

Robert B. Smith (Statistics Canada), "Measuring the Sustainability of Well-Being: a Capital Approach"

Abstract

One interpretation of sustainable development is that its objective is to ensure the maintenance of the preconditions necessary to ensure human well-being across time. This interpretation gives sustainable development an explicit intergenerational focus, distinguishing it clearly from other interpretations in which the well-being of the current generation is seen also as a sustainable development objective.

In the first part of this paper, we put forth an argument in favour of an intergenerational focus for sustainable development. It is shown to be logically more defensible, of greater practical value for policy and theoretically more tractable.

The second part of the paper puts forth an argument for an extended notion of capital as the basis for measuring sustainable development from an intergenerational perspective. The theoretical framework is first elaborated and then proposals are made for key sustainable development indicators. The discussion then turns to practical questions of measurement frameworks, advocating the benefits of an accounting approach.