

Course title:	Pathways to Sustainability: Frameworks for a Great Transformation
Instructor:	Dr. Edgar Göll
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Track:	B-Track
Language of instruction:	English
Contact hours:	48 (6 per day)
ECTS credits:	6
Prerequisites:	Students should be able to speak and read English at the upper intermediate level (B2) or higher.

Course description

The course introduces students to the grand challenges of today's world (for example planetary boundaries) and the necessity for a "Great Transformation" toward a sustainable development of our societies. So far, since the 1990s a great many projects, policies and regulations (e.g. national and regional Sustainable Development Strategies, circular economy, urban agriculture, ecovillages, co-housing, renewable energy projects) have been introduced and tried, experiences got started and innovations realized in all communities, organizations and countries. Nevertheless, the major trends and policies in most societies are still not sustainable and are destructive in nature, despite symbolic actions and many declarations. The reasons for this self-destructive development, caused by specific structures, patterns and processes of our various societies such as unlimited economic growth, over-consumption, environmental pollution, CO²-emissions, exploitation of people and resources will be analyzed. This will take into account the systemic characters and the complex dynamics in today's societies, including the individual, organizational, community, regional, national and international levels and their relations and interactions.

One of the major questions in our course are which social actors contribute to a transformation towards sustainable development and how - and in what way this happens, which inertias and obstacles stand in the way and could be overcome? What has the German government done, what is the German parliament doing, what is the function of business, sciences or civil society organizations – what happens in Berlin? We want to consider the broadest possible spectrum of approaches, strategies and actors for a reflected change towards a Great Transformation in an exemplary manner, as well as thinking theory and practice together (in the sense of transformative science and shaping the future). Of course, we will consider and reflect different national, regional and cultural systems and backgrounds for all this. Specific examples which are part of the pathway to sustainability are green taxes, renewable energy projects, cooperative housing, car-free streets and places, urban farming, or even eco-villages.

In order to get closer to an understanding of those complex realities we will utilize concepts like path dependency (path management), Multi-Level Perspective – MLP, social innovation, models of change, change agents, MAP – movement action plan. Depending on student's interest and motivation, we will relate some of our seminar's aspects and questions to very relevant sociological theories, i.e. social systems theory, practice theory and real utopias. These will give basic insights into societal factors for stability as well as for change.

A new concept for our seminar comes from climate research, investigating specific patterns in complex processes and changes: tipping points. This has recently been used to analyze ways to accelerate a transformation towards sustainable development. That new concept is called “social tipping process / points” and is currently being tested and further developed. It is very demanding because it often involves the interweaving of social action with biological-physical-chemical-natural and technological processes (systemic-dynamic). A good definition is this: “A ‘social system’ can be described as a network consisting of social agents (or sub-systems) embedded within a social-ecological ‘environment’. Such a social system is called a ‘social tipping element’ if under certain (‘critical’) conditions, small changes in the system or its environment can lead to a qualitative (macroscopic) change, typically via cascading network effects such as complex contagion and positive feedback mechanisms. Agency is involved in moving the system towards criticality, creating small disturbances and generating network effects. By this definition, near the critical condition the stability of the social tipping element is low. The resulting transient change process is called the ‘tipping process’. The time it takes for this change to manifest is the ‘manifestation time’.” (Winkelmann et al. 2022: 6)

The course will in the end enable students to understand societal developments, its mainly short-minded actions and unintended consequences, and on the other hand also intended developments, labelled “Transformations”, often based on evidence-based decision-making.

Student profile

The course is designed for students with different academic backgrounds and a general interest in sustainability and sustainable development. There are no special prerequisites for the course.

Required language skills

The language of instruction is English. Language proficiency on an advanced Intermediate level (Mittelstufe II) is a prerequisite for participation. For orientation purposes, you can assess your language skills here (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR):

<https://rm.coe.int/CoERMPublicCommonSearchServices/DisplayDCTMContent?documentId=090000168045bb52>

Course Requirements

- 1.) Attendance and class participation
- 2.) Presentation
- 3.) Exam

Grading

Attendance and class participation: 30%

Presentation: 30%

Exam: 40%

Reading

A digital course reader will be provided.

Course schedule

Date	Program*
Tuesday, July 29, 2025	Sustainability as grand challenge Overview of major crises and negative megatrends in today's societies. For example: planetary boundaries, socio-eco-

	<p>conomic disparities and inequalities, unsustainable trends (unlimited growth and expansion; great acceleration, post democracy, militarization, imperialism, neo-colonialism, overexploitation, peak everything).</p> <p>How can those phenomena be felt and by whom? What are concrete and different forms of affectedness? What societal forces, organizations, actors are sensing these and are trying to bring these into public debate and policy?</p>
Friday, August 1, 2025	<p>Sustainability as civilizational task How can we understand and explain all those grand challenges? What are the root causes, the structures and procedures, the specific cultures which make such maldevelopments possible? We will learn about a variety of explanations, theories and concepts from various scientific fields and backgrounds, we will need and use a multidisciplinary approach.</p> <p>Students are asked to bring in their own experiences and their favorite explanations.</p> <p>Visit to a Local Agenda 21 project (Projekt Tempelhofer Feld)</p>
Tuesday, August 5, 2025	<p>Concepts for a sustainable development Based on different world views and ideologies, there are different theories and concepts, and many “belief systems” about sustainability. Some types focus solely on ecological aspects, others on technological innovations, others on individual or local change. Right now, in Western societies there seems to be a backlash with regards to sustainable policies. What are the reasons for this? What are the driving forces?</p> <p>What are the effects of different concepts? What are the effects of the adversaries?</p> <p>Visit to a Local Agenda 21 project (id22)</p>
Friday, August 8, 2025	<p>Individual steps towards a sustainable development Over the last decades a huge number of approaches, tools, ideas for individuals to act and live more sustainably have emerged and been practiced. Some are easy to follow, others are very demanding or expensive. What are their real effects, what are their preconditions, which socio-cultural milieus are acting strong, and which are opposing this?</p> <p>Students' Presentations</p>
Tuesday, August 12, 2025	<p>Local steps towards a sustainable development In the 1990s, after the Sustainability Summit in Rio de Janeiro an almost global movement grew: “Local Agenda 21”. Based on specific criteria and proposals many people engaged in manifold projects in communities. They did not want to wait for a top-down policy and state regulations. What happened there? What have been the effects?</p> <p>Visit to a Local Agenda 21 project (UFA-Fabrik)</p>
Friday, August 15, 2025	<p>National steps towards a sustainable development</p>

	<p>In various international and national documents sustainable development is proposed as a major framework and orientation for policies, business actions, societal practices and individual behavior. Currently, the so-called SDGs (Sustainable Development Goals) are leading those concepts. What has been done so far? What are the effects? Which countries are affected most? Which countries are “leading” on that path (free market, regulatory state, authoritarian systems...)?</p> <p>Students’ Presentations</p>
Tuesday, August 19, 2025	<p>Transformation to a sustainable future: What are the many specific lessons learned from all the earlier and the ongoing projects, policies, activities in the direction of a Great Transformation? How can an intended change for a better, a sustainable development be implemented? What has to be considered? Are there possible and realistic roads and steps to be taken?</p> <p>While there very likely is no “silver bullet” for solving all the challenges at once, the outcome for the students of this course will be manifold. First, a better understanding of grand challenges, secondly, an improved ability for complex thinking, third, stronger analytical abilities, and fourth, more knowledge about concepts and ways to make practical contributions to the creation of sustainable development.</p> <p>Students’ Presentations</p>
Friday, August 22, 2025	<p>Final Exam</p> <p>FUBiS Farewell Ceremony</p>

*The field trips may be subject to change depending on the availability of appointment and speaker. On field trip days, adaptation of class times is possible.