

Measurement of individual pillars of sustainability

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The most difficult challenge facing policymakers is deciding the future directions of society and the economy in the face of often conflicting requirements for short-term political success, economic growth, social progress, and environmental sustainability. Improving the basis for sound decision making, integrating many complex issues while providing simple signals that a busy decision maker can understand, is a high priority. We need information tools that condense and digest information for rapid assimilation while making it possible to explore issues further as needed. This is the goal of indicators. Assuming that indicators are intended to report on sustainability, the most important and difficult definition is that of sustainability itself. Sustainable development is the development of a human, social, and economic system able to maintain itself indefinitely in harmony with the biophysical systems of the planet.

Sustainable development, as elaborated in Agenda 21 and confirmed at the World Summit on Sustainable Development, has three explicit dimensions, domains, or pillars: social, economic, and environmental. A fourth pillar, institutional, was included in the system of sustainability indicators adopted by the UN Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD), although very few institutional indicators were identified. Most indicator sets for sustainable development have assembled indicators for each of the pillars while neglecting the links between them despite their key relevance for policy and planning. Development of interlinkage indicators is thus a particular challenge. The so-called decoupling indicators are highly relevant in this respect, and other cross-cutting indices have been proposed.

While there is quite a lot of systems and sets of indicators for environmental pillar of sustainability, the issue of economic and in particular social sustainability is much less developed. This paper focuses mostly on possible indicator frameworks for these two pillars of sustainability. The special attention is paid to interlinkage indicators.