

Making Sustainability Happen: The Jena Declaration

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We are living in the *Anthropocene*, an epoch when the myriad social and economic activities of nearly 8 billion people dominates and shapes the cycles and processes of nature. We are pushing the planet's boundaries to sustain life. The world faces an “omni-crisis” of climate change, biodiversity loss, the COVID-19 pandemic, financial instability, and glaring inequality. These problems are deeply rooted and interwoven, and call for global system-wide transformations towards socio-ecological sustainability.¹

What will it take for the world to heed scientists’ dire warnings? This question led a group of influencers in the social sciences and humanities to call for global grassroots mobilization to attain the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals ([SDGs](#)) before the 2030 target date. Under the leadership of the UNESCO Chair for Global Understanding of Sustainable Development at Friedrich Schiller University Jena, Germany, the group will launch a public declaration on September 9. ‘The Jena Declaration ([TJD](#))’ calls for a new bottom-up approach. Specific recommendations for institutional change are aimed at enabling ordinary citizens around the world to make fundamental changes in the way they live to build a better future for our planet. The approach respects cultural and regional diversities.

Change toward a sustainable and prosperous future for society ultimately requires deep behavioural changes from all 7.9 billion of us, and time is running out. While it is convenient to frame inaction as a [crisis of leadership](#), it is simplistic to expect decisive action on a transformative political agenda without broad support in the electorate. Thus, the question that lies at the heart of the Jena Declaration: How can large-scale public mobilization bring about transformative change on a global scale?

The dilemma of [cultural change resistance](#) has not escaped the attention of the scientific community, but organised attempts to address it have been sadly lacking. One reason for this is that policy advice on climate change and sustainability is dominated by natural scientists and technocrats whose expertise is not social or political change. Addressing this shortcoming, The Jena Declaration (TJD) aims to broaden perceptions of the sustainability dilemma by working in three program streams: the arts, learning and education across all age groups, and community engagement. TJD calls for societal transformation towards sustainability through holistic systemic changes in social, cultural and natural systems, and for solutions to real-world problems based on inclusive co-design and co-production of knowledge.

TJD argues the SDGs cannot be achieved simply by intensifying the use of established methods and strategies. A fundamental change in strategy is necessary, an approach that

¹ I would like to thank fellow founding signatories of the Jena Declaration, Howard Blumenthal, Joanne Kauffman and Benno Werlen, for their detailed comments and suggestions on earlier drafts of this paper.

builds on the power of millions of creative people, teachers and students, and local communities throughout the world. Participants argued that faster, more robust progress can and must be made by involving the whole of society, and concluded that the arts, education and civil society need to be mobilized to engage far more people of all ages to understand the issues and their potential for transformational power. TJD points toward necessary changes in human behaviour on a massive scale, and the necessity of redistribution of power so that the world's future is not determined by companies, governments and institutions who favor their own agendas over the needs of sustainable life on earth.

This approach shifts the focus from technical solutions to active engagement by large numbers of people from every walk of life. For example, the budget plan for the European Union's sustainability policy allocates an overwhelming majority of funds to environmental technology, and only a small portion to all other approaches, such as education or civil society engagement. Conversely, TJD calls on all relevant political and scientific institutions and funding agencies to use the United Nations Decade of Action (2020-2030) as an opportunity to put the cultural dimension at the centre of sustainability programs. This would entail:

- Working across generations and heritages to ensure that people of all ages and backgrounds are engaged and their concerns heard from the start;
- Reforming sustainability research, funding, and organization to reflect these new priorities;
- Redesigning curricula and educational institutions to focus on global societal priorities and how to address them;
- Complementing solution-oriented top-down strategies with inclusive, regionally differentiated bottom-up approaches that address specific local and regional issues;
- Strengthening collaboration across all areas of research so that technical knowledge is deeply integrated with social engagement.
- Including the arts, humanities and social sciences and, especially, local stakeholders in the co-creation of culturally and regionally diverse sustainable lifestyles.

While there have already been numerous local initiatives, there has never been a serious attempt to coordinate local action throughout the world. The UNESCO Chair on Global Understanding for Sustainability is thus taking responsibility for launching a coordinated global movement for implementation of The Jena Declaration, in cooperation with local and global partners. To this end, the partners are asking for the broadest possible support. The declaration can be signed [here](#). The official kick-off of this movement took place on 9 September 2021 with wide participation by communities and individuals from around the world

Implementation has now commenced and entails a linking of various partners for mutual support and the launching of model projects across continents. This will be guided by three program lines:

1: Creating

Mindsets, daily routines and habits depend very much on their cultural context. How we do things depends on what they signify to us, how we see the world and our place in it. Much of this context is the result of exposure to imagery, music, stories, journalism, and other types of media. The arts in all their forms are crucial for expanding mindsets, providing new aesthetic and ethical perspectives on what constitutes good living. TJD thus connects artists from many different orientations for the broadest possible arts movement throughout the world, in every language. By connecting arts with scientific understanding, we are building a new vision of transformation and sustainable life on earth.

2: Learning

Students are the second pillar of action. The current generation of students—who are 1 in 4 of the people now on earth—are curious, and increasingly concerned about global practices related to sustainability, environment, social structures, equality, equity, cities, public health, climate change, and more. They are learning much of this on their own, through media and from one another. Caught in 20th century traditions and thinking, schools are woefully behind. Recognizing the growing popularity of individual learning among students, we plan to reach students through one path and the teachers through another, in parallel. But our efforts cannot end with students finishing secondary school, or their tertiary education. We must think of every person on earth as one who learns. Everyone needs all to know as much as possible about sustainability. Otherwise, they will not understand, and they will not care. The Jena Declaration is thus a global movement encouraged by students and teachers, powered by a massive shift in priority from 20th to 21st century thinking about priorities and desired outcomes.

3: Bringing about

Community groups, NGOs, charities, faith-based organizations, youth organizations, and many other groups in this sector bring local citizens together to engage for the common good. Much of this activity is already underway, but little of it is coordinated on a global scale. As a result, most groups are unaware of their peers and their potential collaborators. The JD will assist and extend this solidarity and knowledge exchange with an online platform that will connect local civil society actors with local government and business for joint engagement in achieving global sustainability. Flagship projects will increase awareness of the vital role of local inter-sectorial cooperation in social transformation. Extensive media coverage will help everyone understand that they are part of a massive global movement.

The Jena Declaration was inspired by an October 2020 conference held in the historic town of Jena, Germany. Jena is the birthplace of libertarian thought and the Romantic movement in the early 19th century, and home to pioneering thinkers in sustainability (Carl V. Carlowitz) and ecology (Ernst Haeckel). Organized by the UNESCO Chair on Global Understanding for Sustainability, Prof. Benno Werlen, in partnership with the International

Council for Philosophy and the Human Sciences (CIPSH); the World Academy of Art & Science (WAAS), the Club of Rome; Academia Europaea, the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada; the International Geographical Union and other partners, the conference asked these urgent questions: Why are the UN's 17 SDGs unlikely to be achieved by 2030, if ever? And what can we, as educators, influencers, activists, artists, and students do to turn the situation around and claim success?

We have begun. We hope you will join us.