FAQ – Frequently asked questions

Sustainability

Living sustainably - but how?

How can I live sustainably? is a question that preoccupies many people. There are at least two main reasons why this seemingly simple question is so difficult to answer.

First, the answer depends on how you define "sustainability". And second, we are not alone: nearly all of us live in societies that are far from what most people would call "sustainable," so that "living sustainably" is not just a matter of individual lifestyle choices, rather would also involve fundamentally changing our societies as a whole:

How do I live sustainably?

A vital role that people can play is to help themselves as well as their friends and families to remain positive and not fall into despair.

To a great extent, the main challenge in the current situation individuals will face is mental. It will be hard to maintain a happy outlook in the face of so many difficulties. It will be hard for people to feel optimistic when they will have so much to worry about, whether it is access to water, falling living standards or frightening weather.

Individuals can only really have a major impact by acting collectively, as activists, shareholders and voters. They can push for change in the political system and the education system. They can demand that the costs of the transition are shared fairly, so that the rich pay much more than the poor. They can stand for election.

Maybe we individuals can make the greatest difference,

- if we take other people with us on the path to sustainable development,
- if we act together and network locally and globally,
- if we push for fundamental changes in politics, so that it listens again to the voice of the people and not only to the voice of the big companies and banks,
- if we reduce our collective consumption by just ten percent, because that would already have a major impact on many of the most polluting activities of our economy.

Many websites offer useful tips for everyday life – here are two examples:

- How to live more sustainably?
- 100 Ordinary Ways to Make an Extraordinary Difference – pdf

How many resources do I need?

With the Wuppertal Institute's calculator you can assess the ecological backpack of your lifestyle, and find out how sustainable your lifestyle is and what a more resource efficient lifestyle could be like.

My ecological backpack

What is the definition of sustainability?

The video from Stepscenter offers a brief and concise explanation of sustainability:

What are Pathways to 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.

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

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

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.

As simple as these definitions may sound, it is still difficult to agree on a uniform, common understanding of sustainability.

Are we on a sustainable path?

No, we are not on a sustainable path. Within the lifetime of *one single* generation, the world's population has increased 4-fold, CO2 emissions 7-fold, resource consumption 8-fold and energy consumption 10-fold.

At present, only 12 % of the 17 goals (SDGs) of the UN's 2030 Agenda for sustainable development are on track. Progress on 50 % is weak and insufficient. More than 30 % of the SDGs have stalled or are moving backwards.

We urgently need to fundamentally change the way we manage our economy and consume in order to achieve sustainable development in the future.

This can probably only be achieved with

- an economic transformation inclusively moving towards a consistent circular economy,
- simultaneously cutting back on over-consumption,
- the decisive action to drastically reduce socio-economic inequalities,
- rapidly reducing CO_2 emissions and
- a fundamental change in the way we manage land.

We are confronted with the Herculean task of satisfying the basic needs of soon to be 9 to 10 billion people while at the same time respecting the ecological limits of the Earth.

Why is it so difficult for us to act sustainably – and what would the realignments be?

The causes are manifold. They include psychological factors such as our habits, social dynamics such as norms and consumer culture, economic barriers such as costs and price pressure, structural hurdles such as a lack of infrastructure and complex implementation, and perceptions such as feelings of powerlessness and successes that only become visible much later.

We need a turnaround regarding resources, energy and prosperity – cornerstones of sustainable development within the limits of the Earth's carrying capacity. It takes much more than just reducing CO_2 emissions.

In order to fundamentally reduce risks in the future, extraordinary U-turns and realignments are necessary in almost all areas of our society – which makes it so difficult for us, not least because this challenges seem almost insurmountable.

However, these U-turns are not an attempt to create an impossible utopia. They form the indispensable foundation for a more resilient civilisation that is currently under extraordinary pressure:

- **Ending poverty**
- **Eliminating extreme inequality**
- **Empowering women**
- **Building a food system that is healthy for people and ecosystems**
- **Transition to the use of clean energy**

The building blocks for sustainable development are mainly the following realignments, which are all closely interlinked:

- **Turnaround in prosperity and consumption**
  The question is how a “Culture of Enough” is possible and how the formation of such a culture can be supported by politics with the introduction of framework conditions.
- **Energy turnaround**
  The goal of a revolution in our energy systems can only be achieved if the switch to renewable energy goes hand in hand with energy savings and greater energy efficiency.

- **Resource turnaround**
  Only if resource consumption per capita of the wealthy is reduced by a factor of 4 to 5 will humanity remain within planetary boundaries in the long term.
- **Mobility turnaround**
  The change in mobility is closely linked to the energy turnaround and the resource turnaround and therefore needs more than just technological developments. We need to rethink mobility.
- **Nutrition turnaround**
  Today's food production is responsible for a significant proportion of global resource consumption and CO_2 emissions. 30% of consumer-related environmental impacts in Europe are caused by our eating habits. Our consumption of meat and fish needs to be significantly reduced.
- **Urban turnaround**
  By the middle of this century, around 80% of the world's population will be living in cities. The nature of urban development is therefore of central importance for sustainable development as a whole.

Our Earth

How much is global warming at the moment?

Globally, the average temperature has already gone up by about 1.5 °C compared to the pre-industrial era. It's worth noting that the temperature rise over land areas is higher than over the oceans, which make up about 70% of the Earth's surface. For example, the temperature rise in Switzerland has already reached 2.9 °C.

The temperature change from 1850 to the present day is illustrated in clear graphics on the University of Reading website. You can select by country and region:

#ShowYourStripes

Can climate change still be halted?

No - because global greenhouse gas emissions have been rising every year for decades and continue to do so. Once emitted, the greenhouse gases remain in the atmosphere for a very long time. Every additional tonne of greenhouse gas adds to the greenhouse gases emitted in previous decades and further increases the concentration in the atmosphere.

That is why the damage we are doing to the climate – unlike, e.g., in the case of financial crises or pandemics – is irreversible. What we fail to do now to reduce CO2 emissions cannot be made up for later. This means, even if we were to radically reduce greenhouse gas emissions in the coming years, the concentration in the atmosphere would still continue to rise, causing additional global warming.

So we can no longer halt climate change, but we can slow down the rise in global warming.

The world is on a slightly less dangerous climate path than it was before the 2015 Paris Climate Agreement. However, if we carry on as before, global warming could rise to 3 °C or more, which would have serious to catastrophic consequences for billions of people.

This makes decisive action all the more urgent, in order to significantly reduce global greenhouse gas emissions in the coming years.

Because every tenth of a degree Celsius less global warming significantly reduces the suffering and misery of people affected by climate change.

Have we exceeded the Earth's load limits?

Due to high energy and raw material consumption and the resulting impact on the environment, our planet has largely exceeded its boundaries of the load capacity. Limits that must be respected in order to preserve the foundations of human life:

Seven of nine planetary boundaries now breached

Resource extraction and processing are responsible for 90% of global biodiversity loss, 50% of global greenhouse gas emissions, and over 30% of air-pollution-related health impacts.

Despite efforts to move towards a circular economy, the proportion of recycled materials out of total material consumption globally fell from 9% to 7% between 2019 and 2023.

Reducing the resource intensity of food, mobility, housing and energy systems is most likely the only way of achieving the sustainable development goals, the climate goals, and ultimately a just and liveable planet for all.

What about biodiversity, life's variety on Earth?

Biodiversity, the variety of *genes*, *species* and *habitats* provides indispensable services for society and the economy, known as ecosystem services. These provide food, influence the climate, maintain water and air quality, contribute to soil formation and, last but not least, offer humans space for recreation.

Records show that species extinction occurs naturally, but today's extinction rates are estimated to be 100 to 1,000 times higher. It is not only the number of species that is declining alarmingly, but also the number of living creatures. Global wild animal populations

of mammals, birds, fish, reptiles and amphibians have declined by an average of 73% since 1970.

The loss of biodiversity in agriculture is also significant. Until the last century around 7,000 plants were cultivated for food purposes, today only around 80 varieties contribute significantly to the global food supply.

And biodiversity of the oceans with an estimated one million animal and plant species, is undergoing even greater change than on land.

The rapidly advancing decline in biodiversity on land and in the sea therefore poses a serious risk to the food security of humankind. That's why an agreement at the 15th UN Biodiversity Conference 2022 was reached to protect at least 30 per cent of the world's land, sea and inland waters by 2030.

Conserving biodiversity is considered one of the most powerful levers for achieving sustainable development worldwide.

The WWF report on biodiversity provides an up-to-date overview and focuses on the years 2025 – 2030 as crucial for climate protection and species conservation:

2024 Living Planet Report - A system in Peril - pdf

Society

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How does social inequality affect climate change?

There is enormous inequality in terms of wealth, income, resource consumption, consumer spending, CO2 emissions between countries and also within societies.

Large parts of the global population have little share in economic growth, while economic value added largely benefits a small section of society. Their wealth has never been as great as it is today and is currently rising rapidly.

And it is precisely this social class, the richest 1 per cent of humanity, that is responsible for more CO2 emissions than the 66 per cent poorer and poorest people in the world.

The richest 10 per cent of the world's population are responsible for two-thirds of the global warming observed since 1990 and the resulting sharp increase in extreme weather events.

It is also consistent with these facts that the government of the world’s largest economic power, promoted by influential billionaires, categorically rejects responsibility for the climate change caused by rich industrialised countries and continues to rely on fossil fuels.

It is easy to see why a policy aimed at reducing CO_2 emissions that ignore these enormous inequalities are unlikely to find broad support and will meet with strong resistance.

It is also entirely understandable why a large part of the world's population, who have to fight for their daily survival, consider economic growth that promises them prosperity much more important than serious climate protection measures, the costs of which are now also to be burdened on them.

As a result, billions of poorer people and the world's poorest people, who have contributed little or nothing to climate change and global warming, are exposed without any protection to

the effects of climate change through drought, flooding and heat and are under existential threat.

In addition to many other social impacts, high inequalities also have serious consequences for global efforts to tackle climate change, environmental pollution and biodiversity loss.

Without decisive measures to drastically reduce socio-economic inequalities, there will be probably no solution to the climate and environmental crisis.

Does our society need a strategy of the Enough?

The pressure of the global middle and upper classes on our planet's vital ecological systems has now become so strong that a climatic and ecological destabilization of the Earth has begun.

This destabilization endangers the ecological foundations of life, which include a stable climate, a functioning biosphere, sufficient availability of clean water, healthy soil and clean air.

The past decades have brought unprecedented prosperity to many people. However, our planet and a huge number of people are paying a high price for this.

This is the historic novelty of the current situation: As we run ever closer to the edge of the environmental envelope – the conditions within which our species can thrive – the development of the rich world systematically undercuts the conditions for survival of billions of people in the climate danger zone.

What is needed is a shift from extractive, growth-oriented economic models toward sufficiency, circularity, and intelligent and just provisioning systems.

We need urgently a discussion about sufficiency as a strategy of the Enough - the hitherto neglected dimension of future policy:

Sufficiency as a Strategy of the Enough. - pdf

What's the impact of pollution on us humans?

Pollution is now a substantial problem that endangers the health of billions, degrades the Earth's ecosystems, undermines the economic security of nations, and is responsible for an enormous global burden of disease, disability, and premature death:

- In the most severely affected countries, pollution-related disease is responsible for more than one death in four.
- According to a new study, it is estimated that over four billion people worldwide do not have an adequate supply of drinking water. That is more than half of the world's population.

Policymakers and society need to rethink approaches to these issues and recognise how strongly human health and the environment are interconnected.

Health and environmental risks from emissions, wastes and chemicals in the air, soil and water should be prevented with a controlled circular economy and emissions regulations.

How is digitalisation linked to sustainable development?

Overall, digitalization processes today tend to act as «*fire accelerants*», exacerbating existing non-sustainable trends such as the overuse of natural resources and growing social inequality.

Despite innovative small-scale initiatives, it can be noted that in none of the key sectors – transport, energy, agriculture, housing, consumer goods – has the introduction of digital tools so far brought about a shift towards sustainable alternatives. On the other hand, digitalization offers an enormous range of possibilities for supporting the transformation towards sustainability.

The major breakthroughs in Artificial Intelligence (AI) do not lie in ChatGPT's ability to write an essay, but rather in AI's potential to improve personalised medicine or, as a technology, to enable measures to be taken against climate change. That is why it is necessary to make artificial intelligence sustainable.

We have various stages of industrialisation: mechanisation, electrification, computerisation and now we are in the digitalisation stage. The fifth stage is the ecologisation and the personalisation of our systems - and we need to get to this Industrie 5.0 quickly.

In fact, we will need AI for a world worth living in. After all, we will not be able to predict floods, better manage droughts, understand the melting of glaciers or adapt agriculture to changing conditions without IT and AI.

This requires economic transformation. We will move from the concept of efficiency to that of sufficiency and ask ourselves what and how much needs to be digitalised in order to develop a balanced life for people.

Our Common Digital Future - pdf

The references have been omitted in order to keep the FAQ page easy to read. However, they are listed in detail elsewhere on this website.