



RIFS Research Institute for
Sustainability | at GFZ

Tough Conversations in Tough Times

Organised by Research Institute for
Sustainability (RIFS) at GFZ

3 December 2025, 11:30–
5 December 2025, 13:00

Leonardo Royal Berlin Hotel
Otto-Braun-Straße 90
10249 Berlin, Germany

Programme
RIFS Conference
2025

Climate change and escalating social and environmental crises are touching our lives with growing frequency. Yet, we are also seeing growing opposition to policies, designed to address these challenges. This resistance to sustainability is no longer subtle—it's becoming increasingly vocal in the public and political debate, including social media. The RIFS 2025 Conference “Tough Conversations in Tough Times” aims to create a space for open discussion to understand this backlash and explore how we, as a community dedicated to sustainability, can effectively foster a just and inclusive societal transformation.

In keynotes and a high-level panel discussion we will discuss the current challenges and potential strategies of change. In 48 break-out sessions with presentations, panel discussions and co-reflective workshop sessions, participants can engage in discussions on:

- Policy backlash against sustainability, climate obstructionism, the relationship between far-right populism and attitudes towards socio-ecological justice, and how societal fragmentation affects sustainability transitions.
- Narratives and approaches to dialogue that can enable effective discussions.
- The role of research in counteracting policy backlash and the potential of transdisciplinary alliances.
- Governance arrangements and instruments at local and global levels, democratic innovations and instruments for sustainability-oriented transformations.
- Local and global (in)justices of sustainability transitions and the potentials of participation and co-creation.
- How to achieve sustainability in consumption, especially through the concept of consumption corridors.
- The effects of AI, systemic risks and global (military) conflict on sustainability transitions.

In addition to its academic focus, this inaugural RIFS conference will feature art exhibitions, artistic interventions, and role-playing exercises exploring the connections between sustainability research, emotions, and environmental activism.

3 December	4 December	5 December
11:30–12:30 Registration & light lunch	8:30–9:00 Arrival & Coffee	8:30–8:45 Arrival & Coffee
12:30–12:55 Welcome & opening remarks Doris Fuchs, Mark Lawrence & Franziska Mey, Research Institute for Sustainability (RIFS)	9:00–10:30 Parallel Workshop Sessions C ↗	8:45–10:15 Parallel Workshop Sessions G ↗
12:55–13:00 Video message: Healthy Planet—Healthy People. How to communicate climate, biodiversity and health Eckart von Hirschhausen, Stiftung „Gesunde Erde–Gesunde Menschen“	10:30–10:50 Break	10:15–10:35 Break
13:00–14:00 Challenge 1: Building “We” in a Wounded World: Cross-Class Alliances and the Challenge of Environmental Justice Keynote Manisha Anantharaman, Sciences Po Paris	10:50–12:20 Parallel Workshop Sessions D ↗	10:35–12:05 Parallel Workshop Sessions H ↗
14:00–14:20 Break	12:20–13:15 Lunch	12:10–13:00 Final Reflections, Feedback & looking ahead Doris Fuchs & Mark Lawrence (RIFS)
14:20–15:50 Parallel Workshop Sessions A ↗	13:15–14:15 Challenge 3: Facts, lies, feelings —tough times for science Keynote Jürgen Trittin, former German Federal Minister for the Environment, Nature Conservation and Nuclear Safety in Germany	13:00 Light Lunch & Departure
15:50–16:10 Break	14:15–14:45 Reflections in Action: Interactive Insights	
16:10–17:40 Parallel Workshop Sessions B ↗	14:45–15:00 Break	
17:40–18:00 Break	15:00–16:30 Parallel Workshop Sessions E ↗	
18:00–19:00 Challenge 2: How can we advance sustainability at multiple levels in times of backlash? Panel discussion Farhana Yamin, climate lawyer & expert for climate and development policy, Richard von Weizsäcker Fellow Heidemarie Wieczorek-Zeul, former Federal Minister of Economic Development and Cooperation Katja Dietrich, Mayor, Municipality of Weißwasser Susanne Buitter, Scientific Executive Director, GFZ Helmholtz Centre for Geosciences Moderation: Julia Vismann	16:30–16:45 Break	
19:00 Day One Wrap-Up followed by a Reception Doris Fuchs & Mark Lawrence (RIFS)	16:45–18:15 Parallel Workshop Sessions F ↗ Special panel on Tensions Between the Green Transition and Planetary Health Katrín Böhning-Gaese, Scientific Director, UFZ Helmholtz Centre for Environmental Research Henning Flaskamp, Stiftung Gesunde Erde, Gesunde Menschen Karen Siegel, Senior Fellow, RIFS Moderation: Ortwin Renn, Former Director, RIFS	
	18:20–18:30 Day Two Wrap-Up and Evening Agenda Doris Fuchs & Mark Lawrence (RIFS)	
	20:00–22:00 Drinks and food at the “Spreespeicher” Christmas market	

Exhibitions

There will be several exhibitions on site throughout the duration of the conference:

— **Climate Tides: A Visual Dialogue on Climate Narratives—Framing Policy, Action, and Change** by Sanyam Bajaj.

This exhibition will be showcased in the coffee area. The artist offers a discussion of his art work during parallel session H on 5 December from 10:35–12:05



— **Blind spot intervention: A photographic exhibition that seeks to bring awareness to climate activism** done by Scientist Rebellion. The artists offer a discussion of their work during parallel session E on 4 December from 15:00–16:30



— The exhibition, **“Possible Landscapes of a Common Place”** by Samir Dams presents a selection of 20 mixed-media works created with recycled materials collected from the streets of Belém’s commercial center in northern Brazil. This exhibition will be showcased in the plenary

— Manisha Panda from the Helmholtz Centre for Environmental Research will be on-site with the **EE-Monitor: Public Environmental Monitoring of the Energy Transition.**

— **Fact Making, Exhibition & Performance by** Julika Gittner from RIFS showcases selected methods developed as part of the Kiezblock consultation process in Antonkiez, Wedding (April 23–Sept 25), using interactive sculpture and visual art practices to engage the public around mobility transformations. The artist will host a workshop on Thursday, 4 December 2025, 10:50–12:20 in the coffee area



Session 1 (panel discussion in plenary)

Climate Policy Backlash and Populism in Germany: Drivers and Consequences

Location: Plenary Room

Chair: Julia Vismann

Germany has long been considered a frontrunner in climate policy and sustainability transitions. Yet, recent political and societal developments reveal increasing resistance to environmental measures, reflecting broader trends of populist mobilization and policy backlash across Europe. This backlash appears closely linked to the rise of right-wing extremist parties, which have politicized and weaponized sustainability issues to mobilize public discontent. Rising costs, perceptions of unfairness, and fragmented public discourse have further fuelled opposition to key transition policies, challenging both their implementation and legitimacy. Understanding the underlying drivers of this backlash—and its political and social consequences—has become central to ensuring that climate action remains both effective and socially just.

This session examines the dynamics of climate policy backlash and populism in the German context. Contributions explore the role of societal fragmentation in shaping attitudes towards mobility transitions, analyze conflicting interests and mentalities underlying resistance to sustainability policies, and assess how the rise of far-right movements influences carbon dioxide removal strategies. Further presentations investigate public responses to the German heating reform and the economic roots of current sustainability setbacks. Together, these discussions ask: What drives opposition to climate policy in Germany? How does populism interact with climate and energy debates? And what strategies can strengthen social cohesion and acceptance of ambitious climate action?

Speakers

- Elisabeth Dütschke, Anne Kantel, Fraunhofer ISI
- Linda von Faber, Martin Fritz, Friedrich Schiller University Jena
- Niklas Kramer, Free University of Berlin, RIFS
- Christian Fahrbach, Leuphana University Lüneberg

Session 2

Quantifying the Unquantifiable? Rethinking Knowledge for Future-Oriented Policy

Location: Room 1

Chair: Silvia Weko, Friedrich Alexander University Erlangen-Nürnberg

This panel explores the interactions between science and policy in the face of uncertain futures. Dominant understandings of what counts as “legitimate” knowledge shape both sustainability research and policy advice. A strong preference for quantitative analyses has created an orthodoxy in which modeling tends to be perceived as more scientific and actionable. However, such models are limited in that they usually focus on easily quantifiable interventions (usually carbon pricing) rather than policies to encourage community participation or local ownership in transitions.

As a result, policy advice tends to focus on specific kinds of interventions that are more easily quantifiable and model-able. This, in turn, constrains the possible sphere of policies that can be used to push sustainability transitions. We therefore bring together academics and policy advisors to discuss the implications of this orthodoxy, and how it can be challenged for more accurate and inclusive policymaking. Our discussion revolves around two main points: how we can challenge this hierarchy of evidence, and ensure that other complex or qualitative dimensions are not treated as secondary or anecdotal? And, given the demand for evidence-based, “objective” policy advice, how can

Parallel Sessions A

Wednesday, 3 December 2025, 14:20–15:50

we quantify difficult-to-quantify phenomena? We discuss current efforts to organize sustainability data and their potential usefulness for both policy advisors and researchers.

Speakers

- Diana Süsser, Institute for European Energy and Climate Policy
 - Ioannis Milioritsas, Friedrich Alexander University Erlangen-Nuremberg
 - David Krogmann, University of Bremen
 - Samarth Kumar, Agora Energiewende
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Session 3

Do Democratic Innovations Foster Sustainability-Oriented Transformation and Governance?

Location: Room 2

Chair: Inês Campos, University of Lisbon

To what extent, how, and under what conditions can democratic innovations foster effective sustainability governance in the context of the present (geo)political, environmental, and social challenges? According to the state of the art, democratic innovations are expected to enhance the legitimacy and resilience of democracy via the creation and strengthening of new forms of participation and engagement. Aiming to mitigate against declining trust and participation in democratic institutions, such innovations are understood to invite a re-imagination of governance and frequently associated with an ambition of improved opportunities for societal dialogue, learning, and inclusivity. However, the emergence of democratic innovations in this specific context has not received sufficient attention. This may partly be the case because democratic innovations themselves still are an emerging set of practices that both rely on and instigate the ongoing scholarly debate.

Innovative democratic practices at all levels of governance hold the potential to accelerate transformations toward sustainability, yet they may also fail to do so. Accordingly, it is extremely important to develop a better understanding of the conditions under which promising outcomes are likely to be achieved. The panel proposed here aims to address this lacuna. The papers included offer a range of perspective on the question of the conditions under which democratic innovations hold the potential for an effective support of sustainability-oriented transformations. Jointly, they offer a better understanding of the need and potential for democratic innovations as co-created processes of civic participation and engagement critical for transformative change.

Speakers

- Oliver Treib, Caner Simsek, Bernd Schlipphak, University of Münster
 - Inês Campos, University of Lisbon
 - Christian Klöckner, Norwegian University of Science and Technology
 - Vanessa Buth, University of Münster
 - Doris Fuchs, RIFS, Paula Berendt, RIFS
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Session 4

Urban Digital Twins for Climate Adaptation: From Interoperability to Governance Innovation

Location: Room 3

Chair: Jörg Radtke, RIFS

Digital transformation and climate resilience are increasingly entangled in urban governance. Urban Digital Twins (UDTs) have emerged as promising tools for visualizing climate risks, simulating adaptive strategies, and integrating diverse datasets to support faster, evidence-based planning. Yet, the promise of UDTs is met with unresolved questions: How can we ensure interoperability across urban systems? How do we embed these tools into everyday administrative processes? And crucially—how do we center social acceptance, equity, and local identities in technologically mediated climate adaptation? This session brings together insights from multiple research and municipal initiatives to explore the role of Urban Digital Twins in accelerating planning for climate adaptation.

Speakers

- Felix Creutzig, Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research (PIK)
- Tomas Fernandez-Steege, TU Berlin
- Christoph Nytsch-Geusen, Berlin University of the Arts, tbc
- Jacqueline Henle, FZI Research Centre for Information Technology
- Dorothea Winter, Humanistische Hochschule Berlin AdöR
- Tobias Hungerlund, Institut für Innovation und Technik (iit)
- Rita Streblow, RWTH Aachen University
- Stefan Ullrich, KI-Ideenwerkstatt für Umweltschutz, ZUG gGmbH

Session 5

Root Causes and Remedies: Exploring Interrelations Between the Crises of Democracy and Sustainability

Location: Rooms 4+5

Chair: Lea Becker, RIFS; Lars Berker, University of Münster

In recent years, the dual crises of liberal democracy and socio-ecological sustainability have emerged as defining challenges of our time. While liberal democracies face growing threats from authoritarian populism, institutional distrust, and socio-political polarisation, the global sustainability agenda confronts mounting ecological degradation, climate emergencies, and widening social inequalities. Although often treated as separate domains, these crises are deeply interlinked. This session includes contributions that critically explore the intersections between the crisis of liberal democratic governance and the sustainability imperative. In this regard, it aims at providing contributions to two key issues in particular:

1. Identifying root causes common to the crises of sustainability and liberal democracy.
2. Exploring solutions to these crises, with a focus on the synergies between (strong) sustainability and democracy.

The main emphasis of this panel is to provide space for meaningful dialogue across different approaches. In particular, the session seeks to place emphasis on the conversation between more empirical and more theoretical scholars. This seeks to promote a constructive analysis of the root causes and remedies of these two major crises of the 21st century, thus, contributing to a deeper understanding of the political conditions necessary for a just and sustainable future.

Speakers

- Aron Buzogány, University of Natural Resources and Life Sciences Vienna
- Lars Berker, University of Münster; Lea Becker, RIFS
- Jens Marquardt, Technische Universität Darmstadt
- Marit Hammond, University of Warwick
- Tobias Gumbert, University of Münster

Session 6

Tough Relations in Tough Times? Bridging Urban and Rural Realities

(interactive session)

Location: Rooms 6+7

Chairs: **Sophia Becker & Katharina Beyerl**, RIFS, Technical University of Berlin

Currently, half of the world's population lives in cities, while the other half lives in rural areas. Cities offer a wide range of goods and services, cuisines, mobility options and culture in a condensed space. Living in rural areas has different advantages, but there are fewer options to choose from. The challenges faced in cities and rural areas differ, particularly with regard to income opportunities, housing prices and opportunities for societal exchange. While many cities are growing and setting new standards, rural communities are experiencing demographic change in the form of smaller, older and more isolated populations, as well as limited funds to maintain public services. Communities and individuals who are already under pressure seem overwhelmed by the socio-ecological crisis and the need for radical change towards more sustainable lifestyles. This is leading to increasing tensions, which are mirrored in polarised election results and political realities. In this interactive session, we will reflect on these challenges and discuss specific solutions for sustainable development, focusing particularly on the mobility and food transition from the perspectives of provisioning and consumption. After short input statements on urban and rural challenges, we will open the reflection space to collect approaches tailored to the specific needs of different communities. Our goal is to address the question of how to create enabling environments that encourage sustainable behaviours despite challenging and differing conditions.

Session 7

Transdisciplinary Spaces of Conflict (Transformation)

(interactive session)

Location: DaVinci Lounge

Chairs: **Daniela Pastoors & Rebecca Froese**, University of Münster

In the current simultaneity of transformation processes and the risk of overwhelming society, transdisciplinary (TD) research is credited with the ability to integrate different forms of knowledge, providing a robust base for conflict-laden transformation processes. However, deconstructive, polarising forms of dealing with conflicts are increasingly dominating public discourse. These dynamics are also often observed in TD formats (such as real-world laboratories (RWL)), where conflicts are either dealt with superficially or avoided altogether. While these formats are considered to have great potential for strengthening inclusive and participatory processes, they are often based on the expectation that representation will legitimise transformation measures. Conflicts are given little value and tend to be presented as 'disturbing' and 'to be solved'. In this interactive workshop, we will explore participants' experiences of different types of conflict in TD settings, as well as the diversity of conflict perceptions and ways of dealing with them. Using sociometric methods, we will share insights from our current research and discuss additional roles that can support constructive conflict transformation. How can social negotiation processes constructively transform emotions and conflicts without homogenising and reproducing inequality and injustice? How can TD formats be designed in a conflict-sensitive way to create generative spaces for learning and relationship-building? Which methodologies are more effective than others for addressing conflicts in TD settings, and why? Finally, we would like to develop and discuss further recommendations for designing TD spaces for conflict transformation.

Session 8 (panel discussion in plenary) Roundtable on Strategic Springboards for Consumption Corridors

Location: Plenary Room

Chair: Michael Maniates, Yale-NUS College Singapore

Consumption corridors—“a space between minimum consumption standards that provide every individual with the ability to live a good life, and maximum consumption standards that prevent individuals from consuming in quantities or ways that hurt others’ chances to do the same”—are a necessary and contentious element of any path to a better future. Necessary because of the social, ethical and ecological violence arising from deeply asymmetrical and continuously expanding levels of consumption. And contentious because of resistance by vested interests that benefit from an economic logic of expansion and appropriation, supported by narratives about the imperatives of growth and the efficacy of technological innovation. Efforts to overcome political and social opposition to consumption corridors must be strategically incremental, focusing on places and ways where small wins and shrewd policy sequencing create positive feedback loops of expanding political support. No preliminary reconnaissance of these possible “places and ways”—where elements of consumption corridors are already supported, accepted, or pursued—yet exists in the scientific literature. Consumption corridors do not yet exist. But their precursors do, in the form of existing or emerging norms, participatory governance practices, specific consumption-focused policies and practices, larger institutional forms, and the like. Identifying these precursors, understanding their evolution and operation, and strategizing about appropriate interventions (research, advocacy, organizing, storytelling, etc.) to escalate their salience and power could uncover springboards for robust corridors while dodging unnecessary political struggle. This roundtable is conceived as a first step toward this work.

Speakers

- Manesha Anantharaman, Sciences Po
- Erik Assadourian, Gaian Way
- Doris Fuchs, RIFS
- Michael Maniates, associated with Yale-NUS College Singapore

Session 9 Deep-Dive into the Format of “Bittersweet Lessons” from the European Horizon SCALEDEM Project (interactive session)

Location: Room 1

Chairs: Dorota Stasiak & Ingeborg Niestroy, RIFS

The European Horizon project SCALEDEM, which studies and supports the development and enhancement of democratic innovations, encompasses prototypical interaction formats designed to enhance the culture of acknowledging and learning from mistakes, which are perceived as a resource to reflect upon and build on. One specific format to unlock this potential is called “Bittersweet Lessons”, which brings together scholars and practitioners experienced in developing and implementing democratic innovations to exchange not only on the “sweetness” of success achieved in transformative work but also on the “bitterness” of disappointments, trial and error, and failures. At the RIFS conference, we invite participants to experience firsthand what the “Bittersweet Lessons space” looks and feels like in practice during a workshop in which we wish to explore constructive approaches to drawing lessons from smaller or larger failures in projects related to sustainability transformations, democratic innovations, and at the intersection of these two fields. The workshop consists of two parts. In the first part, participants have the opportunity to get to know our method through firsthand experience and engagement in a shortened version of a facilitated “Bittersweet Lessons space.” In the second part, we invite meta-reflection on the format itself, sharing feedback, and developing ideas about how

Parallel Sessions B

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to enhance and scale it so that more and more contexts can benefit from the lived practice of learning from mistakes. In particular, we also reflect on the new roles for scientists and facilitators as enablers of conversations that might be tough but ultimately fruitful.

Session 10

Reactionary Realignments: Technology and the New Right

Location: Room 2

Chairs: Hilton Simmet & Tobias Haas, RIFS

This panel examines how sustainability and democratic governance can be pursued amid the growing alignment of technology (and technologists) with the “new right.” While the political turn of Silicon Valley to the right—powerfully captured in an image that showed the CEOs of America’s richest and most influential tech companies lining up behind Donald Trump on the day of his second inauguration—surprised many, we examine how this turn emerged from libertarian, masculinist, and authoritarian currents in tech culture. The panel will ask how an ethos of disruption, once associated with progress and openness, came to fuel reactionary politics, undermine democratic oversight, and reshape geopolitical alignments, for instance in the growing political divides between Europe and the United States. By interrogating the role of “tech” in crystallizing regressive political forces, the panel explore related implications of this turn such as: How does this realignment affect visions of a sustainable future? Can the democratic, collaborative promise once associated with the internet be recovered? Through these questions, the panel seeks to clarify the historical roots, contemporary dynamics, and global implications of technology’s turn toward the political right.

Speakers

- Stefan Schäfer, RIFS
 - Hilton Simmet, RIFS,
 - Tobias Haas, RIFS
 - Nils Markusson, Lancaster University
 - Margo Boenig-Liptsin, ETH Zurich
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Session 11

Structural North-South Inequalities in Energy Transitions

Location: Room 3

Chairs: Grace Mbungu, Consultant for Brot für die Welt

While there is a growing chorus of voices calling for just sustainability transitions, structural North–South inequalities are still rarely addressed systematically, leaving several blind spots. Much of the literature on just transitions from the Global North, for instance, focuses on protecting jobs in industrialised countries and mitigating the local impacts of extractive activities in the Global South. Yet it often overlooks a more structural concern: the broader development trajectories of entire countries in the South. Likewise, there are concerns that green transitions in the Global North are exacerbating a rush for natural resources and the installation of renewable energy infrastructures in the peripheries of both the Global North and the Global South.

By focusing on concrete case studies from Latin America, Africa, and the Arctic region of Finnmark, this session takes a closer look at what sustainability transitions mean in peripheral territories along the North–South divide. Some of the questions addressed include: What do sustainability transitions look like in territories marked by persistent fragmentation, violence, and institutional “absence”? What can we learn from struggles for environmental justice in these contexts? And how can international governance frameworks better promote fairness and equity in the global green transformation?

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Speakers

- Paula Juliana Salazar Becerra, University of East Anglia; Angela Ocampo, Independent researcher
 - Chetna Ahlawat, Central European University
 - Elisabeth Möhle, Universidad Nacional de San Martín / Fundar
 - Chris Höhne, Wuppertal Institute
 - Jorge Dávalos, Partnership for Economic Policy
 - Rafael Hernandez-Westpfahl, Heidelberg University
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Session 12

Ecopolitics in an Age of Reaction: Power, Climate, and the Politics of Life

Location: Rooms 4+5

Chairs: Alexandra Tost & Cecilia Oliveira, RIFS

In a time when authoritarian, nationalist, and extractivist politics increasingly define public debate, ecopolitics—the politics of life, the environment, and planetary futures—face urgent challenges. As sustainability discourses are squeezed out of mainstream arenas, critical and radical perspectives are more important than ever to navigate our socio-ecological crises. This panel brings together scholars at the intersection of political theory, climate governance, and transformative ecopolitics to explore how concepts like post-carbon democracy, authoritarian environmentalism, ecofeminism, degrowth, and radical democratic theory can inform and intervene in these “tough conversations in tough times.” * How can ecopolitical thought and practice respond to environmental crises entangled with reactionary politics? * What new forms of collective agency and political imagination are needed to reclaim public spaces for socio-ecological transformation and fairer futures? * And what can critical theory and practice contribute to reframing technocratic management of nature and disrupting power relations re-directing just processes? In dialogue with each other and the audience, the panellists will reflect on the risks and possibilities for ecopolitics today and consider strategies for fostering new imaginaries, political action, and meaningful public conversations about environmental and climate justice in an increasingly polarized world. .

Speakers

- Cara Daggett, RIFS Fellow, Virginia Tech
 - Jennifer Gabrys, University of Cambridge
 - Ulrich Brand, University of Vienna
 - Matthias Schmelzer, University of Flensburg
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Session 13

Stalled Just Transitions? Tough Times for Trade Unions around the Planet

Location: Rooms 6+7

Chair: Denis Eversberg, Goethe University Frankfurt

Until recently, the world seemed to be slowly but surely moving towards sustainability. For decades, despite all detours and partial setbacks, the world appeared to be moving towards binding sustainability targets and increasing integration and coordination of steps toward their implementation within defined time horizons. Due to the social consequences of such a sustainability transformation considering the need for far-reaching change in the energy sector, industrial production and labour conditions, trade unions in particular were seen as a key player in shaping it. In the context of just transition strategies, they could, it was assumed, serve as an intermediary between transformation processes and workers, communicate the necessity of transformation to workers, represent their interests and ensure their political participation in order to actively shape transformation

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processes in a just and democratic manner (references). These promises of labour-oriented just and sustainable change, however, are increasingly in question in view of the rise of the far right, but also declining support from other party families, business and broader sections of the population—tough times for just transitions. In this session we will draw on empirical case studies of challenged and challenging Just Transitions from countries around the world to discuss what this means both for trade unions and for transformative sustainability research on just transitions.

Speakers

- Olga Ustyuzhantseva, Center for Independent Social Research St. Petersburg
 - Aleksander Szpor, Ecorys Poland, tbc
 - Judith Kirton-Darling, IndustriAll European Trade Union, tbc
 - Vera Trappmann, University of Leeds
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Session 14

Authoritarian Backlash and Knowledge Plurality: Transdisciplinarity as a Tightrope or Pathway

Location: DaVinci Lounge

Chair: Flurina Schneider, Institute for Social-Ecological Research (ISOE)

Resistance to sustainability transformations is increasingly accompanied by anti-democratic, science-sceptical, anti-pluralist and right-wing populist voices. As a result, basic principles of transdisciplinary sustainability research—such as the integration of diverse perspectives, dialogical cooperation and joint reflection—are increasingly being challenged. How can we as researchers respond to this, which roles do or can we assume, where do we need to adapt or reinvent our approaches to remain effective and open to a plurality of voices? How do we deal with project and practice partners who instrumentalise transdisciplinary research principles for themselves and undermine research processes? What guiding principles can give us orientation? How to establish principles (and boundaries) for just and fair participation?? How can transdisciplinary research support constructive dialogues and navigate challenging debates about transformative steps, trade-offs, and justice implications of sustainability transitions? We want to address these questions together in a 90-minute session to discuss and reflect both, normative and theoretical challenges, as well as practical possibilities, for dealing with nationalist and authoritarian counterresponses in transdisciplinary settings (min. 15; max. 40 participants). After a brief introduction to the topic that will already engage participants, we will depart from real-world experiences with anti-democratic voices in different contexts. After this empirical co-reflection, we will introduce potential theses regarding the principles of transdisciplinarity and how they are being challenged.

Speakers

- Stefanie Burkhart, ISOE
 - Anna Brietzke, ISOE
 - Franziska Ehnert, Leibniz Institute of Ecological Urban and Regional Development
 - Rico Defila and Antonietta Di Giulio, University of Basel
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Session 15 (panel discussion in plenary) **War and Sustainability**

Location: Plenary Room

Chair: Mark Lawrence, RIFS

In recent years, escalating geopolitical tensions and catastrophic wars in places such as Ukraine, Palestine and Sudan have had devastating impacts on millions of civilians. Armed conflicts appear fundamentally at odds with sustainability thinking: they generate direct environmental damage through greenhouse gas emissions, water and soil pollution, and biodiversity loss. At the same time, wars may also shape sustainability indirectly in countries that are not directly involved, by diverting public funds from environmental initiatives to defence budgets, fuelling right-wing movements opposed to refugee reception or sanctions, and deepening international fragmentation.

This panel explores how sustainability research and practice can respond to both the direct and indirect consequences of war, with particular attention to “frontier” or neighbouring countries. Key questions include: How can sustainability policy navigate the disruptions caused by armed conflict? In what ways can sustainability frameworks better integrate issues of war and peace-building? And to what extent can military institutions incorporate sustainability principles?

Speakers

- Agata Stasik, Kozminski University
- Annegret Haase, Helmholtz Centre for Environmental Research
- Nataliia Miroshnyk, National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine, RIFS
- Ole Adolphsen, German Institute for International and Security Affairs
- Bernd Sommer, TU Dortmund
- Margarita Balmaceda, RIFS (discussant)

Session 16 **Weaving New Narratives—A Generative Space for Reflecting and Practicing Transdisciplinary Sustainability Research** (interactive session)

Location: Room 1

Chair: Philip Bernert & Felix Beyers, RIFS; Viola Hakkarainen, Leuphana University of Lüneburg

The session invites participants to co-create new narratives and practices of transdisciplinary sustainability research (TDSR). Grounded in the forthcoming Handbook on Transdisciplinary Sustainability Research, it offers a reflective, dialogical space to connect diverse positionalities and practices, strengthen collective reflexivity, and envision the next generation of transformative sustainability science through Being, Thinking, Doing, and Narrating.

Session 17

Climate Obstruction—Conceptual Perspectives, Sectoral Insights, and Strategic Challenges

Location: Room 2

Chair: Vincent August, HU Berlin; Sarah Kessler, University of Vienna; Tobias Haas, RIFS

Climate obstruction is a relatively new concept. The concept was coined against the background of intensifying climate policy conflicts in recent years. To better understand the barriers against effective climate action, it expands research beyond its long-standing focus on denialism. In this panel, we will advance conceptual and sectoral analyses of climate obstruction. The goal is to gather, compare, and integrate insights into strategic obstruction efforts and their relationship with lifeworld resistance to climate policies.

The four contributions are as follows: (1) Vincent August presents the conceptual framework, locating climate obstruction in a theoretical matrix of conflict dynamics and illustrating mechanism of obstruction in recent climate conflicts. (2) Noémi Grißmer, Marianna Raizner, Nelly Reinstorf, and Lotte Lenz discuss the social imaginaries of farmers from Lower-Saxony, based on a series of interviews that investigated conventional farmer's concepts of sustainability, agriculture, and social-ecological transformation. (3) Sarah Kessler examines denial of climate change and responsibility in 'green' startups and construction. (4) Tobias Haas presents research on the heating sector based on an analysis of the contestations on the amendment of the German Heating Law (GEG).

With this panel on obstruction and resistance to climate action, we directly investigate the title-giving "tough conversations in tough times" for the sustainability transformation. In particular, we contribute to the overarching question: „What does an analysis of the status quo reveal about the tensions within sustainability transformations, and how can reflection on our own actions and failures inform future approaches?“

Speakers

- Vincent August, Humboldt University of Berlin
- Noémi Grißmer & Nelly Reinstorf, Humboldt University of Berlin
- Sarah Kessler, University of Vienna
- Tobias Haas, RIFS

Session 18

Enhancing Community and Local Benefits Practices in Renewable Energy Infrastructure: Exercising implementation scenarios (interactive session)

Location: Room 3

Chairs: Ira Shefer & Anais Picart, Renewables Grid Initiative

Large-scale energy infrastructure projects, such as electricity transmission lines, are required to drive forward the energy transition. These projects have direct and indirect impacts on local communities and nature, which are expected to be intensified when considering, for example, recent regulatory developments in Europe to accelerate renewable energy and grid projects through shortening permitting procedures. This situation may create resistance for energy infrastructure projects and public mistrust in the project promoters and policy makers. To address and minimise negative sentiments, and allowing faster project implementation, active steps are required to increase the engagement of communities in planning and implementing processes.

Parallel Sessions C

Thursday, 4 December 2025, 9:00–10:30

Examining the broader context of social and environmental considerations when planning and implementing community and local benefits (CLB) in electricity infrastructure projects, RGI will facilitate a co-creation activity that explores approaches, opinions, challenges and applications of several optional CLB mechanisms by different type of stakeholders. With this exercise, participants could have an opportunity to better understand the interests of different groups concerning electricity grid infrastructure projects, while practicing participatory decision-making processes that resemble real-world cases. This experience aims to provide participants a better understanding of the relationships.

Session 19 (In)Justices in Transition Governance

Location: Rooms 4+5

Chair: Frances Fahy, University of Galway

Efforts to govern sustainability transitions are increasingly confronted with complex justice challenges. While the aim of transition governance is to steer societies towards climate neutrality and sustainability, these processes often reproduce or deepen existing inequalities—across gender, class, and geography. As political and economic pressures reshape the global landscape, questions of fairness, inclusion, and accountability have become central to the governance of change. Understanding how transition policies distribute benefits, burdens, and responsibilities is essential for ensuring that sustainability does not come at the expense of justice.

This session examines how justice and injustice manifest within the governance of sustainability transitions across different contexts and sectors. Contributions address the gendered dimensions of agricultural transformation, co-creation of just and climate-neutral futures in Europe, and the implications of twin transitions for labour in Southeast Europe. Further papers reflect on shifting discourses around raw materials governance in civil society and explore the limits of anticipatory governance in fulfilling the promises of just energy transitions. Together, these contributions ask: How can transition governance deliver on its justice commitments? What institutional or structural changes are needed to avoid reproducing inequalities? And how can emerging governance models ensure more inclusive and equitable pathways towards sustainability?

Speakers

- Temitope Odusanya, Robert Gordon University
 - Elisa Thomaset, INKOTA Network or Humboldt University Berlin
 - Anna Fünfgeld, University of Hamburg
 - Lea Kammler, University of Hamburg
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Session 20 Consumption Corridors in Mobility and Access

Location: Rooms 6+7

Chair: Michał Czepkiewicz, University of Warsaw

Recent years have seen an increased interest in studies on defining lower and upper limits of consumption and production, and providing conditions for achieving well-being and need satisfaction within ecological and societal boundaries. New concepts and frameworks, such as consumption corridors, safe and just space for humanity, and decent living standards, have inspired theoretical and empirical research. At the same time, tensions between social and ecological outcomes inherent to sustainable transport policies make them politically difficult and rife with conflicts. Explicitly social-ecological approaches are potentially helpful in anticipating and reconciling these tensions, but the explicit notion of limits makes them vulnerable to opposition and mistrust (e.g., 15-minute city conspiracy theories). So far, only a handful of academic studies have applied such perspectives to study mobility-related topics, and their use in public policy and planning is even more limited.

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We are thus convening this session to discuss the current and future work on providing decent mobility and access within limits in the context of politically tough times. We encourage submissions on long-distance travel and tourism, as well as on the local and urban scopes of travel.

Speakers

- Marlin Arnz, Forschungszentrum Jülich
 - Henrike Rau, LMU Munich
 - Peeters, Anougmar, University of Antwerp
 - Marianna Kostecka & Marta Skowronska, University of Poznan
 - Alexandra Millonig, Austrian Institute of Technology
 - Michał Czepkiewicz, University of Warsaw; Filip Schmidt, University of Poznan
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Session 21

Exploring Multi-Level Governance for More Inclusive and Effective Climate Policies in Practice (interactive session)

Location: DaVinci Lounge

Chair: Diana Süsser, Giulia Pizzini & Indriany Lionggo,
Institute for European Energy and Climate Policy

This interactive session explores how multi-level governance (MLG) can strengthen the design and implementation of socially inclusive, effective, and resilient climate policies. However, despite the importance of MLG, the consistent implementation of effective MLG processes across the EU remains limited. Through three real-world examples from European projects, participants will examine how MLG can operate in practice: the NEC Platform, which established national dialogue mechanisms to embed local voices in national energy and climate planning; JUSTEM, which supported the preparation of Territorial Just Transition Plans ensuring that no region or community is left behind during the coal phase-out; and REGILIENCE, which promoted regional pathways for climate resilience by mobilising financing and resources for implementation. After a brief introduction, attendees will join small-group discussions to analyse the benefits, challenges, and limitations of each approach. The session will conclude with a collective reflection, allowing participants to exchange insights, identify transferable lessons, and discuss how multi-level governance can improve coordination, strengthen stakeholder engagement, and ease political frictions in climate policy processes. Ultimately, the session aims to inspire more coherent and inclusive governance practices across European regions.

Session 22 (interactive session)
**United or Polarized? Pitting Two Societal Narratives
against Each Other**

Location: Plenary Room

Chair: Jean-Henri Huttarsch, RIFS

Are societies uniting around the need for sustainability transformations—or drifting apart in response to them? Depending on perspective and data, research diagnoses differ: some find shared values and willingness to act, others highlight growing polarization, diverging realities, and deepening socio-political divides. This panel brings together four researchers whose work embodies these contrasting views to discuss how such divergent narratives emerge—empirically and discursively—and what they mean for the collective pursuit of a sustainable future. Rather than seeking resolution, the discussion will explore: How do scholars define and study societal polarization in the context of sustainability transformations? Do their findings suggest unity, polarization, or both—and what shapes these conclusions? What follows for public understanding, political decision-making, and sustainability policy? Can polarization sometimes foster change, and under what conditions? Aligned with the conference theme, “Tough conversations in tough times,” the session examines how conflict and disagreement may hinder or catalyze collective action. Substantial time for audience engagement will invite diverse perspectives on how science can inform societal learning and responsible communication about contested interpretations of readiness for change.

Speakers

- Dennis Eversberg, Goethe University Frankfurt
- Jule Specht, Humboldt University Berlin
- Nils C. Kumkar, University of Bremen, tbc
- Elke U. Weber, Princeton University

Session 23
**Researching Sustainability Transformations in the Arctic:
At the Nexus of Knowledge Production, Activism and
Science Diplomacy**

Location: Room 1

Chair: Charlotte Gehrke, German Institute of Development and Sustainability

This session brings together four interdisciplinary perspectives that interrogate how science, politics, justice, and activism intersect in shaping Arctic knowledge and futures. Marianne Pascale Bartels (RIFS) explores how Arctic geologists’ practices, patterns, and perceptions of knowledge production create and reproduce dominant narratives of Arctic oil and gas resources. In doing so, her ethnographically-inspired exploration reveals how geoscientific work participates in the reconfiguration of energy landscapes amid changing environmental and political conditions of the Anthropocene. Holger Straßheim (Bielefeld University) examines how “worldviews of ice” mediate the entanglement of science and politics across Canada, Germany, and Norway, revealing how competing epistemic and geopolitical imaginaries shape Arctic governance. Darren McCauley (Newcastle University) extends this discussion through the lens of transformative justice, reflecting on the tensions and possibilities of engaging Western and non-Western philosophies of fairness in Arctic contexts. The panel will conclude with Charlotte Gehrke (IDOS) presenting work on the risks of romanticising science diplomacy, including the silencing of important realities on the ground and the potential for bad actors to exploit science diplomacy for malign purposes. Together, these contributions illuminate the Arctic as a contested site where knowledge, justice, and power intersect, challenging conventional boundaries between science and politics, as well as between academic disciplines, and inviting reflection on the values and visions that guide our collective Arctic futures.

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Speakers

- Charlotte Gehrke, German Institute of Development and Sustainability
 - Marianne Pascale Bartels, RIFS
 - Darren McCauley, Newcastle University
 - Holger Straßheim, Bielefeld University
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Session 24

The Opportunities and Challenges of International Climate Governance

Location: Room 2

Chair: Petter Lydén, German Zero

International governance faces an uphill battle in its endeavour to address climate change. Initiatives such as the Paris Agreement have faced pushback and fallen short of their stated goals, with carbon emissions remaining high. The United States, the world's second largest carbon emitter, has effectively abandoned its climate goals and recommitted itself to the fossil fuel industry. Despite the efforts of international governance institutions, it is increasingly unlikely that the 2030 climate goals will be reached. Over the course of this session, contributions will explore both the challenges as well as the opportunities of international climate governance. Contributions include discussions of international cooperative initiatives in an era of polycrisis and the role of international governance in regulating the oil and gas industry. This will be followed by a presentation on how governance institutions such as the European Environment Agency envision sustainability transformation and economic growth. The final contribution will address the role of "hope" as a narrative in international governance and sustainability discourse.

Questions include: What are the prospects for strengthening the role of international governance in the climate crisis? How can international governance better regulate the oil and gas industry? To what extent should international governance pursue "post-growth" transformations? What role can hope play in international governance?

Speakers

- Mishel Mohan, Brussels School of Governance
 - Janina Herzog-Hawelka, University of Amsterdam
 - Matthias Kranke, University of Duisburg-Essen
 - Manuela Hartwig, University of Tokyo
 - Antje Vetterlein, Enna Volkerts, University of Münster
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Session 25

Social and Solidarity Economy: An Underrated Lever for Just Transition?

Location: Room 3

Chair: Cléo Mieulet, RIFS

Whether in citizen-led energy production, community-supported agriculture, or circular infrastructures in urban neighbourhoods—many bottom-up practices already advance socio-ecological transformation. What they share: they are rooted in the principles of the Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE). SSE strengthens local competence and embedded value creation—enhancing community resilience, especially in times of polycrisis. Despite its alignment with sufficiency, adaptability, and participation, SSE remains underrepresented in both national sustainability strategies and European transition discourse. This session explores why—and how to change that. SSE can democratise economic

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participation while offering dignified, purpose-driven jobs, particularly in sectors critical for transformation: food and energy supply, repair and reuse networks, cooperative logistics, care work, climate adaptation, and more. It helps rethink cities not as mere sites of consumption, but as infrastructures of transformation and collective agency. Although SSE is acknowledged in EU policy frameworks, its implementation and visibility vary significantly across national contexts. By comparing the cases of France and Germany—both of which have rich yet distinct SSE ecosystems—this session asks: What political, legal, and cultural conditions allow SSE to scale and become a recognised lever for transformation? We will bring together 4 panelists from academia, policy, and practice to:

- Discuss concrete examples of SSE's transformative role in cities
- Explore systemic barriers and untapped policy synergies
- Invite reflection on how SSE intersects with participant work.

Speakers

- Heike Birkhölzer, Board of Technologie-Netzwerk Berlin e.V
 - Christian Lautermann, Institute for Ecological Economy Research
 - Florentin Letissier, Deputy Mayor of Paris in charge of the social, solidarity and circular economy, and zero waste strategy
 - Marie Castagné, Co-General Delegate of the French National Network of Resource and Recycling Centres
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Session 26

Do We Bet on the Right Horse? “Reallabore” in Tough Times

Location: Rooms 4+5

Chairs: Antonia Graf, University of Münster; Torsten Fleischer, Karlsruhe Institute of Technology

Reallabore in tough times Living labs or Reallabore have gained prominence as transdisciplinary experimental spaces where researchers, policymakers, practitioners, and citizens co-develop and test sustainability innovations under real-world conditions. They bridge science and practice through learning-by-doing and iterative experimentation. Yet, as highlighted by the RIFS 2025 theme “Sustainability Redux: Tough Conversations in Tough Times”, it is crucial to reflect critically on both the potential and the pitfalls of these formats amid mounting political and social pressures for transformation. The panel explores internal and external challenges of Reallabore. Internally, questions arise about power imbalances, evaluation standards, and the dual roles of researchers as both neutral observers and active change agents. How can reflexivity, ethical awareness, and methodological rigor be maintained within such hybrid settings? Externally, challenges of upscaling and policy transfer persist: how can successful experiments inform broader sustainability policies without losing contextual depth? What governance structures and incentives enable lasting impacts? Moreover, while Reallabore are celebrated as participatory and democratizing arenas, they risk being instrumentalized as legitimizing tools or depoliticized zones. Bringing together scholars from diverse disciplines, this panel invites dialogue on the promises, limits, and evolving roles of Reallabore in sustainability governance. Short, focused inputs will provide stimuli for discussion and interactive exchange on lessons learned, research gaps, and strategies for ensuring that Reallabore foster both scientific insight and real-world transformation.

Speakers

- Franziska Ehnert, Leibniz Institute of Ecological Urban and Regional Development
 - Antonia Graf, University of Münster
 - Annegret Haase, Helmholtz Centre for Environmental Research (UFZ)
 - Torsten Fleischer, KIT
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Session 27

Advancing and Applying the Concept of Consumption Corridors

Location: Rooms 6+7

Chair: Sylvia Lorek, Sustainable Europe Research Institute

The session provides insights how the concept of Consumption Corridors (CC) has been taken up in current research. It locates CC in the wide sustainability—especially sufficiency—discourse by emphasizing central messages and provides some deeper insights how scientific orientation for upper and lower limits of CC could be approached. Attention is given as well to the need and value of democratic processes to establish CC within societies. Case studies on Consumption Corridors are provided from the UK regarding energy consumption and related emissions, from Iceland on food and from Switzerland (Geneva) on housing. Next to brief presentations the session includes a panel discussion on common insights from and further questions for CC research and the potential for societal uptake.

Speakers

- Tobias Gumbert, University of Münster
- Samuel Betts-Davies, University of Leeds
- Sarah Kendall, University of Iceland
- Marlyne Sahakian, University of Geneva
- Lea Becker, RIFS
- Melanie Pichler, Boku-University, Austria
- Juliane Wang, Boku-University, Austria

Session 28

Fact Making, Exhibition & Performance

(interactive session)

Location: DaVinci Lounge

Artist: Julika Gittner, RIFS

Engaging citizens in sustainability transformations in a just and meaningful way is a key ambition for both researchers and democratic institutions. Yet current methods of recruitment and communication often reach only a narrow, likeminded audience. This can alienate individuals who feel excluded, undermining trust in the scientific narratives central to sustainability efforts. In today's polarized political climate, there is an urgent need to communicate scientific findings across social and political divides. Fact Making seeks to break down barriers in science communication by experimenting with alternative public engagement methods through art. These include physical data visualisation to reduce reliance on academic language, playful public space recruitment strategies, and opportunities for people to create and deliberate on their own factual findings. Fact Making will showcase selected methods developed as part of the Kiezblock consultation process in Antonkiez, Wedding (April 23—Sept 25), using interactive sculpture and visual art practices to engage the public around mobility transformations. Participants will explore large-scale, hands-on art installations designed to communicate scientific knowledge and invite participation. The session includes a brief presentation of the artistic methods used, their context, and insights into what succeeded and what didn't. Participants will then engage with the materials directly, followed by an informal group discussion reflecting on the potential and limitations of artistic approaches to citizen engagement in sustainability transformations.

Session 29 (panel discussion in plenary)
From Mont Pélérin to Silicon Valley: The Rise and Reign of Anti Scientific Doomsday Ideologies

Location: Plenary Room

Chair: Julia Steinberger, University of Lausanne

The rise and dominance of neoliberalism since the 1950s is now bearing strange and extreme fruit, of mortal danger to sustainability transitions. Alliances of conviction and patronage between mega fortunes and neoliberal theorists launched an armada of think tanks, many funded and coordinated by the shadowy Atlas Network, pushing neoliberal ideology alongside climate denial-delay. The success of this movement, in terms of rising inequality and an accelerating climate crisis, is hard to overstate. Meanwhile, influenced by neoliberalism's individualism and even social Darwinism, Silicon Valley is infested by a new AI cult drawing on a combination of eugenics, fascist thought, apocalyptic mindset, neo-reactionary Catholicism, belief in own supremacy, and madness. A common element of this neoliberal extremism and "end-times tech fascism" potpourri is lack of empathy. While its unclear how much AI is a tool and how much AI is their master, the confluence of technology and cult results in problematic considerations for human priorities, even survival. Here, we first want to invite contributions aiming to understanding the ideological and religious character of the new neoliberal-AI cult, and its implications. Second, we invite ideas on how to counter these (pseudo-) religious thoughts by other narratives and ideas. In this session, we are not interested in pragmatic regulation, but mainly in religion, philosophy and storytelling.

Speakers

- Felix Creutzig, MCC Berlin
- Julia Steinberger, University of Lausanne
- Céline Keller, Graphic Artist and Science Communicator
- Christian Arnsperger, University of Lausanne, tbc
- Matthias Schmelzer, Universität Flensburg

Session 30
Entrepreneurs, Conflict and Cooperation in Sustainability Transitions

Location: Room 1

Chair: Lale Eckardt, Independent Moderator

Sustainable transitions require political will but also coordinated actions at multiple levels of government. This session looks at some of the opportunities and challenges of sustainability governance at local, regional and national levels. One paper examines the critical question of why certain governments implement ambitious climate policies despite the inherent electoral risks—with a particular focus on the role of climate-governmental entrepreneurs. Another paper focuses on multi-layered engagement processes as an innovative governance approach for complex and highly contested topics. Another focus will be conflict in urban settings and the tensions that can arise between diverse actors and sectors in regional sustainability transitions.

Some of the questions addressed are: What is the role of local entrepreneurs in sustainability transitions? What are the deep-rooted issues underscoring conflict and tensions? How central is the commitment to climate action among elected politicians? What are the opportunities and challenges of participatory processes for effective climate governance?

Speakers

- Eric Hartmann, Pia Redenius, Leuphana University Lüneburg
- Sarah Velten, adelphi
- Josef Kaiser, Helmholtz Centre for Environmental Research (UFZ)
- Antonia Kranz, IREES—Institut für Ressourceneffizienz und Energiestrategien

Session 31

The Role of Researchers in Advancing Sustainability in Challenging Times

Location: Room 2

Chair: Manuel Rivera, RIFS

Sustainability research—and sustainability researchers themselves—face increasingly difficult conditions. Funding constraints, shifting political priorities, and growing scepticism toward environmental and social sciences have reshaped how the value and legitimacy of sustainability research are perceived. Yet the worsening climate crisis and escalating ecological and social challenges re-affirm the urgency of such scholarship and underscore the need for researchers to engage more directly in advancing sustainability.

This session explores how researchers can navigate these challenges while maintaining the integrity and transformative potential of their work. Contributions include reflections on pursuing “slow science” within fast-paced academic systems; developing ethical guidelines for collaboration with Indigenous Peoples in the Arctic; applying transdisciplinary methods in design and public engagement; and analyzing how “closing contexts” affect sustainability research in contested environments such as India. Together, the papers ask: How can researchers practise sustainability research ethically and inclusively? What does “slow science” look like in practice? And how can academic work remain committed to transformation amid growing insecurity and political resistance?

Speakers

- Fynn Schmidt, Julia Wiethüchter, University of Münster
- Evie Morin, RIFS
- Aylin Kayser, Potsdam University of Applied Sciences;
Eva Foos, Federal Association of Allotment Gardens
- Anica Roßmöller, University of Münster

Session 32

Participation, Democratic Innovations and Environmental Activism

Location: Room 3

Chair: Azucena Moran, RIFS

Achieving sustainability transitions necessitates the capacity to engage in challenging societal dialogues, foster inclusivity, and ensure that costs and benefits are distributed equitably. Public participation, democratic innovations, such as mini-publics and environmental activism are diverse pathways for advancing equitable sustainability transitions by bridging the democratic gap observed in representative systems. However, there are also critical voices questioning the effectiveness of some forms of engagement and arguing for a more nuanced and contextual understanding of citizen participation and activism.

This session seeks to shed more light on this debate by focusing on contextual factors of participation and activism as well as the role of researchers in promoting innovation-communities.

In particular, the following questions will be addressed: How do external contextual factors influence the quality of public participation in climate governance? How can social innovations such as innovation communities facilitate cooperation, strengthen local community and democracy and mitigate tensions, conflicts and injustices? In what ways can researchers actively contribute to the initiation, creation and sustaining of innovation communities and what is their role in such innovation communities? Can

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deliberative participation adequately address the problem of increasing inequality, and if so, how? And how do institutional responses to environmental activism influence the tactics of the latter?

Speakers

- Lea Schewe, Brussels School of Governance
 - Pia Laborgne, Volker Stelzer, Karlsruhe Institute of Technology; Florian Jäger, AllWeDo
 - Lena Siepker, University of Münster
 - Angela Oels, University of Hamburg
 - Pablo Lapuente Tiana, Stockholm University
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Session 33

Nationalism, Climate Change and Sustainability — Incompatible Realities

Location: Room 3

Chairs: Kjell Vowles, University of Gothenburg;
Hauke Dannemann, Goethe University Frankfurt

The sustainability consensus that has been dominating environmental and climate politics for the past decades is increasingly off the table. Specific forms of and pathways to sustainability (for example as ecological modernization or as a more fundamental and emancipatory transformation) have always been up for debate in national and global frameworks of environmental and climate governance. Contestations of the need for a transformation toward sustainability have been rather implicit and limited to the “climate change denial machine” (Dunlap & McCright 2011). As the levers of nation states and methodological nationalism to address a global problem are politically and analytically inadequate according to the sustainability consensus, nationalism has been marginally addressed in sustainability governance and science. Today, however, inaction on and contestations of sustainability and climate change mitigation have become more explicit, aggressive, normalized and resonant — nationalism is a central prospect of (in)action on climate change and the contestation of sustainability.

However, there has been little recognition of the role and consequentiality of nationalism within environmental and climate politics research. In order to address this gap, this proposed session will explore the interactions between nationalism and climate change and the role of nationalism in current challenges of sustainability (‘the challenges we face’)

Speakers

- Fredrik von Malmborg, Linköping University
 - Kjell Vowles, University of Gothenburg
 - Virginie Arantes, Vrije Universiteit Brussel
 - Hauke Dannemann, Goethe University Frankfurt
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Session 34
Tough Conversations on Systemic Risks:
What's at Stake, Who Speaks, Who Decides?
(interactive session)

Location: Rooms 4+5

Chairs: Paul Einhüpl & Pia-Johanna Schweizer, RIFS

Systemic risks are characterized by complexity, cascading impacts, and value conflicts, cutting across multiple societal sectors. Climate change–driven events such as droughts exemplify how these risks threaten food security, livelihoods, and social stability. Their interconnected nature creates trade-offs and justice dilemmas that cannot be resolved by scientific knowledge alone. Addressing systemic risks requires “tough conversations” that bring diverse perspectives into open, constructive dialogue. This interactive session provides such a space through a moderated fishbowl discussion. After a short framing on systemic risks and the role of participatory engagement in governance, participants will co-identify interlinked risks and questions through a facilitated brainstorming exercise. These inputs will guide the fishbowl dialogue, where rotating participants engage in conversation while others listen. A facilitator will support the exchange, maintaining focus on shared challenges and introducing new discussion points as needed. The session concludes with a collective debrief, synthesizing recurring tensions, unresolved questions, and forward-looking ideas. By engaging participants from diverse backgrounds, we aim to enhance mutual understanding of systemic risks, their value-laden dimensions, and the role of researchers in shaping inclusive and effective governance processes.

Session 35
Decolonizing Sustainability Discourses and Practices

Location: DaVinci Lounge

Chairs: Thora Herrmann, University of Oulu; Stephan Dudeck, University of Tartu; Ida Hydle, Arctic University of Norway (UiT)

This session examines the frictions, encroachments, conflicts, and resistances that arise when dominant sustainability agendas collide with place-based community-led visions of well-being. It shows how these spaces of encounters contest, reshape, and reimagine sustainability discourses through Indigenous and land-based perspectives across the Global North, and the Global South. Drawing on case studies from Eastern Finnmark/Sáami, northern Canada, coastal Bangladesh, and Nigeria, the session highlights tensions between large-scale green transition projects, state and EU policies, and the lived realities, rights, and visions of Indigenous Peoples and marginalized communities. Presentations examine how sustainability agendas often reproduce colonial power structures, enforce green colonialism, push extractivist logics, and ignore place-based approaches rooted in relational ethics, cultural resurgence, and environmental stewardship. Using performative and participative methods, the session exposes hidden contradictions in dominant sustainability narratives, and highlights relational practices of resilience, sovereignty, and collective well-being. Inviting the audience into the conversation, the session invites reflections on how sustainability can shift toward decolonial, anti-racist, solidarity-driven, and community-led frameworks that honour diverse knowledge systems, care, and relational accountability.

Speakers

- Ilaria Sartini, RIFS
 - Ranjan Datta, Mount Royal University
 - Per-Hennig Mathisen, Sámiráđđi Saami Council
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Exhibition

Blind spot intervention

With this photographic exhibition, Scientist Rebellion wants to bring awareness to climate activism done by scientists. Scientist Rebellion, founded in 2020, has conducted actions involving the temporary blindfolding of statues. The photographs on display document various such actions undertaken in Berlin with each being themed around a blind spot of society. They show statues in public spaces that are blindfolded to symbolize society's unwillingness to acknowledge the crises, gagged statues of scientists to illustrate that scientists' warnings are ignored, as well as blindfolded buddy bear statues to point to the lack of public outcry about police violence towards peaceful civil disobedience.

The exhibition tries to expose these blind spots through art and to start tough, but necessary conversations about the role of the scientific community in times of crisis. The suggested, challenging idea is that, because of the several existing blind spots of society and the urgency to take action, the communication by scientists about the seriousness of the climate, pollution and biodiversity crisis cannot be anymore only on a subject-specific level. It is time for more scientists to start leveraging their reputation, their access to resources (e.g. information and institutions), and to become more visible as advocates and agents of a sustainable transformation.

The scientists will offer a discussion of their work in the coffee area

Session 36 (panel discussion in plenary)
**Navigating Tensions Between the Green Transition
and Planetary Health**

Location: Plenary Room

Chair: Ortwin Renn, RIFS

This panel explores the complex interconnections and potential trade-offs between the green transition and broader dimensions of planetary health. While efforts to decarbonize energy systems and promote green technologies are essential, they can also create new pressures on biodiversity, land use, and sustainable food production. The discussion will examine how these tensions manifest across different contexts, including global North–South dynamics, and how policy, research, and practice can better align climate action with the protection of ecosystems and human well-being. By bringing together diverse perspectives, the panel seeks to identify pathways toward integrated and just sustainability transitions.

Speakers

- Katrin Böhning-Gaese, UFZ
- Henning Flaskamp, Stiftung Gesunde Erde, Gesunde Menschen
- Karen Siegel, RIFS

Session 37
**Knowledge and the Role of Researchers in
Sustainability Transitions**

Location: Room 1

Chair: Dirk von Schneidemesser, RIFS

Sustainability science faces mounting challenges in a world marked by multiple, interconnected crises. As highlighted in other sessions, there has been significant backlash against sustainability transitions, even as the urgency of the climate crisis continues to grow. These developments call for a critical reassessment of both the foundations of sustainability science and the evolving roles of researchers within it. Understanding how knowledge is produced, framed, and mobilized under conditions of uncertainty and contestation has become essential for advancing meaningful transformation.

This session explores how researchers can navigate the epistemological, psychological, and practical dimensions of sustainability transitions. Contributions examine the limitations of sustainability science in current knowledge production, reframe climate change as a form of collective trauma requiring new modes of dialogue and leadership, and reflect on the multiple roles of researchers in living labs—as observers, organizers, and change agents. Further discussion addresses how sustainability transitions may challenge ontological security and influence research practices. Key questions include: What is the role of the researcher in navigating the polycrisis? And what are the possibilities and limitations of existing epistemological approaches within sustainability science?

Speakers

- Anke Strauß, Eberswalde University for Sustainable Development
- Adina-Iulia Deacu, RIFS
- Juliane Haus, WZB Berlin Social Science Center
- Timo von Wirth, Frankfurt University of Applied Sciences

Session 38

Sustainability in the Face of Polarization? A 3-Horizons Dialogue on Collaborative Governance of Transformations in Times of Crises and Conflict (interactive session)

Location: Room 2

Chairs: Niko Schöpke, Universität Freiburg

We propose a co-creative and reflective space to explore the demands, challenges, and opportunities for sustainability governance amid growing polarization and conflict. More specifically, we will focus the exploration on the arenas of collaborative governance at the science-policy-society interface, such as real-world laboratories, transition arenas, relational spaces. The session includes a facilitated dialogue to elicit and integrate participants' knowledge and experiences in a structured, forward-looking manner. This will foster a collective understanding of the changes needed in governance for sustainability and will provide a framework for identifying actionable steps forward. Simple art of hosting techniques will be used to ease inclusivity and reflexive dialogue.

Please note that this session will take 2 hours and will continue until 18:45.

Speakers

- Niko Schöpke, Universität Freiburg
- Philip Bernert, RIFS
- Markus Egermann, IÖR, tbc
- Pia Laborgne, KAT/KIT
- Oskar Marg, ISOE, tbc
- Susanne Ober, KAT/KIT, tbc
- Regina Rhodius, University of Freiburg/ Oeko Institute
- Anja Steglich, Technical University Berlin, tbc
- Timo von Wirth, Frankfurt University of Applied Science

Session 39

The Limits of Sustainable Consumption: Exploring the Concept of Consumption Corridors in Democratic Societies (interactive session)

Location: Room 3

Chairs: Tobias Gumbert, University of Münster

This workshop invites participants to critically explore how democratic societies can address the challenge of governing sustainable consumption in the context of climate change and ongoing sustainability transitions. Using the framework of consumption corridors—defined by minimum and maximum consumption thresholds that secure wellbeing while respecting ecological limits—the session examines the normative foundations, justice considerations, and governance mechanisms needed to navigate consumption limits in a democratic and legitimate way. By engaging current tensions around fairness, responsibility, and collective self-limitation, the workshop aims to foster a nuanced conversation about how sustainability and a “good life for all” can be reaffirmed as core democratic priorities.

Methodologically, the workshop employs an interactive, multi-phase format that combines short inputs, individual reflection, small-group dialogue, and plenary exchange. After a brief conceptual introduction to consumption corridors, participants engage in an initial individual voting exercise that surfaces key normative tensions—such as universal versus relative needs, state non-intervention versus protective responsibilities, and expert- versus citizen-defined limits. Participants then join

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focused small-group discussions on the trade-off they find most challenging, guided by moderators who document emerging insights. The subsequent plenary synthesis highlights convergences, disagreements, and overarching patterns relevant to consumption governance. Finally, participants repeat the voting exercise to reflect on shifts in their views.

Through this structured deliberative process, the workshop seeks to deepen participants' understanding of the political and ethical dimensions of sustainable consumption, encourage reflexive engagement across perspectives, and identify opportunities and barriers for implementing consumption corridors in democratic contexts.

Session 40

Sustainability Policy in Practice: Effectiveness, Acceptance, and Trade-offs

Location: Rooms 4+5

Chair: Karoline Rogge, University of Sussex

Achieving sustainability transitions requires policies that are not only environmentally effective but also socially acceptable and economically feasible. Yet, policy design often faces competing priorities, political resistance, and uneven outcomes across sectors and societies. In the context of mounting economic and geopolitical pressures, questions of fairness, trade-offs, and practical implementation have become increasingly central to policy debates. Understanding how sustainability measures perform in real-world contexts—and how their impacts are perceived—is therefore crucial for achieving durable and just transformations.

This session examines the effectiveness, acceptance, and trade-offs of sustainability policies through diverse empirical and theoretical perspectives. Presentations will discuss sectoral resource targets, the social impacts of climate policy instruments and their implications for policy communication, the role of “green bans” as mechanisms of collective environmental action, and the environmental outcomes of EU trade agreements. Together, the contributions ask: How can policy design balance environmental ambition with social legitimacy? What makes sustainability instruments effective and politically resilient in “tough times”? And how can trade-offs be managed to ensure long-term public and institutional support for sustainability goals?

Speakers

- Iris Frey and Moritz Böttcher, BUND
 - Dirk Heyen, Öko-Institut
 - Franziska Bold, Silvia Weko and Johan Lilliestam, Friedrich Alexander University Nuremberg
 - Simon Happersberger, Vrije Universiteit Brussel
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Session 41

Narratives and Imaginaries of Sustainability

Location: Rooms 6+7

Chair: Martin Frick, United Nations World Food Programme

Imaginaries, narratives, assumptions and projections about sustainability transitions are constantly evolving and are strongly shaped by geographic context. They are often driven less by scientific evidence than by political and economic interests. The historical patterns and underlying assumptions that underpin energy forecasting provide clear examples of this. At the same time, a pronounced backlash against sustainability narratives is now being amplified by far right content that floods digital and other media platforms. This backlash is especially visible in the energy sector, where the term “climate obstruction” has become an umbrella label for a wide range of claims that seek to undermine effective climate action.

Parallel Sessions F

Thursday, 4 December 2025, 16:45–18:15

This session addresses these topics from a variety of perspectives. Key questions include: In the face of the backlash against sustainability, do actors need an ethos that guides how they use media to promote sustainability itself? How do narratives selectively cite negative data points from the energy transition in order to bolster claims of its failure? What are the “markers” that can help distinguish between constructive criticism of energy transition policies and delay tactics? What do we mean by the “nuclear energy paradox” and how does it manifest historically? In light of the backlash how can we reopen space for meaningful, inclusive conversations? And can education be reimagined as a performative, relational, and radically inclusive governance tool to foster sustainability transitions?

Speakers

- Sigrid Kannengießer, University of Münster
 - Fanny Böse, BASE, TU Berlin
 - Jakub Sokołowski, University of Warsaw, Franziska Mey, RIFS
 - Finn Haberkost, RIFS; Niklas Kramer, RIFS & FU Berlin
 - Margo Zalite, Hochschule für Musik und Theater Hamburg
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Session 42

Cryolite Colonialism—Screening of the Film, “Orsugiak—Greenland’s White Gold” and Post-Film Conversation

Location: DaVinci Lounge

Chairs: Naja Dyrendom Graugaard, Copenhagen University;
Anne S. Chahine, RIFS

‘Orsugiak—Greenland’s White Gold’ is a Kalaallit (Greenlandic) documentary film that investigates the forgotten story of Danish cryolite extraction in Ivittuut, southern Kalaallit Nunaat (Greenland). The film seeks to uncover new, critical aspects of the meaning of colonial expropriation and the (de)generation of wealth in the Danish-Greenlandic relation. In the post-screening talk, Danish-Kalaaleq(inuk) researcher Naja Dyrendom Graugaard—who is a lead character in the film and main recipient of the concomitant mediastorm—will be in conversation with Anne S. Chahine to discuss the different “challenges to leading meaningful conversations” about Danish cryolite colonialism.

Session 43 (panel discussion in plenary) **Justice as a Foundation for the Sustainability Transformation?**

Location: Plenary Room

Chair: Doris Fuchs, RIFS

Increasingly, scholars and activists focus on justice as a means to foster the pursuit of sustainability in today's times of populist challenges to democracy and sustainability governance. The underlying reason is the assumption that fears and experiences of the costs involved in e.g. the energy transition are the major cause of the backlash to sustainability governance. But how do such claims fit with empirical trends away from left leaning parties in many countries? If justice is such a motivating factor, why do we see support for parties and politicians redistributing resources from bottom to top? Is this a question of framing, understanding, competing objectives, or ...? This roundtable aims to address this conundrum. Jointly, the inputs address the question "What are the enabling conditions of socially and ecologically just transformation in democracies materially and discursively dominated by economic elites?"

Taking the need to reconfigure human-Earth interaction as a foundation, then, the roundtable discusses the material, ideational, and strategic questions associated with justice as a societal objective in the context of the current climate crisis and beyond. On the material side, it looks at the societal metabolism that links social and ecological dimensions and inquires into relevant distributions in stocks and flows, ownership and control, and costs and benefits. On the discursive side, it explores the transformative power of narratives of justice and a good life as enablers of sustainability-oriented transformation. On the strategic side, finally, the roundtable brings the material and discursive dimensions together to ponder how majorities for socially just climate governance can be achieved. The roundtable will start with short and pointed inputs by its participants, and then turn to a larger discussion with the audience.

Speakers

- Johanna Siebert, Das Progressive Zentrum e.V
- Antonietta Di Giulio & Rico Defila, University of Basel
- Tillmann Buttschardt, University of Münster
- Stefan Pauliuk, University of Freiburg
- Doris Fuchs and Paula Behrendt, RIFS

Session 44 **Sustainability Transitions in Increasingly Fragmented Democratic Societies? Barriers, Drivers, Interrelationship** (interactive session)

Location: Room 1

Chairs: Anne Kantel, Josephine Tröger & Elisabeth Dütschke, Fraunhofer ISI

In this interactive workshop participants will be invited to consider the relationship between societal fragmentation and sustainability transitions. We will explore four hypotheses regarding how fragmentation can hinder or drive these transformations and how ongoing transitions might mitigate or exacerbate divisions.

Session 45

Between Dialogue, Strategic Ignorance, and Defiance: Navigating Contestation in Sustainability Transitions

Location: Room 2

Chair: David Löw-Beer, RIFS

Sustainability transitions—especially in energy and infrastructure—are placing growing burdens on economically disadvantaged, often rural regions. These areas face deep uncertainty: job losses in traditional sectors, eroding public services, and fears of social decline. While policy and research emphasize participation, benefit-sharing, and equity, such measures often fall short in navigating rising political contestation at the local level. In many cases, carefully designed participatory processes are undermined by targeted campaigns that frame sustainability efforts as threats to livelihoods, identities, or regional autonomy. Right-wing actors and disinformation networks increasingly mobilize such narratives, fueling distrust and obstructing implementation—even where local majorities support transition measures. This session invites researchers and practitioners to reflect together on a central tension: Should efforts focus on designing fair, evidence-based sustainability policies and hope that social legitimacy follows—or must we directly engage with contestation, including defiance, strategic ignorance, and antagonistic narratives? Drawing on empirical research and practice-based insights from rural, structurally weak regions, this interactive space explores how political polarization challenges traditional governance approaches. We will discuss what it takes to sustain democratic participation in contested contexts, and what new governance arrangements—formal or informal—can enable meaningful dialogue without succumbing to obstruction. By connecting diverse experiences across disciplines and sectors, this session aims to co-create strategies for navigating sustainability.

Speakers

- Franziska Mey, RIFS
- Tobias Haas, RIFS
- Sophia Dolinga, RIFS
- Matthias Schilling, Gemeinde Uckerland
- Ilka Roose, Eberswalde University for Sustainable Development (HNEE)

Session 46

Exploring Co-creative Conversations Across Difference: A Facilitated Space for Both Narrative and Experiential Learning (interactive session)

Location: Room 3

Chair: Martina Handler, CoCreating Future &
Rosa Zubizarreta-Ada, RIFS

We are offering an opportunity to taste a facilitated process for surfacing deep differences and working with them in dialogical and empathic manner. Notably, this approach creates a context where participants can co-create shared ways forward. A key element of the Vorarlberg Bürgerrat (Citizens' Council) model, the Dynamic Facilitation approach has been used in Austria repeatedly since 2006 to support communities in exploring how they want to “pursue sustainable well-being and the good life.” In addition, the Vorarlberg Bürgerrat model has shown marked success even in working with controversial issues. Some notable examples include the 2015 award-winning state-wide Bürgerrat on how to respond to the high increase of refugees and asylum-seekers, and the 2012 “Region of Consciousness” community involvement process with regard to the former concentration camp at Mauthausen. We will begin with a brief initial impulse, after which we will invite participants into facilitated creative conversations. Working with both smaller groups and with the large group formal, we will then make time to debrief the experience together and explore potential applications.

Speakers

- Martina Handler, CoCreating Future
 - Markus Michael Götsch, Practitioner, Process Facilitator, and Facilitation teacher
 - Ines Omann, Austrian Foundation for Development Research, tbc
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Session 47

**Creating a Reflective Space to Consider the Role of AI
in a Sustainable Economy**
(interactive session)

Location: Rooms 4+5

Chairs: Silke Niehoff, Grischa Beier, Stefanie Kunkel &
Malte Reißig, RIFS

Creating a reflective space to consider the role of AI in a sustainable economy—The role of digital technology in either undermining or supporting ‘a good life for all’ is a controversial topic. Digital technologies, such as AI, support certain sustainability management tasks and also shape our understanding of, and attitudes towards, sustainability. The consequences for normative debates, such as those concerning corporate responsibility, continue to evolve and require exploration. This workshop will focus on the broader topic of how AI, in particular large language models (LLMs), shapes the sustainability worldviews of its users by developing and testing an interactive format to encourage reflection on the role of LLMs. We aim to explore how LLMs may increasingly influence ‘tough conversations’ within companies and, more broadly, with stakeholder groups in society. In particular, we would like to focus on how AI might influence the understanding and vision of sustainability within medium-sized companies that may rely on digital tools to support their sustainability management to save time and resources. Thus, we want to organise an interactive role play in which participants take on the role of a sustainability manager at a medium-sized company looking to develop a sustainability strategy.

Session 48

Pathways to Sufficiency

Location: Rooms 6+7

Chair: Marion Davenas

The detrimental effects of the housing, mobility and food sectors on the environment and climate are hard to ignore. CO₂ emissions from residential housing and private mobility account for about one-fourth of national greenhouse gas emissions and have significantly contributed to the cost-of-living crisis in Europe. The environmental harms of high meat consumption, including climate impact, land use, and nutrient pollution are becoming increasingly recognized. Scientific evidence is mounting that technical approaches alone are unlikely to be sufficient for our societies to stay within planetary boundaries. Even though sufficiency approaches are still subject to reservation and a fringe phenomenon in scientific discourse, there is a growing interest among researchers on how eco-social policy and planning instruments can lead to sustainability transformations in the above-mentioned sectors. This session will focus on diverse policies and tools that allow for sufficiency-oriented practices in Europe with examples from Sweden, Austria and Germany. By doing so presentations also highlight the importance of taking into account cultural norms and practices when implementing sufficiency policies.

Speakers

- Patrick Zimmermann, IFEU (Institut für Energie- und Umweltforschung Heidelberg gGmbH)
 - Elin Rööf, Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences
 - Jörgen Larsson & Jonas Nässén Chalmers University of Technology
 - Michael Pollok, Federal Office for Building and Regional Planning
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Session 49

Climate, Nature or People? Navigating the Dilemmas of the Urban Energy Transition through a Role-Playing Game (interactive session)

Location: DaVinci Lounge

Chair: Neelakshi Joshi, Leibniz Institute of Ecological Urban and Regional Development

In this interactive role-playing game, we will immerse ourselves in the case of conflict over the location of a solar farm. The solar farm promises to achieve greenhouse gas reductions and contribute to the city's attempts to achieve its climate goals. The solar farm is planned on the city's former landfill site, in disuse for the last twenty years. In these twenty years, the landfill has become refuge for various species of birds, butterflies as well as larger animals like deer. Furthermore, the local people use it as a green oasis amidst industrial infrastructure. As a result, the solar farm project has raised opposition from citizens and environment conservation groups. Participants will put forth their ideas and concerns regarding this project in the setting of a city council public session. In the end, the councillors will vote on approving the project or not. Together, we will discuss the socio-ecological implications of renewable energy projects at the urban level as well as the limitations of public consultation and participation in the planning process.

Session 50

Telling the story from the end: introducing the concept of palliative dramaturgy

Location: Room 2

Chair: Christian Tschirner, Dramaturg, Director

Communication about the ecological crisis faces a dilemma: if we emphasise the many small steps in the right direction, this often means downplaying the situation. If we focus on stating the scientific facts about the current state of affairs, we run the risk of reinforcing social paralysis. How do we navigate between reality and hope?

Palliative dramaturgy suggests thinking about things from the end. It is not only we as individuals who die; societies and cultures also have an expiry date. In our progress-oriented mindset, there is little discussion of dying and death, of farewells, loss and grief. Modernity is not only characterised by the idea of a separation between culture and nature; the successful repression of dying and death is also one of the distinctive features of our civilisation. This repression is probably even a major reason for our inability to think and act in longer, cross-generational time frames.

Accepting the inevitable does not mean capitulating. On the contrary. Findings from death research and palliative care suggest that instead of clinging to the untenable, instead of repressing or panicking, we regain our ability to act and make decisions. How we imagine and narrate our end will largely determine what it will actually look like. In the workshop, I will provide input on some aspects of palliative dramaturgy, each combined with small exercises and experiments to open up the imagination for *thinking from the end*.

Session 51 (panel discussion in plenary)

Backlash in Europe and Beyond

Location: Plenary Room

Chair: Kathleen Mar, RIFS

Across Europe and beyond, there has been a notable backlash against policies aimed at addressing the climate crisis and environmental issues more broadly. Institutional actors have increasingly sidelined environmental and climate concerns in the face of economic and geopolitical instability, a volatile political climate, and the rise of right-wing populist parties. This session explores the drivers of this backlash from multiple perspectives, with a particular focus on right-wing populism, and considers ways to move forward.

The contributions examine a range of explanatory factors, including broader political dynamics, cultural grievances, and the spread of conspiracy theories. Other presentations address the effects of right-wing populism on the climate goals of EU member states. Key questions include: How can institutional actors pursue sustainability in the context of weaponized backlash? Which specific policies trigger the strongest opposition? How do such attitudes emerge? And what role do “pessimism” and the prospect of “dystopia” play in shaping public perceptions?

Speakers

- James J. Patterson, University of Massachusetts Boston; Stacy D. VanDeveer, Utrecht University
 - Dimitri Gugushvili & Daniel Spruit, KU Leuven
 - Jonas Nässén & Jörgen Larsson, Chalmers University of Technology
 - Fred Steward, University College London
 - Klaus Ramalho von Behr, University of Brasília
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Session 52

Beyond AI Futurism: Building Democratic Narratives and Alliances for Sustainable AI Governance

Location: Room 3

Chairs: Jonah Paul Schwoppe, Das Progressive Zentrum;
Lena Schröder, Karlsruhe Institute of Technology (KIT),
Paul Schütze, University of Osnabrück

Building Democratic Narratives and Alliances for Sustainable AI Governance. In this interactive reflective space, we explore whether sustainable AI is already possible. Our goal is not to provide definitive answers, but rather to foster a shared space for reflection on how social and ecological transformation can be achieved. Instead of only asking “What does sustainable AI look like?”, we pose the following question: “How can we create the political, institutional, and cultural conditions that enable sustainable AI governance to emerge? What role should researchers, activists, and public officials assume in this process?” The session will commence with a brief introduction outlining our progressive perspective on AI governance. Subsequently, we will welcome short inputs from invited contributors from both practice and academia.

Speakers

— Dr. Esther Görnemann, Weizenbaum Institute

Session 53

“What Should Happen in Coal Regions—and Who Are We to Decide?” International Perspectives on the Role of Researchers at the Coalface of Transition

Location: Rooms 4+5

Chair: Benjamin Klement, Fraunhofer ISI

International perspectives on the role of researchers at the coalface of transition. We bring together a panel of experienced and thoughtful researchers from around the world who are directly engaged in regions that are decarbonising through coal exit, often in the context of multiple transitions—both contemporary and historic. Leaving dominant industries such as coal behind, local communities seem to be at risk of losing not only their sense of purpose and belonging, but also their trust in society and democracy as such, particularly as the decisions are often made by distant actors. Our collective approaches include work of researchers from various disciplines ranging from putting together reports and studies to inform government and industry, consulting local, regional and national administrations to co-creative approaches with the communities. All of these approaches have their pros and cons, nevertheless, researchers have to deliberately reflect on their roles for transformation processes and the affected communities.

Speakers

— Andreas Otto, German Centre for Astrophysics
— Benjamin Klement, Fraunhofer ISI
— Przemyslaw Plucinski, Adam Mickiewicz University Poznan
— Jess Reeves, Federation University Australia
— Johannes Staemmler, Brandenburg University of Technology Cottbus-Senftenberg

Session 54

Le Grand Jeu—SPES scenario: Designing Possible Futures Together (interactive session)

Location: Rooms 6+7

Chair: Federico Bonelli

Addressing voids and participation in sustainability talks, Le Grand Jeu is a free and open source board game workshop for embodied, playful systems thinking and open dialogue on complex transitions. Designed to allow all to contribute to complex discussion.

Session 55

Sustainability in “Transitional and Transformational” Resource Use, Management and Governance Models

Location: DaVinci Lounge

Chair: Juliet Katusiime, Mind-Nature Institute

A Case of Agroecology in the Food and Agricultural Systems Discourse. Sustainability, though a key concept in majority of today's resources use, management and governance models for a transition and transformation, it equally faces a backlash from both academic, scientific, political, business and practitioners' spheres. In this session therefore, we explore how to achieve sustainability better, in transitional and transformational resource models, specifically focusing on the agroecology model within the context of food and agricultural systems. Specially, (a) examining and demystifying sustainability in these models- agroecology for instance; (b) identify ways sustainability and a sustainable well-being and a good life for all can be pursued and (re-) established as a central priority in contemporary social, political, and economic agendas through agroecology and the food system at large; (c) identify the roles being assumed by science and researchers alike in contentious societal settings for agroecology, and how they need to align with the different segments of the population to respond to different values and components of the sustainability discourse. The session provides background to strengthen and sustain transformative approaches and resource models, such as agroecology, but also presenting them as a possible pathway to achieve sustainability in general. Additional attention is put to the elements to integrate and manifest sustainability, inputs and data, gender and women perspective, and the value of agroecology for instance, for sustainability.

Speakers

- Nicole Paganini
 - Hanna Fiegenbaum, Wooden Valley gGmbH
 - Noah C. Mutai, Berlin School of Business and Innovation
 - Cosmas Lambini, Diaspora Academic Network For Africa Berlin
 - Axel Anders, Biocyclic Vegan International
 - Richard Ntirandekura, Volunteers Movement for Humanitarian Rescue (VMHR)
 - Silke Bollmohr, INKOTA Network
 - Denise Matias, Eberswalde University for Sustainable Development
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Exhibition

Climate Tides: A Visual Dialogue on Climate Narratives— Framing Policy, Action, and Change

The artist Sanyam Bajaj will offer a discussion of his art works at this time in the coffee area.

As an independent researcher and visual artist, I have long questioned how to move beyond static reports and technical language to truly engage people in climate action. *Drishya Kala Klima* is a personal and professional experiment to bridge scientific knowledge with emotional connection, transforming art and research into interactive spaces for dialogue, reflection, and collective meaning-making.

Rooted in the long history of art’s role in shaping societal progress—from the 16th-century Académie de Poésie et de la Musique to the enlightenment calls for unifying knowledge by thinkers like Francis Bacon—this exhibition continues the tradition of using art to influence public discourse. It builds on this legacy by asking: *how can we make climate knowledge more emotionally and socially accessible today?*

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