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# Towards a sustainable future in the age of polycrisis

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Our generation lives in an age of polycrisis. Polycrisis is a phenomenon where various single crises interact in ways that lead to an overall negative impact that is more significant than the sum of each issue. The age of polycrisis poses a considerable threat to humanity. Since the age of polycrisis results from human actions, humans are responsible for addressing it. As such, an ultimate roadmap and in-depth sustainability transformations are needed across all sectors. This raises a quest for a unified social contract that can engage everybody to promote the well-being of people and the planet locally, regionally, and globally. Our paper explores a holistic picture of a social transformation process to address the challenges of the age of polycrisis. We put together a new social contract, different actors (civic society, private sector, public sector, decision-makers), and specific focus areas of actors to implement the goals of Agenda 2030. Each societal sector has a unique role to play in this transformation. The private sector can drive innovation and investment, the public sector can provide governance and regulation, civic society can advocate for change and hold other sectors accountable, and decision-makers can provide leadership and coordination. A new social contract called “Society’s Commitment to Sustainable Development” can foster societal transformation towards sustainability with the involvement of these different societal sectors. The widespread commitment of public and private sectors as well as civil society can be an effective driver when implementing Agenda 2030 goals to build a more sustainable future. We, the current generation, have power to make a difference regarding international collaboration, national decision-making, industries, households – even down to the choices we make in our everyday lives. The future is shaped by the decisions we make today.

## KEYWORDS

age of polycrisis, Society’s Commitment to Sustainable Development, social contract, Agenda 2030, sustainable future

## Introduction

The world is undergoing multiple long-term structural transformations, including the rise of AI, a shift in geopolitical power distribution, and demographic transitions. However, the most crucial future challenge is caused by planetary development, where natural resources continue to be depleted while climate stability declines and biodiversity suffers ([World Economic Forum, 2024](https://www.weforum.org/publications/2024/07/world-economic-forum-2024/)). These problems are intertwined so that they are linked to increasing inequality and social instability. The whole picture is diverse including also pollution. In 2015, human-made pollutants tragically caused 9 million premature deaths worldwide, a figure that is three times more than the combined toll of AIDS, tuberculosis, and malaria, and 15 times more than war, terrorism, and other forms of violence ([Landrigan et al., 2017](https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/ambient-air-pollution-and-health-effects)). The economic impact of these preventable deaths, caused by pollution, is a significant 6% of the world economy today ([Fuller et al., 2022](https://www.fullexchange.com/news/fuller-et-al-2022/)).

New vision for development and progress in society is very much needed because simultaneously negative local, global and planetary developments refer to a *polycrisis*. Polycrisis

is associated with challenges “where disparate crises interact such that the overall impact far exceeds the sum of each part” (World Economic Forum, 2023). Polycrisis poses an existential threat to humanity on Earth (Steffen et al., 2015; Richardson et al., 2023). Polycrisis is rooted in deeply intertwined systems with people and the planet, or more explicitly the global economy and Earth’s life support system. Polycrisis is human-made, and so solving it humans’ duty. We will see a better future if we make it happen. Harnessing the entire human potential is, therefore, crucial in building a sustainable future.

Agenda 2030 goals build the bridge for more sustainable future on Earth. The challenge is, however, how to mainstream the realization of the sustainability transformations in society in such a way that everybody is on board. In this paper, we discuss how human potential can empower society through a collaborative effort. We give an example from Finland where a new social contract called Society’s Commitment to Sustainable Development has applied (National Commission on Sustainable Development, 2016; Finnish National Commission on Sustainable Development, 2022a). The novelty of this paper is based on a holistic vision of how just social transformation can be implemented in society so that everyone is on board.

## New development qualities are needed

During the last 200 years, the industrial age has improved our possibilities to have a good life in many ways. Humankind has progressed intensively due to cheap fossil energy (International Energy Agency, 2023). Increasing citizens’ consumption opportunities has been a way to improve people’s living standards over the last decades (Benkler, 2006; Botsman and Rogers, 2010; Belk, 2014; Davidson and Infranca, 2016). This progress is called *development*.

Positive development can have adverse side effects and externalities. The current climate change is an example of such externalities that positive societal development may cause. Fossil energy is the main cause of the current human-induced climate change which is “the biggest environmental market failure in human history” (Auffhammer, 2018, p. 33). In addition to climate change, we are currently living in the sixth extinction era in Earth’s history (Barnosky et al., 2012). This is another example of the negative side effects of positive societal progress. A third negative side effect is linked to the depletion of natural resources. A dependency on ever-increasing consumption is linked to economic growth, which would not be a problem if it were possible to decouple it from the depletion of natural resources, climate change, and the loss of biodiversity. An absolute decoupling in terms of gross domestic product (GDP) is highly unlikely, which has caused economic growth as a societal aim to be increasingly brought into question (Raworth, 2017; Hickel and Kallis, 2020; Vadén et al., 2020; Vogel and Hickel, 2023).

The negative side effects raise a need of new qualities of development. *Sustainable development* brings together development and its quality—*sustainability*. The World Commission on Environment and Development presented sustainable development as a model of holistic social change—“[...] that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (WCED, 1987, p. 46). Relating to the circumstances of the finite planet, the definition of sustainable development underlines the fact that the vitality of an ecological foundation is a prerequisite for humanity’s existence (Hediger, 1999; Ott, 2003; Marshall and Toffel, 2005). This

definition is also associated with the dignity that each human being possesses as their birthright, as agreed worldwide with 196 nations in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations, 1948).

Sustainable development can help countries pull in the same direction by building more sustainable governance and policies (Eckersley, 2004; United Nations Development Programme, 2015; Schneider et al., 2019). In 2015, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, as a new global framework to redirect humanity towards a sustainable path (United Nations, 2015). At the core of Agenda 2030 are 17 universal, transformational and inclusive Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) which describe the major complex challenges humanity faces in the midst of the current polycrisis. Agenda 2030 is, therefore, an ultimate goal that can engage citizens, private and public sectors, and decision-makers to make appropriate decisions needed to attain a sustainable future. In Europe for example, even solid juridical support already exists as the EU Climate Act aims to ensure that carbon emissions will be cut in half by 2030 in the EU (European Commission, 2021). However, the challenge remains in bringing everyone on board.

## Bringing everybody on board

The solution-oriented approach to development refers to in-depth sustainability transformations that are needed across all sectors, together with their scales and the societal actors involved. A solution-oriented approach in society means that some industries need to be expanded as soon as possible, and some run down on justified and safe grounds. For instance, energy industries relying on fossil fuels have no future on a carbon-neutral planet because global warming is likely to exceed the critical 1.5°C threshold by early 2030 if ongoing path continues (IPCC, 2023).

A better future for all on Earth means eliminating dirty energy production by stopping the burning of coal, oil, gas and trees. This calls for bold political decision-making because bringing the majority on board is important to do, regardless of their political view, socioeconomic background, or age group (Dixon-Declève et al., 2022, p. 9). Every political decision opens up new possibilities, while ruling out others. With the help of financial markets, people’s savings can be targeted toward companies that have concentrated on solving sustainability challenges, such as the renewal of the energy sector. Fossil fuels can be replaced, for example, by de-centralized electricity production in the form of wind turbines and solar plants. The finance sector is crucial in targeting capital towards sustainable investments (Boffo and Patalano, 2020), and the public sector can also support households by offering state guarantees for their loans when renewing energy solutions or updating the insulation of their properties.

The emerging role of *civic activism* can also be an essential driver of a sustainable future (Anttiroiko, 2016; Youngs, 2017). Digitalization platforms such as social media enable citizens to find new ways to create and use self-organizing networks. Civic activism is a self-organized and self-motivated cooperation between citizens, usually outside of organizational activities, and based on integral, constructive and proactive collaboration. So, whether it is establishing urban plantations or a food circle, the purpose is primarily for shared thinking and collective action. Specifically, it is a direct action to improve one’s urban environment and its facilities, offerings and functionalities and civic activism can be a key driver for building self-organizing networks and functional communities aiming to foster cooperation between self-defined goals (Young et al., 2018; Rask et al., 2020).

## Society's Commitment to Sustainable Development as a practical solution

Finland was one of the first countries to implement a national commitment to sustainable development, in a statement entitled “*The Finland we want in 2050*” (National Commission on Sustainable Development, 2016). The strategy for 2022–2030 aims to realize this vision, and is based on the six areas of change identified in the Agenda 2030 roadmap and seeks to support other countries in advancing sustainable development. The strategy serves as a long-term target framework and tool for policy coherence in the strategic and program work of different administrative branches and stakeholders in society (Finnish National Commission on Sustainable Development, 2022a,b). The six areas defined in the commitment that is a promising start to make a new social contract (UNRISD, 2022). The focus areas are:

1. Economy and work promoting wellbeing and sustainable consumption
2. Education, competence and sustainable lifestyles
3. Wellbeing, health and social inclusion
4. Food system promoting wellbeing
5. Forest, water and land use promoting biodiversity and carbon neutrality
6. Sustainable energy systems

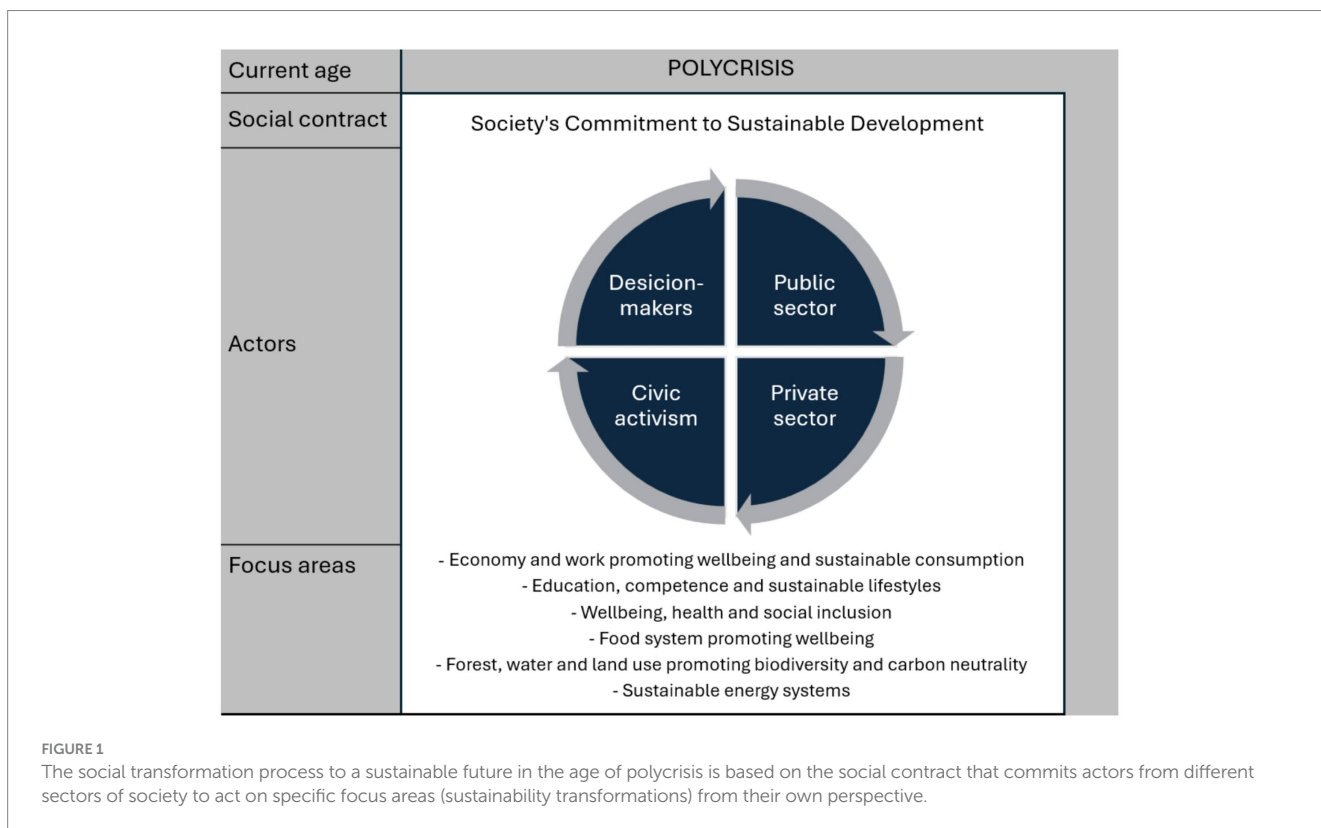
Societal commitment is a practical tool to bring together the public sector, companies, civil society actors, organizations and citizens in a unique way. These commitments are public commitments. Each citizen, organization, business or public sector operator in Finland can commit to the identified initiatives for a sustainable future, while urging others to do so at the same time. The

commitments varies from responsible safety and equality initiatives to a more efficient use of energy and resources, training young people, improving access to the labor market for people with partial work capacity, and strengthening democracy to increasing transparency in government (Finnish National Commission on Sustainable Development, 2022a,b). Also, the SDGs platform is open to all stakeholders, including civil society, local authorities, private sector, scientific and technological communities and academia, to register a voluntary commitment or multi-stakeholder partnership which aims to drive the implementation of the Agenda 2030 (United Nations, 2024).

## Discussion

Agenda 2030 aims to establish a common baseline for worldwide development with new qualities of development and progress. The key question for a sustainable future is how everybody can be brought on board when implementing Agenda 2030 goals in society. Any hope for the future will crumble if people stick to the business-as-usual logic without a comprehensive turning point and societal transformation. In this paper we identified Society's Commitment to Sustainable Development as a practical tool to start for making a new social contract that can engage civil society and activism, together with private and public sectors and policymaking, and implement Agenda 2030 goals to build a more sustainable future in the age of polycrisis (Figure 1).

During the age of polycrisis, a unified social contract is needed to promote the wellbeing of people and the planet (UNRISD, 2022). The widespread commitment of public and private sectors as well as civil society can be an effective driver when implementing Agenda 2030



goals to build a more sustainable future. Society's Commitment to Sustainable Development can be such an effective tool to engage the whole society in implementing the Agenda 2030 goals as it spurs different sectors in society together towards a sustainable future in the age of polycrisis. Each societal sector has a unique role to play in this transformation. The private sector can drive innovation and investment, the public sector can provide governance and regulation, civic society can advocate for change and hold other sectors accountable, and decision-makers can provide leadership and coordination.

However, even in democracy there is a gap between the citizen and the policymaker. The citizen's own possibilities of influence are real but limited. The prevailing societal conditions determine an individual citizen's means to act. Citizens' limited positive impact in society can be supported to become more widely influential via civic activism. By taking part, people feel they are involved actors that can make a sustainable future. In a democratic society, citizens can impact the circumstances in which they live. The understanding of polycrisis is grounded in systems thinking that includes the fact that a small change in one area may have a big impact on the whole system.

The cycle of good begins when citizens share ideas about how we can renew lifestyles, rethink operating cultures, or upcycle products. We humans are social beings connected to each other. We always influence each other. The power of the Society's Commitment to Sustainable Development lies not just in strengthening the voice of the individual citizen or civil society, and the business and education sectors are also innovating in different ways to build a future that inspires confidence. At its best, the power of citizens, organizations and institutions can create a cycle of good. The Society's Commitment to Sustainable Development initiative provides an opportunity to transform society in a citizen-driven way from the bottom up.

Tomorrow is a result of the choices we make today. In the age of polycrisis, a good life is founded on "optimistic people with hope for a better future" (Dixon-Declève et al., 2022, p. 167). Flourishing is more than simply material wealth or a standard of living, and also consists of non-material things that improve the quality of life by giving it good reason, meaning, and purpose. Particularly, the non-material quality of life includes meaningful living, personal growth, engagement and positive relations with others (Salonen et al., 2024).

The current era of polycrisis can cause societies and the whole planet to face significant challenges, including increasing inequality, social instability, and environmental devastation. Because human activity is causing climate change, a loss of biodiversity, and the depletion of natural resources, humans have a responsibility to confront the consequences of their actions, but they also have the power to act. As later citizens, societies, and humankind come to realize this, the more difficult and expensive it will become to live in the age of polycrisis. Large-scale systemic change, driven by a collective effort of progressive political leaders, inclusive coalitions, active

citizens, and social movements can solve this dire situation. Together, we can pave the way for a sustainable future. As polycrisis poses an existential threat to humanity, our generation needs to do everything we can regarding international collaboration, national decision-making, industries, households, and also the choices we make in our everyday lives. After all, building a sustainable future is all about making future generations proud of our generation's decisions.

## Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

## Author contributions

JS: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. AS: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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## Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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