

GREEN BPM

What is sustainability?

As Dr Rack (2014) affirms in her article published for The World Energy Foundation, the concept of sustainability is not a new notion, but an idea that has accompanied our species from its origins, implying the concern with the future of available resources.

The word “sustainability” originates from a more recent time and first appeared in a forestry manual “*Sylvicultura oeconomica*” written by Hans Carl von Carlowitz in 1713. Originally, the term was coined “*Nachhaltigkeit*” in the German language, which could be translated into English as “sustained yield” and refers to never harvesting more than the concerned forest or land can regenerate. Over time, the meaning of “sustainability” started to evolve and adapt to specific needs. Dr Rack continues in her article that, once ecology had become a discipline of research, the concept of sustainability extended to all biological systems and finally had its last chance in the 20th century, when dependence on fossil fuels and the irresponsible use of resources had started to increase.

From the 1980s on, the word sustainability has been used more with regard to the fashion in which humans live on the planet. The authors Johnston, Everard, Santillo and Robért (2007, p. 60) point out that there are around three hundred definitions for the word “sustainability”, therefore, to write this article, only the most commonly accepted definition as provided by the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) in 1987 will be considered: “Development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (Brundtland 1987, p 2.1).

It is important to mention that in 1972, a report known as “The Limits of Growth” contributed significantly to the perception of the systemic interrelation that existed at a global level, dissolving the conception of “trade off” that existed between the concepts of “economic growth” and “environment” as contradictory ideas. Therefore, for something to be sustainable, by the most common definition, it must balance how human needs are met without implicating negative impacts in the environment. As a consequence, speaking about sustainability today means to speak about sustainable development. Sustainability, in this context, emerges from three important areas: environment, society and economy, the link between which is known as Triple Bottom Line. Integrating these three components in a single perspective: it can be said that sustainable development is about recognizing that the economy and that the society depend on the processes that occur in the environment.

Literature

Rack, J (2014). A Brief History of Sustainability. Accessed on 04.06.2020 <https://theworldenergyfoundation.org/a-brief-history-of-sustainability/>

Johnston, P. Everard, M. Santillo, D. Robért, K. (2007). Reclaiming the definition of sustainability. *Environmental Science and Pollution Research* 14 (1) 2007, p. 60 – 66.