

Towards a post-sustainability society?

New challenges, agendas, and roles in socio-ecological transformation and its research

Call for Papers for the International Conference of *Soziologie und Nachhaltigkeit (SuN)* –
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Efforts to strengthen ecological sustainability have transformed the economy, politics, and everyday life. At the same time, these efforts are not sufficient to stop climate change or the loss of biodiversity. Rather than being intensified, mitigation efforts are coming under pressure globally, as is sustainability as a political goal and societal guiding norm. For different societal actors, preventing socio-ecological crises no longer seems to be a vital concern. Instead, the new primacy of a *post-sustainability society* appears to be living — or surviving — within these crises, through adaptation and the fostering of “resilience,” social closure, securing access to resources, maintaining competitiveness, and military rearmament. Hence, the term “post-sustainability” does not imply that ecological crises have come to an end. Rather, it points to the possibility that sustainability itself is losing its integrative political and normative force. This perspective raises new questions of local and translocal solidarity and mutual aid in the context of ecological collapse.

This development is characterised by numerous contradictory dynamics: Across the world, right-wing populist and authoritarian forces are fighting measures aimed at greater ecological sustainability. However, in some cases, even left-wing and progressive actors are distancing themselves from sustainability communication or climate mitigation efforts and are instead focusing on traditional social issues, such as poverty reduction and inequality. At the same time, the wars waged by Russia against Ukraine and by the United States and Israel in the Middle East are accelerating the transition to renewable energy systems. Yet overall, current geopolitical conflicts illustrate a broader transformation in which ecological sustainability is increasingly subordinated to concerns over security, geopolitical tensions, strategic autonomy, and economic competitiveness.

Diagnoses of a gradual shift in priorities towards a *post-sustainability society* — whether resulting from inadequate or actively contested environmental policy — are, on the other hand, called into question by institutional and infrastructural path dependencies established through previous sustainability efforts. It remains unclear, for instance, whether the phase-out of fossil fuels, investments in renewable energy, the infrastructures created for this purpose, as well as laws, international treaties, or court rulings that oblige states and economic actors to pursue climate mitigation can be fully reversed. Finally, empirical findings raise the question of whether a substantive sustainability transformation has ever taken place at all, or whether what has occurred instead amounts to symbolic politics, while world society has remained in a state of non-sustainability.

At the center of the conference lies the question of how actors involved in sustainable transformation — for example, from the fields of politics, business, science, and civil society — can maintain their capacity to act in the face of an observable *greenlash* and the possible failure of a socio-ecological transformation. Which coping and resistance strategies are being negotiated and tested in the process? The conference brings together international perspectives on these recent developments and aims to make visible regional specificities, international differences and asynchronicities, as well as shared problem constellations and possible strategies for action.

While numerous societies, particularly in the Global North, are increasingly concerned about the escalating consequences of socio-ecological crises, for many of the world's *most affected people and areas*, these threats are neither abstract nor confined to the future, but have already been part of their everyday lives for many years. Moreover, for many non-human animals and other more-than-human entities, habitat loss and climate change are already threatening the very conditions of survival.

From a postcolonial perspective, it is therefore necessary to confront the question of whether the Global North and its (social) sciences are increasingly coming to recognise that there has never been a unified global project of sustainability. The insights of the Report to the Club of Rome on the *Limits to Growth* and further approaches to a *degrowth* understanding of sustainability and the efforts of the Brundtland Report with its global institutional-transformative perspective seem to have been lost from view. Instead, a dominant understanding of sustainability as ecological modernisation has emerged, which reduces sustainability measures to technological innovations that address specific ecological challenges. Such policies of the Global North have always depended on the transnational externalisation of impacts and costs.

These developments also raise new questions about the roles, assumptions and responsibilities of sustainability research and researchers. For example, those strands of sustainability research that actively help shape and promote the development towards a sustainable society are faced with the question of whether they should remain on familiar paths. Under changing societal conditions, is trans- or interdisciplinary *business as usual*

still meaningful — or even possible at all? For researchers who have so far primarily analysed sustainability-related trends and development processes from an observational perspective, the question arises as to the extent to which recent developments require new interpretive heuristics and analytical foci.

The conference **“Towards a post-sustainability society? New challenges, agendas, and roles in socio-ecological transformation and its research”** engages with ambiguities inherent in these sociological diagnoses of and perspectives on sustainability. Researchers are invited to submit contributions addressing the question of sustainability “after sustainability.” We ask for abstracts of no more than 250 words to be submitted by **15 November 2026** to veranstaltungen.us.fk17@tu-dortmund.de. Contributions may address, for example, the following questions and topics:

- How should sociology understand and analyse socio-ecological transformation under conditions in which sustainability itself becomes politically contested? To what extent can a sociology of post-sustainability utilise established sociological concepts such as knowledge regimes, nation-states, institutions, social inequality, social practices, or cultural ideas for the analysis of a society facing ecological collapse?
- Which responses to the looming failure of sustainability projects can be observed, and how can these developments be explained? How can societies reproduce themselves in socially just ways under the conditions of socio-ecological catastrophes?
- Which power relations become visible with the development towards a *post-sustainability society*, and how are they shifting? Which new forms of subjectivity, collective actors, claims, and power resources are developing in the *post-sustainability society*? What role do more-than-human actors play in this context?
- To what extent are research topics, methods, and funding opportunities changing in the *post-sustainability society*? How does this change the normative and/or political position and responsibility of researchers? To what extent and in what ways should research aim to prevent a possible collapse, the intensification of social inequalities, or the escalation of violence?
- Which new forms of participation and organisation of sustainable perspectives and practices should emerge? What role can, may, or should transdisciplinary sustainability research play in this context?
- To what extent can the diagnosis of a *post-sustainability society* be empirically challenged? Which societal transformations towards sustainability can still be observed? Which sustainability-related attitudes prevail? What lines of conflict are emerging between the current greenlash and societal expectations and hopes?