



Sustainability



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The question is not *how*? The question is *when* do we decide to do business more sustainably?

» The world is changing – environmentally, socially, economically. The only uncertainties are the pace and direction of that change, and whether societies will find pathways to long-term sustainability and prosperity or instead settle for increasing volatility and accelerating decline.

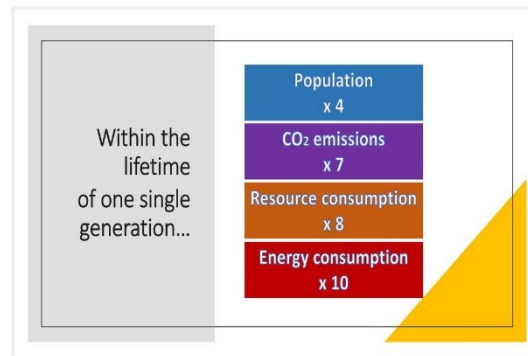
Transitions are very rarely smooth, and the sustainability transformation is perhaps the most difficult that global societies have faced. Seemingly contradictory truths and deep uncertainties must be factored into short-, medium-, and long-term plans.

Like previous transitions – the ongoing digital transformation is a good example – significant value is at risk, and enormous value can be created.

[Jacco Kroon et al. 2024. Report: Catching the wave - Seizing the opportunities of sustainability transformation. Executive Summary. ERM Sustainability Institute and World Business Council for Sustainable Development. PDF](#)

We are not on a sustainable path. Within the lifetime of *one single generation* the world population, global CO₂ emissions, resource and energy consumption increased at an unprecedented rate.





Data source: Christian Berg. 2020. Online presentation of the new report to the Club of Rome - Sustainable Action. Overcoming the Barriers.

Sustainable development is hardly conceivable without

- an economic transformation inclusively moving towards a consistent circular economy,
- simultaneously cutting back on over-consumption,
- rapidly reducing CO₂ emissions and
- a fundamental change in the way we manage land.

We must move from the deeply internalized attitude of *competition* and *self-interest* to a basic attitude of *cooperation* and *common good*, if for example, we really want to curb global climate change.

Definition of Sustainability

Sustainability is a development that satisfies the needs of the present without risking that future generations will not be able to meet their own needs.

Brundtland Report - Our Common Future. World Commission on the Environment and Development, 1987

Sustainability [ecology] is a principle according to which no more can be consumed, than can respectively be regrown, regenerated, and provided again in the future.

Translated from: Duden German Dictionary

Sustainability means - concisely formulated - good life for about ten billion people within the ecological boundaries on our planet.

Translated from: Uwe Schneidewind. Book: Die Grosse Transformation - Eine Einführung in die Kunst gesellschaftlichen Wandels. 2018

Sustainability is a guiding concept to secure and foster humane living conditions for all people worldwide, in the present and future, and to facilitate restoring and preserving the environmental foundations to enable this.

Mark Lawrence. 2023. [How can I live sustainably?](#) RIFS Research Institute for Sustainability. Helmholtz Centre Potsdam.



As simple as these definitions are, it is difficult to achieve a unified, shared understanding of sustainability.

But without a common understanding of sustainability, the transformation to a more sustainable society can hardly be accomplished.

» Transformation means that we determine what we want to keep and preserve - and at the same time what we want to part from.

Translated from: Stefan Brunnhuber. Book: Die Kunst der Transformation – Wie wir uns anpassen und die Welt verändern. 2023

17 Sustainable Development Goals UN 2030 Agenda

» These goals answer all three design questions for good policymaking in the 21st century:

- What are our needs?**
- What are the circumstances?**
- Which resources are key?**

In detail, they are:

1. Overcome poverty
2. End hunger and ensure healthy nutrition
3. Improve health and well-being
4. Guarantee quality education
5. Guarantee gender equality
6. Guarantee clean water and sanitation
7. Provide affordable and clean energy
8. Decent work and sustainable economic growth
9. Sustainably renew industry, innovation and infrastructure
10. Reduce inequality between and within countries
11. Develop sustainable cities and communities
12. Sustainable consumption and production
13. Climate protection measures
14. Preserve life under water



15. Sustain life on land
16. Peace, justice and strong institutions
17. Partnerships to achieve the goals

Translated from: Maja Göpel. Book: Werte – Ein Kompass für die Zukunft. 2025

» In order to achieve the UN 2030 Agenda's Goals, we need to fundamentally change the way we do business and consume.

Although digitalization is hardly mentioned in the 2030 Agenda, it will greatly influence its implementation.

WBGU German Advisory Council on Global Change. Digitalization: What we need to talk about. 2018.

» Recent studies on the interactions between the Sustainable Development Goals identify the *conservation of biodiversity* as one of the most potent levers to achieve sustainability.

[Swiss Academy of Sciences. Achieving the SDGs with Biodiversity. 2021. PDF](#)

Overview and explanation 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development



» The UN warned that without an improved performance by the G20, which makes up two-thirds of the world's population and is responsible for 75 per cent of global CO₂ emissions, the Agenda will fail.

A primary point of criticism is consumption behaviour on the part of rich industrialised countries.

If the estimates forecasting a rise in global population to 9.7 billion by 2050 are correct, humanity and the planet will face immense challenges. Asia's rise will certainly lead to greater energy demand, consumption, and production.



This is not a call for a backward-looking «ecological agenda», but instead for overdue reforms regarding economic modernisation, climate protection, and innovation.

Sabina Wölkner. 2030 Agenda: The courage to achieve sustainability. Konrad Adenauerstiftung. International Reports 3/2019.



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Anyone who really wants to change something cannot get around thinking about the dogma of «ALWAYS MORE».

» In the race for «more», we lose sight of the fact that «better» is a completely different objective.

Translated from: Maja Göpel. Book: Werte. Ein Kompass für die Zukunft. 2025

» No intelligent person still believes that the existing economic system and the level of consumption of the present can be continued for another one or two generations, a thought that would have been self-evident in 1900 or 1950. This makes it clear: we are at the end of something.

Translated from: Blom Philipp. Book: Das grosse Welttheater. Von der Macht der Vorstellungskraft in Zeiten des Umbruchs. 2020

» As restrictions on consumption are not actually being pursued owing to their unwanted consequences, business and politics are focusing instead on a strategy of promises, and consumers on symbolic surrogate actions.

The order of the day is for example: fewer cars, fewer cruises, and smaller homes. But this will not happen. Since economic growth and consumerism are built into the DNA of the system, a politically prescribed contraction of the economy is simply not feasible.

Beckert Jens. Book: How We Sold Our Future. The Failure to Fight Climate Change. 2025

» The idea that consumption should be limited according to the needs of a planet shared in common by eight billion is, for many, especially in privileged nations, unthinkable as an individual orientation and forgettable as a political program.

Anna Katsman. Planetary Commons. The New Institute. 25.05.2024





» It is understandable that the idea of having to renounce some of the wealth you have gained causes anxiety. It helps to realise that a fulfilled life cannot be measured by the number of cruises taken or the size of your wardrobe.

Renunciation is often associated with loss, which leaves a gap *forever*. But where there are gaps, there is also space for something new.

Translated from: Silvia Liebrich. Wir müssen lernen zu verzichten. Süddeutsche Zeitung. 30. Juli 2022.

» We do not have to renounce happiness, well-being and justice, but excessiveness, abundance, stress and consumption decadence.

Translated from: Stefan Brunnhuber. Book: Die Kunst der Transformation. Wie wir uns anpassen und die Welt verändern. 2023

» In rich countries, renunciation means actually nothing more and nothing less than refraining from ruining the planet and in return preserving the basis of life in the future. - That's a big word, of course. Couldn't it be a little bit smaller? Unfortunately not.

Translated from: Maja Göpel. Book: Unsere Welt neu denken. Eine Einladung. 2020

