

The Bellagio Principles for Assessment

Background

In 1987, the World Commission on Environment and Development (Brundtland Commission) called for the development of new ways to measure and assess progress toward sustainable development. This call has been subsequently echoed in Agenda 21 of the 1992 Earth Summit and through activities that range from local to global in scale. In response, significant efforts to assess performance have been made by corporations, non-government organizations, academics, communities, nations, and international organizations.

Who Developed the Principles?

In November 1996, an international group of measurement practitioners and researchers from five continents came together at the Rockefeller Foundation's Study and Conference Center in Bellagio, Italy to review progress to date and to synthesize insights from practical ongoing efforts. The attached principles resulted and were unanimously endorsed.

What is Their Use and Who are the Users?

These principles serve as guidelines for the whole of the assessment process including the choice and design of indicators, their interpretation and communication of the result. They are interrelated and should be applied as a complete set. They are intended for use in starting and improving assessment activities of community groups, non-government organizations, corporations, national governments, and international institutions.

Overview

These principles deal with four aspects of assessing progress toward sustainable development. Principle 1 deals with the starting point of any assessment - establishing a vision of sustainable development and clear goals that provide a practical definition of that vision in terms that are meaningful for the decision-making unit in question. Principles 2 through 5 deal with the content of any assessment and the need to merge a sense of the overall system with a practical focus on current priority issues. Principles 6 through 8 deal with key issues of the process of assessment, while Principles 9 and 10 deal with the necessity for establishing a continuing capacity for assessment.

1. GUIDING VISION AND GOALS

Assessment of progress toward sustainable development should:

- be guided by a clear vision of sustainable development and goals that define that vision

2. HOLISTIC PERSPECTIVE

Assessment of progress toward sustainable development should:

- include review of the whole system as well as its parts
- consider the well-being of social, ecological, and economic sub-systems, their state as well as the direction and rate of change of that state, of their component parts, and the interaction between parts
- consider both positive and negative consequences of human activity, in a way that reflects the costs and benefits for human and ecological systems, in monetary and non-monetary terms

3. ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS

Assessment of progress toward sustainable development should:

- consider equity and disparity within the current population and between present and future generations, dealing with such concerns as resource use, over-consumption and poverty, human rights, and access to services, as appropriate
- consider the ecological conditions on which life depends
- consider economic development and other, non-market activities that contribute to human/social well-being

4. ADEQUATE SCOPE

Assessment of progress toward sustainable development should:

- adopt a time horizon long enough to capture both human and ecosystem time scales thus responding to needs of future generations as well as those current to short term decision-making
- define the space of study large enough to include not only local but also long distance impacts on people and ecosystems
- build on historic and current conditions to anticipate future conditions - where we want to go, where we could go

5. PRACTICAL FOCUS

Assessment of progress toward sustainable development should be based on:

- an explicit set of categories or an organizing framework that links vision and goals to indicators and assessment criteria
- a limited number of key issues for analysis
- a limited number of indicators or indicator combinations to provide a clearer signal of progress
- standardizing measurement wherever possible to permit comparison
- comparing indicator values to targets, reference values, ranges, thresholds, or direction of trends, as appropriate

6. OPENNESS

Assessment of progress toward sustainable development should:

- make the methods and data that are used accessible to all
- make explicit all judgments, assumptions, and uncertainties in data and interpretations

7. EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

Assessment of progress toward sustainable development should:

- be designed to address the needs of the audience and set of users
- draw from indicators and other tools that are stimulating and serve to engage decision-makers
- aim, from the outset, for simplicity in structure and use of clear and plain language

8. BROAD PARTICIPATION

Assessment of progress toward sustainable development should:

- obtain broad representation of key grass-roots, professional, technical and social groups, including youth, women, and indigenous people - to ensure recognition of diverse and changing values
- ensure the participation of decision-makers to secure a firm link to adopted policies and resulting action

9. ONGOING ASSESSMENT

Assessment of progress toward sustainable development should:

- develop a capacity for repeated measurement to determine trends
- be iterative, adaptive, and responsive to change and uncertainty because systems are complex and change frequently
- adjust goals, frameworks, and indicators as new insights are gained
- promote development of collective learning and feedback to decision-making

10. INSTITUTIONAL CAPACITY

Continuity of assessing progress toward sustainable development should be assured by:

- clearly assigning responsibility and providing ongoing support in the decision-making process
- providing institutional capacity for data collection, maintenance, and documentation
- supporting development of local assessment capacity