

Organization and Human Resource Management

ORGANIZATION AND HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT AT THE UNIVERSITY OF BERN

The fields of organization and human resource management are core components of corporate management, within which the University of Bern's [Institute of Organization and Human Resource Management](#) (known by its German acronym, IOP) explicitly promotes sustainable development thinking. In the field of organization, sustainable development means designing organizational processes and structures in a way that enables, effectively and in the long term, economic activity that is sustainable with respect to all three sustainability dimensions (environment, society, economy). In the field of human resources, sustainable development means supporting and managing the workforce in such a way that sustainable modes of working are structurally promoted and embedded also at the employee level.

How are organization and human resource management linked to sustainable development, and how has this influenced practice?

Humanity is in the midst of major challenges such as climate change, biodiversity loss, and resource scarcity. Many social problems are as urgent as ever, such as the unequal distribution of opportunities for social and economic participation both within and between societies and nations. The economy – and individual companies in particular – have a special role to play in meeting these challenges, and thus, a special responsibility. On the one hand, economic activity and corporate performance measurement can turn companies into drivers of environmental destruction, climate change, and social inequality if the effects of corporate activities on the environment and society are not taken into account. On the other, corporate actors also play a key role in addressing such problems, as they have great potential to generate and advance environmentally friendly and socially desirable solutions. The economy and individual businesses should therefore not be seen in isolation, but rather as a constitutive part of society and the environment. As such, they are not only shaped by society and the environment but, conversely, also play a significant role in shaping them, and can thus also help to improve them.

To this day, dominant business models are those that implicitly see human beings as an unsatiable version of *Homo economicus*, intent on short-term benefit and competition. However, the realization that natural resources are becoming scarcer, that short-term profit maximization can have negative long-term consequences, and that social hierarchization can be seriously socially destabilizing and even explosive, has given rise to alternative theories and approaches that question the “classic” profit motive of capitalist economic activity. Topics of debate include the following: How can we decarbonize the economy [1]? How can consumption and production be made socially, ecologically, and economically sustainable [2]? How can organizations be made more inclusive in relation to the entire spectrum of their workforce [3]?

Theories of transformative economics contain critical approaches that call for a more environmentally friendly way of doing business, based on the sustainability strategies of eco-efficiency, consistency (circular economy), and sufficiency [4, 5, 6]; a more socially just economy based on targeted diversity and inclusion strategies; and a treatment of workers that does not reduce them to their value as a human “resource” for maximizing profits. As the 2030 Agenda [7] emphasizes, sustainability transformation cannot be achieved without the support of economic actors.

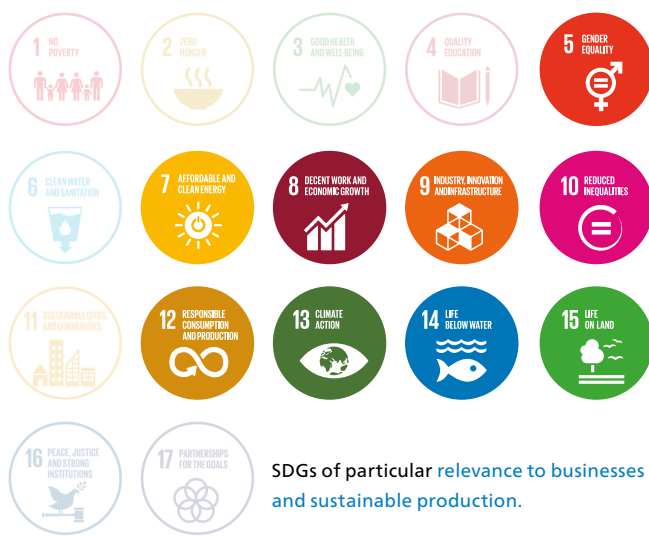
Example: How businesses and sustainable production affect sustainable development

One of the key Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for companies is **SDG 12** on sustainable consumption and production. SDG 12 calls for economic activity to be designed in such a way as to maintain prosperity and well-being while taking care not to overexploit natural resources [8]. Achieving **SDG 12** requires companies to use natural resources efficiently and minimize waste of any kind [9]. This means they must focus not only on sustainability in the company itself, but ensure that sustainability principles are incorporated into every step of the value chain [10]. Better economic integration reduces economic and social inequalities within and between countries (**SDG 10**). It also promotes cooperation on innovation and technology (**SDG 9**). Furthermore, companies can make substantial contributions to the achievement of other SDGs, such as **SDG 8** on decent work and economic

growth – through appropriate measures to protect the climate and ecosystems on land and below water (**SDGs 13, 14 and 15**) and the use of affordable and clean energy (**SDG 7**). The same applies to support for developing countries (**SDG 10**), the promotion of economic productivity and resource efficiency there, and the protection of and respect for human and labour rights [10]. Furthermore, in the context of **SDG 5** on gender equality, companies can have a positive influence on equal opportunities and the end of discrimination against women and girls [10] – as well as on the inclusion of people along the different manifestations of other diversity dimensions.

Research at the IOP includes laboratory and field experiments for testing mechanisms and measures that drive and strengthen environmental awareness and environmentally friendly behaviour among economic actors. For example, one project investigates the use of “nudges” to reduce plastic waste in organizations [11]. Another ongoing project examines the impact of temporal psychological distance on environmentally friendly behaviour. Other studies focus on the social dimension. One focus in the area of social sustainability – or, more specifically, social responsibility – in business administration is to achieve the highest possible degree of inclusion along the many facets of workforce diversity. In addition to fundamental perspectives on diversity management, research at the IOP deals with various issues of inclusion of lesbian, gay, and bisexual employees, of foreign employees, and of transgender and intersex employees.

Since 2018, the event series “IOP meets practice” has been held regularly with the aim of presenting and discussing current topics from human resources and organizational research and promoting exchange between science and practice. Many of the topics discussed at the events lie at the interface of sustainable development and human resources management and organization. Topics range from diversity in the workplace to the future of energy and mindfulness in organizations. In the summer of 2021, the IOP hosted the “Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion International Conference”, the world’s largest conference on diversity and inclusion. The topic of the conference was “social sustainability”.



How does the Institute of Organization and Human Resource Management incorporate the topic of sustainability into research and teaching?

The IOP teaches the basics of sustainable corporate organization in a Bachelor’s-level lecture. The lecture focuses on corporate social responsibility, sustainable business models, and economic behavioural approaches to fostering sustainable action. In a Master’s seminar that builds on this, students use experimental methods to investigate a sustainability issue in cooperation with partners from practice. Another focus of teaching is on business ethics. Here, the main aim is to understand the different legitimization bases for “responsible” action from the perspective of different – even contradictory – moral philosophical approaches, and to discuss and critically reflect on the resulting options for assuming responsibility in the context of business and work. Lectures on human resource management extensively cover topics of diversity management and inclusion.

References

URLs last accessed on 10 August 2022. Sources indicated in German are not available in English.

- [1] IPCC [Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change]. 2022. *Climate Change 2022: Mitigation of Climate Change*. Contribution of Working Group III to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. Shukla PR, Skea J, Slade R, Al Khourdajie A, van Diemen R, McCollum D, Pathak M, Some S, Vyas P, Fradera R, Belkacemi M, Hasija A, Lisboa G, Luz S, Malley J, editors. Cambridge, UK, and New York, NY, USA: Cambridge University Press. <https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/wg3/>.
- [2] Morazán P. 2017. *Profit mit Nachhaltigkeit? Die Rolle der Privatwirtschaft in Entwicklungsländern*. Bonn, Germany: Südwind e.V.
- [3] Köllen T. 2021. Diversity management: A critical review and agenda for the future. *Journal of Management Inquiry* 30(3):259–272. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1056492619868025>.
- [4] Schneidewind U, Pfriem R, Graupe S. 2016. Für einen neuen Vertrag zwischen Wirtschaftswissenschaft und Gesellschaft – Transformative Wirtschaftswissenschaft im Kontext nachhaltiger Entwicklung. *Ökologisches Wirtschaften* 2:30–34. <https://doi.org/10.14512/OEW310230>.
- [5] Paech N. 2010. Nach dem Wachstumsrausch: Eine Zeitökonomische Theorie der Suffizienz. *Zeitschrift für Sozialökonomie (ZfSÖ)* 47:33–40.
- [6] Stahel W. 2016. The circular economy. *Nature* 531:435–438. <https://doi.org/10.1038/531435a>.
- [7] United Nations General Assembly. 2015. *Transforming our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (A/RES/70/1)*. New York, NY, USA: United Nations. https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/generalassembly/docs/globalcompact/A_RES_70_1_E.pdf.
- [8] Leo A-M. 2022. Wo steht die Schweiz in der Umsetzung der Agenda 2030? *öbu & die SDGs*. Zurich, Switzerland: Öbu – Der Verband für nachhaltiges Wirtschaften. <https://www.oebu.ch/de/news/aktuelle-news/wo-steht-die-schweiz-in-der-umsetzung-der-agenda-2030-6971.html>.
- [9] Öbu. No date. Öbu-Themenswerpunkt: Nachhaltige Wertschöpfungsketten und Beschaffung. *Agenda 2030*. Zurich, Switzerland: Öbu – Der Verband für nachhaltiges Wirtschaften. <https://www.oebu.ch/de/agenda-2030/nachhaltige-wertschoepfungsketten-3.html>.
- [10] Schram B. 2020. Die 17 SDGs – was bedeuten sie für Unternehmen? *News*. Vienna, Austria: Quality Austria – Trainings, Zertifizierungen und Begutachtungs GmbH. <https://www.qualityaustria.com/news/die-17-sdgs-was-bedeuten-sie-fuer-unternehmen/>.
- [11] Essl A, Steffen A, Stähle M. 2021. Choose to reuse! The effect of action-close reminders on pro-environmental behavior. *Journal of Environmental Economics and Management* 110:102539. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jeem.2021.102539>.

Centre for Development and Environment (CDE)
University of Bern
Mittelstrasse 43
CH-3012 Bern, Switzerland
www.cde.unibe.ch

Contact: sustainability.cde@unibe.ch

Authors: Dr. Andrea Essl, PD Dr. Thomas Köllen (IOP)

Series editors: Leonie Greta Schmid, Camilla Steinböck, Dr. Lilian Julia Trechsel (CDE)

Copyediting of German version: Dr. Marion Leng (CDE)

English translation: Tina Hirschbuehl and Marlène Thibault (CDE)

Layout: Simone Kummer (CDE)

This publication is available for free download at:
https://www.bne.unibe.ch/material/publications_further_reading/index_eng.html

Version 1.0

© 2022, the authors and CDE



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution- NonCommercial 4.0 International License. See <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/> to view a copy of the license. For any commercial use of the content, it is mandatory to obtain permission from the authors of the corresponding content.

This document was compiled within Project 7.9, Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), of the University of Bern. Project 7.9 supports the Vice-Rectorate Quality in incorporating sustainable development into teaching at the University of Bern. Project 7.9 focuses on disciplinary and interdisciplinary connections with sustainable development, helping the faculties and institutes to identify these connections and make them visible to a wider audience.

u^b

UNIVERSITY OF BERN

**CDE
CENTRE FOR DEVELOPMENT
AND ENVIRONMENT**