

Student Cases

Sustainable Development: A Course Linking Science with Practice

The student cases are where you put the course to work. Each one asks you to take a real region that is already pursuing sustainability and evaluate how it is doing, where it is stuck, and what might help—drawing on everything the course has taught you, and on research you do yourself.

A central challenge in the pursuit of sustainability is how to integrate the general knowledge of core principles with the specific knowledge of local contexts to provide useful guidance for action on the ground. The student cases are where you practice exactly that.

Each region comes with a research guide. It is important to understand that this guide is only a springboard for your own inquiry into the region. Your job is to become well-versed in the region and its potential to effectively pursue sustainability. It is thus necessary to read the guide and its linked sources critically—but simply mastering the guide and its citations is not enough. Background material on a place has never been easier to gather; the harder and more valuable work is the first-hand inquiry you build on top of it—the wider literature, the primary sources, and above all the people you talk to. You will need to delve into the available literature on the region, as well as the broader literature in sustainability science and related fields.

Working as a sustainability evaluation committee

To give the work a focus, imagine you are preparing your evaluation for the United Nations Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN), a high-level body set up under the auspices of the UN Secretary-General to promote integrated approaches to implementing the Sustainable Development Goals. Whether you are working on your own or with a class, you take on the role of a “sustainability evaluation committee” asked to bring an outside perspective on the region’s pursuit of sustainable development, organized around three questions:

1. How is the region doing in articulating shared goals for its sustainable development, and at both making and tracking progress toward those goals?
2. What are the region’s principal obstacles to further progress, and the most important opportunities for overcoming those obstacles?
3. How can relevant knowledge drawn from scholarship and experience around the world be better linked with action on the ground in the region for the successful pursuit of sustainability?

Requests for outside evaluations like this are not uncommon in today’s world. Countries in the OECD, for example, are regularly evaluated on their environmental and sustainability performance by outside experts from other member countries. What these experts inevitably lack in insider knowledge, they make up for by being free from local political alliances and by having access to relevant experience from elsewhere. You should not be daunted by the fact that you won’t have the familiarity a local researcher might. Your outsider perspective, and your ability to bring a fresh view of how sustainability is being pursued in the region, are what make your work valuable.

Each region here is already pursuing sustainability. Your challenge is not to convince anyone that sustainable development matters. It is to mobilize what you know and can learn to help them do better.

What you produce

The work culminates in a policy memo. In Part I, you identify the important barriers or problems that need to be addressed in the region’s pursuit of sustainability—kept short, about a page. In Part II, you propose two or more alternative interventions that reasonable people in the region might consider, analyze the strengths and weaknesses of each using the frameworks from the course, and then recommend and defend the specific intervention you are convinced has the best chance of advancing a transition toward sustainable development.

The recommended intervention should not be too small (switching to LED lights) nor so large that it stops being a single intervention (fixing maternal mortality and restructuring agricultural subsidies at once). Rather, it should help resolve a problem that merits attention. The key to presenting it compellingly is to show that you have taken into account how it will interact with the rest of the complex nature-society system in the region. No one can do this perfectly. But serious reflection on what your intervention is intended to do, the obstacles it is likely to encounter, and the other effects it is likely to have, is an essential step on the road to more effective, if humble, policy work.

If you are working with a group, you can also prepare a short oral briefing—a “symposium presentation”—of the same evaluation.

For the fundamentals of policy writing, we recommend Eugene Bardach’s short guide, [A Practical Guide for Policy Analysis: The Eightfold Path to More Effective Problem Solving](#). Bill and Alicia return to it regularly in their own policy writing.

Expert interviews: the heart of the case

Expert interviews are the centerpiece of the student cases. They are particularly effective tools for developing a sense of the complexities of your region, and interviews with local experts are especially important for ensuring your recommendations are nuanced and respectful of local context and history. Experts can come from any sector—business, government, non-governmental organizations, academia, and even journalists.

A step-by-step Interview Guide—covering how to identify the right people, reach out to them, and conduct a good conversation—is coming soon. In the meantime, keep this in mind: you will be surprised, if you send a polite and informed email, how many people—even those quite senior in their fields and organizations—are happy to spend fifteen or twenty minutes sharing what they know.

The regions

Each region will have its own research guide to get you started.

- Uganda — *coming soon*

- Acre, Brazil — *coming soon*
- Pearl River Delta (Hong Kong) — *coming soon*

We expect to add further regions over time.