

# ETHICAL ASPECTS OF SUSTAINABILITY

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**Abstract.** *Ethics can be defined as a reflection on nature and a definition of “the good”. Individuals value qualities and things dissimilarly, most visibly, but they also value their goods in different ways, in different relations to each other, for different reasons, and to different ends. These differences are very applicable to sustainability. In other words, sustainability cannot be achieved without attention to its ethical dimensions. The aim of this research is to examine the ethical aspects of sustainability. Consequently, the main tasks of the research are: to define a reason for developing the ethics of sustainability and to describe the ethical context of sustainability. The following primary research methods are used: the monographic method, analysis, scientific induction and deduction. The key results are: a survey on the responsibility to the next generations and categorized values of the ethics of sustainability. All forms of sustainability in society depend on the human conduct. Therefore, the ethical aspects of reality are of larger significance in ensuring sustainability. Ethical sustainability needs to be realized in order to have sustainable political and social systems and processes.*

**Keywords:** *ethics, sustainability, development, justice, solidarity.*

**JEL code:** *D63, Q56, I38, F63.*

## Introduction

Ethical context is understood in the term of sustainability, as sustainability means taking into account not just the effectiveness, but also moral values and goals. Sustainability cannot be achieved without attention to its ethical dimensions. The ethical aspects of sustainability often remain implicit as most analyses focus on the economic, social, environmental, and technical issues. It is one of the main tasks of this research. The current research contributes to this goal by describing the ethical context of sustainability. The aim of this research is to examine the ethical aspects of sustainability. Consequently, the main tasks of the research are: to define a reason for developing the ethics of sustainability and to describe the ethical context of sustainability. The following primary research methods are used: the monographic method, analysis, scientific induction and deduction.

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values of the ethics of sustainability. The hypothesis to be proved is as follows: sustainability has ethical aspects.

Firstly, this paper discusses reasons for developing the ethics of sustainability. Secondly, it clarifies the ethical context of sustainability. Thirdly, it outlines some of the most important characteristics and principles of the ethics of sustainability. In other words, the base of this research is to explain how sustainability has an ethical dimension and to examine the most appropriate values of the ethics of sustainability. These discussions clarify the questions of great importance for specialists and scientists, as well as politicians, non-governmental organizations, and other citizens who search for a more sustainable society.

The ethical questions have occupied the human mind since ancient times. Civilization or culture with ethical rules constrains people to follow “the right path”. This research describes the ethics of sustainability providing the moral and rational basis for implementing sustainability as a framework to improve decision-making. Sustainability is always an integrated process with multiple synergies and loops. Just as the social, environmental, and economic dimensions of sustainability can reinforce each other, so can sustainable practices at work. It proposes a set of principles to be used to guide decision-making. More often than not these choices are about technology and the approach allowing technologies to leave the laboratory without adequate debate and scrutiny which results in complex dilemmas for the global community. The ethics of sustainability described here will help change the decision-making process and ensure that the benefits of this kind of thinking to all generations will far outweigh any negative consequences.

## **Discussion and results**

### **Reasons for developing the ethics of sustainability**

At first, before addressing the issue of ethics, the question needs to be answered – what is philosophy? Philosophy can be defined in many ways – the eternal question of existence, love of truth, wisdom, a deeply personal world, humanity and human material; the principle of the search and revelation. Philosophy is a conversation with me and others. As French philosopher René Descartes aptly noted: “I think therefore I am”. It is just like the way always leads to seeking the unknown. Nowadays philosophy is linked to the issue of ethics as well.

Ethics is practical philosophy. It is teaching about the habits, customs and seeking a better life. The word ‘ethics’ itself is neutral, it implies neither good nor bad. It just identifies a particular person or a group of people in action against the traditional system of values. Ethics

is a lesson of one's life. It can benefit people to recognise the values to be of the greatest importance to them and analyse possible actions or results in relation to these values. However, ethics is not only about applying pre-established rules to clear situations.

Do ethical issues matter in economics? As it is well known, economics is a social science, and for this reason it has a moral dimension. Economics deals with society and society deals with limited resources.

Professionals can reinforce the values of sustainability on multiple faces, by first educating themselves about the choices that will make a difference and then seeking changes – personal and structural – allowing those choices to take root. We cannot change our society if we ignore sustainability in one aspect of our lives. Instead, we must see and seek out contacts among diverse activities at home, at work, and in the community.

While single activities are not sufficient to create a more sustainable society, they are invaluable. Individual performance can help initiate and support structural changes, for example, by promoting direct sales to increase consumer demand for locally produced food. Large scale policy changes are required to transform the national food production and distribution system, but such changes may never get a start, even at a local level, without the pressure of individual choices. Such choices not only form support for policy changes, but also provide good examples stimulating other individuals to start more sustainable practices. For example, a colleague buying potatoes at direct selling can inspire others to try the same. However, without any individual connection these changes might not seem possible. Individual connections also make sustainable activities more enjoyable and thus more probable to continue.

Sustainability is an important idea generally referenced and widely supported. Sustainability is usually understood by the stable pursuit of three goods: ecological social equity, health, and economic welfare. It is grounded on the ethical commitment to the well-being not only of contemporary populations, but also the comfort and enhanced opportunities of future generations.

Nowadays the word 'sustainability' is used more and more frequently from a wide variety of perspectives and with a number of different purposes in mind. As a result, the 'sustainability' is becoming harder to define. Probably the best known basic definition of sustainability is stated in *Our Common Future*, also known as the *Brundtland Report*, from the United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) published in 1987: "...meeting

the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs” (Kilbert et al., 2010). Much work has occurred since the *Brundtland Report* to explain the worldwide consensus about the goals of sustainability, development of subsequent and previous global efforts (such as *Agenda 21*, *The Earth Charter*, *The Rio Declaration*) on sustainability goals, standards, and models.

The most essential aspect in this definition is the planned responsibility of contemporary society for the quality of life of today’s population plus the preservation of resources, environment, and other ingredients needed for future populations to also experience a good quality of life. It is a huge and daunting mission and requires enormous changes in the way of thinking, policy, and basic assumptions about the economy for its full implementation. At present, it would mean that wealthier, more technologically urban societies would have to contribute materially through a wide range of assistance programmes to increase the wealth of poorer nations. They have to aid them in raising the ability to provide the basic needs of their population. For future generations it means guaranteeing the availability of a wide range of resources, for example, natural, cultural, educational and many others providing a good quality of life.

It is normal to set a question: why should we apply the sustainability basis? Interdependence, rights and obligations shall be used to answer this question. Everyone on the Earth has a right to having their needs for food, housing, and clothing met. Present people have a duty to future generations to provide them a complete and functioning planet in at least as good state as they received it. The request of the sustainability framework therefore requires a better understanding of the ethical concepts.

Through a better understanding of the ethics of sustainability it becomes clear why the sustainability framework is not only an approach to addressing and answering many difficult problems facing us, but why it is, in fact, the right approach, the right thing to do.

The issue of how to frame ethical problems in constructive and fruitful ways is vital but underappreciated – it is especially applicable for difficulties of sustainability where popular discourse often defines problems as stark choices between economic or environmental goods. In such situations, one of the most important tasks of ethics is asking questions that help lead to good solutions. Philosopher Anthony Weston (1971) notes that “if we are to find the best solutions to our ethical problems, we first need to find the best problems” (Kilbert et al., 2010).

Ethical societies provide tools for thinking about problematic issues in a complicated world. Therefore it is a vital component of successful

and effective decision-making processes. It is especially important for sustainability which seeks to integrate diverse and sometimes conflicting ethical and practical goals.

### **The ethical context of sustainability**

Sustainability suggests that in the decision-making process societies having a good quality of life have an obligation to ensure that both future societies and contemporary, less well-off societies are also able to achieve a standard of living in which their basic needs are met.

The Whistler 2020 (Canada) sustainable community movement describes sustainability as "... a minimum condition for a flourishing planet in the long term" (Kilbert et al., 2010).

As noted earlier, the classic *Brundtland Report* definition of sustainable development is as follows: "[development] that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." Really this definition proposes a new ethical concept that frames the privileges of both present and future generations. It is a gap between the rights of the future versus present generations and suggests that everyone's needs should be fulfilled before the wants of some are addressed.

Even as issues of both intergenerational and intergenerational justice are raised by this definition, some clear dilemmas arise. For example, how is it possible to define the needs of future people when the needs of the majority of the world's present population are not being met?

M.P. Golding addressed this problem in 1972 when he suggested that a moral community can be organized only in one of two ways – by an explicit contract between its members or by a social arrangement in which each member benefits from the efforts of other members. With respect to future generations neither an explicit contract nor social arrangement is possible and thus rights cannot be attributed to future generations as a result of a contract or social arrangement (Kilbert et al., 2010).

At the end of the nineteenth century and beginning of twentieth century rationality became more and more important in economic studies. But at the end of the past century this perspective changed and more attention was paid to the ethical aspect of economy. Considering it, the analysis of core economic problems of the countries could get better.

One example of this new point of view is the work of Nobel Prize winner Amartya Sen (1999) *On Ethics and Economy*: it is the analysis of the economic impoverishment due to excluding ethical components in its analysis. This author also states that there are relevant advantages and

improvements in the analysis when economics introduces ethical characteristics in its studies (Rogers, 2008).

Another contemporary author Elizabeth Anderson (2004) investigates the social relations of creditors and debtors what she calls as the ethics of debt and the ethical assumptions of the economic theory. She describes the history of the ethical and moral dimension of debt from the Biblical time to the latest economic theory schools.

However, when the economic analysis introduced such a concept as efficiency, the main objectives were maximization of profits and efficiency in allocation of resources. This new concept implied that the ethical base of economy lost its importance. More relevance was given to the practical aspect of economy. This view was changed just at the end of the twentieth century, and the interest in ethical issues in economy was converted.

Although the ethics of sustainability will rightly vary according to the context, culture, and other factors, it is possible to summarize some of the main features the acceptable ethics of sustainability should possess to some degree:

1. the goal of sustainability by its definition is future-oriented, the ethics of sustainability must take into account the relations between the present and future generations;
2. the ethics of sustainability, like any social ethics, should address the question of rights or interests;
3. the ethics of sustainability should be feasible or practical;
4. in both cases individuals and groups may incur duties or responsibilities in relation to the rights and interests of others.

The goal of the ethic of sustainability is to guide people in their efforts to address real world problems and build more socially, environmentally, and economically sustainable institutions, practices, and societies. The ethics of sustainability cannot succeed only in the realm of theory because, as Kant famously declared, ought implies can (Kilbert et al., 2010). Sustainability without ethics is an empty shell, e.g., sustainability lacks a generative purpose and ends serving as a guide for reflection if we do not reflect the culture, values, and methods for realizing durable.

Why must we leave as much and as good for future people? What if that requires us to sacrifice money, work, time, satisfaction, etc.? Another interesting question is: must we sacrifice just as much for the people in the far future as for the people in the near future?

The author of this research has conducted a survey with just one question – you have 1000 EUR that you must give to the future people; what amounts will you give to people of each year? It is possible to give

money to the next generations that will live in the following years: 2025; 2055; 2085; 2115 and 2145. The question was asked to 57 students.

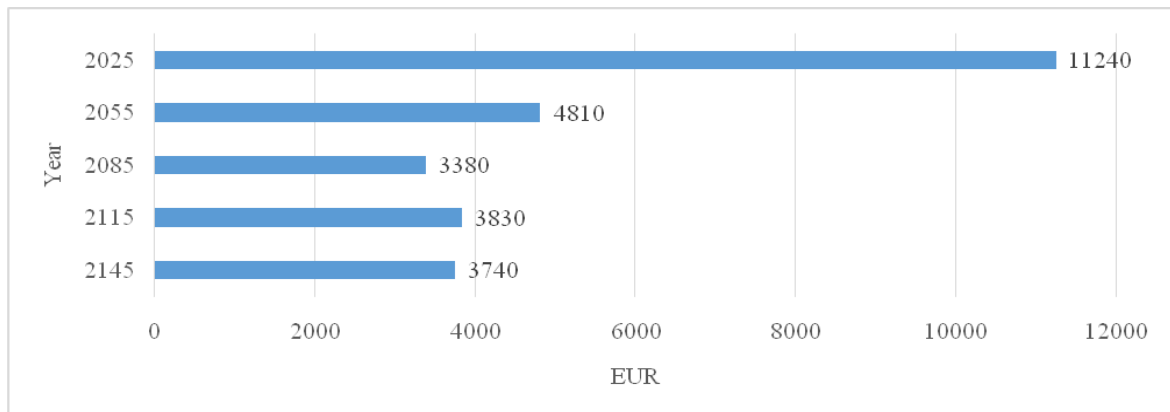


Fig. 1 Money given to next generations  
(Source: compiled by the author)

The students gave the biggest amount of money (11,240 EUR) to people who will live in 2025. Typical prejudices are: nearer future people are closer relatives, so we have stronger obligations to them; most future people are non-existent, therefore, the question is why we should make sacrifices for non-existent people; they will have knowledge and technology we cannot predict; future people will be richer than us. A very strong principle is: "first-come, first-served!"

In addition to general features, the ethics of sustainability must address a number of definite values helping fill out the most important principles of sustainability in relation to economic, social, and environmental aspects. Obviously, not all ethics of sustainability will be equal in relation to these matters. Though, suitable and complete ethics of sustainability must deal, in some way, with the following values.

Sustainability offers traction to the idea that we are obligated to reflect future generations in our policies, in our interactions with nature, in our production, and in our daily decision-making. These are all matters that require an on-going ethical discussion.

Alternatively, if future generations shared the same interests or social ideals as present people, then it could be argued that they have rights equal to ours, it is possible that, due to technological progress and other factors, it is not imaginable the conditions of future generations and their conception of life and values. Walter Wagner (2002) suggested that if we recognized the rights of future generations, then we would experience a greater degree of self-actualization and wellbeing (Atkinson et al., 2014).

Another lens to view the issue of future generations is that our ancestors have highly helped us and that we have an analogous obligation to the future. In addition to the positive benefits which must be passed on to future generations, destructive consequences must not be passed on, for example, modern technologies such as genetic engineering are likely to pose warning threats to future generations.

Therefore, if sustainability recommends an obligation to the well-being of future generations, how to deal with technology progress and application must be the issues of concern. The Earth is stated as a single ecosystem; major ecological injury in any area affects the entire system. Without a sense of community sustainability will not be realised. Someway the ability of individuals to view themselves as a part of the global community is dependent upon a global life to be achieved.

Table 1 Values of the ethics of sustainability  
(Source: compiled by the author)

<b>Economic</b>	<b>Regulation of the market</b> in order to address the true costs of pollution (the “polluter pays” principle).
	“ <b>Perverse subsidies</b> ” helping make environmentally unhealthy products cheaper. Perverse subsidies are especially widespread in agriculture.
	<b>Obligation to help</b> the poor persons in need – the right to take from the rich.
<b>Social</b>	<b>Obligations to future generations</b> – to leave adequate resources, preserve a fair, democratic society, etc.
	<b>Justice: procedural</b> (establishes rules and standards by which decisions are made to ensure both political democracy and the rule of law); <b>distributive</b> (concerned with fair or correct distribution of goods (also to environmental goods such as clean air and water and perhaps access to recreational or wilderness land) in the society); <b>substantive</b> (refers to absolute numbers – while distributive justice might insist that a small amount of food be shared equally among starving people, the principle of substantive justice would seek to provide those people with an absolute amount of food adequate to their needs, not just with a fair share of an inadequate amount).
<b>Environmental</b>	<b>Human welfare</b>
	<b>Ecosystems</b> or natural systems and organisms
	The <b>precautionary principle</b> was formulated to address scientific and technological projects that may have effects on environmental and public health.

All these principles emphasise that the individuals responsible for implementing technologies must be ready to address possible consequences of their implementation. It requires policy-makers to



reflect upon as many different choices as possible before acting and consider as fully as possible not just the likely but also possible outcomes of those actions. Individual human welfares, even the collective interests of a certain generation, are not complete; they are significantly limited by responsibilities to other persons, including those not yet born.

### **Conclusions and suggestions**

Sustainability is a meta-concept applied in the formation of the bases that are planned to be useful to real conditions to guide government, organizations, citizens, etc. on a route where both present and future generations can have the potential for a good quality of life. Sustainability has proven its stable power nowadays. Behaviour conducive to sustainability can be learned and passed to future generations.

An aspect of sustainability is the attempt to integrate a various set of ethical principles and goals in both practice and theory. Sustainability is not simply a combination of different values, but a combined scheme in which the parts work together to reinforce each other.

Sustainability is about ethics because it requests the existing people not only to consider the condition of the current impoverished population, but also the possible condition of future inhabitants. Obviously we are approaching the consequences of climate changes and resource depletion. Therefore, the question of our responsibility to the future is ethical responsibility to be addressed and better understood. Sustainability forces us to the consequences of our behaviour in a way different from any other concept, and, as a result, developing ethical underpinnings of sustainability is essential to applying it as a solution for the numerous problems being met or shall be faced by current and future individuals.

In the case of a possible conflict between, for example, economics and environmental principles, the ethics of sustainability should not just select one, but should effort to make the most of both values to the possible degree. It may require considering varied options, including some that might not normally seem feasible. It may require attractive negotiations with individuals or groups which are not one's usual conversation partners.

All forms of sustainability in society depend on human conduct. Therefore, the ethical aspects of reality are more important in ensuring sustainability. Ethical sustainability needs to be realized in order to have sustainable political and social systems and processes.

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## **ILGTSPĒJAS ĒTISKIE ASPEKTI**

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### **Kopsavilkums**

Pētījuma centrā ir ilgtspējas ētikas aspektu raksturojums, kas nodrošina morālu un racionālu pamatu lēmumu pieņemšanai. Ilgtspēja vienmēr ir integrēts process ar vairākām sinerģijas cilpām. Ilgtspēju var nodrošināt dažādi aspekti: sociālie, vides un ekonomiskie. Pētījumā tiek ierosināts principu kopums, kuru var izmantot, lai atvieglotu lēmumu pieņemšanu jautājumos, kas ir saistīti ar ilgtspējas nodrošināšanu. Pētījuma mērķis ir izpētīt ilgtspējas ētiskos aspektus.

Pirmkārt, šajā pētījumā tiek analizēti ilgtspējas ētisko aspektu attīstības iemesli. Otrkārt, tas izskaidro ilgtspējas ētisko kontekstu. Treškārt, pētījumā tiek iezīmēti daži no svarīgākajiem parametriem un principiem, kas raksturo ilgtspējas ētiku. Pētījuma rezultāti palīdzēs dažādu jomu speciālistiem un zinātniekiem, kā arī politiķiem, nevalstiskajām organizācijām un iedzīvotājiem, kuri meklē pamatu ilgtspējīgākai sabiedrībai. Šis raksts, atsevišķos gadījumos, rosinās diskusiju par jautājumiem, kuri saistīti ar ilgtspējas nodrošināšanu, pieņemšanas procesu un nodrošinās jauna veida domāšanu, kas saglabās mūsu paaudzei uzticētās vērtībās nākamajām paaudzēm, t.i., ilgtspēja ir meta-koncepcija, kas aicina nodrošināt labu dzīves kvalitāti arī nākamajām paaudzēm.

Ilgtspējas ētikas aspektu pamatā ir mēģinājums integrēt dažādus ētikas principus gan praksē, gan teorijā. Ilgtspējība ir ne tikai dažādu vērtību kombinācija, bet jaukta sistēma, kurā atsevišķas daļas strādā kopā, lai papildinātu viena otru.

Ilgtspēja ir saistīta ar ētikas jautājumiem arī tāpēc, ka tā pieprasa no šobrīd dzīvojošajiem cilvēkiem, ne tikai domāt par nabadzīgajiem iedzīvotājiem šobrīd, bet arī rūpēties par to, kas sagaida nākotnes iedzīvotājus. Nepārprotami mēs esam tuvu sekām, kas saistītas ar klimata pārmaiņām un dažādu resursu izsīkšanu. Tāpēc jautājums par mūsu atbildību nākotnes cilvēku priekša, ir saistīts ar ētiku.

Attiecībā uz iespējamo pretrunu starp, piemēram, ekonomikas un vides aizsardzības principiem, ilgtspējas ētika princips neliek izvēlēties vienu prioritāro virzienu, bet gan pielikt pūles, lai lielākā daļa no abiem pretrunīgajiem virzieniem tiktu atrisināta.

Visas ilgtspējas formas sabiedrībā ir atkarīgas no cilvēku rīcības. Tāpēc ētiskie aspekti ir paši svarīgākie ilgtspējības nodrošināšanā. Ilgtspēja ir jārealizē pielietojot ētikas principus. Tikai tad tiks nodrošināti ilgtspējīgi politiskie un sociālie procesi.

**Atslēgas vārdi:** *ētika, ilgtspēja, attīstība, taisnīgums, solidaritāte.*