# Sustainability glossary

action

The act of undertaking a task or changing a process to achieve a goal. For example, a business may take climate action by switching to renewable energy services or recycling waste products.

agency

A sense of control, creativity or autonomy of actions and their related consequences.

backcasting

A process that starts with defining a desirable future and then working backwards to identify policies and programs that will connect the future to the present.

beliefs

Preconceived or developed attitudes or positions on a topic.

climate

The average weather conditions (temperature, precipitation and other weather factors) over several years in a particular place.

community

The way living things interact and share a place. For humans, this is referred to as a ‘social community’ and for the broader environment it is an ‘ecological community’.

*See also:* ecological community, social community

cultural system

The interaction of common understandings, stories, values, traditions and beliefs within a community.

cultures

The customs, activities, and religious and social beliefs or behaviours of a group of people at a particular time.

design thinking

An approach that helps people to empathise and understand needs, opportunities and problems; generate, iterate and represent innovative, user-centred ideas; and analyse and evaluate those ideas.

designed solutions

Also referred to as solution-focused thinking, designed solutions or thinking focus on managing needs and developing products, services or environments that provide long-term solutions to a problem, for example the development of renewable fuels in response to climate change.

Earth’s systems

The 4 interrelated, interdependent and interacting systems, or spheres, that make up the global system: the lithosphere, biosphere, hydrosphere and atmosphere. Also referred to as ‘environmental systems’, especially when referring to the 4 pillars of sustainable development.

ecological community

More than 2 species occurring and interacting within a unique habitat that is characterised by geographical and environmental factors, such as latitude, climate, soil type and water accessibility. For example, a desert ecological community may consist of lizards, snakes, rodents, cacti and other desert-dwelling species adapted for a dry environment.

ecological diversity

Ecological diversity is defined by the range of different environments present in a given area and how species interact with these environments. For example, Australia has a strong ecological diversity, with deserts, semi-arid land, coastlines and mountainous areas.

ecological integrity

The ability of an environment or ecological community to maintain diversity, adapt to changes, carry out natural chemical and biological processes and access the required living and non-living resources for future growth.

economic system

A system that coordinates resource allocation and production and distribution of goods and services within a society or country.

environmental systems

*See:* Earth’s systems

equity

A quality of fairness based on the needs of individuals or groups, for example the fair distribution of resources within a community.

forecasting

The process of predicting the direction of future trends based on current and historical data analysis, and using historical data to determine the direction of future trends.

innovation

Creativity in developing a new idea, process, service or product to fill a gap in the market or achieve an aim.

interdependence

The reliance of 2 or more people or things on each other, such as the interdependence between communities, local economy and the natural environment.

interrelationship

A shared history or connections between people, countries, economies, systems and/or environments that may have developed over time and that influences contemporary relationships.

lifeforms

All organisms (living things).

nature

A broad term used to describe the physical beings, events, processes, landscapes and other features that occur without human intervention or creation.

resource

Something that is needed to fulfil a purpose. Resources may be naturally occurring, like water, or they may be human-made goods or services.

social community

A group of people living and working within the same place, which forms part of a larger society. These people may share a common interest or attitude.

social system

The structure of society that is built upon common goals and the roles and status of the people within it. Each person may belong to a range of social systems, such as their family, community, religion and industry.