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## Is sustainability still possible?

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**Instead of throwing a loose term around, sustainability needs to be defined and quantified as a metric so that any progress can be measured, says a new Worldwatch report.**

As far as the Earth and its resources are concerned, man has crossed the Rubicon. But even today, many hope to do a turn-back if the collective will of humanity desires so.

In today's society, the word 'sustainable' has become practically meaningless, with most sustainable products just a shade better than conventional alternatives. Because of the power of 'sustainable', the world has largely ignored the rich spectrum of political, cultural, and technological changes that would set us on the path to a truly sustainable future. Although the science of sustainability is clearer than ever, we still face the question of whether transforming our society into one guided by sustainability is even possible.

The new volume of State of the World 2013 — which features contributions from experts at the Worldwatch Institute as well as from environmental thought leader David Orr; freshwater expert Sandra Postel; ecological economics pioneers Herman Daly and Annie Leonard; science fiction writer Kim Stanley Robinson; and others — sets out to answer the question, is sustainability still possible?

In the book, these voices strive to define clear sustainability metrics and examine various policies and perspectives, including geo-engineering, cultural engineering, corporate transformation, and energy solutions that could put the world on a path to prosperity without diminishing the well-being of future generations. They then go on to explore

ways that governments and communities might cope with the likely consequences of failing to make those necessary changes before reaching planetary tipping points.

While the increasingly popular use of the term 'sustainable' reflects a greater public awareness of the environmental predicament we face, the reality is that the actions taken to confront this problem are still far from ideal. Instead of throwing a loose term around haphazardly, sustainability needs to be defined and quantified as a metric so that any progress can be measured.

"Simply doing 'better' environmentally will not stop the unravelling of ecological relationships that we depend on for food and health," says Worldwatch president Robert Engelman. "Vastly larger changes are needed than we have seen so far. It is essential that we take stock, soberly and in scientifically measureable ways, of where we are headed. The information detailed

in State of the World 2013 report does that."

Development and economic growth have long been tied to increases in greenhouse gas emissions and natural resource use. In the book, the authors discuss the urgency of reconciling economic and population growth within the tenets of sustainability in order to facilitate less, rather than more, harm to our planet.

"Clearly, trouble is coming — but there are better responses to it than stockpiling canned goods and weaponry," says State of the World 2013 co-director Tom Prugh. "In view of humanity's failures of foresight and political will to address the array of sustainability problems ahead, we asked some notable thinkers to ponder what we might do to make the best of it."

State of the World 2013 is divided into three sections that address how the term 'sustainability' should be measured, how we can attain it, and how we can prepare for the possibility of falling short. In 'The Sustainability Metric', authors offer ways to track global progress to sustainable living. In 'Getting to True Sustainability', chapters examine policies and perspectives that could build a truly sustainable society if implemented. And in 'Open in Case of Emergency', authors tackle whether and how to prepare for a disruptive global environmental transition that looks increasingly likely.

"Environmentalism, first and foremost, continues to be a game of defence — working to reduce overall carbon emissions, chemical releases, and forest loss — rather than a battle to transform the dominant growth-centric economic and cultural paradigm into an ecocentric one that respects planetary boundaries," says Worldwatch senior fellow and State of the World 2013 co-director, Erik Assadourian. "The environmental movement will require a dramatic reboot if it is going to reverse Earth's rapid transformation and help create a truly sustainable future."

The State of the World 2013 project's findings are being disseminated to a wide range of stakeholders, including government ministries, community networks, business leaders, and the non-governmental environmental and development communities.

## **Nub of sustainable development**

World Commission on Environment and Development, presented in 1987, states that sustainable development is "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs". Sustainable development promotes the idea that social, environmental, and economic progress are all attainable within the limits of our earth's natural resources. Sustainable development approaches everything in the world

as being connected through space, time and quality of life.

In terms of the world being connected by space, consider the following: Pesticides sprayed in Chile have the potential to harm fish stocks off the coast of Japan. The air pollution that is emitted in Los Angeles affects the quality of air in Asia.

On the flip side, clean air practices on one continent will positively impact air quality across the ocean.

**Tags:** [Annie Leonard](#), [science fiction writer Kim Stanley Robinson](#), [Worldwatch report](#)

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