

TRANSCRIPT

Revisiting The Sustainability Timeline

Rohan Hazell:

In the last chapter, we explored some of the major milestones that have led to the conceptualisation of sustainability as we know it today. You may have noticed something about this timeline. It's almost entirely defined by the contribution of European and American thinkers, governments and organisations. But of course, their non-Western counterparts have had major influences on the modern understanding of sustainability.

Unfortunately, however, these contributions are rarely recognised in the canon of sustainability. Now it's important that we do so because the challenge of sustainable development is a global one and will need solutions from all parts of the world tailored to local contexts.

So, let's revisit the timeline.



As far back as the 9th to 13th centuries in the Middle East, Arabic treaties dealt with early environmental science, covering subjects like air and water pollution, soil contamination and even the mishandling of municipal solid waste. They even included assessments of certain localities' impacts on the surrounding environment. And if we look at the last century alone, there are many other examples.



In the 1930s, Mahatma Gandhi introduced concepts of sustainability to the international community through his philosophy of non-violence, termed Ahimsa and self-sufficiency, or Swaraj. These principles aimed at achieving harmony with nature as well as equitable social and economic outcomes.



In 1970, Vietnamese Zen master monk Thich Nhat Hanh and his colleagues Chan Kong and Alfred Hassler organised a first-of-its-kind international environmental conference. The effort culminated in a statement entitled "A message to our 3.5 billion neighbours on Planet Earth from 2,200 environmental scientists."

Wangari Maathi founds the Green Belt Movement in Kenya



Across the world in Kenya, also in the 1970s, Wangari Maathai, a Kenyan environmentalist, founded the Green Belt Movement, promoting environmental conservation, women's rights and economic empowerment, typifying a holistic approach to sustainability decades ahead of its time. And in 2004, she won a Nobel Peace Prize for her work.



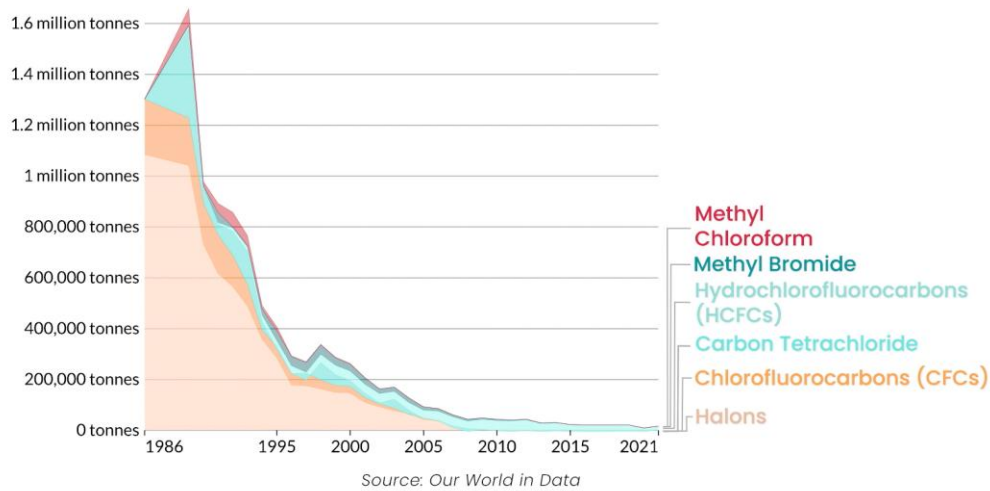
Mostafa Kamal Tolba

Mostafa Kamal Tolba leads the UNEP, addressing ozone layer protection and international pollution reduction

1989

Then there's Mustafa Kamal Tolba, an Egyptian scientist who acted as the second Executive Director of the United Nations Environment Programme. During his 17 years in office, he led the development of the Montreal Protocol, which is an international treaty designed to protect the ozone layer. It remains to this day as one of the only international environmental efforts that has resulted in a successful outcome, saving millions from skin cancer and other impacts. He also steered the Basel Convention to reduce international pollution and helped set up the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, or IPCC, which is the world's foremost voice on climate change today.

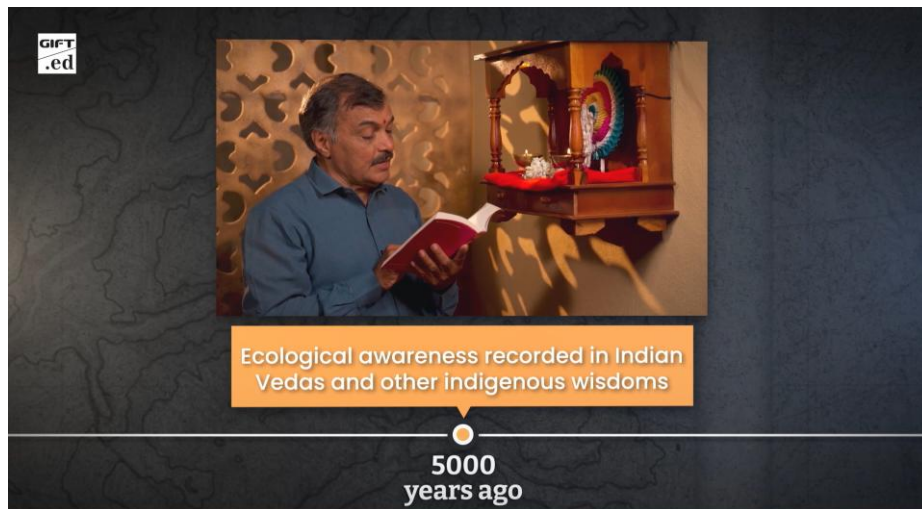
Emissions of substances that deplete the ozone layer have fallen by more than 99%



In the 2000s, we see China proposing a new form of development under the banner of "ecological civilisation" to replace "industrial civilisation". Again, this is a very different model than Western counterparts, and began to be enacted in 2011.



In 2008, Bhutan gained international attention for setting Gross National Happiness as its national metric for growth instead of GDP. The aim was to prioritise physical, mental, social and environmental well-being over GDP, or purely monetary terms of reference. And of course, let us not forget that ecological awareness was first recorded up to 5,000 years ago in Indian Vedas, which are ancient poems.



The teachings of Taoists, Jains and Buddhists, as with other religions, all include a respect for nature. The philosophy of Ubuntu shared by various African nations, meaning "I am because we are" or "humanity towards others". Or the Native American concept of "Seven Generation Sustainability", which advocates for decision-making that considers impacts on seven generations into the future.

These philosophies are returning to influence modern-day discussions on sustainability around the world. Importantly, these are just a handful of the contributions made by non-Western thinkers and organisations. Many more remain unclear simply because they are not in a global language, nor in our education systems.

So, what are the key takeaways from this timeline of sustainability? First, sustainability is not just environmental protection. Although the concept has its roots in re-evaluating the relationship between humans and the environment, it now also encompasses economic systems, socio economic development, governance mechanisms and much more.

Second, sustainability is clearly not a static concept. It has evolved across time and it will continue to change. There is no universal understanding of sustainability because views on it depend on culture, geography, governance, level of development and much more.

Third, sustainability is not just a Western concept. Although most common understandings of sustainability may cite Western contributions, sustainability is a global challenge, one that requires listening to voices and ideas from around the world. Failing to do so will only limit our potential to create sustainable solutions through policymaking, innovative business models, and international collaboration.

To get a better understanding of the global sustainability challenges we face, you'll hear from two of the world's most renowned sustainability experts in the next chapter, Dr. Jane Goodall and Professor Jeffrey Sachs.