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Handout:

What's all This Got to Do With Us?

An Introduction to Environmental Issues for Trustees

It's clearly a good thing to have a healthy environment, but many people and organisations working on other issues might wonder if this is something you should put time into.

Part of this may be due to how the 'environment' means very different things to different people, and it doesn't always connect to where we live. A survey some years ago asked people what they thought of when they heard the word 'environment': most talked about something they'd seen on television: rainforests being burnt, David Attenborough watching killer whales, or global climate change. Few talked about the streets outside their homes.

But our environment is where we live, work (and play), and it's also all the other things that affect our neighbourhood. Talk to anyone about ways to improve the place where they live and they'll raise a lot of issues. The environment may not be top of the list. What they'll talk about can usually be grouped into three issues. People need:

- **A better local environment** – that means green spaces and play areas, less noise and pollution, decent homes, and less litter.
- **A better local economy** – that means jobs, reasonable prices, cheaper heat and light, no loan sharks
- **Better social conditions** – that means low crime, good leisure facilities, community groups, and friendly neighbours.

Many people now realise that if we are to tackle one issue, then we'll probably have to tackle the others as well. For instance, new shops are unlikely to open in an area where crime and poverty levels are very high. Similarly crime is unlikely to fall in an area where the housing has been improved unless there are jobs to be had. People may move into an area where housing and jobs are available, but if the surroundings are run-down and public transport is poor, they may well not want to stay.

This is not just a local issue. If the governments of the world are to deal with poverty, they don't just need to provide money and food aid, they need to help local people get educated and get jobs. People also need a safe environment with adequate homes and drinking water. To make these things work, governments also need to make sure that people have an effective voice in deciding what happens where they live.

Towards sustainable development

They call this approach 'sustainable development' (see below). While this phrase can be confusing, it's now used in many government documents and in funding programmes. If you and your organisation want to make sure you get access to information and resources that are available, then it makes very good sense to get to grips with sustainable development and 'sustainability'.

What does 'sustainable development' really mean?

There are many official definitions but there's two key points:

- Development means change or growth.
- Sustainable means things that last.

This is about making changes that last, about making things better now and in the future.

At the core of this idea is the matter of meeting people's needs – for a home, for a decent job, for education for their children, for good health care, and for a safe and healthy neighbourhood to live in.

Most people in the UK have most of these needs, but there are still many people living in poverty and in poor quality homes. Even if these basic needs are met there are still plenty of ways in which their 'quality of life' is under threat: from crime, from pollution, or from living in neighbourhoods where no-one in authority seems to care.