

## The Three Pillars of Sustainability

*Prepared for The Council of The Town of The Blue Mountains  
By The Sustainability Committee, September 2019.*

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Since the 1980s, the notion of sustainable development being comprised of three interconnected pillars of economy, environment and society, has become widely accepted (Purvis et al. 2019). This three part description is often presented in the form of three intersecting circles, with sustainability being placed at the intersection, as shown in **Fig. 1** below. This approach recognizes that economic, environmental and social factors need to be integrated in order to achieve sustainable development. As a 2012 resolution of the UN asserts, “We therefore acknowledge the need to further mainstream sustainable development at all levels, integrating economic, social and environmental aspects and recognizing their interlinkages, so as to achieve sustainable development in all its dimensions” (UN 2012).

The notion of sustainability being comprised of three interconnected pillars or circles emerged from a growing awareness of the environmental and social costs of economic development in the 1970s and 80s. In the 1980s, ecological and social critiques of economic development led to international efforts to balance economic growth with social and ecological sustainability. In 1987, the UN-appointed World Commission on Environment and Development published ‘*Our Common Future*’ (UN 1987). *Our Common Future* is widely credited with popularizing the concept of “sustainable development,” and called for “a new era of economic growth—growth that is forceful and at the same time socially and environmentally sustainable” (UN 1987). The institutionalizing of ‘sustainable development’ occurred through the 1992 UN Earth Summit in Rio, which led to the adoption of Agenda 21, a plan consisting of 27 principles to guide ‘sustainable development’ efforts. Agenda 21 called on local governments around the world to implement Local Agenda 21 plans, and reinforced the essential need to reflect the interconnectedness of the environment, economy and society in local decision making (UN 1992).

In 2005, the Canadian federal government initiated a New Deal for Cities and Communities. The program, which involved federal-provincial agreements, promised substantial funding to municipalities to promote integrated community sustainability as it recognized the important role municipal governments and their communities have in planning and implementing sustainability initiatives. Funding was provided and administered through the Federation of Canadian Municipalities’ Green Municipal Fund which encouraged the preparation of Integrated Community Sustainability Plans (ICSPs). To be eligible for funding, the plans needed to reflect the integration of the three components of sustainability, and be community-based, with significant public and stakeholder involvement.

In 2009, The Town of The Blue Mountains initiated a 2-year process of developing our sustainability plan. The Town facilitated the engagement and support of over 100 community partners. The “Sustainable Path” followed the international framework of sustainability advanced through the UN, and was based on three key pillars – Environment and Ecological Integrity, Community Vibrancy and Economic Prosperity (TBM 2010: 6).

In 2015, the United Nations adopted a new 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. This new approach built on the work of the past 30 years, and identified 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and 169 measurable targets. According to the UN, the new SDGs “are integrated and indivisible and balance the three dimensions of sustainable development: the economic, social and environmental” (UN 2015). Canada has since incorporated the SDGs into its Sustainable Development Plan, released in 2019. The Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN) Canada and the University of Waterloo are developing the Sustainable Development Goals Index for Canadian Municipalities to benchmark municipal progress on the SDGs. The Waterloo SDG Index is planned to launch in the fall of 2019.

## Works Cited:

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**Figure 1** –Interplay of the environmental, economic, and social aspects of sustainable development pillars. Source: Purvis, B., Mao, Y., & Robinson, D. (2019).

