

Sustainability – Misconceptions and Realities

Vol 4.12



DECEMBER

Gaayatri Trinityyaa
Sustainability Consultant

What is Sustainability?

The term "sustainability" has, over the years, become one of the most frequently used, misused, and often misrepresented concepts in both professional and public discourse.

According to a simple Google search, sustainability refers to "the ability to be maintained at a certain rate or level." However, the accompanying images - trees, windmills, solar panels - offer a narrow and arguably misleading depiction of what sustainability truly encompasses.

Sustainability means different things to different people. For some, it is synonymous with environmental preservation. For others, it reflects social equity, economic resilience, or ethical governance. As someone passionate about climate change and environmental advocacy, I interpret sustainability as a multifaceted concept that integrates resource conservation, individual and community well-being, and the responsible governance of systems.

It is a holistic approach to managing the planet, its ecosystems, and the diverse entities - human and otherwise - that inhabit it.

Having completed a Master's degree in Sustainable and Green Finance, I've come to understand that every professional in this space prioritizes different aspects of sustainability, depending on their perspective or field of expertise. This divergence often results in a fragmented understanding of what sustainability truly is, leading to its misuse and dilution.

"It is a holistic approach to managing the planet, its ecosystems, and the diverse entities - human and otherwise - that inhabit it"

Corporate Sustainability: A Growing Concern

From an organizational standpoint, sustainability is often reduced to three pillars: governance, people, and the planet. As a sustainability consultant, my role typically involves preparing impact and sustainability reports. However, I have observed a troubling trend—many companies create these reports not as a genuine reflection of their actions but as a compliance exercise.

Reports are often filled with buzzwords like "green" or "eco-friendly," accompanied by colorful graphics and glossy pictures, with little substantive information about tangible actions or measurable outcomes.

This shallow approach undermines the credibility of corporate sustainability efforts. When sustainability becomes more about appearances than impact, it fuels skepticism and reinforces the misconception that sustainability is a marketing gimmick or a form of "greenwashing."

Misconceptions About Sustainability

Among skeptics, sustainability is often dismissed as propaganda or a trend lacking real-world impact.

This viewpoint stems partly from the inconsistent and sometimes hypocritical practices of organizations and governments.

- **Overemphasis on Carbon Offsetting:** Some organizations promote their carbon-neutral claims without addressing the root causes of their emissions. Purchasing offsets does not necessarily lead to systemic change.
- **Confusion Between Sustainability and Environmentalism:** While environmental stewardship is critical, sustainability also includes social and economic dimensions. Focusing solely on ecological issues neglects other critical aspects like social equity or ethical governance.
- **Tokenistic Actions:** Planting trees or banning plastic straws can create positive headlines but often fail to address larger systemic issues like deforestation or unsustainable production practices.



The Need for a Critical Lens

To address these misconceptions, it is essential to adopt a more critical and nuanced perspective on sustainability. Here are a few reflections:

The term "sustainability" often lacks specificity. What exactly are we sustaining? For whom and for how long? Clear, measurable definitions are essential to prevent misuse.

Sustainability requires making difficult choices. For instance, transitioning to renewable energy might temporarily increase costs or disrupt industries. Acknowledging and addressing these trade-offs is vital for long-term success.

The pursuit of infinite economic growth on a finite planet is inherently unsustainable. The conversation needs to shift toward models like circular economies or degrowth that prioritize well-being over GDP.

Organizations must move beyond cosmetic changes and demonstrate accountability through transparent reporting, verifiable actions, and meaningful engagement with stakeholders.

A Shared Responsibility Across Sectors

Sustainability is not the responsibility of a single sector - it is a collective obligation that spans industries, governments, and individuals. Every sector has a role to play in this transformation



Sustainability is a collective obligation that spans all industries, each with a critical role to play. The energy sector, often at the center of climate debates, is navigating the delicate balance of meeting current energy demands while investing in renewable energy, carbon capture technologies, and sustainable fuels.

Reframing the Narrative Around Oil and Gas

The oil and gas industry has become the face of public outrage in the climate crisis. While it is true that the sector is one of the largest contributors to global emissions, it is also important to approach the conversation with nuance. The demand for energy is a reflection of societal needs - transportation, manufacturing, heating, and electricity all rely on the energy mix that fossil fuels currently dominate.

Expecting oil and gas companies to halt operations overnight is neither practical nor fair. The global economy is deeply interwoven with energy systems that took over a century to build. Abrupt discontinuation would not only create economic chaos but also leave millions of people in developing and developed nations without access to energy.

However, the narrative is not entirely bleak. Many oil and gas companies are pivoting to become energy companies, diversifying their portfolios to include renewables like wind and solar, investing in biofuels and sustainable aviation fuels, and exploring cutting-edge solutions such as green hydrogen and carbon capture technologies. Criticism of these industries must be balanced with acknowledgment of the role they can play in accelerating the energy transition.

Moreover, the shift to sustainability in oil and gas must be a shared effort. Governments need to implement supportive policies, businesses in other sectors must reduce energy demand, and consumers must adopt energy-conscious behaviors. Demonizing one industry while ignoring the role of others creates a fragmented approach that is counterproductive to addressing the climate crisis.

“The global economy is deeply interwoven with energy systems that took over a century to build. Abrupt discontinuation would not only create economic chaos but also leave millions of people in developing and developed nations without access to energy”

A Collaborative Path Forward

No single sector can solve the sustainability challenge alone, and no sector should be disproportionately blamed. Transitioning to a sustainable future requires a collaborative effort that leverages the strengths of every industry. The focus should be on creating incentives, fostering innovation, and holding all players accountable to their commitments.

In the end, sustainability is not about perfection - it is about progress. Recognizing the shared responsibilities of all sectors and supporting industries in their genuine efforts can lead us to a more balanced, equitable, and sustainable world.