An Introduction to Sustainable Development

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Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of present generations without prejudicing the ability of future generations to meet their needs. This definition, coined by the World Commission on Environment and Development (often referred to as the Brundtland Commission) has caught the attention and earned the support of peoples around the world as perhaps no other concept has.

A great many books and even more articles have been written about the meaning of sustainable development. However, several elements of the definition are especially important. First, sustainable development is a qualitative concept, not necessarily a quantitative one. It speaks primarily of what kind of development, as opposed to how much, should be pursued. It also recognizes that there is going to be a significant increase in global population irrespective of the population policies adopted and that this growth must be accommodated. Second, it recognizes that the economy and the environment are not in conflict but are irrevocably interconnected. A sustainable economy depends on a sustainable environment while a sustainable environment is not possible without a sustainable economy.

Next, this definition speaks in terms of needs, not desires. It does not promise a BMW in every pot, and yet it does not demand major sacrifices. It does, however, imply a change in values--values that recognize other peoples, other generations, other species, and the earth itself. Lastly, it speaks of meeting the needs of present generations, meaning people of all nations, races, sexes, and ages, in addition to those of future generations.

Sustainable development is what we planners would call a goal. It is a challenge to achieve a better quality of life for all humans, born and unborn, in this country and in all countries. It is not like comprehensive planning, strategic planning, growth management, or development management with which we are more familiar and probably more comfortable. These are not goals but tools and techniques used to achieve a set of locally defined goals. They can be useful in moving a jurisdiction in the direction of sustainable development, but the means should not be confused with ends.

Sustainable development requires that we consider the needs of all peoples, generations, species, and the earth in addition to the health, safety, and general welfare of the voters in the jurisdiction in which we happen to be working. However daunting the challenge, it has been accepted around the world by countries, regions, provinces, and cities, by financial institutions and corporations, and by non-governmental organizations. A solid global foundation for action towards sustainable development was laid with the United Nations Conference on the Environment and Development (UNCED), held in 1992 in Rio de Janeiro, and the creation in 1993 of the United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development.

In this country, the Bush administration did not take UNCED seriously but President Clinton has. He has formed the President’s Council on Sustainable Development, which is made up of leaders from the public and private sectors as well as from the spiritual and...
environmental communities. Here in North Carolina, Governor Hunt has created the Commission for a Competitive North Carolina, which early in its deliberations took active notice of sustainable development. A number of cities in the United States, including Seattle, Washington, Portland, Oregon, and Boulder, Colorado, have incorporated the notion of sustainability into their planning programs. Momentum seems to be building.

At UNCED, commonly called the Earth Summit, an agreement called Agenda 21: Program of Action for Sustainable Development was negotiated by the governments at the conference. The introduction to Agenda 21 calls it a “comprehensive blueprint for action to be taken globally—from now into the twenty-first century—by governments, United Nations organizations, development agencies, non-governmental organizations, and independent-sector groups, in every area in which human activity impacts on the environment.” Underlying the Earth Summit agreements is the idea that humanity has reached a turning point. We can continue with present policies which are deepening economic divisions within and between countries, which increase poverty, hunger, sickness, and illiteracy, and cause the continuing deterioration of the ecosystem on which life on Earth depends. Or we can change course, better managing and protecting the ecosystem and bringing about a more prosperous future for us all.

Chapter Seven of Agenda 21, “Promoting Sustainable Human Settlement Development” defines sustainable development in terms more familiar to planners: the overall human settlement objective is to improve the social, economic, and environmental quality of human settlements and the living and working environments of all people, in particular the urban and rural poor. The program areas included in the chapter are:

- Providing adequate shelter for all;
- Improving human settlement management;
- Promoting sustainable land-use planning and management;
- Promoting the integrated provision of environmental infrastructure: water, sanitation drainage and solid-waste management;
- Promoting sustainable energy and transport systems in human settlements;
- Promoting human settlement planning and management in disaster-prone areas;
- Promoting sustainable construction industry activities;
- Promoting human resource development and capacity-building for human settlement development.

Agenda 21 suggests a number of mechanisms that can and should be used to achieve sustainable land-use planning and management. One suggestion is that all countries undertake a comprehensive inventory of their land resources in order to establish a land information system. Such a system would classify land resources according to their most appropriate uses. For example, environmentally fragile or disaster-prone areas would be identified for special protection measures.

It also urges all countries to develop land-resource management plans to guide land-resource development and utilization. To that end, it recommends that countries do the following:

(1) Establish national legislation to guide the implementation of public policies for environmentally sound urban development, land utilization, housing, and the improved management of urban expansion;

(2) Create efficient and accessible land markets that meet community development needs by improving land registry systems and streamlining procedures in land transactions;

(3) Develop fiscal incentives and land-use control measures, including land-use planning solutions for a more rational and environmentally sound use of limited land resources;

(4) Encourage partnerships among the public, private, and community sectors in managing land resources for human settlements development;

(5) Strengthen community-based land-resource protection practices in existing urban and rural settlements;

(6) Establish appropriate forms of land tenure that provide security of tenure for all land-users, especially indigenous people, women, local communities, low-income urban dwellers, and the rural poor;

(7) Accelerate efforts to promote access to land by the urban and rural poor, including credit schemes for the purchase of land and for building, acquiring, or improving safe and healthy shelter and infrastructure services;

(8) Develop and support the implementation of improved land-management practices that deal
comprehensively with potentially competing land requirements for agriculture, industry, transport, urban development, green spaces, preserves, and other vital needs;

(9) Promote understanding among policy makers of the adverse consequences of unplanned settlements in environmentally vulnerable areas and of appropriate national and local land-use and settlements policies required for this purpose.

From this list, several conclusions are obvious:

• This a very large agenda;

• Planners can and should play a very important role;
  and

• There is an almost infinite variety of things that planners can do.

But where to start? It would be nice to have a clean slate, a large budget, and a perfect legislative framework. None of us do, but we do have a lot that can be done here and now. The articles that follow discuss some of the creative ideas, projects, and programs related to planning that are being formulated and implemented to create a more sustainable future.