

Human Geography

HUMAN GEOGRAPHY AT THE UNIVERSITY OF BERN

Human geography at the University of Bern's [Institute of Geography](#) investigates the production, valuation, and effectiveness of spatial and societal structures [1]. It comprises three research groups: Political Urbanism and Sustainable Spatial Development, Economic Geography, and Social and Cultural Geography. The Political Urbanism and Sustainable Spatial Development research group analyses the sociopolitical dimensions of spatial development, resource use and regulation, and the access of actors to resources, with a specific focus on how spatial planning can contribute to sustainable development [2]. The Economic Geography research group investigates the development of urban and regional economies. It examines ways in which places develop and maintain their economic competitiveness while preserving sustainability. In this respect, it focuses on the evolution of companies and industries in the spatial context [3]. The Social and Cultural Geography research group examines how global processes can affect intimate areas of daily life. It investigates how sociopolitical changes influence sustainable lifestyles. The population debate, which is gaining renewed strength in the context of the climate crisis and related protests and which raises fundamental ethical questions about whose lives are wanted or unwanted, serves as a starting point for the research group's critical examination of future sustainable societies [4].

How is human geography linked to sustainable development, and how has this influenced practice?

Human geography studies the social, cultural, and economic aspects of societies and communities, their relationship to natural resources and the environment, and the spatial dimension of human activity. This enables the discipline to develop a perspective on sustainability that is based not only on ecological aspects, but that also considers political, social, and economic factors.

For example, human geography contributes indirectly to combatting hunger and poverty by investigating how economic, social, and political factors influence the distribution of resources. Resource conflicts are studied in their

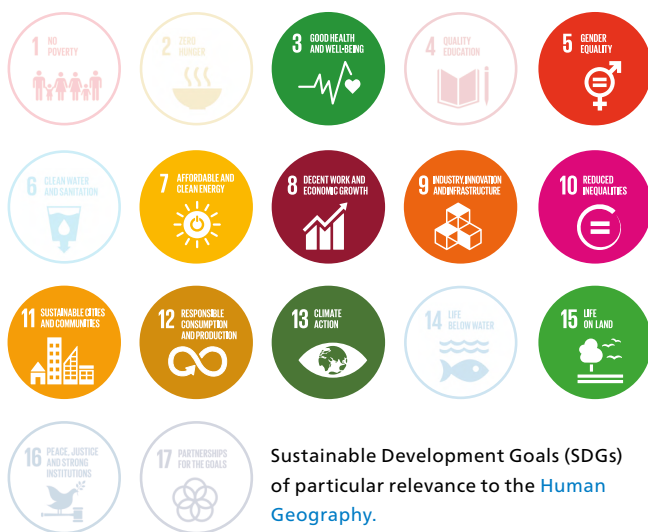
multiple dimensions and analysed for dependencies, economic entanglements, social contrasts, and societal power struggles. Human geography also examines globalization processes, which are closely linked to migration, intercultural relationships, and the multilocality of families. These factors can result in the loss of spatial identity and identification and thus strongly influence people's well-being. In this context, living conditions and spatial planning also play a key role. Poor and overcrowded living conditions, for example, affect health issues such as respiratory diseases, tuberculosis, and other infectious diseases [5]. An additional factor is anthropogenic pollution. This is often particularly pronounced in megacities, which form another field of study in human geography. A growing majority of these large spatial hubs are located in countries of the global South and are characterized by major environmental problems as well as informal economic and political governance structures.

Furthermore, human geography analyses ongoing societal changes and aspects of social differentiation, thus raising awareness of inequalities in society. At the same time, it considers the world from a constructivist angle and investigates how "world views" are created and embedded in cultural discourses, and what political effects these constructions can have. This means that human geography also examines topics such as the contextual use of language, the new role of religions, and questions of gender justice and sexuality or transsexuality [6,7].

Example: Developing sustainable neighbourhoods

Amid growing populations and increasing urban sprawl, ensuring the sustainable use of space in cities and villages is becoming ever more important. Neighbourhood development projects can facilitate more sustainable use of space by promoting social justice, economic development, and environmental sustainability. Human geographers can contribute by identifying and analysing opportunities to promote sustainable neighbourhoods, such as in creating more green space (**SDG 15**), lower-emission buildings and more sustainable transport (**SDGs 3, 7, and 13**), and affordable housing for marginalized groups (**SDG 10**). Development and promotion of sustainable consumption options in cities and rural municipalities (**SDG 12**), as well

as creation of decent jobs (**SDG 8**), sustainable industrial spaces for innovation (**SDG 9**), and accessible public spaces for all (**SDG 5**) are also areas in which human geography research can help advance sustainable development. Human geographers examine the social impacts of neighbourhood development projects, including how they affect local populations, especially social groups that experience marginalization due to their origin, gender, class, or sexuality. Overall, human geographers can help develop a better understanding of the complex interactions between neighbourhood development, social justice, and environmental sustainability, and identify approaches that contribute to sustainable neighbourhoods (**SDG 11**).



How does the University of Bern’s Institute of Geography incorporate sustainability into research and teaching?

Sustainability plays an important role in research and teaching across all areas of human geography. It is a main topic of the Political Urbanism and Sustainable Spatial Development group, which analyses the sociopolitical dimensions of spatial development in research as well as in teaching by asking: (1) Why and how are resources such as soil, housing, green spaces, landscape, food, and biodiversity regulated? (2) What strategies do actors pursue to secure their access to resources? (3) Which institutions – as in “rules of the game” – contribute to strong sustainability? For the research group, sustainability depends on these rules, which must be analysed to enable suggestions for improvements. Such considerations take place at different levels: from optimizing selected strategies and measures, to addressing fundamental societal issues (e.g. growth and post-growth, mounting inequalities, or the role of private property in urban development). Research

takes place in the global North and South. In particular, it aims to understand what strategies public, collective, and private actors can use to combat urban sprawl, secure affordable housing, or ensure a sustainable food supply.

The Economic Geography group investigates sustainable development through a critical examination of issues related to economic growth and finite resources. A key topic in teaching and research is what is known as “post-growth geography”. Questions studied include: How can economically and socially innovative projects and entrepreneurial initiatives help cities and regions become independent of the growth imperative? What actors (e.g. companies, government agencies, NGOs) initiate and drive discussions about a post-growth society? What motivates different actors to work for development that is independent of growth? Other topics include social innovations, alternative and diverse economies, and entrepreneurship in the context of sustainable development.

Sustainability questions addressed by the Social and Cultural Geography group are linked mainly to issues of global justice and the interplay between productive and reproductive labour. How can we address global environmental problems in such a way that the solutions are socially just? How are questions that seem private – how we live, love, and reproduce – related to national and global sustainability policies, as well as to policies on migration, health, and population? How can we organize paid and unpaid care and production work so that incomes are distributed more fairly across the globe? Research and teaching examine how networks of various actors, such as government agencies, NGOs, companies, and political activists, acting at global, national, local or intimate levels, discuss issues related to making life more sustainable.

By anchoring sustainability as a fundamental concept in both teaching and research, human geography enables future generations of researchers and professionals to prepare for the challenges facing society and to help shape a more sustainable future.

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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: Nora Komposch, Prof. Dr. Carolin Schurr,
Prof. Dr. Heike Mayer, Prof. Dr. Jean-David Gerber
(Institute of Geography)

Series editors: Jonas Frédéric Chastonay, Camilla
Steinböck, Dr. Lilian Trechsel (CDE)

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

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Marlène Thibault (CDE)

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