

# In dialogue – sustainability

## Viewpoints and trends on key issues related to Cotton made in Africa.

### What's the meaning of sustainability?

Sustainability – career of a concept

There is no word that is used more often in the environmental debate. And none that is so often misunderstood. Some estimates reckon that, worldwide, there are 800 different definitions of sustainability in use and in discussion. It is worth looking at the career of this concept, right from its origins. The first worldwide accepted definition was the one in the Brundtland Report of 1987. It said that development is sustainable only if it “meets the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs.”

The report, named after the then Norwegian prime minister Gro Harlem Brundtland, proposed a contract between the people living today and future generations. That was on the principle of the often quoted warning by Wilhelm Busch, “ We have not inherited the Earth from our *parents*, but borrowed it from our *children*”. The fuzziness of this new ethic of responsibility, spanning whole epochs, lies simply in the fact that we do not know the needs of future generations. Which raw materials should we conserve and leave to them, and which will be totally obsolete in the future, as a result of revolutionary technologies?

The next phase of the sustainability debate comprised replacing the older term “environmental protection” by the more modern sounding “sustainability”. The accepted guideline was that all economic activities should be designed so as to cause as little impairment as possible to the environment, the climate and the resources of the planet.

In the past decade, a new consensus has emerged, understanding sustainability as achievement of a successful balance between three concerns – economic development, environmental protection, and social needs. It is evident from this there are no parameters and limits which can be defined objectively, but that every society, and every company, has to weigh up the priorities between different values, which may often conflict with one another. Weighing up interests, setting priorities, finding the middle path – that is the modern approach to management of sustainability. It is up to governments and managers to look after the “Triple Bottom Line”, that is to get it right between the three pillars indicated above. But that



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means they have to make decisions on matters that really cannot be decided. When are jobs more important than limiting air pollution? Does it serve the environment if a company fails and has to dismiss its employees because of environmental dumping in developing countries? Is the orientation of company management towards share price and shareholder value really sustainable in the sense of “successful in the long run”? Every expensive environmental programme has to stand the test of usefulness and positive environmental impact; there is no shortage of problems (climate protection, desertification, shortage of drinking water, clear cutting of tropical rain forests, ...) and government budgets are limited. That is why it is important to set the right priorities for action.

### **Sustainability has always to be discussed again**

The ethics of responsibility is not aimed at attitudes, but at results. But they do not happen until later, and that makes things tricky. That brings the scientists onto the scene. It is their job to say which of the environmental problems could be the most threatening; when which resources will be exhausted; what investment is the most worthwhile for rehabilitation of air, soil and water. But however complex their models may be, there are still doubts remaining about what the right strategy is, that is the truly sustainable strategy, in order to avoid wrong allocation of funds. Perhaps it would give more environmental benefit to spend money on women's education and birth control in Africa, by slowing the growth of the world's population, rather than to run an equally expensive waste avoidance campaign in Germany.

The conclusion is that sustainability cannot be measured exactly, and nor can it be imposed as a strategy for each and every situation. It has to be discussed again and again in the debate in society, to establish which way is the best for the future. For everyday purposes, we can take our orientation from simple principles – save energy, drive less, choose regional products. That is how ordinary people, of every continent and every generation, can take on responsibility. The vision is “Leave the world in a better condition than you found it.”

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