

# Sustainability culture: fresh thinking is what the country needs!

## on the cultural dimension of the sustainability debate

By Olaf Zimmermann, Director of the German Cultural Council



**All too often, the debate surrounding sustainability focuses on what we must give up or will be lost. The true focus, however, should be the potential rewards for everyone. The UN's Sustainable Development Goals will only become a reality if we can successfully reorient our perspective and give the term positive connotation. And this is first and foremost a cultural challenge.**

In its broadest sense, the term “culture”, which comes from the Latin cultura meaning “tilling”, “care”, “cultivation”, stands for everything that humans produce themselves, in contrast to nature which has been neither created nor changed by humans and is in other words still natural. We tend to classify the environment as natural, but this attribute is very misleading, considering the noticeable influence that humans have on the environment all over the world. We instantly associate “natural” with “original”, “unspoiled”, “pure”, “clean” – in other words, not artificial. But this ideal of natural nature is a fantasy – wherever human culture has left its mark, this unspoiled state is no more. These days, traces of human culture can be found in the deepest oceans, in the highest mountains and even at the North and South Poles. So if this unspoiled nature no longer exists and we humans have made our mark everywhere, everything is ultimately culture.

I am not all that interested in the fierce debate among scientists as to when the final patch of unspoiled nature was impacted by human culture. I find it far more interesting to discuss the impact of culture on nature – a fact which can no longer be seriously disputed – and to draw conclusions from this regarding how we can treat our environment responsibly.

The most radical option for treating our environment sustainably is for us to exert less or indeed no cultural influence on it. This culture-free world would be incredibly sustainable, no resources would be squandered and life would strike a balance. But if we are honest, this alternative is more of an academic than a practical solution from our point of view as this scenario is only conceivable without us humans.

However, this does not mean that we humans bear no responsibility for our environment

simply because we happen to be here. Precisely because humans are universal shapers and in spite of being unable to simply cease this shaping, we are responsible for our actions, in other words for the form that this shaping takes and for all of its consequences. We are responsible for species extinction, global warming and the overexploitation of nature's treasures.

A culture which is not sustainable is on the path to self-destruction in the long run. But how is culture made sustainable?

The book *The Limits to Growth* published in 1972 marks a turning point. In Western Europe and the USA, the previous two decades were decades of supposedly unlimited growth. From the creation of whole branches of industry and manned space flight to full employment and the expansion of the science and higher education sectors – everything seemed to point towards unlimited growth. West Germany was finally able to indulge itself a little. The problems of the so-called Third World were far, far away.

The aforementioned book was the first instance of a serious damper being put on the optimism regarding progress that was associated with this growth. Higher, faster, farther appeared to not automatically lead to greater prosperity. The *The Limits to Growth* study was commissioned by the Club of Rome and was financed among others by the Volkswagen Foundation. Exten-

sive computer simulations – run back then on mainframe computer systems that filled entire rooms – were used to calculate the effects that the ongoing use of resources would have on our planet and the consequences of continued global population growth.

I was electrified by that book when I was young. Already fascinated by the beauty of the macrocosm and microcosm, I was shocked by the scenarios presented in the book. And the alarming reports have continued to this day, such as the oil crisis, criticism of nuclear power as a “future technology”, forest dieback and biodiversity decline, to name but a few.

Two camps were formed – on the one side, those who were convinced that prosperity and progress could only be guaranteed by pressing on, in other words more and more and faster and faster, and who warned against allowing Germany as a developed country to be set back in global competition. And on the other side, there were those who warned that simply pressing on as before wasn't an option in the long run as our planet's resources are finite.

The debate revolved around loss and forgoing. Driving less, eating less meat, using less water, reducing emissions – these were the buzzwords of sustainable development. They were first formulated within a social climate which was characterised by the majority of West Germans being happy that they could afford more – finally owning a car,

finally going on holiday abroad, finally not just eating meat on Sundays.

I believe that the logic of forgoing and loss of that time, which idealised an almost ascetic lifestyle, is one of the biggest problems in the debate about sustainability. Turning this logic on its head and changing the perspective is therefore one of the most important tasks in the realisation of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals. And this is first and foremost a cultural challenge.

The UN's 2030 Agenda has itself already made an important contribution to the change in perspective which is needed. It is directed at the international community as a whole. It is not a UN agenda that only applies to the countries in the north or the countries in the south; all countries are called upon to incorporate the 17 goals into their national policies and be bound by international agreements. If thought through, this means sustainability policy is actually an interdisciplinary task which is everyone's responsibility – that of the governments, civil society and each and every one of us.

The 2030 Agenda is a global plan for the future. Its realisation calls for fresh cultural thinking that confidently highlights the opportunities of sustainable development. Affording everyone a good and successful life is enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It is time this obligation towards sustainable opportunities was realised for everyone and the over-exploitation of resources was countered with a different image of a good and successful life.

Art and culture need to step up to the plate in two different ways. Firstly, much more needs to be done to raise awareness of the fact that sustainable development is a cultural challenge. Old models and certainties need to be dispensed with, and new future strategies need to be developed. And secondly, art and culture have a direct obligation to boost sustainable development, to develop resource-conserving products, to facilitate access to education, and so on.

The German Cultural Council has formed its own 2030 Agenda working group that focuses on implementation of the UN's 2030 Agenda in the cultural arena. It addresses issues such as sustainable urban planning and architecture, the development and marketing of sustainable design, gender equality within the cultural sector and the media, access to knowledge and information, etc.

The German Cultural Council contributes its point of view to the 2030 Agenda network coordinated by VENRO and the German Forum on Environment and Development. The German Cultural Council has been championing fair global trade for some years now and is a co-founder and sponsor of the fair trade network Netzwerk Gerechter Welthandel. This network furthers the discussion of trade agreements, detaching oneself from the desire to protect one's own area and generally promotes a fair international economic order that affords countries in the south fair market opportunities. The German Cultural Council continues to work

with the Climate Alliance Germany in order to also make the point here that climate issues have a cultural dimension.

I am anticipating particularly important input from the German Cultural Council's latest project which it is running together with Friends of the Earth Germany (BUND) – a series of discussions and an ideas workshop regarding the change in values and the cultural dimension of sustainability debates entitled "Heimat – was ist das?" (What is homeland?). The aim of the project is to consider how the term "homeland" takes on new meanings, what cultural and societal

connotations the term has and how it fits into current discourse on how we wish to live. In this context, the term "sustainability" in particular will be scrutinised and discussed. The focus here is first and foremost on bringing the cultural aspect to the fore, more clearly elevating the role of the cultural sector in the sustainability debate and addressing issues such as cultural education and environmental education, among others. It will also look at the relationship between the terms "homeland", "culture" and "environment". This entails consideration of cultural attributions and myths such as the German Forest. This project will seek to highlight two things. On the

## THE SUSTAINABILITY CULTURE FUND

Sustainability is sometimes simply a question of eating more chocolate: the Green Economy Academy in Frankfurt am Main invites people to chocolate events featuring delicious food made exclusively using fair trade chocolate, music, poetry slams and a baking competition. The aim of these events is to teach those who attend about the poor conditions in which chocolate is usually produced.

The German Council for Sustainable Development (RNE) funds these chocolate events and 12 other projects with up to 50,000 euros each as part of the "Esskultur und Nachhaltigkeit" (Food Culture and Sustainability) ideas competition. The Council is able to

regularly run competitions of this kind thanks to the Sustainability Culture Fund, which is being supplied with 7.5 million euros by the Federal Chancellery up to 2020. The idea behind this is that the existing thought patterns need to be broken down and values need to change in order for a sustainable society to be achieved. And art, culture, the creative industry and culture creators have a key part to play in this change of mindset. There are also ideas competitions in areas such as mobility culture and sustainability, building culture, living and sustainability, and fashion and textiles.

The ideas competitions are open to non-profit stakeholders with transformational projects, such as associations,

foundations and non-profit companies as well as public sector entities, universities, communal kindergartens or regional authorities. A jury of Council members selects the winners. They base their decisions on how innovative a project is, whether it has a clearly defined target group, whether it has the potential to play a part in transforming how we think and act – and therefore whether it contributes to the achievement of the global Sustainable Development Goals.

For further information, please see [www.sustainabilitycouncil.de](http://www.sustainabilitycouncil.de)

one hand, that the sustainability debate is a cultural debate and that it is a question of cultural change. And on the other, that the cultural and environmental sectors are considering the term “homeland” jointly with a common focus on sustainability.

The purpose of the various activities is to contribute to a change in perspective. Firstly, awareness of the issue of sustainability needs to be raised within the cultural sector because our immediate environment influences how we live. Furthermore, it needs to be made clear and

explicitly shown that the cultural sector can make a greater contribution to the sustainability debate than just what happens on the stage at climate conferences.

### Conclusion

Humans are pleasure-oriented creatures. Doing something which is pleasurable and which focuses on what is gained rather than the forging of something encourages us to participate. The topic of sustainability must be given a positive cultural connotation. If we are successful in

## TWO OF THE SUSTAINABILITY CULTURE FUND'S PROJECTS

Everyone can act sustainably, including schoolchildren after a sports lesson, for example - by choosing between snacking on an apple from the meadow orchard three kilometres down the road or an apple that has been transported from 10,000 kilometres away. Three pupils at the Geschwister Scholl School in Lebach, Saarland, addressed this topic in a short film.

The film was the highlight of the inaugural event of the Saarlouis district's Food Culture and Sustainability campaign year, which saw the RNE funding 13 projects from the Sustainability Culture Fund. In Saarlouis, the issue of plastic waste in the oceans was addressed and kids were able to measure their ecological

footprints or be given an introduction to beekeeping. Numerous similar events were held over a 12-month period, such as a guided city walk on the topic of eco-friendly shopping, a Consumption and Plastic art installation as a pupil participation project and project days on the topics of climate change and the global Sustainable Development Goals.

Apples are the focus of another of the 13 projects too - "Neue Essklasse für Apfel & Co." (New Eating Class for Apples etc.) run by the St Marienthal International Meeting Centre Foundation in Saxony. This project won't really get under way until the apple harvest in the autumn, when apples from the region will be marketed in a regional value chain

covering everything from the apple harvest in meadow orchards and local juice production to the sale of apple juice in hotels and restaurants in the region.

Two school companies will organise the harvest and sales, while the Culture and Management study group at Zittau/Görlitz University of Applied Sciences is designing the sales stands for the regional supermarkets where the products will be sold. Top chefs and regional celebrities will cook with the apples and other regional products. This will be shown on regional TV and on YouTube - the idea behind the project is, after all, to get young people in particular excited about regional food produce.



this venture, the focus will shift to what is gained and away from what is lost. It will be an economic gain because sustainable business practice has long since become a market and an economic factor. It will be an environmental gain because preserving our natural resources is essential for our survival. It will be a social gain because a sustainable society is based on the common good. And it will be a societal gain because living in a world in which nature and culture lastingly get along with one another is a prerequisite for a good life.

Commitment from society as a whole will be needed in order to realise the 17 Sustainable Development Goals of the UN's 2030 Agenda. This future-oriented composition of a sustainable society calls for all areas and strata within society to change the way they think and be willing to reorient themselves. A fundamental change is necessary in order for a comprehensively cultural understanding of the world and the challenges of its sustainable development to be gained. Fresh thinking is what the country needs!

This article was published in the "German Almanac of Sustainability 2018: Ideas and actions. Transformation!". You can find the complete publication on the website of the German Council for Sustainable Development [www.sustainabilitycouncil.de](http://www.sustainabilitycouncil.de)