University of Basel

Sustainability tomorrow: Identifying challenges, analysing approaches and assessing future strategies

Video Transcript

The Discovery of Sustainability

[Narrator] Measures to protect the environment and regulate access to resources have a long tradition. For our discussion, the period after 1972 is important. From that date onwards, society discovered sustainability. We can divide this discovery into three phases.

The first phase began with the 1972 Stockholm Conference on the Human Environment. It ended with the publication of the Brundtland Report in 1987. What would the future of humanity look like? At this stage, one point became increasingly clear: tackling global environmental problems and fighting poverty and injustice were interlinked. The Brundtland Report then demanded that solutions to improve the existing situation must also take into account the interests of future generations.

The second phase extended from 1987 to 2015. During this time, sustainable development became the guiding principle for shaping our future. It became institutionalised. A number of global sustainability conferences took place in this period. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, IPCC, began its successful work. Governments and firms published sustainability strategies. All this showed that sustainability had become a key factor in human development issues. The Millennium Development Goals of 2000 devoted special attention to poverty reduction. In addition, climate change became a new and extremely important concern.

The third phase started in 2015. In that year, the Paris Agreement set the goal to limit the global temperature increase in this century to 1.5 degrees Celsius. Also in 2015, the United Nations adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development with its 17 goals. This third phase has been characterised by underlying challenges that have intensified over the years and which now require urgent action.

Political and economic measures are still far from where they should be. Sustainability is not a clearly defined term. Nevertheless, it has proven to be a fertile concept for shaping the global discourse on human development.

It is important to distinguish between what is going on in the societal sphere and the knowledge production in the scientific sphere. Of course, there is no strict separation between the two. Results from science

influence social discourses, while challenges and proposed solutions in the public sphere are taken up by science in order to investigate them.

When the Club of Rome published its famous report on limits of growth in 1972, the scientific publication influenced the societal discourse. The report launched a long-standing discussion on growth in both spheres. In the 1970s, scientists also published fundamental work on social justice. At the same time, they made progress in understanding the properties of systems.

Both lines of thought continue to influence public debate and scholarly work on justice and complexity to this day. Although important scientific breakthroughs in governance and human behaviour came slightly later, these two areas have also provided important insights for understanding sustainability transitions.

[Prof. Dr. Ulf Hahnel] The discovery of sustainability is therefore not the same as, for example, the discovery of the structure of atoms. Rather, it is the discovery of a path that we must continuously follow. On a societal level, it is a concept that is constantly evolving. On a scientific level, it is a continuous object of enquiry. This forces scientists to collaborate across disciplines and gather information based on scientific evidence. This, in turn, influences and supports societal discourse.