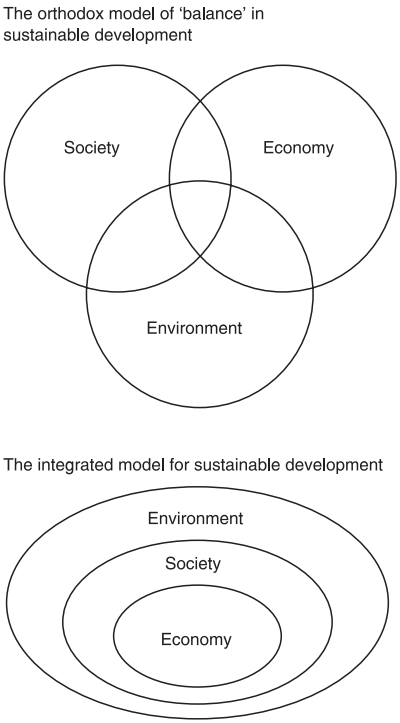

Figure 5.2 Sustainable development (source unknown)

sustainable development has proved to be an elusive concept. It is everything and nothing – one moment the fig leaf of respectability for otherwise damaging policies, the next underpinning key initiatives related to climate change or social inclusion. At its simplest of course it is common sense – living our lives in ways which do not compromise the lives of others and wherever possible improve the world which we all share, and which our children will inherit.

One of the problems with sustainable development is that it was first promoted and identified as a process to help 'balance' economic, social and environmental factors. This implied that losses in one area could safely be traded for gains in another, and in particular that economic development, being part of sustainable development, could continue unfettered. Hence one of the Government's four sustainable development objectives is 'the maintenance of high and stable levels of economic growth and employment'.

It is much more useful to approach the subject with integration rather than balance in mind (Figure 5.2 shows the difference in diagrammatic form). The integrated figure places the three elements in their correct relationship – economic activity is subsumed within society because it is one of many forms of social activity. Social life is then placed within the environment, because all activities take place within an environment of some sort. This approach would justify changing the above objective to 'achieving appropriate levels of economic growth coupled with high and stable levels of employment'. This is a subtle but significant difference which maintains the distinction between ends and means.

Another of the four objectives is 'effective protection of the environment'. Although this is very broad, it is widely recognized that the state of, and trends affecting, the natural environment and biodiversity are key indicators relating to this objective.

Design and planning incorporating sustainable development principles would incorporate the social and economic needs of people, whilst at the same time making provision for the high-quality natural, semi-natural and built environments which contribute to those needs.

In considering the various aspects of people's relationship with nature, David Nicholson-Lord (2002) says, 'Ever since human beings created cities, we have tried to escape them. We have moved out – to

suburbs and more recently to distant villages and small towns. We have moved the countryside in – as parks and gardens.' He points out that the Hanging Gardens of Babylon were built to resemble the mountainous country so beloved of Nebuchadnezzar's queen.

In discussing the current fashion for increasing housing densities and building on brownfield land, he also says '... the new orthodoxy is profoundly mistaken. For all the inspiring talk of sustainability and urban renaissance, our obsession with compact cities risks another great planning disaster – a new era of town cramping which, by ignoring human relationships with nature, will do nothing to secure the long-term stability of the city. By recognising those relationships, however, it's possible to envisage a city which is genuinely sustainable, because it fulfils human needs, and a countryside which, while altered, may be greatly improved.'

Nicholson-Lord goes on to propose a Manifesto for Green Cities which includes:

- Scrapping the indicator that measures sustainability by the proportion of brownfield sites redeveloped.
- Having a new sustainability indicator measuring people's satisfaction with the urban environment.
- Having a target for the proportion of managed urban land in designated greenway strategies.
- Mandatory standards for the quantity and accessibility of urban open spaces.
- More imaginative greenspace design.
- Habitat creation.
- River and wetland restoration and sustainable drainage.

CASE STUDIES

HARMONY FLORIDA

One disadvantage encountered by those trying to change established practices, or 'retro-fitting' new ideas and principles to existing towns, is that they may have to work with centuries of infrastructure. In a typical city, up to 90 per cent of the buildings that will be there in thirty years' time already exist. Their vices and virtues have to be accommodated within any new planning and management regimes. The luxury of designing and building completely new settlements is given to few now. Even the British new towns of the mid-twentieth century were based on existing towns, and places like Port Sunlight and Bournville were more suburb than independent towns.

In Florida, however, there is a new town being built called Harmony. Describing itself as 'a new conservation community', Harmony's developers plan to build 'a model for how communities can accommodate a growing population in environmentally intelligent ways'. Half an hour from Orlando, Harmony is set in 11 000 acres of meadows, wetlands and pine woods, and has two 500-acre natural lakes. The first of up to 7000 houses and apartments were occupied in 2003 after a new school was built, and after some streets, a golf course and 'dark skies' street lighting were installed. Residents (18 000 are planned for) will share their land with, amongst other things, deer, bobcats, sandhill cranes, ospreys and owls. No development will be allowed along the lakes' shores or, unusually on or around the golf course. Neither will powered boats be allowed on the lakes. The town's layout will facilitate and encourage walking and cycling,