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## IMMEDIATE POLITICAL ACTIONS NEED TO BE PRIORITISED IN THE SUSTAINABILITY CRISES

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**The current political actions towards sustainability are insufficient and not in line with the urgency of the intertwined climate crisis and biodiversity loss. Instead of far-reaching future objectives, which shift the responsibility away from the current decision-makers, actions need to be implemented right now. We immediately need to:**

- Shift away from economic values and business-as-usual practices
- Prioritize multi-stakeholder inclusion in decision-making and policies
- Define terms and clarify the objectives within legal and political systems
- Prevent lobbying of polluting companies
- Regulate overconsumption and improve citizens' education
- Improve the independence of environmental agencies
- Reinforce inspection authorities in charge of monitoring and enforcing regulations

## RECOMMENDATIONS

**TO EFFICIENTLY AND PROMPTLY RESPOND TO THE SUSTAINABILITY CRISES POLICIES MUST:**

### **SHIFT AWAY FROM ECONOMIC VALUES AND BUSINESS-AS-USUAL PRACTICES**

Local, national, European and international public authorities must give priority to social, health, and environmental protection over economic considerations and rapidly move away from business-as-usual practices [1]. Immediate actions taken in favor of nature and biodiversity will bring more financial benefits through better quality of life, thus also better health of citizens [2]. The current political and economic perspective of nature-based solutions and values must change to face contemporary challenges. Such a change can

happen by recognizing the interconnectedness of socio-ecological systems and developing a shared awareness of sustainability crises. This opportunity lies in the hands of public and private pioneers that should support each other to better achieve sustainability objectives. In the European demographic and climatic context, policies must prioritize environmentally resilient and adaptive strategies, even if economically unpopular in the short term.

### **PRIORITIZE PLURALISM IN DECISION-MAKING AND POLICIES**

Greater inclusion of local actors, researchers, civil society and the environment in public and private decision-making processes will reinforce resilience and adaptability. This cross-sectoral collaboration can improve the awareness of local decision-makers, increase legitimacy and improve the efficiency of policies [3]. Such collaboration can happen through

the establishment of a public forum where the various stakeholders regularly exchange on plans and strategies. This inclusive approach's relevance is already acknowledged by European institutions as most EU-funded projects now require the involvement of all possible stakeholders. This method allows novel research methods for participatory and adaptive management of crises, through transformation labs and scenario methods for future-proof policies.

#### **CLARIFY TERMS AND METHODS IN THE LEGAL AND POLITICAL SYSTEMS**

A simplification of the legal system not through the reduction of regulations but rather with clearer and sharper rules is required. Flexibility leads to innovation, but grey zones and backdoors allow polluters to circumvent environmental protections through greenwashing. Clear and constraining rules level the playing field for all actors. This creates natural benefits for those who lead in transforming their business into a sustainable one. If the EU sets the minimum standards on many policy fields, Member States must be more ambitious when transposing the legislation. When the national initiative is lacking, local actors must feel empowered.

We need to create an understanding of sustainability and a regulatory system that leave space for innovative solutions. This can be from individual understandings to groups or nations solving sustainability challenges. While doing so, we need to secure the societal structures that allow our societies to benefit from innovative and sustainable initiatives [4]. To foster innovations, long-term objectives on climate and environmental protection and immediate political, regulatory, and financial actions must be aligned. Both need to simultaneously aim at creating an efficient and sustainable transformation.

#### **PREVENT HARMFUL LOBBYING OF COMPANIES**

Industrial influences on international, European, national, and regional scales created long-term policies aimed at tackling contemporary issues. This shift to long timelines became a justification for immediate inaction. Current leaders, by setting distant objectives without practical tools or science-based decision support are leaving the sustainability crises unresolved as they know they will not be in

charge when the deadline comes. Constant delays in the application of strict governance are due to its immediate, short-term impacts on the economy. Complete transparency on companies' influence over decision-makers and scientific knowledge proved to be impossible, and market self-regulation constantly failed to prevent the contemporary disasters. Polluting rights, impunity, subsidies and tax evasion are often protecting companies. The wealth these generate is not shared on the regional scale, only their detrimental impacts which are long-lasting and burden local inhabitants and authorities who do not have the means to deal with it. Thus, by preventing the lobbying of short-termist and polluting companies, public authorities indirectly support actors in the private sector who have taken the lead in the sustainability transition.

#### **REGULATE OVERCONSUMPTION AND IMPROVE CITIZENS' EDUCATION**

Overconsumption needs to be addressed as one of the root causes of the sustainability crises. Regulating it separately from the production stage is not yet implemented aside from minor examples, such as bans on the sale of weapons, alcohol, etc. The logic of arms sales and alcohol could, however, also be translated to the problem of overconsumption. We restrict buying guns and strong alcoholic beverages because they are health hazards. So is buying a t-shirt once a week. Why restrict only the former and not the latter? National authorities must create programs or campaigns for the education of populations on the issues at hand with overconsumption. These strategies must then be supported on the local scale with innovative and participative actions or labs to improve circularity and short production chains.

#### **IMPROVE THE INDEPENDENCE OF ENVIRONMENTAL AGENCIES**

National and regional environmental policies depend on strategies and orientations of different political groups. The regular cycle of political elections on various levels hampers the continuity and consistency of environmental actions and policies. The aim here is to support the coherence of environmental actions and protect them against political U-turns or inactions. Political pledges on distant objectives proved to delay immediate actions, but these can change as regularly as politicians are elected on

different scales. We advocate for more independent institutions to ensure the coherence of environmental strategies from one political term to another.

### REINFORCE INSPECTION AUTHORITIES IN CHARGE OF MONITORING AND ENFORCING REGULATIONS

Although important, designing efficient rules is but one step in the right direction. A long-standing issue of constraining regulations is the lack of monitoring and enforcement on all levels. Rules protecting the health of inhabitants and natural environments have, at times, even protected industries thanks to backdoors and grey zones as well as a constant lack of resources for law enforcement agencies. Thus, designing clearer rules for a just transition in which the polluter pays must go together with giving sufficient means - human and financial - to agencies in charge of controlling the application of the law. This applies to all the different scales, from local agencies to national, European, and international institutions in charge of monitoring and enforcing laws and policies.



**Figure 1:** National parliaments such as the Finnish parliament are places where actions must be taken. Source: [Paasikivi](#), CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons.

### BIOSPHERE-BASED STRONG SUSTAINABILITY AS A BASELINE FOR ACTIONS

Current legal systems do not provide enough support to actors transitioning to sustainable business models. There is no harm in desiring a predictable operational environment but creating such ought to take place in the right order: first securing ecological sustainability, then the rest. As the move to earnestly sustainable business strategies is an ongoing trend, we are witnessing a situation where the trailblazers of sustainable - and simultaneously also profitable - businesses are harmed by regulatory actions that do not reward them for their initiative. Simultaneously

businesses and industries that are harmful to the climate and environment are subsidized. This situation was created by a profit-oriented strategy, financial or political, of both private and public leading authorities. This stems from a belief that a greener and self-regulated economy will tackle overconsumption and that infinite economic growth in a finite world is possible. The shift towards honestly sustainable and environmental-friendly policies is often seen as economically as well as politically risky. This short-term thinking is associated with a “weak sustainability” transition, which sees economic, social, and ecological sustainability as separately pursued goals.

**The sustainability crises require an immediate change to “strong sustainability” - a holistic perspective in which human actions are always considered within the limits of the biosphere.** The context of economic, energy, and resource crises should trigger this push instead of targeting lexical changes (green transition or sustainable economic growth), which do not radically challenge business-as-usual practices, the over-consumption and over-exploitation of the planet’s resources.

### DELAYED ACTIONS FOR FUTURE GENERATIONS

The 1970s were the beginning of the environmentalism movement internationally. Policies and objectives were set, but concrete actions were often delayed for the next authority or generation. Industries and governments knew about the environmental and climate crises, as scientists warned them decades before [5,6]. Today, business-as-usual practices of public and private authorities keep prevailing over the rapid societal change the crises demand. Greenwashing practices flourish while putting the responsibility on consumers not equipped to make informed choices. Even the green transition advocated by decision-makers is unachievable without a drastic reduction in energy consumption, and sharper goals to reach the 1.5 C target of the Paris Agreement.

Energy consumption is in symbiosis with consumption patterns, especially our alleged freedom to overconsume [7]. Because of a lack of anticipation in regulatory actions, we are facing a climate and

environmental disaster on a global scale. However, frameworks, tools, and practices to reduce energy and resource extraction and consumption exist. The response to the energy crisis caused by the war in Ukraine demonstrated it. The financial constraints linked to high prices of fossil fuels efficiently reduced energy consumption in the European Union. The ability of Finland to cut almost 10 % of its electricity consumption over a year is a prime example of how mistaken were the assumptions that the level of consumption can only grow [8]. Due to short-term interests and a lack of strong political will policies and regulations promoting sustainability have failed and keep failing to deliver political promises. **We need policy-making where basic needs are met while overconsumption is curtailed and not considered part of our basic human rights or liberties.** This regulatory action has proved its efficiency although limited to specific products (pharmaceuticals, fireworks, arms, alcohol, tobacco) [9].

### STRONG POLITICAL WILL TO QUESTION CURRENT ECONOMIC PRACTICES

Regular international reports have highlighted the unsustainable rate at which economic growth is consuming resources. Yet, questioning economic practices now seems to account for political suicide – as does questioning people’s right to keep consuming at increasing rates independent of how materially wealthy they already are. **Achieving sustainability objectives largely advertised in Europe, on national and European levels, is impossible without strong political commitments toward new economic behaviors.** In order to support such commitments, decision-making needs to be based on collaborations with interdisciplinary groups of independent researchers.

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