

# What Is a Sustainability Plan?

The following explanations have been excerpted and distilled from ICLEI's 56-page Sustainability Planning Toolkit, which is available exclusively to ICLEI local government members at [www.icleiusa.org/sustainabilitytoolkit](http://www.icleiusa.org/sustainabilitytoolkit).

## What Is “Sustainability,” and What Is a Sustainability Plan?

According to the United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development, sustainability means “meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” Sustainability is not an end goal, but a journey that local governments can take to improve the social equity, environmental, and economic conditions in their jurisdiction. A common framework to guide their efforts is a sustainability plan, which ties together a community's goals, strategies, implementation plans, and metrics for improving sustainability.

## Why Develop a Sustainability Plan?

Today's visionary local leaders face challenges on many fronts: climate change, environmental justice, energy independence, natural resource conservation, unemployment, poverty, and public health. Yet they recognize their opportunity to address these issues in collectively powerful ways, and their duty to act, since the impacts of such problems are often felt first at the local level. Local leaders also recognize that these seemingly disparate issues are inexorably linked because they deal with the same core fact: we, as a society are living beyond our means and will not be able to continue to do so.

To address all of these issues is at the heart of sustainable planning. When local governments bring their services, land use, and infrastructure in line with sustainable principles, they can achieve broad benefits for their communities. A sustainability plan is the roadmap to achieving this, and to improving quality of life for all community members.

Many local governments have already implemented a number of environmental and energy saving programs, often on a one-off basis. However, they often lack a single framework for measuring the impact of their programs. A sustainability plan provides a means of bringing everything together under a set of goals and metrics and provides a vision for the future development of the jurisdiction.



## What Is Typically Included in a Sustainability Plan?

A sustainability plan must define and clearly explain the community's key sustainability challenges, high-level sustainability goals, and the smaller measures and strategies to meet each goal.

The scope of a sustainability plan will vary by jurisdiction based on local challenges and needs. These challenges may touch on the following areas:

### Environment

- Natural Systems (ecosystems and habitat, water and stormwater, air quality, waste, and resource conservation)
- Planning and Design (land use, transportation and mobility, and parks, open space and recreation)
- Energy and Climate (energy, greenhouse gas emissions and other air pollutants, renewable energy, and green building)

### Economy

- Economic Development (clean technologies and green jobs, local commerce, tourism, and local food system)
- Employment & Workforce Training (green job training, employment and workforce wages, and youth skills)

### Society

- Affordability and Social Equity (affordable and workforce housing, poverty, human services and race and social equity)
- Children, Health, and Safety (community health and wellness, access to health care, and public safety)
- Education, Arts, and Community (education excellence, arts and culture, and civic engagement and vitality)

## Sustainability Plans vs. Climate Action Plans

Local governments considering their approach to responding to climate change and addressing sustainability issues have several options. The most common approaches are either a sustainability plan or a climate action plan. Although the two are similar, they differ in scope and overall approach to framing the issues. A sustainability plan can be considered a climate action plan with a broader, more holistic view on community sustainability.

A climate action plan focuses primarily on reducing greenhouse gas emissions, including emissions resulting from both the local government's operations and from the community as a whole. It typically includes an analysis of the opportunities to reduce greenhouse gas emissions resulting from energy use in transportation, solid waste disposal, buildings, lighting, and waste water treatment and water delivery. Some local governments also



include environmental opportunities beyond reducing energy consumption—such as the development of renewable energy resources, the conservation of natural resources, forestry (urban and beyond), agriculture, and green jobs. A climate action plan often addresses the co-benefits of its initiatives, such as improving air quality and public health or reducing stormwater runoff. However, a climate action plan does not explicate these other issues as thoroughly as a sustainability plan. For more information on climate action planning, visit ICLEI’s website:

<http://www.icleiusa.org/action-center/planning>

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