The idea is often broken down into three pillars: economic, environmental, and social also known informally as profits, planet, and people.

In that breakdown, the concept of "economic sustainability" focuses on the portion of natural resources that provide physical inputs for economic production, including both renewable and exhaustible inputs. The concept of "environmental sustainability" adds greater emphasis on the "life support systems," such as the atmosphere or soil, that must be maintained for economic production or human life to even occur. In contrast, social sustainability focuses on the human effects of economic systems, and the category includes attempts to eradicate poverty and hunger, as well as to combat inequality.

In 1983, the United Nations created the World Commission on Environment and Development to study the connection between ecological health, economic development, and social equity. The commission, then run by former Norwegian prime minister Gro Harlem Brundtland, would publish a report in 1987, "Our Common Future," which has become the standard in defining sustainable development. That report describes sustainable development, or the blueprint for attaining sustainability, as "meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs."