

PRESENTATION

Sustainability is an increasingly recurring term that synthesizes the growing concern to re-orient economic growth and, in general, to change the way economic and human activities are carried out, so that the elements of the ecosystem are preserved, regenerated and recovered.

It has often been said that, in order to achieve this goal, cultural changes in connection with our form and levels of consumption, based on the unending creation of needs, are required. Another aspect that has been highlighted is the need to have a comprehensive approach to the process. However, in practice, we find multiple exercises or proposals where the problem is addressed in a fragmented and incomplete fashion.

Beyond that consensus or general guidelines, not enough progress has been made in terms of materializing, introducing or translating the ultimate goal of this process into public policy actions: how can we solve major environmental problems while meeting social needs?

The aim of this publication is to provide elements in order not to lose sight of the multidimensional nature inherent in the materialization of public policies, in addition to sharing several agreements and recommendations deriving from the linkage between it and the socio-environmental performance of cities in the short, mid and long-term. The most obvious relationship between cities and sustainability lies in the fact that, at present, over half of the population lives in urban settlements that are the place of production and consumption of an endless supply of goods and services, as well as the source of huge amounts of waste that, to a larger or lesser extent, transform, and have a negative impact on, the ecosystem.

Cities, and human settlements in general, are artificial milestones; their construction and functioning involve substantial transformations of the environment and have an impact not only on the area where they exist, but also on those places from which resources are extracted and to which different kinds of waste and contaminants are sent.

In addition, the urban structure generally expresses inequalities, inequity and the segregation of some population groups. In this regard, it is important to lead urban expansion in optimal directions and contribute to the elimination of inequalities within cities and between regions. This implies the need to develop interventions in different timeframes and scales under a strategic vision that includes defining the priorities of actions. Thus, the conception of sustainability in cities requires a process of dialog, through the construction of consensus and informed decisions, between authorities and local, regional, national, and even supranational, social actors, in the selection of, or the decisions regarding, urban and territorial management strategies.

The main contribution of this work is that it understands sustainability as a guiding principle in the decision-making process in all its different dimensions, taking into consideration the needs of society. To this end, the text proposes a multidimensional model aimed at the formulation of orderly, agreed, prioritized and evaluable urban development policies, based on operational instruments on different spatial and time scales.

This issue is particularly relevant in Latin America and the Caribbean, as it is precisely in this region that urban growth occurs at a faster pace. For this reason, it is necessary for the region to make progress in terms of controlling urban expansion, the consumption of resources and the wellbeing of its inhabitants. This is not a minor challenge, particularly in contexts of growing economic, political and governance uncertainty and the rhetorical use of the term by some social, economic and political agents that commonly use it to legitimate different actions. Going beyond these circumstances is an opportunity to influence the wellbeing of society, in the understanding that respect for, and the optimal management of, the environment cannot be separated.

Making reference to the different elements of the ecosystem and not to natural resources is conceptually important to differentiate and question other more anthropocentric perspectives of sustainability that assign value to nature only on the basis of its benefits or usefulness to human societies. The truth is that all the ecosystemic elements have value in themselves because they are fundamental to natural cycles, survival and the reproduction of, and in, the planet.

It is for this reason that the United Nations Fund for Population Activities and the National Population Council celebrate this type of publications, which give us an opportunity to reflect and redefine the path to follow, not only as a society, but as a human species, which goes beyond making an effort to materialize different public policy recommendations, an aspect in which, without a doubt, we will continue to work.

Sincerely yours,

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