

Eternal Stewardship in Law: The Legal Concept and Temporal Aspects of Sustainable Development

Abstract

Although sustainable development is a late twentieth-century construct, its foundations can be traced to classical legal cultures, particularly Roman and Jewish law, which embedded resource stewardship, communal access, and intergenerational equity. Contemporary legal discourse presents numerous definitions; this study therefore conducts a selective comparative analysis, emphasizing the Hungarian legislative definition and its environmental focus. The research demonstrates that a precise and unambiguous definition of sustainable development is essential, as the pathway toward sustainability remains unclear without it. It is not enough to ensure “the long-term” improvement of quality of life and preservation of biodiversity, it is crucial to prevent the collapse of ecological systems. In the context of sustainability, the temporal dimension emerges as paramount, necessitating a perspective “sub specie aeternitatis” – that is, an orientation toward the perpetual existence of humankind, framed within the horizon of eternity. Although the tendencies appear unfavorable, or even hopeless, there remains potential for a positive outcome.

Keywords: Sustainable Development, Sustainability, Legal Definitions, Environment, Collapse

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1. Introduction – the theoretical, legal², biophysical and economic problem of sustainability

First and foremost sustainability is a biophysical question in tight connection with natural resources used by people and protected by the law. Sustainable development practices have been implemented for a long time and, despite their lack of uniformity, have so far proven to be successful³ at times and in some places.

As a complex regulatory subject, *sustainable development* is recognized at varying normative levels these days. The highest one is the constitutional level, on which sustainability usually appears as a principle, like in France⁴, Italy (Constitution, Art. 9) and Poland (Constitution, Art. 5⁵) for example. Germany, through Grundgesetz Article 20a, obliges the state to protect the natural foundations of life for future generations⁶. ‘Sustainable development’ can even be codified also in statutory definitions or objective e.g. in Wales (in the so called WFG Act of 2015⁷), Spain (act 2/2011⁸) and Germany (BNatSchG⁹).

As a unique example, New Zealand’s Resource Management Act 1991 offers a particularly rich statutory articulation of sustainability, defining its purpose as “the sustainable management of natural and physical resources”¹⁰.

The third solution, like in the U.S. federal law or in England (UK)¹¹, there is just a policy reference. However, in spite of the lack of constitutional roots or statutory

2 | As Prof. Bándi states, in case of sustainability, the most difficult task is to specify the legal consequences, to turn the general dream (like ‘ecological conversion’, ‘green transition’ and any other similar catch phrase) into a practical answer or a set of practical answers, while current political, legal, and institutional establishments are not designed to properly respond to long-term interests (Bándi 2022, 61–63).

3 | Hopej & Malinowska 2023, 18.

4 | République Française (2004) Charte de l’environnement establishes sustainable development as a constitutional principle guiding public action.

5 | The Constitution of the Republic of Poland (1997), Article 5 provides that the Republic “shall ensure the protection of the natural environment pursuant to the principles of sustainable development.” <https://www.sejm.gov.pl/prawo/konst/angielski/kon1.htm>

6 | Federal Republic of Germany (1949, as amended) Grundgesetz für die Bundesrepublik Deutschland [Basic Law], Art. 20a.

7 | The Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 provides an explicit statutory definition. Section 2 states: “‘Sustainable development’ means the process of improving the economic, social, environmental and cultural well-being of Wales by taking action, in accordance with the sustainable development principle, aimed at achieving the well-being goals.” (Act 2015).

8 | The Law 2/2011 on the Sustainable Economy (Ley de Economía Sostenible) defines a “sustainable economy” in Article 2 as a growth pattern that harmonizes economic, social and environmental development so as to generate long-term prosperity and employment (Official text, BOE). This statute operationalizes sustainable development in economic governance.

9 | Federal Nature Conservation Act (BNatSchG), §1: establishes the objective of ensuring the “sustainable usability” of natural resources.

10 | New Zealand Government (1991) Resource Management Act.

11 | The Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004, s.39 requires plan-making authorities to exercise their functions “with the objective of contributing to the achievement of sustainable development.” This provision does not itself define the term but makes it a statutory objective.

definition, the U.S. National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) of 1969 defines the national environmental policy as achieving “productive harmony between man and nature” in order to meet the needs of present and future generations (42 U.S.C. § 4331). The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has subsequently adopted this as the operative federal understanding of sustainability¹².

In Hungary, there is both constitutional basis and statutory definition of ‘sustainable development’. The Fundamental Law of Hungary (2011), Article P) commits to protecting natural resources (agricultural land, forests, water, biodiversity, cultural assets) as “the common heritage of the nation,” with explicit reference to the rights of future generations. This provision is interpreted by the Constitutional Court as embedding the principle of sustainable development into Hungarian constitutional law.

The concept of sustainable development is marked by a duality: difficult to circumscribe in legal and policy terms, yet easily grasped at the level of ethical intuition and logic, reflecting its hybrid normative and practical dimensions. It has long been characterised by a definitional paradox: it is at once elusive and self-evident. This duality – difficult to define precisely, yet simple to apprehend conceptually – explains the persistent contestation of its normative content.

Logically, if someone is standing at the south pole and wants to go north, simply cannot start off in the wrong direction, definitely will move north. The current situation is merely the opposite: a highly precise objective, i.e. definition is needed to move towards the goal (real sustainability), to overcome the obstacles, limits on the way, to avoid all the wrong paths, fake or dream solutions. Mankind is in the position of having a stable knowledge of which system is not sustainable: the current socio-economic system of relations and activities. This is the object of the definition to be changed.

At first the fact must be admitted that – due to some respectable limits – now the globalized system is in the state of unsustainability. The biggest of the biophysical limits – beside the shortage of concentrated energy and material sources – is the factor of world population growth. The world population – without significant external, modifying factors – surely will triple in the hundred year period of 1950–2050. In addition, the problem is unfortunately not merely a matter of population: today each human consumes around ten times more material goods (water, metals, energy, food, etc.) than did their great grandparents a century ago, while those living in the richest countries consume six to ten times more resources than those in the poorest¹³. Here comes the psychological limit: humans are basically not willing to give up the level of material wealth and comfort already reached, unless being forced to do therefore in a way and that seems almost impossible peacefully and in accordance with justice and rights on a global scale.

12 | <https://www.epa.gov/sustainability/learn-about-sustainability> (Accessed: 29 August 2025)

13 | Cribb 2019, 20–22.

Mankind should let go of the illusion that the modern society can be kept alive with its lust for growth within the limits of the sensitive climate system and other components of the finite environment. The global economy, including overloaded logistics, industry and industrial-style agriculture is merely not sustainable, because it is operated with easily available and energy-intensive but depleting fossil resources and materials extracted from their finite, concentrated sources and all these are being entropically dispersed.

Being awake to the problems, in the past decades sustainable development became the generally accepted paradigm and philosophy of international, governmental, non-governmental documents, regulations and scientific conferences dealing with the environment. The law of the protection of the environment is still anthropocentric despite the formal acknowledgement of natural values.

The experts cry out loud for (environmental) sustainability, but it is becoming more and more obvious that they started late and that the choice of direction is not appropriate, therefore – the term itself is becoming more and more worn out – humanity lives under the spell of dreams. According to the realistic, data-based opinion of András Gelencsér, a chemist and atmospheric researcher and former rector of the Pannon University, if people substantially implement the ideas labeled as sustainable in the context of the transition to sustainability, the known stocks of the critical elements necessary for this will practically be exhausted in a few decades. The ongoing “sustainable technological change” is actually not sustainable, because of the lack of material resources. Thus, due to some busy acts instead of helping, the world is heading for disaster¹⁴. So thinking rationally, based on the scientific data, the situation seems hopeless, the probability of the collapse of the complex societies is increasing, the only question is when it will happen. Mankind can have only one hope. No, it is not the conclusions of the optimistic view, according to which “the end of the world will only come if we do nothing about it”¹⁵. In this special topic, attention should be drawn to a special information package consisting of a special collection of books, according to which, neither environmental pollution nor the lack of material resources, nor the insufficiency of humanity’s self-saving cooperation will be the direct cause of the collapse. There is an obvious answer in the Bible about does humanity objectively have a chance to save itself or not. Due to lack of time, people will not reach the total diffusion of the Earth’s resources, but at the same time, there will still be time for the activities of a concentrated power implementing a kind of ‘global rescue package’. However, the complex set of environmental problems cannot be solved in the manner of a Gordian knot with a single cut, such as enabling the regeneration of the ozone layer – with a single agreement (1987, Montreal) serving as an

14 | Gelencsér 2022 (Accessed: 29 August 2025).

15 | Bart & Üрге-Vorsatz et al. 2022 (Accessed: 29 August 2025).

only really successful solution, which has been unprecedented in environmental matters ever since. As already stated in Kohelet Rabba 7:13, “Do not spoil and do not destroy the world, for if you spoil it, there will be no one to restore it after you,”¹⁶ emphasizing the ethical imperative of stewardship and intergenerational responsibility.

Sustainable development is an integrative concept resting on three pillars: the basic environmental pillar, the economic¹⁷ and social pillars, and all three must be considered when taking concrete measures. Some experts say that the cultural aspect of sustainability is also included in the concept¹⁸. As a legislative example, Section 2 of the Well-being of Future Generations Act (2015) of Wales emphatically includes the “cultural well-being”, among the “well-being goals”. Calculated with this, there are four perspectives together with “the cultural” one¹⁹. Thus, the chair is not three, but four-legged, and the building stands on four supporting columns (pillars). The cultural pillar also can substantially have a great influence on the others. Not only for the social (socio-cultural components), but also for the economic and agricultural (see “agriculture”²⁰), moreover, the use of the environment is – in general – culturally dependent. (It is interesting from this point of view that traditional, ancient cultures were typically more balanced than modern, industrial society. According to the latest findings, the environmental balance of Easter Islands also began to upset due to ‘cultural’ influence with the increasingly massive arrival of foreign ‘discoverers’). Of course, cultural sustainability can be an interesting research topic in itself, merely to make one thought-provoking comparison: the ancient Greek culture with its human scale (*homo mensura*) seems better in the context of sustainability than today’s “high-tech technoculture”, which is forced by itself to face an environmental and economic crisis not to mention the practically unassessable dangers of artificial intelligence as a kind of peak of cultural development.

Economic, social and cultural sustainability cannot be reached when basic conditions of life are not met, therefore the conservation of these has to be the prior issue. It is logical that environmental sustainability has the primacy among the pillars²¹. According to this, the external services provided by natural resources must be maintained and a substantially sustainable system also provides these resources for the future generation, as well as the assimilation capacity of the environment.

16 | Kohelet Rabba 7:13.

17 | See: Olajos 2024, 334–349.

18 | Moreover, a holistic approach to sustainability is also possible and even necessary. See: Veresné Somosi & Sikos (ed.) 2023.

19 | Bravo 2022, 213.

20 | The English word ‘culture’ ultimately comes from Latin *cultura* that means “a cultivating, agriculture; care”, derived from the verb *colere* = “to till, cultivate, care for or even worship.”

21 | Horváth 2015, 302.

2. The “soft law” and a “hard law” legal concepts of sustainability

Lawyers are engaged in a heated debate on the legal nature and normative content of sustainable development. The term ‘sustainable development’ is now frequently used to describe the objective or purpose of environmental regulation. Despite being designated a cornerstone of environmental regulation both domestically and internationally, there is little consensus on what sustainable development entails²². The exchange of ideas is useful in this matter, that is why the comparison of the most common, international concept with the Hungarian one can be instructive in some respects. Sustainable development has a well-known soft law definition since 1987 published in the Report the title of which is “Our Common Future”: it is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. The report states that it contains two key concepts: the concept of ‘needs’, in particular the essential needs of the world’s poor, to which overriding priority should be given; and the idea of limitations imposed by the state of technology and social organization on the environment’s ability to meet present and future needs²³²⁴

In legal context it is necessary to articulate a more precise definition of sustainable development, particularly the ‘needs’ of current and future generations²⁵. The problem is that human generations’ needs are basically the same: suitable life conditions, the supply of vital, life-sustaining resources including especially the same ecosystem services and finite conserved materials (e.g. rare earth elements) that mankind is already sort of²⁶.

This international definition of sustainable development is too broad and part of the so called “soft law”, therefore it is not enforceable, it is a norm without sanction if not fulfilled (that is *lex imperfecta*).

As opposite, the Hungarian Act on the general rules of the protection of the environment (Act LIII. of 1995) gives a normative, “hard law” definition of sustainable development, merely like the EU. The Hungarian legislator defines sustainable development in a circumstantial way, referring to the EU goals and striving for completeness, according to which it is “a system of socio-economic relations and activities that preserves natural values for the present and future generations, uses natural resources sparingly and expediently, and ensures the improvement

22 | Fatema 2023, 5.

23 | WCED 1987.

24 | Ibid.

25 | Fatema 2023, 5.

26 | Restrictions are needed soon e.g. on cobalt, tellurium, indium and molybdenum and on heavy rare earth elements [IEA (2025), Global Critical Minerals Outlook].

of the quality of life and the preservation of diversity from an ecological point of view in the long term". (Act LIII. of 1995, 4. § 29.)

This longer definition is far better in that sense, because it is not exclusively anthropocentric: it mentions values free from direct human interests ("diversity, natural values") and emphasizes the "ecological point of view", not merely human "needs". At the same time also contains the human aspects of „the quality of life" (that is much more than the simple needs), intergenerational equity (relation between successive generations) and of course intragenerational equity (relation within the groups of people of the present generation). It must be admitted that intergenerational equity, generally the "man to man relation" is not in the centre of the definition like in the WCED-definition, it is merely built in as part of the duty of preservation of natural assets. This is in line with that the economic and social pillars (just as the whole humanity as the actor) is embedded into the environmental pillar, fully depends on the fundament.

In addition, section 8.3.1 of the Parliamentary Decree No. 18/2013 (III. 28.) on the National Sustainable Development Framework Strategy defines 'sustainability' as ensuring current well-being without exhausting resources, preserving quality and quantity for future generations.

Logically, in case of e.g. non-renewable resources, this is practically impossible: they cannot be used while preserving their quality and quantity. The inevitable depletion and scarcity of raw materials (e.g. metals essential to modern life also needed for green energy²⁷) calls into question the reality of the green transition necessary for sustainability.

The definition used by the EU primary law (also a "hard law" concept) is balanced and detailed, but uses a highly controversial term in the context of sustainability ('growth'): "...the sustainable development of Europe based on balanced economic growth and price stability, a highly competitive social market economy, aiming at full employment and social progress, and a high level of protection and improvement of the quality of the environment" [Treaty of Lisbon Amending the Treaty on European Union and the Treaty Establishing the European Community (2007/C 306/01) Article 2].

The concept of sustainable development – in a sense beyond the law – substantially raises semantic uncertainty in several aspects, that is why many people now use the term 'sustainability' instead, which, apart from being shorter and more precise, gives less opportunity for terminology-motivated debates. The 5th environmental action program of the European Union, which was entitled "Towards Sustainability", was an emphatic topos of the shortening, the word 'development' was not even included in its title. A new field of science, called "Sustainability Science" also appeared soon in the literature. One might think now that sustainability and sustainable development are the same thing. The answer is no.

27 | See: Carrington 2025 (Accessed: 28 August 2025).

Sustainable development is the pathway to achieving sustainability. Sustainability would be a long-term goal and it is only achievable through integration²⁸. Practically we can only talk about sustainable development if environmental considerations and interests are integrated into the normative system of all behaviors in which we manage natural resources²⁹.

Critics of this concept of ecologically sustainable development mostly emphasize that the responsibility towards future generations is 'only' a moral and not yet a legal category. According to these opinions, intergenerational responsibility and especially accountability are to be strengthened in legal practice. It is substantially not widespread, but in the Hungarian legal system, the position of the Deputy Commissioner for Future Generations or Ombudsman for Future Generations primarily and expressly represents the interests of future generations³⁰. However, the enforcement is becoming an increasingly clearly visible necessity. Since the number of future generations will also be larger and the volume of environmental damage will also increase, it will also become necessary to transform the legal system, which will also create institutional possibilities for establishing intergenerational responsibility, making the exercise of "intergenerational fairness" directly enforceable.

3. The key question: how long can the system be sustained? Is a "long term" enough?

Would the bride in love be glad, if she were told that her marriage will merely be a 'long term' connection? The same or – due to the actual loss of meaning – even more serious problem arises in case of "long-term sustainability", "long-term approach", "long-term availability" (of energy), "long-term perspective", "long-term economic sense" as these words can be read in the Report on "Our Common Future"³¹, just like in the Hungarian normative definition.

In case of sustainability, the most important question is the temporal dimension: logically, people must think of sustainability *sub specie aeternitatis*³², that is from the point of view of the endless existence of mankind, in the spirit of eternity. 'Long term' is not the same as 'eternal'.

Human actions – including those associated with environmental impacts – often fall under a different judgment if the time dimension is taken into account

28 | Bravo 2022, 213.

29 | Fodor 2015, 188.

30 | Krajnyák 2023, 11.

31 | WCED 1987.

32 | The formula ("from the point of view of eternity") was already known in classical Latin, but its philosophical weight was given by Baruch Spinoza (*Ethica, ordine geometrico demonstrata*, 1677), who sought to view human existence and events *sub specie aeternitatis*, that is, not from the perspective of momentary, human limitations, but embedded in the necessary order of nature and eternity, i.e. from the perspective of the infinite order of nature, God or *Natura*.

emphatically. If only its immediate or short-term effects are taken into account, then deploying a herbicide with chronic human health risks in the home garden may seem merely as good an idea as running the industry and society built on non-renewable energy. As a related example the sustainability of biofuel energy can be mentioned made with the use of precious agricultural land however its sustainability increases with the removal of greenhouse gas from the atmosphere via cultivation³³.

In the spirit of sustainability, the use of the environment must be viewed from the perspective of eternal time, with regard to eternal consequences. The perspective of eternity encourages self-control and self-restraint, places human actions in a different framework, at the same time filling them with moral content, giving much weight to the manifestations of selfishness, miserliness and gluttony. As a positive consequence, legal rules of sustainability could be built on this morality.

4. Controversial and desirable alterations in the concept

As it turned out, the most important desirable alteration of the definition would be the proper inserting of the time factor: the goal is not merely 'long term', but 'eternal' existence.

In recent times, however, while fundamental questions have arisen even in relation to the results of development, including its concept – as if more and more kinds of crises had thrown us back in time to the era before the creation of sustainability concepts in the 20th century – rather absurdly, the term 'growth' is in use again instead of 'development'. According to Professor Bándi, a change in the use of words in itself can have serious consequences, because it is not clear whether it is merely a different wording or a change in attitude at the same time. In any case, the time that has passed since the publication of the Europe 2020 recommendation in 2010 could not reassure those worried about the future of the environment³⁴. It may appear to be a slight difference in wording, but it might even mean that the entire history of sustainable development until now becomes relative³⁵. The 2012 bioeconomy strategy was also born under the title "Innovation for sustainable growth: the European bioeconomy". Despite the fact that the term 'growth' cannot be connected with ecological sustainability logically due to the realization of the finitude of permanent expansion forced in a closed system, this word echoes again in the latest 21st century's basic EU strategic documents, such as the EUROPE 2020 Strategy for intelligent, sustainable and inclusive growth. The European Green Deal which is otherwise filled with a high level of ambition on environmental

33 | Olajos 2020, 324.

34 | Bándi 2018, 128.

35 | Bándi 2013, 117.

issues – in a strange way – defines itself as a “new growth strategy” in its introduction. As a national legislative example, the Spanish act on the Sustainable Economy defines a “sustainable economy” in Article 2 as a “growth pattern”³⁶ also carries the self-contradiction expressed.

Among the Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations set for 2030 “No poverty” (SDG1) and “Zero hunger” (SDG2) goals are in line with the EU strategies, although it easily turns into unsustainability right at the moment when these – as priorities – overtake environmental goals. At the same time, the goal of “economic growth” (SDG8) collides with these strategic documents, since the latter comes into logical contradiction with the finitude of the closed environmental system, pactly the environmental pillar of sustainability. Viewing the SDGs through the lens of human dignity food supply problems are increasing as floods, landslides, and fires become more common and droughts make access to food less secure and when rising sea levels erode land, to give just a few connected examples³⁷.

On top of all that – as one of the new conceptual-logical impossibilities – the addition of adjectives also appeared in the meantime, namely in the form of the expression “more sustainable growth” e. g. in the “Report on the Blue Growth Strategy – Towards more sustainable growth and more jobs in the blue economy” [SWD(2017)128, 31.03.2017], although it does not need any particular explanation, that regardless of the context, it is a binary concept: something is either sustainable or not.

There is no doubt that formally and under pressure relativism can be admissible in this matter, but there are lots of ‘compromising’ relativization, even when it can hardly be justified. For example, specific solutions and sectors can obviously, strikingly be unsustainable, even for the layman, or they can be less spectacularly, in a way that seems suitable for temporary gain of time, but ultimately merely as unsustainable (e.g. logistics based on diesel engines compared to logistics based on lithium batteries that is also finite material-dependent electromobilitization). Another example of the relative assessment is the partial return to coal-fired power plants in Germany to replace the shut-down nuclear power plants: the climate protection aspect was de-emphasized as soon as energy hunger occurred (it should be noted that coal and uranium ore are both finite goods).

Sustainability will not be achieved until the human race does not realize its perpetual dependence on the environment. Economic prosperity is now based on natural capital, “the natural bases of life” that man can not ruin without consequences. Man has to be aware of the effects of forcing economic growth and the misconception of the ‘endless’ biophysical environment³⁸.

36 | Ley de Economía Sostenible 2/2011.

37 | May 2025, 797.

38 | Horváth 2014, 59.

In many situations in life, the saying ‘he who wins time wins life’ substantially applies. If the wisdom of the saying turns out to be true in the case of sustainability as well, then the use of the term ‘more sustainable’ would become legitimate. However, the crucified man only gained temporary time by being able to lean on his legs, the suffering of the drowning man was only shortened by the Roman soldier stabbing him or breaking his legs. Giving some water, encouraging, kissing, wiping, i.e. the small actions of improving the situation a bit, are only suitable for expressing good intentions, but they are not sufficient for saving life in such vital situations, fatal times.

5. An interesting retrospective solution through comparative synthesis: Roman Law, Jewish Law, and modern sustainability

Although the explicit modern doctrine of sustainable development is a twentieth-century construct, Roman jurisprudence and biblical–rabbinic law already articulated institutional responses to the problem of reconciling private advantage with communal and intergenerational stewardship. Recurring legal techniques like communal or public designation of certain goods, temporal or cyclical restraints on productive use, and redistributive or anti-enclosure devices—appear across these traditions and prefigure modern sustainability regulation.

5.1. Communal goods and the commons

Roman jurisprudence ensured collective access to essential ecological resources declaring certain resources *res communes omnium*, incapable of private appropriation: as Ulpian observes in the Digest (Digesta 1.8.2.1), “certain things – such as air, running water and the sea – are *res communes omnium*, inherently common to all.”³⁹ This anticipates the modern legal notion of the global commons. Parallel norms emerge in biblical and rabbinic law: the Torah mandates open access in certain contexts, for example, the seventh-year agricultural produce is open to all, even for the strangers (Leviticus 25:6–7⁴⁰).

5.2. Temporal cycles and ecological rest

Roman agronomists recommended fallowing and rotation to preserve soil fertility (e.g. Cato, *De Agricultura* §37⁴¹). Jurists reinforced such practices by limiting over-exploitation of servitudes, e.g. prohibiting excessive diversion of water

39 | Mommsen & Krüger 1872–1895.

40 | The Holy Bible (1611/1769) King James Version.

41 | Cato, in: Hooper & Ash 1934.

(Digesta 8.3.1⁴²). Jewish law mandated cyclical rest: the *shmita* (every seventh year) and *yovel* (every fiftieth year) both served ecological and social ends (Lev. 25:1–13; just like the Babylonian Talmud). These provisions institutionalised intergenerational balance long before today's concept of sustainability.

5.3. Non-waste injunctions

The Torah's *bal tashchit* – “you shall not destroy its trees by wielding an axe against them” (Deuteronomy 20:19) – originated in siege law but was extended by rabbinic jurisprudence into a general prohibition against needless destruction of resources and a general prohibition against waste. Roman jurists similarly prohibited harmful alteration of rivers or overuse of resources (Digesta 39.3.2.⁴³). Both systems articulate an ethic of stewardship limiting destructive exploitation.

5.4. Modern resonance

Modern law inherits these elements in new institutional forms. NEPA speaks of “productive harmony between man and nature” (National Environmental Policy Act of 1969, 42 U.S.C. § 4331(a)), whilst section 2 of the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 provides the statutory definition of ‘sustainable development’, framing it as the process of improving the well-being of Wales in ways that achieve a balance between present and future needs⁴⁴. The Treaty on European Union (Art. 3(3)) enshrines sustainable development as a Union objective.

Where premodern regimes embedded sustainability in property structures, communal obligations and distributive norms, modern states employ statutory mandates, administrative procedures, and supranational instruments. The continuity is structural: effective sustainability frameworks combine normative obligation, temporal regulation, communal access, anti-enclosure devices, and non-waste injunctions.

6. The real solution

Research results in the natural and social sciences increasingly indicate that the current civilization is heading towards an inevitable collapse. Boris M. Dolgonosov, for example, in his 2020 civilization macromodel calibrated with historical data – creating 90 scenarios, a multiple of the Meadows models – showed that based on the relevant control parameters, civilization is on the edge of stability, along

42 | Mommsen & Krüger 1872–1895.

43 | Ibid.

44 | Available at: <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/anaw/2015/2/section/2/enacted> (Accessed: 29 August 2025).

a critical stability line. Consequently, even a small deviation can lead to a loss of stability, even to the complete extinction of the civilization, and there are no intermediate steady states⁴⁵.

In the case of situations that are difficult to understand due to their extreme complexity, such as the one that has developed in today's global system, understanding can be helped if we look at it from a distance, from a broad, holistic perspective. There is a suitable 'retrospective binocular' for this purpose with which we can see the fate of this global system, the terrestrial ecosystem in terms of eschatological time giving a definitive answer: the 'biblical telescope' reveals a sharp picture that of course requires proper interpretation.

It is at least interesting to read that this fate of the global system develops according to the important parts of the Bible totally in line with the scientifically proveable data and visible processes. Humanity – after breaking 'the laws' – cannot find the solution to save this world neither to the great apocalyptic speech found in the Gospels (in Matthew 24, Mark 13, and Luke 21) nor to Isaiah's revelation (Isaiah 24:3–5) emphasizes the consequences of human exploitation of the earth: "The land shall be utterly emptied, and utterly spoiled: for the LORD hath spoken this word. The earth mourneth and fadeth away, the world languisheth and fadeth away, the haughty people of the earth do languish. The earth also is defiled under the inhabitants thereof; because they have transgressed the laws, changed the ordinance, broken the everlasting covenant."⁴⁶

According to the Book of Revelation (17–18. chapter) – written in 'prophetic past tense' expressing certainty – the great cooperation (the wealthy 'Babylon') also will fall. That is rather thought-provoking.

In recent decades, we have witnessed the beginning of a well-intentioned, seemingly indisputably noble attempt to save the world based on global cooperation which undoubtedly seems to be salutary. However, this material world is under an increasing and obvious recrudescence, it simply cannot be saved by crisis management even with centralization to be established sooner or later, with legally founded concentration of power and with promised omnicompetence. Why not? On the one hand, because there are *essential conditions for sustainability*, the absence of which creates relentless limitations, and if even one of them is missing, the system becomes unsustainable. Highlighting some basic conditions partly mentioned above: in addition to the scarcity and finitude of the raw materials that form the conditions for life, the biophysically based self-centeredness of human nature (selfishness based on an untranscribable unique life instinct) – in this state as far from paradise as the ecosphere itself – does not allow for the necessary level of voluntary renunciation and self-limitation. Just the opposite: for example if large regions of the world run short of food, land, or water in the decades that lie ahead,

45 | Dolgonosov 2020.

46 | The Holy Bible (1611/1769) King James Version.

then wholesale, bloody wars are liable to follow. Famine and war as horsemen of the Apocalypse have been inseparable since antiquity⁴⁷. On the other hand – although a potential global crisis governance, faith-replacing ideals are able to force significant consumption restrictions – this imagined “human self-redemption” will not be successful. The increasingly dictated cooperation – becoming divisive (also according to historical experience) – will quickly lose its original charm and nobility. The over-consuming, gluttonous, greedy, material goods-driven, complex consuming-based socio-economic system is capable of collapsing – according to the well-known collapsological laws – with surprising speed compared to the time of its formation. ‘Babylon’ and its wealth (economic power) will fall like a house of cards⁴⁸(Revelation 18:17). Accordingly, sustainability, as it has been for more than three decades now, is stuck at the level of more and more worn-out words, and will not be realized. Man simply will not be able to save the material world that he himself has destroyed. Although this simple fact seems undoubtedly sad, but man cannot⁴⁹ (Revelation 21:5) by himself. It is not bad news, because everything is not over with the fall of ‘Babylon’, since the collapse is not on the last page, there is hope: the Bible says that there is going to be⁵⁰ (Revelation 21:1). The fact that, according to all signs and data, humanity is indeed unable to put its socio-economic system on a sustainable path, we should not be afraid, even if it is a pressing fact. Life is full of paradoxes: this unfolding chaos does not require panic, nor helpless resignation, but trust and wakefulness. Not passive inaction, but also not hyperactive rushing around, worrying about many things while⁵¹“only one is necessary” (Luke 10:42). Not for the sky-shaking attitude, for building the Tower of Babel again (it also failed), but for humble protection of creation. The difference between these two attitudes can be felt. It is an optimistic solution, not in the regular sense, but it surely worth to examine and to count on by intelligent people. According also to the scientific facts the world is heading for disaster, and forcing solutions as sustainable on a global scale will only accelerate the collapse⁵².

7. Conclusions

From a comparative perspective, the principle of sustainable development has been codified in diverse ways across jurisdictions, ranging from constitutional entrenchment to sectoral statutory provisions and policy-level objectives. Taken together, these divergences illustrate that, while the normative core of sustainable

47 | Cribb 2010, 14.

48 | The Holy Bible (1611/1769) King James Version. Revelation 18:17.

49 | The Holy Bible (1611/1769) King James Version. Revelation 21:5.

50 | The Holy Bible (1611/1769) King James Version. Revelation 21:1.

51 | The Holy Bible (1611/1769) King James Version. Luke 10:42.

52 | Gelencsér 2022.

development – balancing environmental, social, economic, and cultural dimensions – is widely accepted, its legal articulation remains fragmented across jurisdictions. The Anglo-American model relies on incremental statutory integration and policy guidance, often privileging flexibility over enforceability. By contrast, the continental European model favors constitutional and codified guarantees, embedding sustainability as a legal principle guiding public administration and judicial decision-making. Meanwhile, Central and Eastern European states have constitutionally entrenched sustainability in explicit intergenerational terms, reflecting both transitional constitutionalism and EU integration pressures. The tension between flexibility and enforceability, and between policy aspiration and constitutional entrenchment, will likely continue to shape the trajectory of sustainable development law in the years to come.

Sustainable development continues to have varying – often broad and vague – meanings depending on the scientific field and prevailing value patterns. Yet, it must be clearly defined and, in crisis situations, even fundamentally re-evaluated: there is only one path to genuine sustainability; all other approaches are ultimately unsustainable. This underscores the necessity of an exact, legally binding definition of sustainable development as a cornerstone.

Disregarding ecological sustainability, the principle of use according to carrying capacity, and adequate risk management (e.g., chemical exposure, resource depletion, technological evolution) endangers the global environmental system and ecosystem services. In this context, the protective function of law is of critical importance.

The Hungarian normative concept of sustainable development also reflects the realism of the Hungarian legislator: if biological diversity and natural resources – the foundation of human existence – can only be maintained ‘in the long term’, then humanity itself survives merely ‘for a long time’, which is far from ‘eternal’. Consequently, the present socio-economic system must be acknowledged – honestly and logically – as ‘unsustainable’. Due to the lack of unanimous commitment to voluntary self-restraint and insufficient concentrated resources to sustain the global economy without environmental exhaustion, the only optimistic solution aligns with the guidance preserved in certain parts of the Holy Scripture (from Isaiah 24–27 and Daniel 7–12 to Matthew 24–25 and Revelation 6–22), presented as a coherent “information package” highly relevant to this topic offering the only prospect for achieving a sustainable world. There will be no other, human solution, as it appears that humanity will soon run out of both time and critical materials.

The so-called environmental pillar is primary, forming part of a foundational structure according to systematic interpretation (*interpretatio systematica*), in addition to grammatical interpretation (*interpretatio grammatica*). At the same time, economic, social and cultural sustainability are duly integrated within the broader concept. In the name of sustainability, environmental use must

be considered *sub specie aeternitatis* – that is, from the perspective of eternity. Consequently, the most important adjustment to the definition of sustainable development would be the proper incorporation of the temporal dimension: the perspective should extend beyond the merely ‘long term’ to the ‘eternal’, since the ultimate goal is perpetual existence, everlasting being (eternal life). Only that constitutes genuine sustainability.

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