



PRACTICE ABSTRACT NR. 17

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Sustainable development in agriculture

The term 'sustainable development' was coined in 1987 by the World Commission on Environment and Development, also known as the Brundtland Commission which used the following definition:

“Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”.

Making agriculture more sustainable can be approached from two different angles:

- As a state of affairs: a specific agricultural technology or practice can be more or less sustainable;
- As a process of 'sustainable development': developing more sustainable agricultural technologies and practices.

Both are important, the first to assess where renewal is needed and the second to take action to change unsustainable practices.

In AgriLink, the starting point is that agriculture cannot be sustainable unless it is economically viable. We will move beyond the earliest definitions of sustainability as purely an environmental issue and start from the 'Triple P' model. This model has its origins in the Brundtland report and proposes that there are three main dimensions to sustainability: social sustainability (people), environmental sustainability (planet) and economic sustainability (profit). 'Integral' sustainability is achieved when these three pillars are balanced such that all can be maintained simultaneously in the long term.

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## ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

The practical implication is that it is not very productive to state where something is sustainable or not. For a concrete case, one needs to identify the specific sustainability issues that are at stake for each of the three Ps and assess which of these is most problematic (i.e. least sustainable). Sustainable development should then develop new solutions for that dimension, without making things worse in the other dimensions. However, with a poor performance in one of the dimensions (e.g. large emissions of greenhouse gases), a slight decrease in one of the other dimensions (e.g. slight loss of income) may be considered acceptable if the poorly performing dimension is considerably improved. Hence, most of all, sustainable development is a balancing act towards achieving 'integral sustainability', i.e. sustainability on all relevant dimensions.

This Practice Abstract is derived from one of 27 Theory Primers that support the conceptual framework which underpins the AgriLink project. Each Theory Primer introduces a specific theoretical topic in the conceptual framework and is intended primarily for academic readers. The Practice Abstracts derived from each Theory Primer aim to make these topics more accessible and understandable to a wider non-academic audience. The AgriLink Conceptual Framework and all Theory Primers can be found [here](#).



## ABOUT AGRILINK

AgriLink is a multi-actor project funded by the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme. It brings together 16 partners from 13 countries, including universities, applied research institutes, advisors and consultants from public organisations, private SMEs, a farmer-based organisation and specialists in communication and distance learning.

### DISCLAIMER:

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All the Practice Abstracts prepared by the AgriLink project in the EIP-AGRI common format can be found here: <https://ec.europa.eu/eip/agriculture/en/find-connect/projects/agrilink-agricultural-knowledge-linking-farmers>