



# Sustainable Development

OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY CAN CONTRIBUTE AND MAKE A DIFFERENCE



**THE GLOBAL GOALS**  
For Sustainable Development



SWEDISH ASSOCIATION OF  
**OCCUPATIONAL THERAPISTS**

Sustainable Development – Occupational Therapy Can Contribute  
and Make a Difference, 2018

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# Preface

In 2010, the Swedish Association of Occupational Therapists published its first document on occupational therapy and sustainable development. The Association was the first occupational therapy organization in the world to raise these issues from a professional perspective. The document attracted international interest from countries such as Canada, Japan and the UK - and in particular from the World Federation of Occupational Therapists (WFOT), which adopted a position on sustainable development in 2012. Since then, Sweden has been represented in the WFOT expert group working with issues related to occupational therapy and sustainable development.

Since 2010, there has been a great amount of input in the field of occupational therapy to support sustainable development. Through the United Nations Global Goals for Sustainable Development in Agenda 2030, these issues have become increasingly important. For this reason, it is important that the Swedish Association of Occupational Therapists further clarifies how occupational therapy can contribute to sustainable development.

This publication is meant for occupational therapists and students of Occupational Therapy as well as decision makers and others interested in occupational therapy and sustainable development. The publication is a further, in-depth development of previously published reasoning.

I would like to extend my heartfelt thanks to Petra Wagman, Senior Lecturer in Occupational Therapy at the Department of Rehabilitation, School of Health and Welfare, Jönköping University who has had the main responsibility for developing the contents of this document.

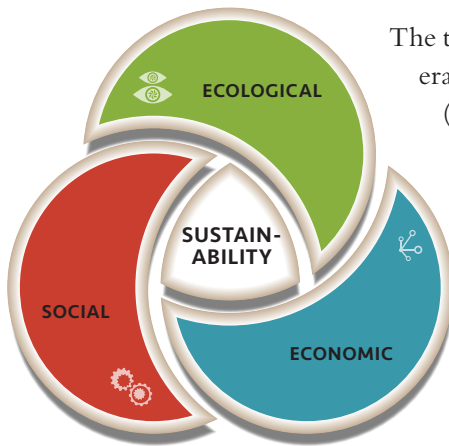
**IDA KÄHLIN,**

President,

The Swedish Association of Occupational Therapists

# Sustainable Development

The concept “sustainable development” is gaining increased focus and spread throughout society. Both nationally and internationally, we are discussing how we can develop and preserve welfare in a world that constantly reminds us of climate change and other global threats. The concept was initially used by the UN during the 1980s to describe development “that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” <sup>(1)</sup>. In political contexts, sustainable development is considered as a task that should be integrated into all areas. The goal is a common endeavor to create a sustainable society in which good health for all is stimulated <sup>(2)</sup>.



The term is complex and includes consideration of both the geographical aspect (here and there) as well as time (now and in the future). It takes its starting point from three dimensions – social, ecological and economic sustainability – which are in constant interaction with one another. Sustainable development is about human beings and their surroundings – about a society that wants to promote good lives for everyone based

on Nature and the planet’s resources. Taken together, one can say that sustainable development is comprised of more than our relation to the physical world and its inhabitants. It is also about democracy, participation, diversity and human rights.

The breadth of the concept is clearly visible in Agenda 2030 and the 17 global goals for sustainable development (for people, planet, prosperity, peace and partnership) adopted by the UN in Autumn 2015 and to be achieved by 2030 (see pages 8-9). Together, the Goals contain 169 different sub-goals<sup>(3)</sup>.

The holistic view of individuals and society which sustainable development implies presupposes that efforts are made at all levels of society. Both private and public sectors must integrate the pursuit of sustainable development into their activities, but one important starting point is also each individual's responsibility and participation. In occupational therapeutic activities, as in all activities, there is a need to review contributions towards sustainable development. One way is to help create both good working environments as well as the environment as a whole by ensuring that that which is used in our activities has been produced under sound conditions and with as low climate impact as possible. This is also in line with the World Health Organization, which sees working towards sustainable development as an important health issue and encourages business operators as well as individual professionals in healthcare and nursing to "be in the forefront" and set good examples<sup>(4)</sup>.



# Occupational Therapy Know-how

Occupational therapists have a unique competence when it comes to knowledge of the relationship between activity and health. The aim of occupational therapy is to create opportunities for people to live a meaningful life, in accordance with their own wishes and needs, as well as in relation to requirements in their surroundings. With the aim of achieving this, occupational therapists work at individual, group and community levels of to prevent impaired ability in activities, improve or maintain abilities for activities and compensate for possible impaired activity capability<sup>(5)</sup>.

Due to our unique competence concerning activity, occupational therapists' contributions towards sustainable development have increasingly begun to be noted<sup>(6-12)</sup>. Occupational therapists know how individuals, surroundings and activities interact, and how these relate to participation and health. This competence is important in society's pursuit of sustainable development. It is also competence that occupational therapists can offer society to a greater extent and ought to be more sought after and taken advantage of. Occupational therapists should also include a sustainability dimension in their own work<sup>(9, 12, 13)</sup> and it has been argued that occupational therapists should broaden their range of client groups<sup>(10, 14, 15)</sup>.

Occupational therapeutic competence regarding changes in patterns of activity can encourage activities that are as sustainable as possible whilst maintaining well-being. In the quest to build a sustainable society, occupational therapists can also contribute their competence concerning consequences of activity limitations and their relation to participation and health.



## United Nations Global Goals

The global sustainability goals in Agenda 2030<sup>(3)</sup> are a possible starting point for occupational therapists' work towards sustainability. There are several goals with a clear occupational therapeutic link. Goal 3: "Ensure everyone can live a healthy life and promote well-being for all at all ages" is, of course, given. It is also a goal in which sustainable development can clearly be linked to working with human activity patterns, such as "healthy living habits"<sup>(16)</sup>. For example: changing from driving to walking can contribute to better health and well-being at individual, community and global levels. Furthermore, Swedish researchers have argued that so-called eco-ethical activities (ecopations) are health promotional, both individually and globally<sup>(17)</sup>. Research has also shown that people whose lives (activity patterns) lead to high greenhouse gas emissions do not see themselves as being healthier, nor happier, than people in lower-emission households<sup>(18)</sup>.

Goal 12: "Ensure Sustainable Consumption and Production Patterns" is also of great relevance to occupational therapy. Consumption can be related to people's activity patterns and habits. The Swedish Government's strategy for sustainable consumption includes, among other things, "stimulating behavioral patterns that take into account sustainability aspects"<sup>(19)</sup>. Here, occupational therapists competence in respect of activities can be of use. The relevance of Occupational Therapy also becomes clear when considering that sustainable transport and housing are among the things the Swedish Government intends to prioritize<sup>(19)</sup>. Occupational therapists can work towards increasing accessibility to public transport. More persons with physical, mental or intellectual impairments should be given the opportunity to go by train, bus, subway and other public means of transport. Another example of how our competence can be used is to influence the design of waste-sorting systems so that it is physically and cognitively possible

# 17 Global Goals for Sustainable Development

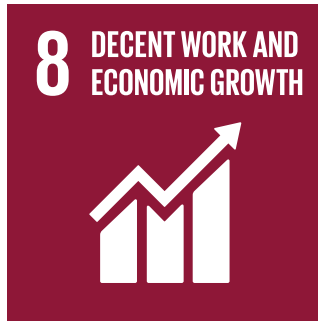






Illustration: UN

Among the UN's global goals are several with a clear occupational therapeutic link.

for everybody in society to take care of their own garbage in a sustainable way.

That products and services should be sustainable over time and be functional for as many as possible without adaptation or requiring special solutions is also included in work towards creating a sustainable society. Here too, occupational therapists have competence that society can use to a greater extent. Avoiding special solutions for people with special needs is economically advantageous and in line with sustainable development. Individual housing adjustments can be avoided to a certain extent if new housing is designed so as to function immediately for everyone, as current Swedish building legislation requires, but which is rarely entirely fulfilled. Then, more people will be able to live in all of the available housing; affecting people's opportunities to experience participation.

Finally, goal 5 on *achieving gender equality*, Goal 8 on *decent working conditions* and Goal 10 on *reducing inequalities within and between countries* are relevant to the work of occupational therapists. The same applies to Goal 11 on *inclusive and safe cities*. Sustainable development is not only about the physical design of the environments we construct, nor products, but also concerns how information, services and activities are designed. In these contexts, one usually uses the terms universal design and sustainable design. Increasing accessibility and usability so that more people can make use of the regular supply of services and products is an issue that concerns more and more people, especially in view of the increasing proportion of elderly people in the population. Sustainable social planning must take into consideration that the needs of citizens varies and changes. In common with sustainability Goal 10, on reducing inequality<sup>(3)</sup> we have to work towards including everyone on equal terms. When looking at them more closely, other goals in Agenda 30 are also more or less likely to be of relevance for occupational therapists.

# Person-centered Occupational Therapy

Nowadays many people are working towards sustainable development in their daily activities – at home, at work, at school and during leisure time. More and more people choose to consume climate-smart and health promotional groceries, transportation, leisure activities and holidays. However, if a person has, or comes to have, a reduction in his or her capabilities because of injury, illness or a change of circumstances, his/her possibilities of acting for sustainable development are likely to be affected.

So, occupational therapists' work embraces a person-centered approach to accommodate the ability of individuals to participate in activities that promote sustainable development. This can be done through individual-oriented interventions, such as prescribing facilities, housing adjustments or developing individual strategies. For example, a person with a reduced perception of time e.g. time taken to shower, may be provided with a memory aid to prevent excessive use of hot water. Using personalized checklists with supportive images, a person with reduced intellectual ability can plan purchases and cooking in climate-friendly and energy-saving ways. Adaptations in housing can also make it possible for a wheelchair user to sort garbage etc.



# Tools for Occupational Therapists

Occupational therapists are used to working to change activity patterns. The reasons for such change are many; the desire for a more sustainable lifestyle can be an additional one<sup>(15)</sup>. Sustainable development is still a new area for many occupational therapists, but there are publications that show possible ways ahead and tools to include this aspect when working. The ValMo model was the first model which included focus on these issues<sup>(20)</sup> and the Model of Human Occupation<sup>(21)</sup> has also been described as useful in this area<sup>(15)</sup>. In addition, there is a model for how individuals themselves can reflect on their patterns of activity and the pros and cons thereof in relation to sustainable development<sup>(9,22)</sup>.

Finally, a review of literature<sup>(7)</sup> has identified four ways in which occupational therapists can contribute by:

- adapting activity patterns to changes that have already taken place (such as drought) and preventing future climate change.
- collaborating with clients and with other professions.
- doing research on people's activities and what governs them.
- from the perspective of activities, warning of the consequences of various aspects of non-sustainability

# The Swedish Association of Occupational Therapists and Sustainable Development

In Sweden there are about 11,000 practicing occupational therapists and Swedish occupational therapy has a very positive reputation internationally. Despite this, Swedish society does not make use of all of the competence that occupational therapists possess.

The Swedish Association of Occupational Therapists holds the view that the competence of occupational therapists regarding human activity patterns, the relationship between activity and health and input in social planning is not sufficiently utilized in the pursuit of sustainable development. This competence, as well as education, training and research in our field, should be highlighted even more clearly by occupational therapists.

With this document we hope to further positive changes.



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Sustainable development involves more than mankind's relationship with Nature. It is about participation, living habits and human rights – that is to say about creating a good society for all. Occupational therapists' competence regarding people's activity patterns, the relationship between activity and health as well as our input in social planning can contribute and make a difference in the pursuit of sustainable development.



SWEDISH ASSOCIATION OF  
**OCCUPATIONAL THERAPISTS**

Box 760 • SE 131 24, Nacka • Sweden  
+46-8-507 488 00  
[kansli@arbetsterapeuterna.se](mailto:kansli@arbetsterapeuterna.se)