



# **ESDN Vienna Workshop 2026**

## **Discussion Paper**

**Building a Resilient Europe:  
Sustainable Development and  
Culture in focus**



This Discussion Paper is published as a work of the ESDN Office. The opinions expressed do not reflect the official views of the ESDN Executive Committee nor the views of the ESDN Advisory Board.

Microsoft Copilot was used to support the writing process, particularly in refining language, improving clarity, and checking grammar. Analytical content and interpretations are the author's own.

Please cite this publication as:

Ylikruuvi, Saana. (2026). Building a Resilient Europe: Sustainable Development and Culture in focus. ESDN Workshop 2026 Discussion Paper, May 2026, ESDN Office, Vienna.

Contact us at:

[office@esdu.eu](mailto:office@esdu.eu)

Visit our website: [www.esdn.eu](http://www.esdn.eu)

# Table of Contents

- Introduction..... 3
- Chapter 1: Culture and Sustainability – Perspectives and Approaches ..... 5
  - Culture as a dimension of sustainability and supporting resilience..... 6
  - The power of culture to foster sustainability..... 7
  - Culture transforming the worldview and fostering a more sustainable living ..... 9
    - Keynote: Culture as SDG 18? - Importance and advantages of recognizing culture as decisive aspect in the post-2030 discussions ..... 12
    - Keynote: From SDGs to Practice: Culture as a Driver of Sustainable Development ..... 13
    - Keynote: Integrating Culture and Cultural Actors more Closely to Sustainability Work..... 13
    - Keynote: Culture as a Driver of Sustainable Development: Preparing Future Generations ..... 14
    - Conversation Islands: – Interactive Group Work with Questions ..... 14
- Chapter 2: Sustainability, Resilience & Democracy in Transformative Times..... 16
  - Resilience in social-ecological systems and policies..... 17
  - Sustainability strengthens democracy ..... 19
  - Resilience and sustainability promote security..... 20
    - Keynote: Can resilience go wrong? Critical reflections connecting ecology and peace ..... 21
    - Keynote: The Way Sustainability Can Support Achieving more Resilience, Stability and Security in Europe ..... 22
- Exchange Spaces: Reflecting on Different Topics in the Context of Sustainability, Resilience & Democracy ..... 23
  - Table 1: Reducing Critical Raw Material Dependency through Circularity and Technological Innovation ..... 23
  - Table 2: The Contribution of Sustainability to Democracy & Security in Europe and beyond ..... 23
  - Table 3: A broader sustainability perspective for successful policy making and communication ..... 24
  - Table 4: GreenDEMO: Making green transitions more democratic - and democracies greener..... 24
- References..... 26

# Introduction

This Discussion Paper will provide participants taking part in the ESDN Workshop with some background information on the workshop's focus, the topics that will be covered by speakers and presenters, as well as how the workshop's interactive parts will be run.

The Workshop will be focusing on “Building a Resilient Europe: Sustainable Development and Culture in focus”. The workshop is taking place in Vienna, Austria on the 28th and 29th of May 2026, and is being organized by the European Sustainable Development Network together with the Federal Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, Climate and Environmental Protection, Regions and Water Management (BMLUK) and the Austrian Federal Chancellery.

World famous natural historian, David Attenborough once stated that “*Nature once determined how we survive. Now, we determine how nature survives.*”<sup>1</sup> This quote showcases how the relationship between humans and nature has transformed throughout history. An important part of that change is the role of the Industrial Revolution, as it fundamentally transformed the human–nature relationship by reducing human dependence on natural cycles and enabled technological control over ecological processes. This reframed nature as a resource rather than a living system to which humans belong.

Ecosystems form the fundamental life-support systems, on which human well-being ultimately depends. For this reason, the resilience of ecosystems is inseparable from the resilience of societies: when ecological systems weaken, social, economic and political vulnerabilities intensify. Culture is deeply intertwined with this dynamic, as it shapes how communities value nature, use resources and imagine their place within the biosphere. This interdependence underscores the need not only for resilient policies that protect ecosystems, but also for transformative cultural change that reorients societies toward ways of living that support both human and ecological flourishing.

Culture is essential for sustainability transitions because it shapes worldviews, norms, identities, and the ways societies understand their relationship with the biosphere. In this sense, culture is also a foundation for resilience, because it influences how communities interpret risks, adapt to change and imagine alternative futures within the limits of social–ecological systems.

Chapter 1 focuses on the relationship between culture and sustainability by examining how cultural meanings, values and practices shape the conditions for societal transformation. It explores culture both as a distinct dimension of sustainable development and as a cross-cutting force that influences worldviews, norms and identities. The chapter analyses how cultural and creative sectors and policy frameworks in the field contribute to sustainability. By linking cultural change to planetary thinking and social–ecological interdependence, the chapter shows how culture can enable the transformative shifts needed to reconnect human development with the biosphere and support more sustainable ways of living. In addition, chapter 1 provides information on the conversation islands.

Chapter 2 explores how ecological, social and democratic systems are deeply interdependent. Sustainability transitions place pressure on democratic institutions while strong democracies are essential for enabling resilience. It examines the systemic nature of resilience, and the ways in which environmental degradation and geopolitical tensions challenge cooperation and societal stability. The chapter concludes

---

<sup>1</sup> Attenborough 2019.

that resilient societies require not only ecological and economic adaptation but also democratic renewal, inclusive governance and shared narratives that support collective action within planetary boundaries.

Chapter 3 will provide information on exchange spaces that will be taking place during the workshop and provides introductions to the topics that will be covered at the tables. The purpose of the exchange spaces is to allow participants the chance to exchange with their peers from other countries on good practice cases. Each table will include an example of different topics around sustainability, resilience and democracy.

After the Workshop, an ESDN Policy Note will be published that will highlight the main outcomes, ideas, and recommendations that come out of the presentations, the discussion panels, and from the Exchange Spaces. The ESDN will publish this as soon as possible.

# Chapter 1: Culture and Sustainability – Perspectives and Approaches

This chapter focuses on culture and its role in building a more sustainable future. Culture plays a multifaceted role in sustainability, functioning both as a distinct dimension of sustainable development and as an essential element of systemic sustainability. Beyond its intrinsic value, culture shapes the ways societies understand the world, empower change and imagine alternative futures. As global interdependence deepens and the pressures on planetary systems intensify, cultural perspectives become central to enabling the transformative capacities required for sustainable development and resilient ecosystems. Culture not only reflects collective worldviews but also drives shifts in norms, practices and meanings, making it a critical force for societal transformation.

Culture can be defined in different ways. It can be understood as values and actions and the practices through which culture is produced.<sup>2</sup> For example, at the EU level, the cultural and creative sector has been defined as all sectors for whose activities *are based on cultural values and/or artistic and other creative expression, whether those activities are market- or non-market-oriented.*<sup>3</sup> Therefore, culture consists not only of values, social norms and practices but also of the products that emerge from them. UNESCO has identified a momentum where culture is comprehended as *a system of meaning, belonging, creativity and care*, and the adoption of the Pact for the Future in 2024 reaffirmed this shift at the United Nations level.<sup>4</sup>

Cultural rights were acknowledged as part of human rights already in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 and the international framework for cultural rights has since evolved.<sup>5</sup> In the 2030 Agenda Sustainable Development Goals, culture was not noted as a stand-alone goal but it is acknowledged as part of other targets.<sup>6</sup> The cultural and creative industries contribute to other pillars of sustainable development,<sup>7</sup> for example, by creating decent work and strengthening gender equality. Sustainability in culture can mean different things. It refers both to preserving culture and cultural heritage for future generations (see Hosagrahar 2017) and to the means through which culture can foster societal transformation (see Järvelä 2023). According to UNESCO, culture is a *“cross-cutting dimension that may foster a paradigm shift to renew policymaking towards an inclusive, people-centered and context-relevant approach.”*<sup>8</sup>

Culture can be seen as a mirror of the evolution of societies,<sup>9</sup> as it reflects the ideas and understandings of society. At the same time culture has been a tool for change and transformation. It has been a way to express new ideas and experienced realities from new perspectives. Therefore, worldviews and culture are deeply intertwined. There is a rising belief that culture has potential to drive societal change toward more sustainable daily practices and lifestyles.<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Järvelä 2023, 2.

<sup>3</sup> European Commission: Directorate-General 2025, 11.

<sup>4</sup> UNESCO 2025, 297-298.

<sup>5</sup> Mendizábal & Salmi 2025, 40-41.

<sup>6</sup> Mendizábal & Salmi 2025, 41.

<sup>7</sup> UNESCO 2018, 6.

<sup>8</sup> UNESCO 2025.

<sup>9</sup> UNESCO 2022, 6.

<sup>10</sup> Järvelä 2023, 2.

The contemporary world is shaped by a transformed understanding of global interdependence. Societies are now embedded in a deeply interconnected system in which actions in one part of the world can trigger unexpected consequences elsewhere. This heightened complexity reveals that sustainability challenges cannot be addressed solely through technical or sectoral solutions. In addition, they require a cultural shift in how we perceive the world, our place within it, and our responsibilities toward one another. Recognizing the world as a wide, interlinked system calls for new ways of thinking, acting and imagining futures. Such a cultural transformation is essential for building the collective capacity needed to navigate global risks and advance sustainable development.

## **Culture as a dimension of sustainability and supporting resilience**

Sustainable development has been defined through four dimensions: ecological, economic, social and cultural dimensions. Sabatini (2019) is one of the researchers who has examined the integration of culture and sustainability and has sought to develop a theoretical framework that would allow identifying culture as a fourth pillar of sustainable development. He presents three possible actions: the use of built heritage, participatory practices of performing arts and the development of cultural districts. He calls for adequate policies that regulate, enable and empower the role of cultural industries in building sustainable growth.<sup>11</sup>

While Sabatini represents one scholarly contribution to this discussion, international organizations have also advanced the cultural dimension of sustainability, most notably UNESCO. According to UNESCO, culture contributes to sustainable development through the 5 P's: people, planet, prosperity, peace and partnerships.<sup>12</sup> UNESCO promotes the 2030 Agenda implementation through its Culture Conventions and programs. The focus is on policy support, capacity-building, monitoring and operational projects.<sup>13</sup> This mandate is reflected in several of UNESCO's key instruments. One prominent example is the 1972 Convention Concerning the Protection of World Cultural and Natural Heritage, which safeguards cultural and natural heritage through rehabilitation, education, resilience, capacity-building, conservation and sustainable use of resources.<sup>14</sup>

Culture also enhances resilience and UNESCO's work in emergency preparedness and response contributes to the resilience of communities and decreases disaster risks. UNESCO works in both conflicts and natural disasters. For example, a multi-donor fund, the Heritage Emergency Fund, was established in 2015 to prepare and respond in emergency situations. It has supported responses to different emergency situations by planning and implementing emergency interventions as well as long-term recovery.<sup>15</sup>

In addition to UNESCO's work, national and local governments have also included culture in their policies, such as climate strategies, post-COVID recovery plans, gender equality policies and social inclusion initiatives.<sup>16</sup> For example, the EU adopted the EU Work Plan for Culture 2023-2026 in 2022, which shapes cooperation between Member States, the Commission and the Presidencies of the Council on culture. The resolution focuses on four priorities: artists and cultural professionals, cultural participation, culture for the planet and co-creative partnerships.<sup>17</sup> UNESCO maintains that the strategic role of culture is also

---

<sup>11</sup> Sabatini 2019.

<sup>12</sup> UNESCO 2018, 7.

<sup>13</sup> UNESCO 2018, 11.

<sup>14</sup> UNESCO 2018, 12-15.

<sup>15</sup> UNESCO 2018, 22-23.

<sup>16</sup> UNESCO 2025, 298.

<sup>17</sup> European Commission 2022.

increasingly acknowledged in national sustainable development plans, yet there are nuances and differences in how aspects of culture are prioritized.<sup>18</sup>

Nevertheless, challenges remain in embedding culture into sustainable development. Although culture has become a more integral part of public policies, UNESCO has stated that there are difficulties in institutional mechanisms, funding systems and regulatory frameworks as well as in data.<sup>19</sup> There are also concerns about the gap between broad recognition of culture and its operational integration into sector-specific policies. A second gap relates to how culture's role is recognized in policies regarding crisis response and peacebuilding.<sup>20</sup> Culture plays a crucial role in strengthening societal resilience, shaping the values, practices and shared meanings that enable communities to withstand and adapt to crises. For example, UNESCO has noted that culture demonstrated its capacity for adaptation and resilience during the Covid-19 crisis.<sup>21</sup> Culture supported society as an infrastructure through meaning and connection, collective spaces and adaptation.<sup>22</sup>

In response to these challenges, UNESCO has called for a unified and adequately resourced framework to support culture and sustainable development through the following key findings:<sup>23</sup>

1. Advancing inclusive and equitable participation in cultural life
2. Leveraging digital technologies to reduce inequalities and stimulate innovation
3. Fostering culture and arts education
4. Enabling an inclusive and sustainable cultural ecosystem and driving economic development
5. Tackling climate change and promoting environmental sustainability through culture
6. Protecting artists and culture at risk and bolstering resilience, peace and security
7. Data and policy integration: evidence for a goal

UNESCO contends that integrating culture into sustainable development practices and policies would bring significant benefits by fostering culturally diverse and inclusive governance, enhancing the localization of development through context-specific values and knowledge systems, and promoting peaceful coexistence by strengthening mutual understanding, gender equality and social cohesion. By advancing cultural and human rights, addressing disparities, such as gender inequalities, and empowering communities to shape their own futures, culture would also enable a rights-based approach to development.<sup>24</sup>

## The power of culture to foster sustainability

The transformative nature of culture is widely understood and supported by different policies. UNESCO has acknowledged culture's capacity to drive change.<sup>25</sup> In addition, the Council of the European Union has acknowledged the cultural and creative sectors as *"drivers of systemic change through storytelling, imagination and behavioural influence"*.<sup>26</sup> In December 2025, a group of culture and environment experts

---

<sup>18</sup> UNESCO 2025, 299.

<sup>19</sup> UNESCO 2025, 298.

<sup>20</sup> UNESCO 2025, 299.

<sup>21</sup> UNESCO 2022, 7.

<sup>22</sup> UNESCO 2025, 299.

<sup>23</sup> UNESCO 2025, 301-308.

<sup>24</sup> UNESCO 2025, 299.

<sup>25</sup> UNESCO 2025, 299.

<sup>26</sup> European Commission 2025.

from EU countries, mandated by the EU work plan for culture 2023-2026, published recommendations on how the EU, Member States and cultural stakeholders could more effectively support the cultural and creative sectors in adopting greener practices and accelerating their contribution to systemic transformation.<sup>27</sup>

Building on these policy developments, several frameworks further articulate how culture can act as a catalyst for social transformation. For example, UNESCO (2025) has published a toolkit for gender equality in policymaking to support targeting gender equality in cultural policies. Culture and the creative sector are not free from gender inequality as women are underrepresented in leadership, decision-making and highly visible roles. Additionally, the ways of working in the field of culture involve irregular hours, income insecurity, insufficient access to social protection and benefit, because work in the cultural and creative sector is often freelance. Many existing cultural policies and measures fail to tackle the structural problems. One identified key reason is the lack of sex-disaggregated data, and another is the insufficient attention to intersectionality.<sup>28</sup>

One goal for the toolkit was to support embedding gender perspectives into regional and sub-regional cultural policy frameworks and strategies to foster inclusive and equitable regional cultural development.<sup>29</sup> An example of recognizing gender equality in cultural policy frameworks is the previous Council Work Plan for Culture for the period 2019-2022, which recognized gender equality as a pillar of cultural diversity and its role in challenging stereotypes as well as promoting societal change.<sup>30</sup> Gender equality is also covered in the EU work plan for culture 2023-2026, especially as part of cultural statistics.<sup>31</sup>

Alongside the social dimension, the ecological dimension of culture has gained increasing attention, particularly regarding its impact on the resilience of ecosystems. Indigenous peoples and local communities illustrate this interdependence particularly clearly: many rely directly on biodiversity and maintain cultural practices, identities and knowledge systems that are inseparable from their landscapes and seascapes.<sup>32</sup> Biodiversity therefore forms a foundation for cultural diversity, while cultural diversity in turn can support more sustainable living. Recognizing this interdependence makes clear that addressing environmental degradation requires approaches that integrate ecological, cultural and social dimensions.

Europe and the global society are facing urgent environmental challenges which require systemic transformation. Some progress has been achieved but more is required.<sup>33</sup> According to the report “Creative shifts: empowering culture for sustainable living”, there are major financial challenges for implementing green practices in cultural and creative sectors (see European Commission: Directorate-General 2025). The most needed interventions to adopt greening practices were national-level policies, targeted financial programs, monitoring and evaluation systems, and expanded capacity-building and learning processes.<sup>34</sup>

Nine main recommendations across three key domains were concluded in the report:<sup>35</sup>

---

<sup>27</sup> European Commission 2025.

<sup>28</sup> Villarroya & Ollé 2025, 7-8.

<sup>29</sup> Villarroya & Ollé 2025, 6.

<sup>30</sup> European Commission 2024.

<sup>31</sup> Council of the European Union 2022; European Commission 2024.

<sup>32</sup> UNESCO 2026: Culture and values.

<sup>33</sup> European Commission: Directorate-General 2025, 13.

<sup>34</sup> European Commission: Directorate-General 2025, 14-15.

<sup>35</sup> European Commission: Directorate-General 2025, 5-6.

1. Establishing culture and creativity as keystones of sustainability
  - 1.1. Position culture at the core policy response to ecological challenges
  - 1.2. Recognize culture as a pillar of the global sustainable development framework
  - 1.3. Strengthen coordination between culture and environment policy domains
2. Mobilizing the cultural and creative sectors
  - 2.1. Use culture and creativity to drive climate and biodiversity action
  - 2.2. Promote the role of artists and creatives in ecological and climate action
  - 2.3. Embed environmental criteria into cultural funding frameworks
3. Supporting the green transition
  - 3.1. Enable culture agents to lead the green transition
  - 3.2. Improve sectoral sustainability funding
  - 3.3. Introduce carbon footprint tracking for major cultural events and platforms

These developments illustrate that the urgency of climate change and environmental degradation requires more than technical solutions. They are threats to humanity as a whole and to our present cultural values and assets. Thus, there is a need for a broader approach that incorporates cultural capacities and meanings into sustainability transitions. It is also important to understand that cultural contexts shape how risks are perceived, how challenges are interpreted and what kinds of transitions are considered possible or legitimate,<sup>36</sup> making culture an essential component of systemic transformation.

## Culture transforming the worldview and fostering a more sustainable living

Culture has the power to transform society, as it plays a crucial role in shaping our identity.<sup>37</sup> It is not only a social process, but also essential for reimagining humanity within the planetary boundaries. Social norms can enable or prevent behavioral change.<sup>38</sup> Social norms can be divided between norms that represent what people typically do in a given group, based on observing the majority's actual behavior, and norms people express and believe one ought to do, grounded in social approval, disapproval, and moral expectations.<sup>39</sup> Social norms are therefore an integral part of our worldviews and how we understand our relationship with nature. This makes culture a key entry point for shifting worldviews from human-centered perspectives toward planetary thinking, where humans are seen as part of interconnected social–ecological systems.

Humans and societies are an integrated part of the biosphere, and in a globalized world people and ecosystems are increasingly intertwined. Meeting global sustainability criteria and human development needs requires a fundamental shift in cultural and societal understandings of the interconnectedness between people and the biosphere.<sup>40</sup> The current conceptual detachment of human and economic progress from the biosphere has diminished the long-term capacity of 'natural capital' to support societal developments.<sup>41</sup> There are different factors leading to this disconnect. People are not dependent on nature in the same manner as they were before the Industrial Revolution. As a result, several planetary boundaries have been exceeded, eroding the planet's capacity to absorb shocks and maintain the stability of its ecological systems.

---

<sup>36</sup> Järvelä 2023, 3.

<sup>37</sup> Hosagrahar 2017, 12.

<sup>38</sup> Prawitz & al 2026, 2.

<sup>39</sup> Prawitz & al 2026, 3.

<sup>40</sup> Folke & al 2011, 719-720.

<sup>41</sup> Folke & al 2011, 732.

Research on social–ecological systems highlights this challenge. Folke and others (2011) note that human actions are often viewed as external drivers of ecosystem dynamics. They have noted that many recurring problems in natural resource use and environmental management are rooted in the lack of recognition that ecosystems and the social systems are inseparable.<sup>42</sup> They argue that overcoming this requires both social and ecological capacity, and refer to this challenge as transformability: the ability to create new beginnings and develop new ways of living when existing ecological, economic, and social conditions make the current system unsustainable.<sup>43</sup>

A planetary approach builds on this understanding by integrating humans and the rest of nature.<sup>44</sup> According to Salonen, Isola, Jakonen and Foster, the planetary context means that the lived experience is *simultaneously local, regional and global, connected to the past, present and future continuum, and transcending human and non-human reality*.<sup>45</sup> Moraes, Arraut E. and Arraut J. have argued on behalf of the understanding that there are no distinct things as “humanity” and “nature”. They view that humans emerge from nature and continue to be a part of it. In addition to recognizing this, they state that there is a need for a mental perception that humans live on *a single and finite planet that they share with all other components of this nature*.<sup>46</sup>

Salonen, Isola, Jakonen and Foster suggested extending the human-centered notion of inclusion to planetary inclusion. They extend the scale of the experience from social to the planetary realm.<sup>47</sup> In this approach, they extend the norms of the moral expectations and thus promote transformative change by introducing temporal and spatial dimensions to the experience of oneself.

---

<sup>42</sup> Folke & al 2011, 732.

<sup>43</sup> Folke & al 2011, 724.

<sup>44</sup> Salonen & al 2024, 2.

<sup>45</sup> Salonen & al 2024, 4.

<sup>46</sup> Moraes & al 2021.

<sup>47</sup> Salonen & al 2024, 5-6.

**Table 2. Comparison of the human-centred social inclusion scale and the proposed planetary inclusion scale**

	<b>Items of the experiences of social inclusion scale</b>	<b>Items of the experiences of planetary inclusion scale</b>
1	I feel that what I do every day is significant.	I feel that my presence in the world is significant.
2	I get positive feedback on what I do.	I believe that those who will live after me will be satisfied with my choices.
3	I belong to a group or community that is important to me.	I feel I do not belong only in a community or a nation, but on a single and finite planet.
4	Other people need me.	I believe that the planet needs me to preserve future opportunities for a good life.
5	I can influence the course of my life.	I can influence the intertwined future of me and the planet.
6	I feel that my life has purpose.	I experience meaningfulness.
7	I can strive for things that are important to me.	I am engaged in broadening my sphere of care.
8	I get help when I really need it.	I belong to the world that supports my life.
9	I feel trusted.	I live in peace and harmony with the world.
10	I can influence some things in my living environment.	I am part of the intergenerational chain and contribute to the world to make it a better place.

Figure X. Comparison of social inclusion scale items by Leemann, Martelin et al. in 2022 with suggested experiences of planetary inclusion scale items. (Salonen & al 2024, 6.)

Economic growth has been intertwined with biodiversity loss and climate change. Human well-being is measured through different indicators, and one most common is the Gross Domestic Product (GDP). GDP measures the country’s economic performance in a specific time period, typically a year. This approach has been widely criticized, because it does not cover all aspects of well-being. One concern has been that it views people as consumers and assumes that by consuming the well-being increases. However, this assumption does not reflect current societal trends. Despite rising levels of consumption, for example, mental health problems have increased in many countries. One reason could be the unequal distribution of wealth, which prevents many from benefiting from economic growth to the same extent as others.

Another indicator of well-being is the Human Development Index (HDI), which measures three dimensions: long and healthy life, knowledge and a decent standard of living.<sup>48</sup> Yet it fails to take into account, for example, inequalities, poverty and human security.<sup>49</sup> Although the standard of living has been growing for the past decades, there remain both societal and ecological issues. When our well-being has increased, also the ecological footprint has been rising, and ecosystem services have declined.<sup>50</sup>

A need for a “beyond GDP” approach has been acknowledged widely. For example, the EU has had its own initiative, which includes environmental and social aspects of prosperity, focusing on the wellbeing of all

<sup>48</sup> UNDP 2026.

<sup>49</sup> UNDP 2026; Steffen & al 2011, 749.

<sup>50</sup> Steffen & al 2011, 749.

people and the planet.<sup>51</sup> Similarly, the OECD has created a framework for improving current and future well-being.<sup>52</sup> The OECD well-being framework provides a beyond-GDP approach to measuring current and future well-being across multiple dimensions. The framework includes 11 key dimensions of current well-being and 4 key dimensions of future well-being. These dimensions are measured in different ways, also from the perspective of social equality.<sup>53</sup>

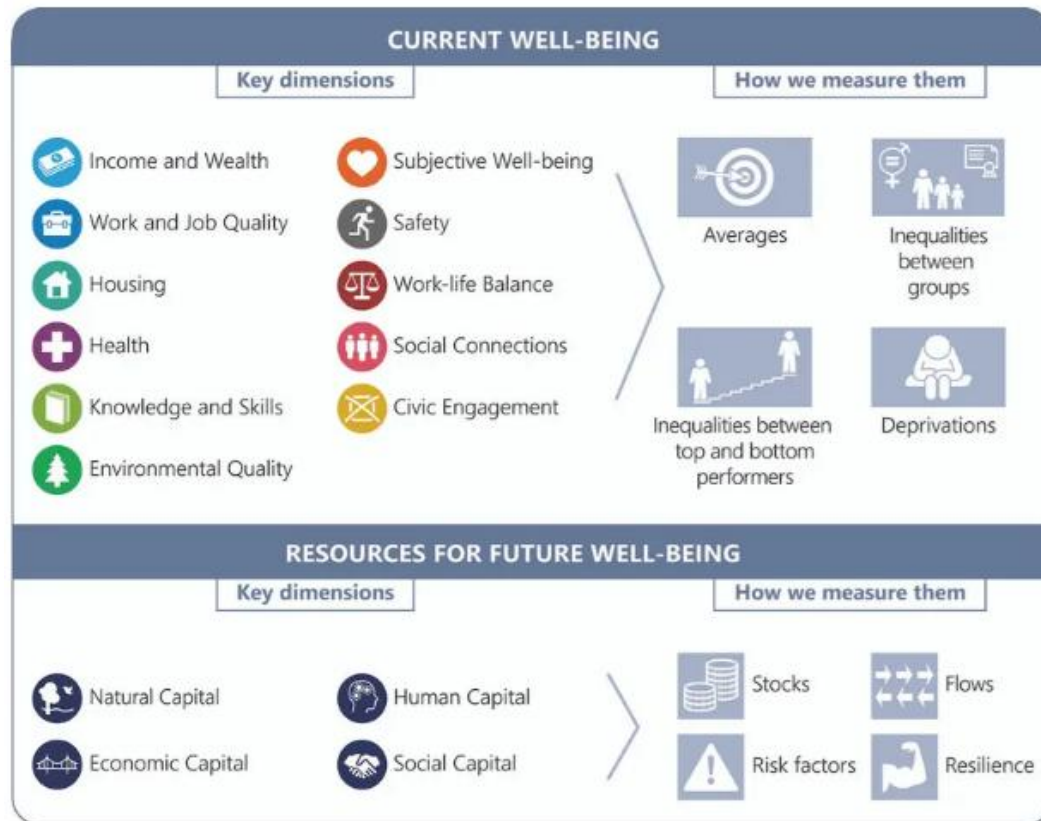


Figure X. The OECD well-being framework. (OECD (n.d.): OECD Well-being Data Monitor.)

Some scholars have also suggested moving from standard of living to quality of life (see Salonen 2026). This concept is closely connected to what we view as the life to which we aspire. As societies increasingly recognize that current lifestyles are not sustainable and cannot secure good lives for future generations, it becomes evident that aligning our ways of living with planetary boundaries requires transformative change. This calls for a reassessment of what we consider desirable: rather than seeking well-being through consumption and material goods, we need to cultivate forms of a good life that do not harm the planet, such as meaningful social relationships, a sense of belonging and other non-material sources of fulfillment. This shift ultimately requires transformation in the social norms that shape our aspirations and everyday choices.

## Keynote: Culture as SDG 18? - Importance and advantages of recognizing culture as decisive aspect in the post-2030 discussions

<sup>51</sup> European Commission (n.d.): Beyond GDP: delivering sustainable and inclusive wellbeing.

<sup>52</sup> OECD (n.d.): Well-being and Beyond GDP.

<sup>53</sup> OECD (n.d.): OECD Well-being Data Monitor.

The first keynote will be held by Klara Košťál, Head of Department for Diversity of Cultural Expressions, from Austrian Commission for UNESCO and Anna Steiner from Federal Ministry of Housing, Arts, Culture, Media and Sport of Austria. This presentation invites participants to explore that shift and to consider what it means for policy, practice, and the future of the Agenda for Sustainable Development (post-2030 Agenda).

Culture proved to be a core source of resilience during Covid-19. It became clear that culture is a vital human resource. As social life collapsed into isolation, cultural practices, like shared music, storytelling, digital creativity, and other forms of collective expression, kept communities connected. The crisis also revealed how fragile cultural ecosystems are when not treated as system-relevant: cultural institutions closed first and reopened last, despite their importance for mental health, social cohesion, and public wellbeing. These lessons, reinforced by later global disruptions, have reshaped international debates on culture's role in peace, inclusion, resilience, and sustainable development.

Across Europe and beyond, cultural actors responded to global challenges with remarkable innovation. Institutions developed climate-friendly infrastructures, fair-pay models, digital transformation strategies, and new approaches to accessibility and participation. Civil-society organizations demonstrated how cultural practices strengthen belonging, identity, and dignity, especially in times of crisis. Together, these developments point to a broader understanding of culture: not as a sector, but as a system factor with social, ecological and economic dimensions. As global discussions move toward the post-2030 agenda, the question is no longer whether culture contributes to sustainable development, but how the international community can structurally recognize and strengthen this contribution.

### **Keynote: From SDGs to Practice: Culture as a Driver of Sustainable Development**

The Session 1 keynote presentation will be held by Selina Kahle, who is a culture and sustainability expert working at the intersection of cultural practice, climate responsibility, and social transformation. She led the German government-funded initiative Culture4Climate and served as Deputy Chairwoman of 2N2K, where she helped to advance sustainability strategies and the sustainability declaration for the cultural sector. She has presented this work at international forums including the UN High-Level Political Forum, Mondiacult, and UCLG Culture Summits.

She is a lecturer and researcher of Cultural Management at Heinrich Heine University Düsseldorf, with a focus on the social impact of museums and the role of cultural organizations in sustainable development. Her doctoral research explores how impact measurement can better capture culture's contribution to the SDGs.

In her presentation, she will present an overview of developments related to culture and sustainability in Germany, embedded in a wider international perspective. The session will examine how the discourse has evolved, which policy and practice developments have been most relevant, and why culture is increasingly understood as an essential driver of sustainable development for the future.

### **Keynote: Integrating Culture and Cultural Actors more Closely to Sustainability Work**

This keynote is held online by Antti Huntus, Director of Arts and Culture Networks, Finnish Arts and Culture Agency, Finland. Huntus will present how art and culture in Finland are part of the work and implementation of the strategy of the National Commission on Sustainable Development. The strategy is

built on a systemic approach, and culture and arts are deeply embedded in it. It has been noted that there is a need for a cultural transformation towards a society with a more sustainable lifestyle.

In addition to government measures, Huntus will also discuss development projects within the Finnish arts and culture sector as well as in research.

## **Keynote: Culture as a Driver of Sustainable Development: Preparing Future Generations**

The fourth keynote of the first session will be held online by László Borbély, ESDN Advisory Board Member, State Counsellor, and National SDG Coordinator from the Prime Minister's Office - Department of Sustainable Development, Romania.

Romania will address the role of culture as an essential component of sustainable development and the importance of preparing future generations not only through access to information, but also through the development of values, critical thinking, cultural identity, and active community participation. The intervention will highlight the need to approach sustainable development in an integrated manner, recognizing culture as a key factor in shaping mindsets, strengthening social cohesion, and building more resilient communities.

Romania will also present examples of collaboration between public institutions and non-governmental organizations, emphasizing the impact of sustainable development education projects and community initiatives dedicated to young people and civil society. In this context, the intervention will open a discussion on strengthening the role of culture within the sustainable development agenda and on the importance of giving culture greater recognition as a strategic pillar for the future, including a reflection on the potential value of considering culture as a dedicated objective — a possible SDG 18 — acknowledging its role in shaping sustainable societies and future generations.

## **Conversation Islands: – Interactive Group Work with Questions**

The conversation islands are similar to World Café and their purpose is to exchange views between participants. There will be three rounds of 25-minute discussions on the pre-determined topic. The topics are as follows:

**Island 1:** How can cultural heritage and traditions be leveraged to accelerate progress on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), or on sustainable development, in general, in your region?

*Kristina Smieskova, ESDN Youth Network Member, Slovakia*

**Island 2:** What are the biggest challenges in preserving cultural diversity while pursuing the economic, social, and environmental dimensions of sustainable development? How can these tensions be resolved?

*Antoine Stevens, ESDN Advisory Board Member, International Policy Attaché, Federal Institute for Sustainable Development, Belgium*

**Island 3:** Stories and narratives shape public perception and political will. How can we use culture to accelerate the adoption of sustainable practices?

*Louis Meuleman, Chair of the Scientific Committee, European Environment Agency (EEA), Belgium*

**Island 4:** Beyond GDP and carbon footprints, how can we develop indicators that capture the cultural dimensions of sustainable development—such as community well-being, cultural resilience, or intangible heritage? What metrics would you propose?

*Maria Stoll, Scientific Officer in Sustainable Development, Federal Office for Spatial Development (ARE), Switzerland*

**Island 5:** As civil servants and experts, we often face resistance to change. What leadership qualities or cultural shifts are needed within our own institutions to champion sustainable development? How can we model these changes?

*Melina Matzawrakos, ESDN Advisory Board Member, Policy Officer for Sustainable Development and Participation, Federal Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, Climate and Environmental Protection, Regions and Water Management, Austria*

## Chapter 2: Sustainability, Resilience & Democracy in Transformative Times

This chapter focuses on the resilience in social-ecological systems and how it can be strengthened through policy frameworks. The interlinkages between sustainability, resilience and democracy will be explored through policies. Socio-ecological systems are the foundation for humans to exist and therefore vital for well-being. This means that the well-being of humans and nature is interconnected, and the resilience of humans cannot be fulfilled without considering the environment. This underlines the importance of a sustainable way of living.

There is no single, universally accepted definition of resilience, nor a shared understanding of what it encompasses.<sup>54</sup> Resilience generally refers to a system's ability to maintain functioning as the surrounding environment changes. It also includes flexibility and the capacity to develop further,<sup>55</sup> the system does not simply return to the state it was in before the disturbance. What distinguishes resilience from everyday flexibility or agility is the aspect of adaptation.<sup>56</sup> Through resilience, an individual or an organization may emerge from a crisis or disruption stronger than before or able to perform better than previously.

The 2020 Strategic Foresight Report underlined the importance of resilience in EU policies. In the report, resilience was defined as an ability to withstand and cope with challenges as well as to undergo transitions in a sustainable, fair, and democratic manner.<sup>57</sup> Thus, the understanding of resilience has since evolved and the European Commission has concluded that it is no longer sufficient to react to each crisis, but there is a need to approach resilience as transformative, proactive and forward-looking.<sup>58</sup> This means that instead of “bouncing back”, the policies should enable “bouncing forward” towards a more sustainable future.<sup>59</sup>

The Joint Research Center (JRC) provides science and knowledge services for the European Commission. The JRC works to provide policy makers with scientific knowledge and tools to cope with both expected and unexpected shocks.<sup>60</sup> The JRC's journey with resilience began already in 2015 at a high-level conference, which brought scientists and policy makers together to discuss how to build a resilient Europe in an increasingly interconnected world. In 2016, the Research Network for the Measurement of Resilience was established by the JRC and the European Political Strategy Centre (EPSC) to strengthen resilience thinking in policymaking.<sup>61</sup>

After this, the Covid-19 pandemic was one of the first practical examples showing that a return to pre-crisis conditions may not even be desirable. According to the JRC, one important feature of the COVID-19 crisis was its interconnectedness and systemic nature. It affected our health systems, travel, tourism, production, international trade, value chains, and trust in institutions.<sup>62</sup> The global community is

---

<sup>54</sup> Duchek 2020, 216.

<sup>55</sup> DiBella et al.

<sup>56</sup> Duchek 2020, 216.

<sup>57</sup> JRC 2025; JRC 2020, 2.

<sup>58</sup> European Commission 2025, 5.

<sup>59</sup> JRC 2020, 4.

<sup>60</sup> JRC 2020, 5.

<sup>61</sup> JRC 2025.

<sup>62</sup> JRC 2020, 5.

interconnected and systemic, as demonstrated by the way crises and other major shifts spread across the world and generate diverse, far-reaching impacts.

## Resilience in social-ecological systems and policies

Resilience approach to sustainability explores people as part of the biosphere and how we interact with ecosystems. The ecosystem provides humans with the necessities for living, such as fresh water and nutrition, while people have an impact on the ecosystems with, for example, land use. A resilience thinking approach investigates how the interaction between people and nature, the social-ecological systems, can be sustainable and ensure the essential ecosystem services which humanity is dependent on.<sup>63</sup> It can be argued, therefore, that sustainability and resilience are crucial for humanity to flourish. Building on this understanding, resilience research has identified concrete principles for strengthening the capacity of social–ecological systems.

According to the researchers of Stockholm Resilience Center, there are seven principles for building resilience in social-ecological systems:<sup>64</sup>

1. Maintain diversity and redundancy
2. Manage connectivity
3. Manage slow variables and feedbacks
4. Foster complex adaptive systems thinking page
5. Encourage learning
6. Broaden participation
7. Promote polycentric governance systems

These principles emphasize that resilience emerges from the interplay of ecological, social and institutional factors. A similar systemic perspective is reflected in the work of the JRC, which has developed frameworks to analyze resilience across four dimensions. The first dimension is the social and economic dimension, which enables us to tackle economic shocks and achieve long-term structural change in a fair and inclusive way. The second one is the geopolitical dimension which relates to Europe's 'open strategic autonomy' and global leadership. The third is the green dimension, which includes climate neutrality and adapting to climate change, reducing pollution as well as restoring the ecological systems. The fourth dimension is the digital dimension which supports engagement and participation in society.<sup>65</sup>

To operationalize these dimensions, the JRC has developed conceptual frameworks that illustrate how different components of a system contribute to overall resilience. One example is the framework on vulnerability and resilience, which consists of three elements: 1) assets such as natural, human, social and built capital, 2) engines, for example, eco-system and socio-system services as well as institutions and 3) outcomes, which can be well-being, consumption and investment. The systemic approach makes it possible to tackle complexity by illustrating the interconnectedness of different parts of the system.<sup>66</sup> This systemic approach makes it possible to address complexity by showing how resilience can be strengthened at multiple points in the system, ultimately reinforcing the whole.

---

<sup>63</sup> Simonsen & al 2015, 3.

<sup>64</sup> Simonsen & al 2015.

<sup>65</sup> JRC 2020, 8-30.

<sup>66</sup> JRC 2020, 5-6.

The JRC has assessed how EU Member States coped with the financial crisis by developing indicators (see Alessi & al 2019) that measured the impact of the shock, how much they have recovered, and the capacity to “bounce forward.” These indicators covered not only economic performance, but also broader socio-economic and institutional dimensions. The studies suggest that there are factors, such as higher pre-crisis public spending on social protection, politically stable conditions and strong business environment, which enhance the country’s ability to overcome disruptions.<sup>67</sup> In other words, these factors enhance a country's resilience, and highlight that resilience is not only ecological but also deeply social, economic and institutional.

The JRC has identified three resilience capacities: absorptive, adaptive and transformation.<sup>68</sup> These can be implemented in policies by adopting preventive, preparation, protection, promotion and transformation measures.<sup>69</sup> These different aspects can be seen in EU policies. The Cyber Resilience Act, which establishes mandatory cybersecurity obligation for manufacturers to safeguard customers and businesses,<sup>70</sup> is an example of preventive, preparation and protection. The EU Adaptation strategy, which promotes the EU’s climate-resilience (see European Commission EU Adaptation Strategy), is an example of preparative and protective policy with notes of promotion and transformation. EU policy, which represents the promotive and transformative nature, is, for example, the European Green Deal, Fit for 55 (see more European Commission Delivering the European Green Deal). It aims to transform the EU with legally binding climate targets.

However, the growing tensions regarding sustainability can be seen already. A couple of years ago, there were controversies around the Nature Restoration Law.<sup>71</sup> At the EU level, 80 percent of habitats have poor or bad conservation status.<sup>72</sup> The regulation aimed to set EU-wide targets to rehabilitate certain ecosystems, such as restoring at least 20 percent of the EU’s degraded land and seas by 2030 and all areas in need of restoration by 2050.<sup>73</sup> The law was criticized, especially by the conservative politicians and lobby groups from the land-use sector.<sup>74</sup> Negotiations weakened the law, and despite these negotiations, several member countries endangered the passage of the law by withholding their support.<sup>75</sup> Finally, the European Parliament agreed on the final text in February 2024, and in June 2024 the Council of the European Union adopted the Nature Restoration Regulation.<sup>76</sup>

These debates show that resilience-building is not only a technical or ecological task, but also a political one, requiring shared values and stable societal conditions. The European Commission has identified three fundamental elements for a resilient EU in 2040: 1) peace through European security, 2) the values of democracy (human dignity, freedom, equality, the rule of law, and respect for human rights), and 3) people’s well-being.<sup>77</sup> These elements are at the core of sustainability as well.

---

<sup>67</sup>Giovannini & al 2019, 8-9.

<sup>68</sup> JRC 2020, 6-7.

<sup>69</sup> JRC 2020, 8.

<sup>70</sup> European Commission (n.d.). Cyber Resilience Act.

<sup>71</sup> Politico 25.3.2023.

<sup>72</sup> European Environment Agency (n.d.).

<sup>73</sup> European Commission (n.d.). Nature Restoration Regulation.

<sup>74</sup> Politico 25.3.2023.

<sup>75</sup> ESG News 26.3.2024.

<sup>76</sup> European Commission (n.d.). Nature Restoration Regulation.

<sup>77</sup> European Commission 2025, 6-7.

## Sustainability strengthens democracy

The worldwide peak of liberal democracies was in 2009, after which democracy has declined on a global level.<sup>78</sup> According to the European Commission, the key long-term global developments are security, the erosion of the rules-based international order and fracturing of the global landscape, and the worsening impacts of climate change and the degradation of nature and water resources.<sup>79</sup> The European Union is an economic and political union of states, which stands out from a global democracy perspective.<sup>80</sup> Despite this, democracy also faces threats in Europe.<sup>81</sup> There has been a decline in the rule of law and freedom of expression, both globally and in the EU, economic inequalities have risen, and election fairness and effective parliamentary oversight has shown decline.<sup>82</sup>

Sustainability does not come for free: safeguarding biodiversity and sustainability transformation is expensive for individuals and firms. On the other hand, not transitioning would have an even higher cost. The expenses are distributed unevenly between individuals, firms and countries. Therefore, sustainability creates tensions with democracy,<sup>83</sup> and societal resilience in the EU is under pressure.<sup>84</sup> Economic dissatisfaction often contributes to polarization, which is reinforced with citizen apathy, disillusionment, and the normalization of authoritarian values. Part of the problem is the current information environment, which is fractured and includes information manipulation.<sup>85</sup>

Yet at the same time, democratic participation is integral to sustainability through, for example, equality, participation and cooperation. Rule of law, rights, representation and participation are at the core of democracy.<sup>86</sup> The European Strategy and Policy Analysis System (ESPAS) has stated that democracy is pivotal for our ability to address global challenges.<sup>87</sup> There is no one size fits all solution for reviving democracy, but some key factors have been identified, such as restoring democratic norms and institutions, the restoration of civil society and media, anti-corruption and rebuilding public trust, and cooperation.<sup>88</sup>

Taken together, these developments show that democratic resilience is increasingly intertwined with broader social sustainability challenges, which are now becoming more visible in Europe's demographic and societal trends. One often overlooked trend is the aging population. The average life expectancy has grown and Europeans live longer. However, when taken together with the declining fertility rates, it causes a challenge when the projection for working aged people in 2040 is 17 million fewer. This will have an impact on the economy of the EU. At the same time, global developments increase the pressure on migration flows. This offers opportunities for the labor markets but challenges the unity. Migration is a politically sensitive issue.<sup>89</sup> These challenges can be overcome, but they require socially and intergenerationally just, human rights-based policies.

---

<sup>78</sup> ESPAS, 1.

<sup>79</sup> European Commission 2025, 9.

<sup>80</sup> Soete & al 2026, 179-180.

<sup>81</sup> Soete & al 2026, 181; ESPAS, 2.

<sup>82</sup> ESPAS, 4-6.

<sup>83</sup> Soete & al 2026, 178; European Commission 2025, 14.

<sup>84</sup> European Commission 2025, 13.

<sup>85</sup> ESPAS, 9.

<sup>86</sup> ESPAS, 3-4.

<sup>87</sup> ESPAS, 2-3.

<sup>88</sup> ESPAS, 12-13.

<sup>89</sup> European Commission 2025, 13-14.

Democracy is not only policies. We are connected to it also on an emotional level. ESPAS has noted the power of narratives and presented examples from their foresight workshops. One example was a metaphor of a garden, which embodies the idea that there is a collective responsibility for the maintenance and the growth of democratic systems. It was also suggested that rather than framing conflict of interests and competition as something to avoid, they should be normalized by reframing them as inherent and productive aspects of democratic life.<sup>90</sup> By promoting participation, democracy can be strengthened, and strong democracy is vital for resilience.

## Resilience and sustainability promote security

Ecological and social issues transcend national borders and therefore require cooperation between countries and regions. Environmental security has been defined as “*the state of human–environment dynamics that includes restoration of the environment damaged by human activities that could lead to social disorder and conflict*”.<sup>91</sup> Environmental degradation, climate change and biodiversity loss, have an impact on societies. Increasing droughts and floods as well as environmental disasters affect human well-being and can disturb peace, especially when natural resources are limited or when societies face sudden and severe environmental changes.

Another perspective for safety is ecological safety, which refers to the secure state of ecosystems.<sup>92</sup> This means that the ecosystems are in a good condition. It can also be understood as the relationship between the supply and demand of ecological resources.<sup>93</sup> All of these perspectives underline the need for resilient and sustainable policies in order for human societies to flourish. The European Commission has also pointed out how planetary health affects the well-being of humans, and how nature contributes to social and economic prosperity.<sup>94</sup>

Building on this, it becomes clear that the state of nature and the stability of societies are deeply interconnected. Conflict situations are a challenge, because they make it difficult to cooperate.<sup>95</sup> In light of this, it is important to prevent conflicts in order to avoid environmental risks. In Libya, the collapse of two dams during heavy flooding was caused by societal instability, which led to poor maintenance of the dams. The people killed by the collapse, as well as the damage to the environment, were casualties of societal conflict.<sup>96</sup> Additionally, the environment can also be weaponized during an armed conflict. In Ukraine, Russia was suspected of a deliberate act of sabotage of the dam failure that occurred at the Kakhovka Dam on the Dnieper River.<sup>97</sup>

These examples illustrate that environmental and societal security are mutually reinforcing, which highlights the importance of policies that integrate ecological restoration, conflict prevention and long-term resilience. For instance, climate mitigation and adaptation helps contain pandemics and supports food security.<sup>98</sup> In addition to these, there are also examples of how nature restoration can be

---

<sup>90</sup> ESPAS, 15.

<sup>91</sup> Zhu & al 2023, 2485.

<sup>92</sup> Zhu & al 2023, 2486.

<sup>93</sup> Zhu & al 2023, 2486.

<sup>94</sup> European Commission 2025, 14.

<sup>95</sup> Conca 2024, 8.

<sup>96</sup> Conca 2024, 4-5.

<sup>97</sup> Conca 2024, 4-5.

<sup>98</sup> European Commission 2025, 14.

used as part of national defense. In October 2025, the Finnish Ministry of the Environment and Ministry of Defense appointed a working group to explore how nature restoration and other ways to make use of natural barriers can support national defense and border security especially in eastern Finland.<sup>99</sup> These examples showcase how policies promoting healthy nature and environment benefit the security of society in multiple ways.

In a broader context, environmental peacebuilding offers a complementary perspective that brings together ecological management and conflict prevention and recovery. It refers to an approach that integrates natural resource management in conflict prevention, mitigation, resolution, and recovery to build resilience in communities affected by conflict.<sup>100</sup> Environmental peacebuilding emerged from the need to have a strategy for peace, which considers ecological perspectives, and it aims at five transformations:<sup>101</sup>

1. Identify mutual gains from environmental action;
2. Soften exclusionary identities and promote a sense of common community around places and ecosystems;
3. Strengthen trust through cooperative learning;
4. Build and sustain social networks across conflict boundaries;
5. Reduce tensions through stakeholder dialogue, “good governance” initiatives, and enhanced livelihoods.

Resilience is the mechanism which enables societies to undergo sustainability transformations. It is not only a mechanism to help them to “bounce back”, but to “bounce forward” and to renew in a sustainable way.

## **Keynote: Can resilience go wrong? Critical reflections connecting ecology and peace**

The first keynote of session 2 will be held by Sophia Stanger from the Focal Point Environmental Peacebuilding, Austrian Centre for Peace. From physics and psychology to economics and defense: resilience has a long history – and is experiencing a great revival. In times of increasing armed conflict, resilience is increasingly invoked at a societal level. How can European societies become more resilient in the face of external threats? This question also encompasses aspects of sustainability, such as transitioning to resilient energy systems and improving resilience to climate-related shocks.

Resilience thus seems to be common ground where people from different political perspectives can meet. No one is against resilience. But resilience is not neutral – and can lead to very different actions, depending on the underlying values used to frame it. In this keynote, Sophia Stanger critically reflects on the opportunities and pitfalls of leveraging resilience for sustainable development. She argues that resilience needs to be grounded in a vision of justice and ecological peace – not to simply maintain the status quo, but to serve as a catalyst for creating healthy social and ecological systems.

---

<sup>99</sup> Government of Finland 2025.

<sup>100</sup> Environmental Peacebuilding (n.d.).

<sup>101</sup> Conca 2024, 6-8.

## **Keynote: The Way Sustainability Can Support Achieving more Resilience, Stability and Security in Europe**

**Maria Nikolopoulou**, President – Sustainable Development Observatory, European Economic and Social Committee, Spain (online)

Maria Nikolopoulou will reflect on the relationship between sustainability, democratic resilience and citizen participation in the current European context. Against a backdrop of climate crisis, geopolitical instability, social inequalities and growing distrust in institutions, the keynote will explore how sustainable development can strengthen social cohesion, democratic legitimacy and long-term resilience across Europe. Particular attention will be given to the role of fairness, inclusion and public trust in ensuring successful sustainability transitions.

Drawing on the EESC's work and the perspective of organized civil society, she will emphasize that meaningful participation is essential for effective and legitimate policymaking. Democratic resilience depends not only on institutional capacity, but also on the active involvement of citizens, social partners and civil society organizations in shaping Europe's future. The keynote will highlight the importance of a just and participatory transition that leaves no one behind and reinforces both sustainability and democracy.

## **Governance for Resilience: Linking Academic Insight and Regional Practice**

**Sabine Schneeberger**, SDG Coordinator, Office of the Regional Government of Styria, Austria

&

**Franz Fehr**, SDG Coordinator, University of Natural Resources and Life Sciences (BOKU), Austria

This keynote will be conducted in an interview-style format. The moderator will pose the following questions to Sabine and Franz, who will reflect from the subnational/regional side and the scientific side, respectively. They will address the following questions:

- 1) What kinds of “democratic transformation” are needed in order to pave the way towards more sustainability and resilience?
- 2) How do we imagine a sustainable and resilient future to look like and (more importantly): How do we make it concretely happen?
- 3) What could or should Europe's role and responsibility be in this context?

# Exchange Spaces: Reflecting on Different Topics in the Context of Sustainability, Resilience & Democracy

This chapter focuses on the Exchange Space that will be taking place during the workshop and provides introductions to the topics being presented at the tables. The purpose of the exchange spaces is to allow participants the chance to exchange with their peers from other countries on good practice cases. Table leads will present their cases for 10-15 minutes, leaving about 30 minutes for more in-depth discussions with participants. Each table will include an example of different topics around sustainability, resilience and democracy.

There will be three rounds and speakers will remain at their tables while everyone else switches tables for next rounds.

## Table 1: Reducing Critical Raw Material Dependency through Circularity and Technological Innovation

**Table 1: Sascha Thöny**, Research Associate - Center for Sustainable Production and Logistics, Fraunhofer Austria Research GmbH, Austria

Table 1 focuses on Europe's dependency on critical raw materials, which is not only an economic risk, but also a major challenge for sustainability, resilience and strategic autonomy. As material demand continues to grow, Europe needs to rethink how resources are sourced, used and kept in circulation.

Together, this exchange table will explore approaches to reducing material dependency, from new mining activities and circular economy strategies to digital solutions such as Digital Product Passports.

## Table 2: The Contribution of Sustainability to Democracy & Security in Europe and beyond

**Vadim Kononenko**, European Environment Agency (EEA), Denmark

Security can be centred around a military and defensive strategy as well as around a more comprehensive view of **societal security**. This focuses **on ecological and societal resilience and nexus thinking** about environmental security, societal cohesion and interdependence (Kononenko and Hakala, 2023).

Furthermore, heightened security risks in a broad range of areas (including in relation to climate-induced risks) will affect Europe's overall **social and economic resilience**. There is a link between the broader and more narrow traditional framing of security because it is difficult to imagine societal security in the absence of military security. Both approaches need to **work in sync** to ensure that transformations in essential systems such as **energy and food** can continue even when faced with military risks. In this context, there is a danger of **silos thinking** (i.e. not connecting the multiple crises and their solutions with one another).

There is a need for a broader policy debate on security and resilience to include environmental and climate action underpinned by climate adaptation, food system transformation to sustain long-term resilience, improved resource efficiency and responsible consumption.

This also involves recognizing that **inequality and poor levels of inclusion** are both factors that can contribute to a lack of security or resilience. The level of inequality across EU countries and regions is an important facet of how society perceives insecurities and how political leadership deals with them. In this regard mainstreaming just and transformative resilience is key (EEA, 2023f; EEA, 2024).

There **are opportunities in strengthening the link between security and sustainability priorities**. There is a crucial role to be played by environmental and climate policy in enhancing EU stability. If this is appreciated and realized, thorough change and more synergistic results can be achieved (e.g. reduced climate migration, reduced dependence on fossil fuel suppliers, less environmental conflict, accelerated energy transition, sufficiency, a circular economy). For example, an increase in more regional supply chains to reduce dependencies may mean they are better monitored and become cleaner.

### **Table 3: A broader sustainability perspective for successful policy making and communication**

**Jürgen Janssen**, Secretary General, German Council for Sustainable Development, Germany

Table 3 will be focusing on a broader sustainability perspective. Against the backdrop of the fundamental challenges to the rule-based system and to the global consensus on sustainable development as encoded in the SDGs it becomes increasingly apparent that the sustainability narrative must be broadened to address economic, societal and policy issues previously mostly out of scope. In 2025 the German Council for Sustainable Development (RNE) initiated a dialogue-process “Rethinking Sustainability” that also covered aspects of resilience and security as well important elements of effective democratic governance and government. One key takeaway is that for sustainable development to remain or become again the north star towards a good future within the planetary boundaries for all of us, these elements must be integral to future sustainability policy.

A further important aspect for successful sustainability policy is the a priori recognition of societal (or target group) acceptance or buy-in of planned policy initiatives and measures. The RNE together with partners conducted research identifying five criteria that significantly influence the probability of policy acceptance. Together, broadening the perspective on sustainable development and addressing public acceptance early in the process of policy design and communication, can contribute to successful sustainability policy implementation.

### **Table 4: GreenDEMO: Making green transitions more democratic - and democracies greener**

**Katia Alarcón Ruiz**, Governance Innovation Expert, ICLEI-Europe, Germany

Table 4 will explore the role of local governments in green transitions. Cities are increasingly expected to deliver ambitious climate and sustainability goals, while at the same time navigating limited administrative capacity, political cycles, and declining trust in public institutions. GreenDEMO asks a timely question: how can local governments make green transitions not only more effective, but also more democratic, legitimate, and durable?

The presentation will introduce GreenDEMO, a Horizon Europe project working with eight European cities to strengthen the transformative capacity of public administrations. It will focus on how cities can use organizational innovation, Local Green Deals, and collaboration to build legitimacy for climate action. The discussion will also invite participants to reflect on the practical challenges their own cities and regions

face: how to build trust, sustain climate action over time, and make public administrations more agile, accountable, and responsive.

## References

- Alessi, L., Benczur, P., Campolongo, F. *et al.* The Resilience of EU Member States to the Financial and Economic Crisis. *Soc Indic Res* 148, 569–598 (2020). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11205-019-02200-1>
- Attenborough, D. (2019). *Nature once determined how we survive. Now, we determine how nature survives* [Speech transcript]. Speakola. <https://speakola.com/ideas/david-attenborough-launch-hbo-our-planet-2019>
- Conca, Ken. (2024). Environmental Peacebuilding: Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow. *The Journal of Social Encounters*: Vol. 8: Iss. 1, 4-12. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.69755/2995-2212.1236> Available at: [https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/social\\_encounters/vol8/iss1/3](https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/social_encounters/vol8/iss1/3)
- Council of the European Union. (2022). *Council resolution on the EU Work Plan for Culture 2023–2026*. Official Journal of the European Union. [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:32022G1207\(01\)](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:32022G1207(01))
- Environmental Peacebuilding (n.d.). <https://www.environmentalpeacebuilding.org/>
- ESG News. (2024). *EU Nature Restoration Law stalled as member states withdraw support*. Published 26.3.2024. <https://esgnews.com/eu-nature-restoration-law-stalled-as-member-states-withdraw-support/>
- European Commission. (2025). 2025 Strategic Foresight Report Resilience 2.0: Empowering the EU to thrive amid turbulence and uncertainty. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52025DC0484>
- European Commission (n.d.): Beyond GDP: delivering sustainable and inclusive wellbeing. [https://joint-research-centre.ec.europa.eu/projects-and-activities/beyond-gdp-delivering-sustainable-and-inclusive-wellbeing\\_en](https://joint-research-centre.ec.europa.eu/projects-and-activities/beyond-gdp-delivering-sustainable-and-inclusive-wellbeing_en) (retrieved 17.5.2026)
- European Commission. (2022). Council of Ministers agrees on new EU Work Plan for Culture 2023-2026. Published 20 November 2022. <https://culture.ec.europa.eu/whats-new/news/council-of-ministers-agrees-on-new-eu-work-plan-for-culture-2023-2026>
- European Commission (n.d.). Cyber Resilience Act. <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/cyber-resilience-act> (retrieved 9.5.2026)
- European Commission (n.d.). Delivering the European Green Deal. [https://commission.europa.eu/topics/climate-action/delivering-european-green-deal\\_en](https://commission.europa.eu/topics/climate-action/delivering-european-green-deal_en) (retrieved 9.5.2026)
- European Commission (n.d.). EU Adaptation Strategy. [https://climate.ec.europa.eu/eu-action/adaptation-and-resilience-climate-change/eu-adaptation-strategy\\_en](https://climate.ec.europa.eu/eu-action/adaptation-and-resilience-climate-change/eu-adaptation-strategy_en) (retrieved 9.5.2026)
- European Commission. (2024). Gender Equality. <https://culture.ec.europa.eu/policies/selected-themes/gender-equality> (retrieved 16.5.2026)
- European Commission. (n.d.). *Nature restoration regulation*. [https://environment.ec.europa.eu/topics/nature-and-biodiversity/nature-restoration-regulation\\_en](https://environment.ec.europa.eu/topics/nature-and-biodiversity/nature-restoration-regulation_en) (retrieved 16.5.2026)
- European Commission. (2025). New report on culture and sustainability in Europe is out. Published 20th December 2025. <https://culture.ec.europa.eu/whats-new/news/new-report-on-culture-and-sustainability-in-europe-is-out>
- European Commission. (2025). Strategic Foresight Report 2025: Resilience 2.0: Empowering the EU to thrive amid turbulence and uncertainty. Publications Office of the European Union, 2025. [https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/strategic-foresight/2025-strategic-foresight-report\\_en](https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/strategic-foresight/2025-strategic-foresight-report_en)

European Commission: Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, *Creative shifts – Empowering culture for sustainable living*, Publications Office of the European Union, 2025, <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2766/6678618>

European Environment Agency. *Conservation status of habitats under the EU Habitats Directive*. <https://www.eea.europa.eu/en/analysis/indicators/conservation-status-of-habitats-under> (retrieved 16.5.2026)

European Strategy and Policy Analysis System. (2024). *What future for democracy in Europe?* General Secretariat of the Council of the European Union. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/y30lx2po/espas-foresight-paper-what-future-for-democracy-in-europe.pdf>

Folke, C., S.R. Carpenter, B.H. Walker, M. Scheffer, F.S. Chapin III, and J. Rockström. 2010. Resilience thinking: integrating resilience, adaptability and transformability. *Ecology and Society* 15: 20. <http://www.ecologyandsociety.org/vol15/iss4/art20/>.

Folke C, Jansson Å, Rockström J, et al. Reconnecting to the biosphere. *Ambio*. 2011;40(7):719-38. <https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/reconnecting-biosphere/docview/898695748/se-2>. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13280-011-0184-y>.

Giovannini, E., Benczur, P., Campolongo, F., Cariboni, J. and Manca, A., Time for transformative resilience: the COVID-19 emergency, EUR 30179 EN, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, 2020, ISBN 978-92-76-18113-2, doi:10.2760/062495, JRC120489.

Government of Finland. (2025) *Working group to explore ways to coordinate nature restoration and national defence*. Published 31.10.2025. <https://valtioneuvosto.fi/en/-/1410903/working-group-to-explore-ways-to-coordinate-nature-restoration-and-national-defence>

Hosagrahar, Jyoti. (2017) Culture: at the heart of Sustainable Development Goals. *The UNESCO Courier*, 1 [877]. pp. 12-14. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000248106>

JRC. (2020). 2020 Strategic Foresight Report: Charting The Course Towards A More Resilient Europe.

JRC. (2020). Time for transformative resilience : the COVID-19 emergency. Publications Office. <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2760/062495>.

Järvelä M. (2023). Dimensions of cultural sustainability—Local adaptation, adaptive capacity and social resilience. *Front. Polit. Sci.* 5:1285602. doi: 10.3389/fpos.2023.1285602

Mendizábal & Salmi. (2025). Advancing inclusive and equitable participation in cultural life. *Culture: The missing SDG*. pp. 34-81. UNESCO2025. <https://doi.org/10.58337/REJU6051>

Moraes, Silvia & Arraut, Eduardo & Arraut, Josefina. (2021). From Global to Planetary Citizenship. 10.4324/9780429346897-4.

OECD (n.d.). Well-being and Beyond GDP. <https://www.oecd.org/en/topics/well-being-and-beyond-gdp.html> (retrieved 17.5.2026)

OECD (n.d.). OECD Well-being Data Monitor. <https://www.oecd.org/en/data/tools/well-being-data-monitor.html> (retrieved 17.5.2026)

Politico. (2023). *How repairing nature became the EU's most contentious green project*. Published on 25.3.2023. <https://www.politico.eu/article/how-repairing-nature-became-the-eus-most-contentious-green-project/>

Prawitz, H., Schwarz, L., & Donges, J. F. (2026). Modeling social norms in social-ecological systems: A systematic literature review. *Environmental Research Letters* 21. 20 February 2026. <https://iopscience.iop.org/article/10.1088/1748-9326/ae3b55/pdf>

Salonen, A. (2026). *Hyvinvointimurros*. Published 1.2.2026. <https://artosalonen.com/hyvinvointimurros>

Salonen, A.O., Isola, A-M., Jakonen, JP & Foster, R. (2024). Who and what belongs to us? Towards a comprehensive concept of inclusion and planetary citizenship. *International Journal of Social Pedagogy* 13(1), 5

Simonsen, S. H., Biggs, R., Schlüter, M., Schoon, M., Bohensky, E., Cundill, G., Dakos, V., Daw, T., Kotschy, K., Leitch, A., Quinlan, A., Peterson, G., & Moberg, F. (2015). *Applying resilience thinking: Seven principles for building resilience in social-ecological systems*. Stockholm Resilience Centre. <https://www.stockholmresilience.org/download/18.10119fc11455d3c557d6928/1459560241272/SRC+Applying+Resilience+final.pdf>

Soete, L., Schwaag Serger, S., Ayala, L., Foray, D., Georghiou, L. Et Al., Capitalism, Sustainability And Democracy - Future-Proofing The European Model, Soete, L., Schwaag Serger, S., Stierna, J. And Landabaso Alvarez, M. (editors), Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, 2026, <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2760/1893644>, JRC144547.

Steffen, W., Persson, A., Deutsch, L., Zalasiewicz, J., Williams, M., Richardson, K., Crumley, C., Crutzen, P., Folke C., Gordon, L. Molina, M., Ramanathan V., Rockström, J., Scheffer, M., Schellnhuber, H.J., Svedin U. 2011. The Anthropocene: From Global Change to Planetary Stewardship. *Ambio*, 40(7): 739–761. DOI: 10.1007/s13280-011-0185-x. [https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC3357752/pdf/13280\\_2011\\_Article\\_185.pdf](https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC3357752/pdf/13280_2011_Article_185.pdf)

UNESCO. (2026). Culture and values. <https://www.unesco.org/en/biodiversity/culture> (retrieved 17.5.2026)

UNESCO. (2018). Culture for the Agenda 2030. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 7, place de Fontenoy, 75352 Paris 07 SP, France. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000264687>

UNESCO. (2022). *Culture: global public good*. Courier. July-September 2022. UNESCO.

UNESCO. (2025). *Culture: The missing SDG*. <https://doi.org/10.58337/REJU6051>

Villarroya, A., & Ollé, B. (2025). *Culture for all: An essential driver for sustainable development*. UNESCO. <https://doi.org/10.54675/REJU6055>

Zhu, B., Hashimoto, S. & Cushman, S.A. Navigating ecological security research over the last 30 years: a scoping review. *Sustain Sci* 18, 2485–2498 (2023). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11625-023-01362-9>