



# oikos



OIKOS'  
UNDERSTANDING OF  
SUSTAINABILITY &  
SUSTAINABLE  
DEVELOPMENT

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### ***Some Scientific backup for our work***

*What does sustainability mean? Why and how do we act and inspire towards sustainability as an organization? How do we make sure that the change we make is sustainable as such? Many questions – here we outline some answers that manifest our standpoint from a scientific perspective.*

### **oikos and the sustainability challenge - facing the crisis**

Climate change, drastic biodiversity decline, poverty, inequality, mass migration:

these are only some examples of the sustainability challenge our world is facing at the moment. Over the past decades, humanity has been moving the socio-ecological system to its boundaries. The effects become tangible and visible, wherever we direct our view. (IPCC 2014; World Bank 2020) The walls of the funnel are tightening as we continue doing ‘business as usual’, limiting the space for individuals, organizations and society to maneuver without hitting the walls of the systems. This degradation of system functions manifests in crises like ecosystem collapse, financial crisis, .... It’s becoming a never-ending list of wicked problems. When taking a systemic stance at the sustainability challenge, the complexity and interconnectedness of the root causes and hidden determinants that systemically undermine our living environment shine through (Pryshlakivsky and Searcy 2013). The scientific understanding of this fact is steadily increasing over the past years.

Social systems have always been designed and structured to serve humanity's fundamental needs - but nowadays it becomes clear that the structures and underlying worldviews we choose to live by are the key drivers of the man-made struggle for the survival of (our) life on earth, both in worsening and relieving it (Robèrt et al. 2019). To move ahead on the path towards sustainability, we all have to act together and will have to rethink the ways we think, create and interact as a society. For oikos and many others, economics and management are two fields at the core of the needed transformation- and in particular the education in these fields. This is where we at oikos aim to help shifting the basic mode of operation onto a sustainable path - and thus widening the walls of the funnel and stabilizing our ecological and social systems.



### ***The learning crisis***

*While society and the world have been changing in tremendous velocity, changes in the educational system have progressed at a much slower pace (Bodinet 2016). For several years, voices from the field have been criticizing outdated beliefs and structures in education that prepare students to operate in the past rather than in the present or future (Freire 2018, Robinson 2009). The structure of the current educational system traces back to knowledge, values, norms and needs originating in the 18th and 19th century (Bodinet 2016), knowledge is split into subjects and learners divided into clusters on all institutional levels (Kerchner 2011). Educators' main purpose is to transfer knowledge and students are expected to recall loads of facts on cue (Bodinet 2016). At oikos (and many other places, check out our partners), we believe that this will not serve us in developing the consciousness and leadership we need to address the sustainability challenge.*

*We do not deny that there already have been tremendous developments. There has been rapid pedagogical revitalization and innovation, especially in the field of Education for Sustainable Development. Nevertheless, it is a shared perspective that sustainability education is still transmissive, and based on knowledge-focused, instrumental pedagogical approaches (Barth 2014, Mulà et al. 2017, Waddock 2013). Wals et al. (2008) see the need to reflect on the purpose of education to tackle the necessary change in our society in order to derive the kind of teaching that will serve our common future. From instrumental to emancipatory approaches: there is a need for a mindset shift when it comes to education and learning, moving beyond traditional neo-liberalist thought patterns of growth and scarcity. Asking essential questions, such as “Who is the educational audience?”, “What is being taught?”, “Who is teaching?” and “from what perspective did the content evolve?” is fundamental in the process of changing education (Bodinet 2016).*

*According to the academic field occupied with the topic, a paradigm of “new learning” needs to consist of open-minded, reflective, and participative processes that examine the possibility of a sustainable future (Hallinger and Chatpinyakoo 2019). Sustainability education needs to become an incubator for fostering deeper understanding and exploration of more systemic solutions (Eaton et al. 2016). Deep listening and critical thinking are two of the much-needed skills. To enable society to address sustainability issues in constructive ways, there is a need to systematically develop capacities in “perceiving, understanding and managing complexity” (Jordan 2011, 48, Chapman et al. 2009, Inglis and Steele 2005, Ross 2006) and current educational systems all over the globe are not fostering these competencies. To reach the necessary change of values and a shift of consciousness, the potential of transformational learning experiences has to unfold through rethinking education and a new organization of learning (Burns 2015, Daviet 2016, UNESCO 2015). Have you already explored oikos' contribution to that? Check our diverse range of projects & programs!*

## Sustainable Development at oikos - our theory of change

At oikos, sustainable development is at the core of our purpose - and more specifically the sustainable development and transformation of the higher education system and how we understand, teach, learn and use economics and management for the good of people and planet.

We do that by empowering and encouraging student change agents and actively creating shifts in the way curricula are structured and developed. We have over 40 active student groups in 23 countries and 4 continents that contribute to this vision in very creative and self-organized ways. The local groups feed their developments back into an inspiring international community of like-minded thought leaders. These groups are supported by our programs and strategic partnerships on the international level that center on leadership, self-development, sustainability and educational reform. But what are **change agents** and why do we want to foster them in the ways we do? The common definition of change agents or sustainability leaders (the terms are used interchangeably) aligns with our own understanding: They are “[...] people who through their own initiative [...] engage in complex societal issues with an aspiration to contribute to systemic change on some scale level: in local communities, regions, countries, the global society” (Jordan 2011, 48). The value-based actions of our change agents follow the aim of collaboratively fostering visions and taking action towards sustainability and resilience. oikos creates spaces for people to step into this way of seeing the world and put it into practice. We nurture the leaders of tomorrow:

### ***Leading in Complexity***

*Change-oriented leadership is relational, non-hierarchical/distributed and contextual with an eco-centric perspective (Goffee and Jones 2009). It was found to be essential to develop creative, constructive solutions to our complex organizational and societal issues (Senge 2015, Bendell et al. 2017). There is a need to foster this kind of leadership to guide society in addressing the sustainability challenge and recover the health of our planet (Koskela and Goldman Schuyler 2016).*

*Through our own leadership, our programs and local initiatives, we foster this kind of leadership for oikees all over the globe. The collective experiences hold the community together - for over 30 years.*

The philosophy of change agents doesn't only guide our actions, but also the direction where we wish to see the system shifting: to support individuals in becoming sustainability leaders, education has to focus



on fostering students to have “an enhanced understanding of themselves, their abilities and desires, as well as a more profound understanding of their fellow humans and the world they inhabit” (Bodinet 2016, 21). The learning and development environment requires creating more space for observation, awareness creation, deceleration, interactive learning through seeing, listening and sharing (Starhawk 2004, Visser and Courtice 2011) and the curriculum as a tangible structure is a good place to start removing obstacles and designing more human-centered, sustainable spaces.

One thing that cannot fall short: if we aim to contribute to the transformation of education and sustainable development in economics and management, a critical question that needs to be asked is: **how do we define sustainability to inform tangible, strategic action that shifts our unsustainable course? And how to do so without claiming that we have all the answers** (we mainly have questions)? Is there a clear-cut, systemic and scientific definition of sustainability that provides us with the necessary guidance for our practice with, and impact on the world and for how we run the organization itself? What is sustainability actually and is there a tangible definition that doesn't restrict our scope of action for positive development while making sure we do not act unsustainable? The discussion on sustainability is often guided by our values and centers around human needs, what makes it intangible and complex and leads to countless creative solutions towards sustainability- but what if we define this space for innovation and transformation by outlining what is not sustainable?

### **Our sustainability definition - the 8 sustainability principles**

After reflecting on this topic together with our community on a mainly normative level and being on the outlook for a while, we came across one of the leading scientific frameworks for sustainable development: the Framework for Strategic Sustainable Development (FSSD) renders sustainability with 8 Sustainability Principles (SPs) that mirror the boundary conditions of the socio-ecological system. These principles give a frame for acting sustainable by pointing out what is unsustainable - thereby leaving a huge space for creative solutions that are (more) sustainable. In other words: they provide a general yet concrete, sufficient yet necessary and non-overlapping description of the boundary conditions that frame a safe, sustainable space for humanity to operate and thrive. The intention of the scientists who developed this concept over time was to create something that helps to strategically plan for sustainable development without unintended consequences - and work from what scientists can agree upon rather than vague



normative statements. Robèrt et al. (2019) highlight that the SPs are robust, enable structure and a bird's eye perspective for complexity. They avoid reductionism but should not be seen as an alternative to more detailed levels of knowledge. By using them we make sure we don't fall short on critical aspects that erode the system and find guidance for designing and executing our actions.

**The eight sustainability principles (3 environmental, 5 social principles):**

In a sustainable society, nature is not subject to systematically increasing...

- 1....concentrations of substances extracted from the Earth's crust (e.g. fossil carbon or metals);
- 2....concentrations of substances produced by society (e.g. CFCs or NOx);
- 3....degradation by physical means (e.g. overfishing or overharvesting of forests); and, in that society, people are not subject to structural obstacles to ...
- 4....health (e.g. by dangerous working conditions or insufficient rest from work);
- 5....influence (e.g. by suppression of opinions);
6. ...competence (e.g. by obstacles for education or insufficient possibilities for personal development);
- 7....impartiality (e.g. by discrimination, unfair selection to job positions or );
- 8....meaning-making (e.g. by suppression of cultural expression)

Have a look at these videos to learn more: [a\)](#) [b\)](#) [c\)](#)

You now might be overwhelmed and think: wow, we'll never get there. This is idealistic, it will take a long time and we don't have time. Well, the idea is one of practicing and eliminating our negative impact as we move towards new, sustainable realities. This definition frames the direction we will have to move towards if we want to live in a sustainable world.

It doesn't imply that we are fully sustainable, but that we're doing our best to move there. The important question this definition is about: what are the systemic contributions to unsustainability? - and then as a next step, after identifying them: what are better options? It's about the 'core business/activity', about systemic degradation at first. And about creating spaces to remove them and all the other, smaller violations. The framework can give guidance on what not to do and thereby opening a creative space for new alternatives. By doing so, we're moving step by step towards sustainability as we stop acting unsustainable - and this allows case-specific argumentation and starting the exciting conversations we need to figure out new ways. Using the SPs as a definition gives a rigid frame in practice to analyze, cluster and understand positive and negative contributions to sustainable development in a holistic way. It's like a language we can use together, not a hard definition of an outcome.



## Example Cases

Here some simplified examples to make the use of this definition more tangible:

**Case: Searching for energy:** A company's mission is to generate enough energy for humanity to thrive. Their main business is extracting oil in order to distribute it for many uses. Whereas the concern also is involved in the exploration of alternative energies already, their core business still is extracting oil from the earth's crust, a clear violation to SP1 (among others). In order to be sustainable in the future, they will have to restrain from extracting oil from the earth's crust and find alternatives that don't violate the SPs in a systematic way. This frame thereby can help them to design smarter solutions and a pathway that can lead them there.

**Case: The inside of an organization (focus on social sustainability):** An organization has very strict, hierarchical structures and rules. Employees have to obey all rules from their managers and are shamed if they fail to reach goals or voice their opinions. Men are paid more than women. Looking at this through the lens of the SPs, one can identify certain aspects of social unsustainability: The structures & ways of working seem to violate SP 4 'health', as employees might suffer mentally through the punishment of the managers; SP5 'influence', as they aren't allowed to voice their opinions; SP6 'competence' because there might be no space for learning and development; SP7 'impartiality', as the organization works on a clear hierarchy of power which allows or even supports that people are treated partially. The different wages acc. to the differences in gender are also a clear violation. From here, there might be a heightened awareness of everyone involved and conversations might start to rethink structures or ways of working. Some employees might also feel more confident to decide to leave this unhealthy environment and find a more meaningful and sustainable workplace.

Did you spot any other violations or opportunities in these very simplified examples? As you see, the use of the principles can be helpful to start conversations in many different ways and fields. There's no clear right or wrong way and it definitely isn't easy - but the structure helps to bring a certain clarity on the main issues, align on them with the help of a scientific foundation and move on from there with more sustainable options.

## Why we use this definition

There are plenty of sustainability definitions out there and many of them have a normative basis. Having a purpose that is linked to higher education and sustainability, it appears critical to us to use a sustainability definition that still has a normative core, but is derived using highest scientific standards and is revised on a constant and transdisciplinary basis. By scientific, we mean it is developed in a scientific consensus process, including being scrutinized in scientific peer-review.. The Framework for Strategic Sustainable Development (FSSD) offers such a definition that takes an inclusive and developmental perspective and has been created for designing and guiding strategic action towards sustainability. The principles were derived from major

*contributions in several academic fields. They are based on the elementary functions of both, the ecological and the social system as studied for several decades and in several streams of peer-reviewed research.*

*Organizations all over the world have been successfully using this definition for several decades. Some of the most popular sustainability role models in diverse industries have built their approaches on the framework. There is a growing international user and practitioner community under the title 'The Natural Step'.*

### ***The Framework for Strategic Sustainable Development***

*The Framework for Strategic Sustainable Development (FSSD) is a framework that supports sustainable development in a strategic way. It has elements that enable a “more generic, intuitive, and practical approach for supporting sustainable development”, providing a frame for decision making and assessment based on science that bridges the gap between short and long-term perspectives (Broman and Robèrt 2017, 20). In practice, conducting strategic sustainable development also means finding a unique path for the organization towards sustainability, moving into a strategic direction that will contribute to positive developments in society and the organization itself while not systemically violating the earth system boundaries (Robèrt et al. 2019).*

*The FSSD contains a set of tools, processes and concepts which in application are adapted to the organizational context and target the development of the organization as a whole. By raising awareness about the sustainability challenge, the FSSD influenced many companies to integrate sustainability into their core activities and showed the potential to foster strategic alignment towards sustainability in an economical way (Conrad and Thompson 2013). Over the past thirty years, this transdisciplinary and peer-reviewed framework has been scientifically developed and assessed through practice all around the globe and academic review on a continuous basis. The framework builds on complexity science and systems thinking, approaching the sustainability challenge from a whole-systems-perspective. (Broman and Robèrt 2017, 17).*

*For more details, visit the [website](#), read the [scientific papers](#) and the [sustainability handbook](#) or study MSLS.*

### **How we use our sustainability definition**

For oikos, sustainable development is development within the boundaries of our planet, so to say a development that does not diminish the functioning of our system, but rather aims at fostering these functions. The 8 SPs provide a clear, operational definition of sustainability that can be adopted by any organization in combination with their existing purpose, values and goals to define organizational success in a way that enables strategic action to be taken in that direction. And that's also how we use it: Our



definition of sustainability frames all our organizational activities and decisions, in particular in the fields of

- *Organizational foundations*: our purpose, values, mission, vision are framed by the SPs to make sure we act in a sustainable manner
- *Program design & execution*: when creating our programs and conducting them, we make sure not to violate any SP
- *Fundraising*: Our principles for fundraising include alignment with our sustainability definition. Donors are only accepted if they do not systemically violate any of the SPs.
- *Team development*: Also, our internal processes and structures have to consider the principles, especially the social ones. We are a social system ourselves :)
- *IT & ethical data processing*: ethics and sustainability in data handling is an important topic for us. The SPs help us to clarify what we are talking about.

When we plan and do all of these things, we scan them through the SPs and make sure to spot as many critical violations and positive contributions as possible. We do that from our own best awareness and in certain cases, we ask experts to support us. This enables us to rethink our actions and exchange or redesign the critical parts, strategically moving towards and designing for sustainability and flourishing spaces. Of course, this means that there is also a lot of space for mistakes and errors - but at least we give our best and create space for collective learning. The aim is not to be perfect but to move ahead - as agile as possible. We also offer this definition to our chapters to help them guide and orientate their actions and will soon be able to share user cases from our own community. This also accounts for our relationships with our partners - we're here to learn from each other and develop further, together.

#### ***Sustainability on many different levels***

*oikos works on sustainability at a number of different levels. On one level, we want our activities as an organization to be sustainable. On a different level, we are working to integrate sustainability into economics and management education and contribute to a shift in how the system is set up. The definition proposed here is useful for both levels. Organizationally, it provides a framework for assessing and improving our actions, and educationally it provides a minimum threshold for understanding which academic content and structures are consistent with the principles of sustainability and which is not.*

*When thinking about the impact we want to achieve and the visions we hold about sustainable education and the way ahead, this definition can frame but not fill in what we strive towards. What this definition does NOT sufficiently do is provide a comprehensive plan for how to teach and learn about sustainability and how to teach and learn sustainably. That's a harder task, and one that requires taking into account specific local and educational contexts. oikos is working on addressing these questions through our initiatives (eg. our Design Your Own Curriculum project), and encourages local groups to spend time thinking and talking about what an education in line with the principles of sustainability could look like at their university.*

Our sustainability definition provides us with the worldview, the awareness that we degrade our boundaries & that this is unsustainable. It opens the underlying quest on how we can move ahead in more sustainable ways that do not harm people & the planet. A quest we courageously follow in co-creation with our chapters and partners. In other words: our goal is a transition towards sustainability as we move ahead. And ahead, that's a transformation of individuals and whole systems towards sustainability, regeneration & thriving resilience by developing the consciousness, leadership and the structures we need to address the sustainability challenge. Join our collective inquiry into how this may look like. (read more about this here soon).

Do you have any questions?

Don't hesitate to reach out to [info@oikos-international.org](mailto:info@oikos-international.org) !

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