

9. Sustainability

Etymology: 1907, in reference to a legal objection, from sustainable + -ity. General sense (in economics, agriculture, ecology) by 1972 in economics, 1979 in conservation and environmentalism. Sustainability is defined as a *requirement of our generation to manage the resource base such that the average quality of life that we ensure ourselves can potentially be shared by all future generations. ... Development is sustainable if it involves a non-decreasing average quality of life.* [Geir B. Asheim, ‘Sustainability’, The World Bank, 1994]

sustain (v.) late-13th c., *sustenēn*, transitive, ‘provide the necessities of life to’; by early 14th c. as ‘give support to (an effort or cause)’; also in physical senses, ‘keep from falling or sinking, hold up or upright’; also ‘give assistance to; keep (a quarrel, etc.) going’. Taken from the stem of Old French *sostenir*, *sustenir* ‘hold up, bear; suffer, endure’ (13th c.), from Latin *sustinere* ‘hold up, hold upright; furnish with means of support; bear, undergo, endure’. This is from an assimilated form of *sub* ‘up from below’ (see sub-) + *tenere* ‘to hold’ (from PIE root *ten- ‘to stretch’).

The meaning ‘continue, keep up’ (an action, etc.) is from the early 14th c. The sense of ‘withstand, endure (pain hardship, a shock) without failing or yielding’ is from ca. 1400. The legal sense of ‘admit as correct and valid, uphold the rightfulness of’ is from the early 15th c. Also from the early 15th c. as ‘suffer (a loss)’.¹

Suggestions for value-specific questions in VISION dialogues

- What is the quality of sustainability?
- What does it mean to be sustained by others?
- Is sustainability heavier or lighter?
- What is its shape: is it rounder and softer or square and sharp?
- How is sustainability related to conviviality?
- What roots sustainability?
- What is added to sustainability given that etymologically *to sustain* relates to suffering and endurance?
- What can assist sustainability to be easy or soft?
- Can sustainability support itself, or does it need help—and, if so, from whom?
- What role would sustainability like to play in life?
- What would human existence look like without sustainability?
- Is there ever a break in sustainability?

Suggestions for exercises and creative activities to inspire a VISION reflection

Art from scraps

Duration: 30 minutes to 2 hours

Description: Make art objects out of scrap/used items and things found in nature, which participants bring and find or which the facilitator provides.

Yarn wrapping

Duration: 45–75 minutes

¹ Extract compiled from <https://www.etymonline.com/word/sustainability>, last accessed 1 May 2026. Note here that references in brackets are taken directly from the source.

Description: This exercise invites participants to engage in nonverbal reflection about values from the value catalogue through a tactile connection to colours and yarns. The method requires minimal technical skills whilst providing great artistic potential. The process is meditative, encouraging individuals to let go and embrace chance.

Participants: Between 8–20 people; suitable for groups with mixed-language abilities and diverse backgrounds.

Materials:

- Small bundles of leftover yarn in multiple colours and textures
- One piece of square cardboard 10 x 10-cm per participant
- A bowl with one small piece of paper per person with selected values from the value catalogue
- Masking tape
- Scissors
- Pictures/ examples of yarn wrappings

How the activity works:

Provide each participant with a cardboard square and have them draw a value from the bowl. Begin the exercise by giving participants one minute to reflect on what colours, textures, sensations, and shapes the value evokes for them. Next, ask them to select a yarn bundle for their first wrapping. Instruct participants to attach the end of the yarn to the back of their cardboard square with a piece of masking tape and begin wrapping the yarn around the square. When they feel that enough yarn has been wrapped, they should switch to another colour, attaching the other end of the yarn to the back of the cardboard as well.

The yarn should cover the squares in a random pattern, evolving as the activity continues. Participants may work individually on their own square for a more calming experience, although this might place pressure on some individual to achieve a specific outcome. Alternatively, encourage participants to swap squares with another participant several times during the process. This approach allows participants to contribute to each other's work rather than only focusing on their own. If participants swap squares, allow 2–4 minutes between each swap.

Once all the squares are completed, gather the group at a table and assemble the squares together as if putting together a puzzle. Invite a volunteer to place their square first, and then have participants add their squares one by one, considering how each fits with those already on the table. This collaborative process results in a shared artwork, which can be secured in place by placing duct tape on the back of each piece. Alternatively, participants may take home one of the small squares as a keepsake.

This exercise can also be completed by wrapping yarn around pieces of wood, allowing for a tactile and visually engaging experience. Alternatively, you can use old or gently used children's books as the base, providing an opportunity to repurpose materials. Another option is to create letters out of cardboard and use them to write out the values.

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