



THE RELEVANCE OF SUSTAINABILITY IN CONTEMPORARY WORLD

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ABSTRACT

Sustainability is one of the most controversial topics in contemporary world because of various challenges, such as climate change, resource depletion, social inequality and economic crises. It is a fundamental strategy for the future development of economic actors and represents a holistic approach to ensure a balance between environmental, economic and social aspects. The aim of this study is to specify the normative base in relation to sustainability regulating the activity of agricultural entrepreneurs in Bulgaria. In this regard, we shall address the new challenges they face with regard to its implementation. The present work explores the historical roots and theoretical evolution of sustainability, as well as critical aspects of the concept of sustainability in the context of contemporary global challenges. The paper argues that sustainable development is not a static state, but a continuous process of negotiation between conflicting interests in an uncertain global environment.

Keywords: sustainable development, agricultural entrepreneurship

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, climate change and rising inequality indicators, such as the Gini index [1], have made sustainability a key business priority [2]. In this complex and dynamic context, the term *sustainable development* has become not just a political slogan or an academic concept, but a vital framework for thinking and action. Sustainable development is inherently a search for balance among three interrelated spheres - environmental, economic and social. It is the pursuit of a model of social and economic functioning that meets the needs of present generations without compromising the ability of future generations to do the same. The practical application of sustainability faces a number of obstacles: lack of political will, unequal distribution of resources, corporate interests, cultural differences and, not least, human inertia. Sustainable development combines two of society's main aspirations: to achieve economic development, and to protect and improve the environment (care for the future).

According to the UN World Commission on Environment and Development [3],

sustainability means "meeting today's needs without compromising the right of future generations to meet their own needs" [4]. In 2015, the UN Sustainable Development Report (SDSR) was launched. In 2015, the United Nations adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development [5], which includes 17 goals that cover everything from poverty alleviation and gender equality to clean energy, sustainable cities, and climate action. The European Union (EU) is committed to supporting the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and striving for a sustainable future for all. The EU Treaties recognise its economic, social and environmental dimensions, which must be addressed as a unity. Regarding the 2030 Agenda [6], its future actions are presented in the 2016 Communication of the European Commission (EC) [7]. The latter sets out the essence of sustainability as the universal right of living with dignity, being respectful of the planet's limits, which underscores economic well-being and efficiency, peaceful societies, social inclusion and environmental responsibility.

Historical background and concept of sustainable development

The concept of sustainable development dates back to 1857 and **Table 1** shows its chronological development:

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Table 1. Chronology of quotations and views of the concept of sustainable development

№	Author(s)	Year	Concept
1	John Stuart Mill	1857	"Steady state" - an economic level with a stable population and capital.
2	George Perkins Marsh	1864	Land is given for use, not for wasteful consumption.
3	Alfred Russel Wallace	1898	Plundering of the Earth and the reckless use of natural resources
5	Egbert de Vries, William Vogt, Henry Fairfield Osborne	1949	Consequences of natural resource exploitation and calls for responsible use.
6	C.W. Kapp	1950	Analysis of environmental problems, part of the discourse of sustainable development.
7	Brundtland Report	1987	Sustainable development - meeting present needs without compromising future generations.
8	Torjman	2000	Holistic approach - economic, social and environmental components as linked elements of well-being.
9	Prof. Yachkov	2019	Sustainability - "meeting today's needs without compromising future generations".
10	Viet T. Dao, Thomas Abraham	2021	Climate change and social inequality make sustainability a key business priority.
11	Johnson et al.	2023	Sustainability as an organizing principle for achieving human development and conservation.

Source: own contribution.

The concept of *sustainability* in economic theory was first posited by John Stuart Mill. In his 1857 work *The Principles of Political Economy*[8] he introduced the concept of a *stationary state* - close to today's understanding of sustainable development. The author focused his attention on population growth, which should be considered "as a possible cause of disturbance of the balance of nature and its destruction"[9]. Another author who has explored the idea of sustainability is George Perkins Marsh [10], who illustrates early environmental thought and the warning of human impact on nature. There sustainability is referred to as "the wellspring of the conservation movement" [11]. Van Zon H. [12] argues that all the topics covered in the 1987 Brundtland Report [13] are present in Alfred Russel Wallace's text. An analysis of most environmental problems was published in 1950 by C.W. Kapp [14]. He identified a key principle as a "cost-shifting system" which is very similar to today's idea of environmental change and sustainability. Examining this analysis, it is clear that the roots of the concept

of sustainability can be traced back to antiquity, but population growth, increasing consumption, and the threat of depletion of key resources such as coal and oil have heightened awareness of the need for sustainable resource use.

In its essence, the concept of sustainable development represents a modern version of positivist perceptions and is closest to the claims of Darwin and Comte [15]. In detail, it is the belief that the natural evolutionary process represents refinement, progress and ascent to an end result of wholeness and completion. Furthermore, according to the proponents of this theory, it is not accompanied by crises, nor does upward development alternate with destruction or decline [16]. Johnson [17] defines it as an organizing principle whose task is to achieve human development goals while enabling natural systems to provide the necessary resources and ecosystem services to people. Following the authors' understanding, it is necessary to combine the pursuit of economic development with ensuring environmental sustainability so that well-being is maintained

in the long term. Torjman presents sustainable development through a holistic approach to improve the quality of life by pointing out that economic, social and environmental components are inseparably linked and interacting components of human well-being [18]. The basic idea of sustainability is built on the foundation of sustainable forms of development that ensure high levels of system functioning. This process is not alienated from the dynamics of rational consumption. Sustainable development includes three closely related aspects - economic, social and environmental. To these is increasingly added the need for strong institutions and effective

governance. According to the Brundtland report, sustainable development should not be seen as a stagnant process of mostly production and consumption. Its grading shows that the object of governance is also expanding considerably, as it is not just about one element, but all three interlinked elements, without singling out any of them. The basic principles of sustainable development need to be formulated at an international level. Achieving harmonious development requires specification of responsibilities among the entities (actors) directly involved in the process. The more important ones are listed in **Table 2**:

Table 2. Key actors in sustainable development processes and their role

Actors	Role and contribution to sustainable development
State institutions and governance bodies	Provide the normative framework, regulate economic activity and stimulate innovation aimed at sustainable growth and socio-economic equity [19].
Business sector and industry	Integrate sustainable practices into all aspects of their operations, including minimizing environmental footprint, responsibility to employees[20].
Civil society and non-governmental organizations (NGOs)	Engage in monitoring and oversight of policies and business practices, raise public awareness and promote education on sustainability issues[21].
International organisations and institutions	Coordinate efforts globally through standards, international treaties and funding; work to address transboundary environmental and social challenges.
Academia and research institutes	Provide research, innovation and training that support the formulation of sustainable policies and the implementation of practical solutions[22].
Individual actors and local communities	Have personal responsibility for sustainable habits, conscious consumption and active participation in local initiatives; play a key role in implementing sustainability at the local level[23].

Source: own contribution.

Sustainable development is a collective process in which the participation of all stakeholders is crucial. The above actors contribute specific resources, knowledge and mechanisms to achieve long-term social, economic and environmental goals. Cooperation between them ensures the effective implementation of sustainable policies at local, national and international levels.

Regulatory basis for sustainable development

The normative basis of sustainable development encompasses international, as well as regional and national legal instruments that together form the framework for the implementation of sustainability principles.

Table 3. Normative documents related to sustainable development by level of regulation

Level of regulation	Document	Relationship to sustainability	Year of adoption
International	Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development (Brundtland Report)	A foundational definition of sustainable development, aimed at balancing the needs of present and future generations [28].	1987
	United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity	Regulates the protection and sustainable use of biological diversity.	1992
	2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.	An overarching framework for action, bringing together economic, social and environmental goals[32].	2015
Regional	United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC)	Supports global and regional efforts to mitigate climate change[30].	1992
	European Green Pact	EU strategy for climate neutrality, promoting a green economy and sustainable resource management[48].	2019
National	Labour Relations Act [24]	Regulates workers' rights and working conditions, creating preconditions for social sustainability and equity.	1986
	Accountancy Act [25]	Regulates financial reporting and transparency of enterprises.	1999
	Environmental Protection Act [26]	Basic law governing national policy on natural resource conservation and environmental sustainability.	2002
	Energy Law [27]	Regulates the use and development of the energy sector with a view to increasing energy efficiency.	2003
	National strategies for sustainable development	Documents that integrate international goals and regional policies.	2012

Source: own contribution.

The table presents the main normative documents related to sustainable development, classified by level of regulation - international, regional and national. They provide the basis for a balanced mix of economic, social and environmental objectives. It is important to

integrate and implement these documents effectively to ensure a sustainable future for societies and the planet.

An important basis for the formation of the concept of sustainable development has been

laid in the report "Our Common Future" (1987) [28] prepared by the World Commission on Environment and Development. It views sustainable development as a process of meeting present needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs [29]. This report lays the groundwork for international initiatives, including the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC, 1992) and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) [30], adopted in 2015, which serve as a global action plan. National legislation also integrates these principles through environmental, energy and spatial planning laws. This creates a multi-level

regulatory system [31] that aims to achieve balanced social, economic and environmental development.

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development developed by the United Nations (UN) [32] was launched in 2015. Its main goal is to end poverty and set the world on the path to peace, prosperity and a healthy planet. It combines the three interrelated elements of sustainable development: economic growth, social inclusion and environmental protection. The classification of the SDGs presented in **Table 4** reflects the integrated nature of sustainable development. The numbering of the SDGs has been retained as they appear in the Programme.

Table 4. Distribution of SDGs by dimension

Dimension	Goals (SDGs)
Economic SDGs	8. Decent work and economic growth
	9. Industrialization, innovation and infrastructure
	12. Responsible consumption and production
	7. Affordable and clean energy
	17. Partnership to achieve the goals (financing and cooperation)
Social SDGs	1. No poverty
	2. No hunger
	3. Good health and well-being
	4. Quality education
	5. Gender equality
	10. Reducing inequalities
	11. Sustainable cities and communities
	16. Peace, justice and strong institutions
Environmental SDGs	6. Clean water and sanitation
	13. Combating climate change
	14. Life under water
	15. Life on land

Source: United Nations, The 17 Goals Sustainable Development [33]

The SDGs are structured along three main dimensions - economic, social and environmental. They show a comprehensive approach to balanced development by promoting harmony between economic prosperity, social justice and environmental protection.

Sustainable development as a principle of contemporary public policy is also reflected in a number of national regulations. Key ones are

discussed below, focusing on their specific contribution to economic, social and environmental sustainability.

The above-mentioned laws create the normative basis for the application of sustainable development principles in various sectors. They provide mechanisms for environmental protection, economic sustainability and social justice, supporting integrated resource management and policies.

Table 5. Key laws related to sustainable development in Bulgaria

Name of the law	Focus and relation to sustainable development
Accounting Act [25]	Regulates transparency, accuracy and comparability of financial information; includes provisions for non-financial reporting [34].
Energy Efficiency Act [27]	Promotes the rational use of energy, reduces energy intensity and supports commitments to the European Green Deal [35]
Regional Development Act [36]	Supports integrated and balanced regional development; aims for social and territorial cohesion and sustainable resource planning [37].
Spatial Planning Act [38]	Regulates sustainable spatial planning, energy efficiency in construction and environmental protection.
Environmental Protection Act [26]	Basic instrument for environmental policy; introduces EIA and SEA, and mechanisms for public participation in planning projects with environmental impacts.
Water Law [39]	Ensures sustainable management of water resources, protection from drought and access to clean water.
Forest Law [40]	Promotes sustainable forest management; forests contribute to biodiversity, carbon sequestration and protection from erosion and flooding.
Agricultural Land Conservation Act [41]	Regulates sustainable land use and protects agricultural areas from degradation, contributing to food security.
Statutory Instruments Act [42]	The new rules require assessing in advance how a law will affect the economy, people and nature - so sustainability becomes part of planning from the outset.

Source: own contribution

Specifics and challenges for the implementation of the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals

One of the major challenges to achieving the SDGs is that the world is facing many crises and external problems. The global SDGs were adopted with a vision of long-term peace, ecological balance and social justice. Events that have put a strain on the health system, education and efforts to combat poverty are: the COVID-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine and the energy crisis. The next challenge is the financial deficit and unequal support. In the aftermath of the pandemic, the need for additional resources is growing and the lack of funding is at the "heart of the sustainability crisis" [43]. Another major bottleneck is the **inadequate system of surveillance and statistics**. Many countries, especially in the **Global South**, do not have well-developed data collection systems, i.e. there are no **established monitoring mechanisms** and **reliable data sources** [44]. This hampers both the **assessment of progress** and the **implementation of national strategies**. The next critical point is the conflicts between

objectives and the need for an integrated approach. Some objectives conflict - for example, economic growth often conflicts with environmental objectives. The lack of strategic interaction between goals not only reduces the effectiveness of their implementation, but also creates the conditions for contradictions that hinder sustainable development in the long term [45]. Another key challenge is insufficient climate and adaptation investments. These not only threaten the implementation of Goal 13, but also undermine progress on other goals - including food security, health, education and economic development. A **better coordinated, long-term and equitable climate finance mechanism** is needed to provide predictable resources for the most vulnerable countries and communities [46].

Strategies and solutions for sustainable development

The main pillars that can ensure long-term sustainability are: national strategies, the integration of ESG principles into business and technology solutions. Their main objective is to achieve a balance between economic growth,

social justice and environmental protection using coordinating and sustainable steps at all levels. In this aspect of global environmental, social and economic challenges, the implementation of sustainable development strategies and solutions becomes a necessity for countries, the private sector and civil society. The first type of strategies are national sustainable development strategies and plans, which play the role of bringing together global sustainable development goals. The National Recovery and Sustainability Plan (2021-2027) [47] in Bulgaria, focuses on climate change, energy transition and societal inclusion. The plan envisages investments in green energy, digital transformation and improved environmental infrastructure, which is in line with the European Green Pact and the UN Goals [48]. The private sector also plays an important role in sustainable development. ESG principles are key to integrating sustainable practices into corporate strategy [49]. According to Phemelo [50], companies that apply ESG criteria not only reduce their environmental footprint but also increase transparency among investors and consumers. Examples of this type of business practices include energy efficiency, circular economy and responsible waste management. This contributes to long-term sustainability and competitiveness in markets. Education plays an important role in changing our values and behaviour. To this end, the addition of educational topics that are related to sustainability in the curricula as well as public awareness campaigns are necessary. This type of strategy involves hands-on training and support for innovative projects that engage students, university students and local communities. Another very important factor in the transition to sustainable development is technological progress. Specifically these are - renewable energy, energy efficiency, circular economy which will help to reduce carbon footprint and sustainable use of resources [51]. The long-term success of the concept of sustainable development is directly dependent on the ability of institutions, businesses and citizens to act in concert, sharing responsibility for the planet's resources and the future of humanity.

CONCLUSION

This article has presented a chronology of the development of the concept of sustainable development, tracing the main stages and milestones in its formation. It also presents a brief analysis of the normative environment at global, regional and national levels that

provides a framework for the implementation of sustainable development principles. This overview helps to understand how different initiatives and policies interconnect and work together to achieve a more sustainable and equitable world. Understanding these processes is key to the successful implementation of the SDGs and to creating a future that is both economically, socially and environmentally sustainable. Sustainable development is not an end goal that is achieved once and for all, but a process that requires continuous adaptation and improvement. For the future to offer good living conditions, it is important that we act responsibly today - together and globally.

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