principle. It means that development should not be at the expense of other groups or later generations. We should aim to share fairly the benefits and costs of resource use and environmental conservation among different communities and interest groups, among people who are poor and those who are affluent, and between our generation and those who will come after us.

All life on earth is part of one great interdependent system, which influences and depends on the non-living components of the planet — rocks, soils, waters and air. Disturbing one part of this biosphere can affect the whole. Just as human societies are interdependent and future generations are affected by our present actions, so the world of nature is increasingly dominated by our behaviour. It is a matter of ethics as well as practicality to manage development so that it does not threaten the survival of other species or eliminate their habitats. While our survival depends on the use of other species, we need not and should not use them cruelly or wastefully.

Improve the quality of human life.

The real aim of development is to improve the quality of human life. It is a process that enables human beings to realize their potential, build self-confidence and lead lives of dignity and fulfilment. Economic growth is an important component of development, but it cannot be a goal in itself, nor can it go on indefinitely. Although people differ in the goals that they would set for development, some are virtually universal. These include a long and healthy life, education, access to the resources needed for a decent standard of living, political freedom, guaranteed human rights, and freedom from violence. Development is real only if it makes our lives better in all these respects.

Conserve the Earth's vitality and diversity.

Conservation-based development needs to include deliberate action to protect the structure, functions and diversity of the world's natural systems, on which our species utterly depends. This requires us to:

Conserve life-support systems. These are the ecological processes that keep the planet fit for life. They shape climate, cleanse air and water, regulate water flow, recycle essential elements, create and regenerate soil, and enable ecosystems to renew themselves;

Conserve biodiversity. This includes not only all species of plants, animals and other organisms, but also the range of genetic stocks within each species, and the variety of ecosystems;

Ensure that uses of renewable resources are sustainable. Renewable resources include soil, wild and domesticated organisms, forests, rangelands, cultivated land, and the marine and freshwater ecosystems that support fisheries. A use is sustainable if it is within the resource's capacity for renewal.

Box 1. Sustainability: a question of definition

Caring for the Earth uses the word "sustainable" in several combinations, such as "sustainable development", "sustainable economy", "sustainable society", and "sustainable use". It is important for an understanding of the Strategy to know what we mean by these terms.

If an activity is sustainable, for all practical purposes it can continue forever.

When people define an activity as sustainable, however, it is on the basis of what they know at the time. There can be no long-term guarantee of sustainability, because many factors remain unknown or unpredictable. The moral we draw from this is: be conservative in actions that could affect the environment, study the effects of such actions carefully, and learn from your mistakes quickly.

The World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) defined "sustainable development" as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs".

The term has been criticized as ambiguous and open to a wide range of interpretations, many of which are contradictory. The confusion has been caused because "sustainable development", "sustainable growth" and "sustainable use" have been used interchangeably, as if their meanings were the same. They are not. "Sustainable growth" is a contradiction in terms: nothing physical can grow indefinitely. "Sustainable use" is applicable only to renewable resources: it means using them at rates within their capacity for renewal.

"Sustainable development" is used in this Strategy to mean: improving the quality of human life while living within the carrying capacity of supporting ecosystems.

A "sustainable economy" is the product of sustainable development. It maintains its natural resource base. It can continue to develop by adapting, and through improvements in knowledge, organization, technical efficiency, and wisdom.

A "sustainable society" lives by the nine principles outlined in this chapter.

Minimize the depletion of non-renewable resources.

Minerals, oil, gas and coal are effectively non-renewable. Unlike plants, fish or soil, they cannot be used sustainably. However, their "life" can be extended, for example, by recycling, by using less of a resource to make a particular product, or by switching to renewable substitutes where possible. Widespread adoption of such practices is essential if the Earth is to sustain billions more people in future, and give everyone a life of decent quality.

Keep within the Earth's carrying capacity.

Precise definition is difficult, but there are finite limits to the "carrying capacity" of the Earth's ecosystems — to the impacts that they and the biosphere as a whole can withstand without dangerous deterioration. The limits vary from region to region, and the impacts depend on how many people there are and how much food, water, energy and raw materials each uses and wastes. A few people consuming a lot can cause as much damage as a lot of people consuming a little. Policies that bring human numbers and life-styles into balance with nature's capacity must be developed alongside technologies that enhance that capacity by careful management.

Change personal attitudes and practices.

To adopt the ethic for living sustainably, people must re-examine their values and alter their behaviour. Society must promote values that support the new ethic and discourage those that are incompatible with a sustainable way of life. Information must be disseminated through formal and informal educational systems so that the policies and actions needed for the survival and well-being of the world's societies can be explained and understood.

Enable communities to care for their own environments.

Most of the creative and productive activities of individuals or groups take place in communities. Communities and citizens' groups provide the most readily accessible means for people to take socially valuable action as well as to express their concerns. Properly mandated, empowered and informed, communities can contribute to decisions that affect them and play an indispensable part in creating a securely-based sustainable society.

Provide a national framework for integrating development and conservation.

All societies need a foundation of information and knowledge, a framework of law and institutions, and consistent economic and social policies if they are to advance in a rational way. A national programme for achieving sustainability should involve all interests, and seek to identify and prevent problems before they arise. It must be adaptive, continually re-directing its course in response to experience and to new needs. National measures should:

- treat each region as an integrated system, taking account of the interactions among land, air, water, organisms and human activities;
- recognize that each system influences and is influenced by larger and smaller systems — whether ecological, economic, social or political;
- consider people as the central element in the system, evaluating the social, economic, technical and political factors that affect how they use natural resources;
- relate economic policy to environmental carrying capacity;
- increase the benefits obtained from each stock of resources;
- promote technologies that use resources more efficiently;
- ensure that resource users pay the full social costs of the benefits they enjoy.

Create a global alliance.

No nation today is self-sufficient. If we are to achieve global sustainability a firm alliance must be established among all countries. The levels of development in the world are unequal, and the lower-income* countries must be helped to develop sustainably and protect their environments. Global and shared resources, especially the atmosphere, oceans and shared

* With the adoption of broader concepts of development, reflecting social and ecological as well as economic conditions, conventional classifications of countries as "developed" or "developing" have become less useful. Throughout this document, therefore, countries are grouped by income (lower-income, upper-income, etc.) following a classification set out in Annex 2.

ecosystems, can be managed only on the basis of common purpose and resolve. The ethic of care applies at the international as well as the national and individual levels. All nations stand to gain from worldwide sustainability — and are threatened if we fail to attain it.

Action 1.1. Develop new strategies for sustainable living, based on the nine principles

The nine principles outlined in this chapter are far from new. They reflect values and duties — especially the duty of care for other people, and of respect and care for nature — that many of the world's cultures and religions have recognized for centuries. The principles also reflect statements that have appeared in many reports about the need for equity, for sustainable development, and for conservation of nature in its own right and as the essential support for human life.

The need now is to build practical strategies for sustainable living around these principles. Governments should review and adjust their national development plans and conservation strategies in the light of the imperative for sustainability. They should cooperate, directly and within international organizations, to ensure that sustainability is achieved at the global level. (See Actions 8.2, 9.2, 9.4, 17.7 and 17.8).