



Rat für
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Entwicklung

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Sustainable Development

It's the politics, stupid: The Responsibility of State and Society for Sustainable Liv- ing Environments

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Contents

Executive summary.....	2
The challenge	3
More sustainability through less moralising and more policy.....	5
Policies for sustainable living environments	6
Sustainable infrastructures for sustainable living environments.....	10
About the Council for Sustainable Development.....	12
Imprint.....	12



Executive summary

The debate over sustainable living environments is a sensitive one. It is a constant weighing of individual and collective civil liberties. At the same time, a wide range of fears and hopes are projected onto it, because the discourse is frequently conducted in a moralising and personalising way. Instead of continuing a restrictive dialogue that does little to achieve any objective, the German Council for Sustainable Development (RNE) believes that what is required are systemic solutions on both the supply and the demand sides of the conversation, addressing shared behaviours and, last but not least, effective interaction between regulatory and fiscal instruments.

Therefore, the RNE proposes a toolbox that makes the sustainability of technical infrastructures standard practice but at the same time also addresses the cultural and individual dimensions of sustainable living environments. Among other things, this includes sustainable public services, expansion of infrastructures for sustainable living, restructuring of harmful subsidies, support for the sharing economy, attractive incentive creation by means of taxes and tariffs, and citizen involvement at an early stage.

Instruments that support sustainable living environments are not something fundamentally new. However, the goal must be to implement them consistently and sector-specifically. If we wish to transform our environment without endangering either social cohesion or the industrial competitiveness of industry, we are faced with the challenging question of financing. This requires a timely advancement of the debt brake and the introduction of a socially targeted or regionally differentiated climate premium. With this statement, the RNE aims to encourage discussion about the promotion of sustainable living environments through deliberate political and investment decisions.



The challenge

The transformation to a more sustainable Germany in Europe has gained significant momentum. Not only are energy providers increasingly moving away from fossil fuels, but the conversion of industry is also on its way. The federal government has accepted this challenge in the form of various strategies – such as expanding renewable energies, transforming industry, developing a circular economy and promoting a bioeconomy. This is also necessary: because passing on our patterns of production and consumption to a future population of nine billion people would far exceed the earth’s ecological capacity – and in many places, its social viability as well. At the same time, we ask ourselves whether this industrial transformation will be sufficient to limit the usage of energy, space and raw materials, the loss of biodiversity, and emissions and waste in water, soil and air to a sustainable level. The central political question here is: What management responsibilities should the public sector assume for creating the economic, ecological and social framework conditions that will allow citizens to self-determinedly shape their living environments in a more sustainable way?

Technical innovation is necessary, but not enough. In order for us as a society to operate within the limits of what our planet can sustain, it is essential that we significantly reduce our use of resources. This calls for changes in many areas of our current economic structures. These changes will only be achievable through a combination of measures. To this end, the federal government’s sustainable industry policies focus on innovation in products and processes: especially consistency policies – that is, for example, replacing non-renewable raw materials and energy sources with renewable ones – and efficiency policies – meaning the economical usage of raw materials and energy.¹ With approaches such as the circular economy, green chemistry or the use of renewable raw materials in construction, many sectors are already on the path to more sustainable business. At the same time, various examples show that more efficiency and more consistency alone are not enough to stay within the limits of what our planet can sustain. Studies prove that advances in efficiency generally do not lead to a greater absolute reduction in consumption, since the “rebound effect” of increased production and consumption eats up a large portion of the gains in efficiency.² The replacement of non-renewable raw materials with renewable ones has its limits as well: the substitution of all fossil fuels with renewable ones (biokerosene, biodiesel) would already put the protection of biodiversity and the food supply of nine billion people in danger in the short term. In Germany alone,

¹ Praetorius, B., Dierker, W. (2022): “Bedingungen einer neuen ökologischen Industriepolitik” [“Conditions for a new ecological industrial policy”], *Wirtschaftsdienst*, 102(13), pp. 6–11; Allianz für Transformation (2024): “Eine starke Kreislaufwirtschaft für Wertschöpfung, Souveränität und Nachhaltigkeit” [“A strong circular economy for value creation, autonomy and sustainability”]. Joint communiqué by the Alliance for Transformation. Federal Chancellery, Berlin.

² Inquiry Committee “Wachstum, Wohlstand, Lebensqualität” [“Growth, Prosperity, Quality of Life”] of the German Bundestag (2011): “Herausforderungen für eine technisch-ökonomische Entkopplung von Naturverbrauch und Wirtschaftswachstum.” [“Challenges for the technical and economic decoupling of environmental consumption and economic growth.”]



agricultural land use would need to be increased more than sixfold in order to completely replace current fossil fuel usage with biofuels.³

Even if it were theoretically possible and wanted, we are still far away from achieving the complete and equivalent replacement of all goods and services in a consistent form. Thanks to technological advances, we will certainly come significantly closer to achieving a sustainable Germany. However, it is extremely risky to rely solely or even heavily on the expectation that the necessary technological leaps, the dissemination of these new technologies and their fair implementation will take place before growing inequalities, global hunger or the climate crisis have already massively compromised our living environments through migration, social unrest and the transgression of ecological tipping points. For precisely this reason, we need intelligent parameters to ensure that not only sustainable patterns of production become the standard on the supply side, but that sustainable consumption – and along with it, sustainable lifestyle decisions – become the rule on the demand side as well. Analyses predict a potential total reduction in demand-side emissions of 40 to 70 percent by 2050, with wide sectoral variations.⁴

In addition to analyses of the technical prerequisites for a path to net-zero in climate protection, we now also have clear evidence that societies with greater socioeconomic equality are able to achieve prosperity with a significantly lower expenditure of resources than societies with greater wealth inequality.⁵ Furthermore, equitable and democratic societies that offer their inhabitants high-quality public services have a better quality of life while consuming less energy than those that do not offer such services.⁶ However, the withdrawal from state involvement in public services⁷ that can be observed in Europe, particularly in rural areas, impedes decision-making capability for a high-quality and socially equitable arrangement of public services. If we want to make sustainable living environments possible, we will also have to address issues of distribution and

³ Mildner, S. (2011): “Konfliktisiko Rohstoffe. Herausforderungen und Chancen im Umgang mit knappen Ressourcen” [“Resource scarcity – a global security threat? Challenges and opportunities in dealing with scarce resources”], German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP) Study 5, pp. 115 ff.

⁴ Creutzig, F., Roy, J., IPCC (2022): AR6, Chapter 5., pp. 540 ff. https://report.ipcc.ch/ar6/wg2/IPCC_AR6_WGII_FullReport.pdf.

⁵ Ravallion, M., Heil, M. and Jalan, J. (1997): “A less poor world, but a hotter one? Carbon emissions, economic growth and income inequality”. World Bank, Washington, DC, USA. McGee, J. A. and Greiner, P. T. (2018): “Can Reducing Income Inequality Decouple Economic Growth from CO2 Emissions?” *Socius Sociological Research for A Dynamic World*, 4, pp. 1–11. Niebert, K. (2016): “Gerechtigkeit ist besser für alle” [“Fairness is better for all”]. In M. Müller, H. Weiger, D. Ludwig, K. Niebert, & R. Hoffmann (Eds.), *Movum – Briefe zur Transformation*, pp. 5–6. GutWetter Verlag.

⁶ Vogel, J., Steinberger, J. K., O’Neill, D. W., Lamb, W. F. and Krishnakumar, J. (2021): “Socio-economic conditions for satisfying human needs at low energy use: An international analysis of social provisioning”. *Global Environmental Change*, p. 69.

⁷ Genschel, P. (2007): “Die Zerfaserung von Staatlichkeit und die Zentralität des Staates” [“The fragmentation of statehood and the centrality of the state”], German Federal Agency for Civic Education (BfP) (Ed.): *Das Parlament*, 20. <https://webarchiv.bundestag.de/archive/2008/0912/dasparlament/2007/20-21/Beilage/002.html>.



social safeguards. Particularly in times of increasing insecurity during periods of societal and economic transformation, this is becoming even more important.

More sustainability through less moralising and more policy

The debate over sustainable living environments is a sensitive one. It is a constant weighing of individual and collective civil liberties. At the same time, a wide range of fears (*sacrifice, eco-dictatorship, hostility towards technology*) and hopes (*the good life, freedom from excess, degrowth*) are projected onto it. It is also frequently conducted in a moralising (*Your cutlet kills!*), dogmatic (*You have to fly less!*) and personalising (*Keep your carbon footprint small!*) manner. We believe that attempts to advance transformation in this way do little to achieve the objective because they narrow the focus in a way that is simultaneously comfortable and dangerous:

- First of all, they place a greater burden on the individual than they can bear. Thus, for example, data from lockdown periods during the COVID-19 pandemic showed that even dramatic changes in behaviour (mandatory work from home, no long-distance travel) only lowered CO₂ emissions by approximately 17 to 25 percent.⁸ At the same time, we can see that individual decisions about mobility and nutrition can have a significant effect on the resource intensity of people's lifestyles. Extensive savings require **systemic solutions** – on both the supply and the demand sides.⁹
- Secondly, scientific evidence very clearly shows that addressing private-sphere actions¹⁰ or appealing to a higher level of environmental consciousness¹¹ have no effect on the improvement of environmental quality. The only effective approach is **addressing shared behaviours** (public sphere actions). Even for people with a high level of ecological awareness, consistently sustainable behaviour is impossible – because our behaviour is too structurally embedded.¹²
- Furthermore, effectiveness analyses show that information and awareness campaigns, along with advertising bans, are the weakest

⁸ For the month of April 2020. Le Quéré, C. et al. (2020): "Temporary reduction in daily global CO₂ emissions during the COVID-19 forced confinement". *Nature Climate Change*, 10(7), pp. 647–653.

⁹ Niebert, K. (2021): "Lessons Learned from COVID-19: Why Sustainability Education Needs to Become Political". *Progress in Science Education*, 4, pp. 6–14.

¹⁰ Stern, P. C. (2000): Toward a Coherent Theory of Environmentally Significant Behavior. *Journal of Social Issues*, 56, pp. 407–424.

¹¹ German Federal Environment Agency (UBA) (2016): "Umweltbewusstsein und Umweltverhalten junger Menschen" ["Environmental awareness and behaviours among young people"], pp. 1–9. UBA (2016b): "Repräsentative Erhebung von Pro-Kopf-Verbräuchen natürlicher Ressourcen in Deutschland" ["Representative survey of per capita natural resource consumption in Germany"], pp. 1–143.

¹² Kranz, J., Schwichow, M., Breitenmoser, P., Niebert, K. (2022): "The (Un)Political Perspective on Climate Change in Education – A Systematic Review". *Sustainability*, p. 14.



implements in the political toolbox. If we want to effectively facilitate sustainable living environments, we must make use first and foremost of **regulatory instruments** (requirements and prohibitions as well as mandatory limits) **fiscal instruments** (taxes and tariffs, subsidies, emissions trading, systems of incentives such as producer responsibility).¹³

Policies for sustainable living environments

Thus, if we want to pave the way for sustainable lifestyles, the responsibility lies first of all with public policy: it creates the framework conditions under which a good and resource-efficient day-to-day life is possible in the first place. In order to achieve this, we need to make use of a toolbox that identifies the necessary measures through which people are inspired and empowered to lead more sustainable lives.

This includes, among other things:

- *Sustainable public services.* Sustainability must become the essential guiding principle for the provision of public services, because if we want to make sustainable solutions our standard, then the deployment of certain services targeted by public policy – such as climate-neutral energy and water supplies, climate-neutral mobility, the creation of affordable, climate-neutral living spaces, etc. – must take place, as a matter of principle, not through individual actions by citizens, but only via public policy measures.
- *Infrastructures for sustainable living.* Sustainable infrastructures are the basis upon which citizens can live sustainably. It must be the responsibility of the state that sustainable action becomes the most obvious choice, and thereby the default option. If, for example, we want to make sustainable mobility models such as cycling or using public transportation attractive, then we need to have safe bicycle paths and special bus lanes that assure on-time arrival. Rural areas require different solutions than large urban centres¹⁴: throughout Germany, approximately 27 million people have little or no access to public transportation close to where they live.¹⁵ The expansion of on-demand mobility, combined co-working

¹³ Steinebach, Y. (2019): “Instrument Choice, Implementation Structures, and the Effectiveness of Environmental Policies: A Cross-National Analysis”. *Regulation & Governance*, 1, pp. 1–18.

¹⁴ Particularly in sparsely-populated rural areas, public services are under pressure. Municipal revenue is sinking due to shrinking populations while at the same time, per-person costs for maintaining the existing infrastructure are rising. Services are often adapted to reduce costs based on changing demand, with the result that public service institutions are gradually being thinned out. Added to this is the growing population of elderly people, requiring new and additional services in the healthcare and nursing sectors, cf. Oswald, P. et al. (2021): “Bauen für die neue Mobilität im ländlichen Raum – Anpassung der baulichen Strukturen von Dörfern und Kleinstädten im Zuge der Digitalisierung des Verkehrs” [“Construction for new mobility in rural areas – adapting village and small town building structures in the course of the digitalisation of transport”]. BBSR online publication 13/2021.

¹⁵ Agora Verkehrswende (2023): [Public Transport Atlas 2023](#).



spaces, mobility hubs as intersections between automobiles and environmental alliances, or such concepts as mobility guarantees are the first connecting points towards strengthening a sustainable mobility infrastructure. Currently, local authorities finance automobile traffic at three times the rate allocated to public transportation, while bicycle traffic receives the lowest subsidies.¹⁶ This misdirection of funds must come to an end.

- *Restructuring environmentally damaging subsidies.* Currently, in Germany alone, unsustainable lifestyles are being subsidised at an amount in the high double-digit billions – thereby making them more attractive.¹⁷ These appropriations range from air travel subsidies to subsidies for large-engine vehicles. Restructuring of these subsidies must be a foundation and goal of any policy for sustainable lifestyles. Only when we remove economic incentives that contradict our goals for sustainability can we develop a sustainable way of living further – and go from swimming against the current to an attractive popular sport. In the course of restructuring the subsidy landscape – for example, for commuter allowances – we must take distribution effects and the different concerns of urban and rural areas into account.¹⁸
- *Make “using instead of owning” attractive.* Despite their great potential, digitalisation and the sharing economy have only contributed to resource savings to a limited degree so far.¹⁹ An intelligently implemented sharing economy that takes both ecological and social limits into account can contribute to easing the burden on the environment.²⁰ This begins with promoting carsharing options – for example, by opening up special vehicle lanes – and extends far beyond the shared usage of household appliances, such as a washing machine in a utility room – a standard feature in apartment buildings in countries like Switzerland and Sweden.

¹⁶ Unikims (online publication): “Der Autoverkehr kostet die Kommunen das Dreifache des ÖPNV und der Radverkehr erhält die geringsten Zuschüsse” [“Car traffic costs local authorities three times as much as public transport while cycling receives the lowest subsidies”]. <https://www.unikims.de/blog/autoverkehr-kostet-die-kommunen> (5 April 2024).

¹⁷ Cf. e.g. German Federal Environment Agency (2021): “Umweltschädliche Subventionen in Deutschland: Aktualisierte Ausgabe 2021” [“Environmentally damaging subsidies in Germany: updated edition 2021”], p. 13.

¹⁸ For instance, proposals for reform such as replacing commuter allowances with an income-independent mobility bonus would provide above-average relief to individuals with lower incomes. Cf. Postpischil, R. et al. (2022): “Forschungsstand verkehrsbezogener Umwelt- und Verteilungswirkungen. Eine Literaturstudie zu den Verteilungswirkungen bisheriger und potenzieller Verkehrs- und Umweltpolitik” [“The research landscape on transport-related environmental and distributional impacts. A literature review on the distributional impact of existing and potential transport and environmental policy”]. FFU Report, March 2021.

¹⁹ Jones, E. C. and Leibowicz, B. D. (2019): “Contributions of shared autonomous vehicles to climate change mitigation”. *Transportation Research Part D: Transport and Environment*, 72, pp. 279–298.

²⁰ Mi, Z. and Coffman, D. M. (2019): “The sharing economy promotes sustainable societies”. *Nature Communications*, 10(1), pp. 5–7.



- *Offer incentives the right way.* Many existing excise taxes and tariffs – such as taxes on electricity and mineral oil or waste disposal fees – generally offer incentives for more sustainable lifestyles. However, these taxes and fees are usually too low to have a steering effect. In the context of sustainability policymaking, the state should view taxes and tariffs not only as a source of revenue, but also as a guiding instrument. It should produce policy packages that meaningfully combine fiscal instruments with other measures while taking social configurations into account. The Commission on the Future of Agriculture, for example, made a specific recommendation for the removal of misplaced incentives in the nutrition sector. The prerequisite is that suitable alternative offerings are available to all income groups.
- *Establish sustainable guardrails.* Bans on private vehicles in city centres, speed limits or coupling maximum apartment size for publicly subsidised housing with the number of occupants – which is common practice in Zürich, for example – are regulatory instruments that lawmakers can employ to promote more sustainable lifestyles.
- *Involve citizens better.* Various studies show that both small decisions in favour of sustainability as well as large infrastructure projects can be implemented significantly faster, more efficiently and more purposefully when citizens are not only involved in the process early on but participate in the process themselves and benefit from the results.²¹ Direct involvement also allows for consideration of and influence on existing sociocultural and mental infrastructures, thereby fostering a feeling of agency. Digitalisation, in particular, provides chances for more efficient and direct citizen participation in the transformation process. In this way, residents can move from being the objects of the transformation to being its subjects.

Instruments that promote sustainable lifestyles are nothing fundamentally new. However, our goal in the future must be to plan the use of these instruments in a logical and coordinated manner and to implement them consistently. This implementation should be differentiated according to the specific sector: whereas some sectors will require strong control from the supply side, other sectors (e.g. mobility and nutrition) call for stronger guidance from the demand side.

Empirical evidence has shown that a mix of regulatory (e.g. mandatory limits) and market-based instruments (e.g. CO₂ prices) combined with information campaigns can produce meaningful reductions in environmental consumption.

²¹ Vanegas Cantarero, M. M. (2020): “Of renewable energy, energy democracy, and sustainable development: A roadmap to accelerate the energy transition in developing countries”. *Energy Research and Social Science*, p. 70; Whittle, C., Whitmarsh, L., Hagger, P., Morgan, P. and Parkhurst, G. (2019): “User decision-making in transitions to electrified, autonomous, shared or reduced mobility”. *Transportation Research Part D: Transport and Environment*, 71, pp. 302–319.



In order to facilitate a shared transformation without endangering either social cohesion or industrial competitiveness, the current political discussion urgently needs to answer this challenging question: How can we finance the conversion of public and private infrastructures? A mixture of public and private capital will be needed in order to strengthen the state's ability to act. This first of all requires a framework that makes private investments in sustainable infrastructures economically attractive. Secondly, it requires further development of the state's revenue and expenditure policies:

- Enabling a credit limit for the state that fits with the challenges in the transformation that both people and industries face. Here, societally necessary investment needs could be subject to different regulations than consumption spending.
- A special transformation fund or assets designated for the preservation of our basic economic, social and natural livelihoods could bridge this gap.
- Discussions should also be held as to how the assessment basis for the taxation of income, assets and inheritances can be broadened to encompass financing for the transformation.

At the same time it is important to keep in mind that solely incurring debt is not sustainable policy. Therefore, we must determine which state expenditures contribute to the transformation. In particular, expenditures that obstruct politically agreed upon and societally supported sustainability goals must be restructured in such a way that they contribute to the rehabilitation and construction of sustainable infrastructures.

With all instruments, it is also important to keep the distribution effects in mind and to avoid curtailments: thus, for example, effective environmental protection cannot be achieved either without nor exclusively through economic instruments such as CO₂ pricing. Likewise, we cannot achieve equitable climate action either exclusively through nor without compensation measures such as a climate bonus. Particularly when aiming to steer transformation by means of economic instruments, we must make certain that as insurance against social hardships, a socially targeted or regionally²² differentiated climate bonus is introduced in order to ensure social solidarity. At the same time, a climate bonus is not a climate policy “silver bullet”: it is not a transformation bonus. What is important is to create an equitable cohesion of different instruments in order to guarantee their acceptance.

²² Especially the Austrian climate bonus, with its regional sliding scale that follows the principle of regional compensation (the poorer a person's connection is to public transportation and the less local infrastructure that is available to them, the greater the amount of regional compensation) can strengthen cohesion in the transformation in both urban and rural regions. https://www.oesterreich.gv.at/themen/umwelt_und_klima/klima_und_umweltschutz/klimabonus.html.



Sustainable infrastructures for sustainable living environments

In order to make sustainable living environments possible, we need a toolbox that makes the sustainability of technical infrastructures standard while simultaneously addressing the cultural and individual dimensions of sustainable living environments.

Specifically, this means that sustainable living environments are not only possible but can be attractive if the conditions are in place for appropriate technical and material infrastructures (for example, access to attractive, plant-based foods); if these conditions become standard via cultural and social frameworks (e.g. lower prices for plant-based foods); and if they are made attractive and self-evident through a corresponding set of values (e.g. good health as a guiding value in nutrition). Empirical evidence shows that we can promote sustainable lifestyle choices over the long term through an intelligent mix of sustainable guardrails as well as fiscal and demand-based instruments.²³

In the process, the policy packages that need to be created will sometimes need to break with what is currently familiar in order to establish a new, sustainable “normal”. Particularly in the transitional phases, the respective parties concerned may view the changes as an imposition. Here, policymakers must not and should not be afraid: experience shows that politics without demands is not possible – and also not necessary. Citizens are quite prepared to accept demands if the purpose is clear to them, if they perceive the demands to be fairly distributed, and if they are transparently and coherently aimed at achieving a shared goal.²⁴ What does this mean in concrete terms? Sustainable living environments also need a cultural change towards consistent policy: instead of negotiating into the night for individual – seemingly haphazard – demands for individual sectors, we need a realistic plan for transformation that must be accompanied by price instruments, technological standards, incentive programs, requirements and bans as well as information campaigns. If this plan is fair and achievable, it will meet with broad approval among the people – even far beyond Germany.

²³ Creutzig, F., et al. (2021a) “A typology of 100,000 publications on demand, services and social aspects of climate change mitigation.” *Environ. Res. Lett.*, 16(3), 033001, doi:10.1088/1748-9326/abd78b; Roy, J., et al. (2012) “Lifestyles, Well-Being and Energy.”, *Global Energy Assessment – Toward a Sustainable Future*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK, New York, NY, USA and Laxenburg, Austria, pp. 1527–1548; Wachsmuth, J. and Duscha, V. (2019) “Achievability of the Paris targets in the EU – the role of demand-side-driven mitigation in different types of scenarios.” *Energy Effic.*, 12(2), 403–421, doi:10.1007/s12053-018-9670-4; Khanna, T.M., Baiocchi, G., Callaghan, M., et al. “A multi-country meta-analysis on the role of behavioural change in reducing energy consumption and CO₂ emissions in residential buildings.” *Nat Energy*6, 925–932 (2021). <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41560-021-00866-x>.

²⁴ Cf. Heidenreich, F. (2022): *Demokratie als Zumutung [Democracy as an imposition]*. Klett-Cotta: Bonn; Strohschneider, P. (2020): *Zumutungen: Wissenschaft in Zeiten von Populismus, Moralisierung und Szientokratie [Impositions: Science in times of populism, moralising and scientocracy]*, kursbuch.edition: Hamburg.



The discussion over sustainable living is most effective when it begins not from a perspective of sacrifice and moralising, but from the perspective of how we can make sustainable living environments feasible and attractive – and do so in such a way that they are compatible with the limits of what our planet and our society can handle. We understand it as a public responsibility to establish sustainable technical, cultural and mental infrastructures.

The Council for Sustainable Development wants to foster a discussion about paving the way for living environments through deliberate political and investment decisions. The personal decision to create a sustainable living environment is ostensibly a private one. However, it does not take place in a vacuum. Policies and communities lay the groundwork for enabling and empowering the establishment of sustainable living environments. Technical and material infrastructures, too, are never neutral. In accordance with the joint national and international agreement to achieve the UN Sustainable Development Goals, the state and the society must, can and may consistently orient their infrastructures towards these goals.



About the Council for Sustainable Development

The German Council for Sustainable Development (RNE) advises the Federal Government on issues of sustainability policy. It acts in this capacity as an independent entity, and since 2001 its members have been appointed every three years by the Federal Government. The Council consists of 15 public figures, comprising individuals from civil society, the business sector, the scientific community and the political arena. Since 2023, Reiner Hoffman has been Chair of the Council; Gunda Röstel is the Deputy Chair. The Council also carries out its own projects aimed at advancing the topic of sustainability in practical terms. In addition, it helps shape topically focused momentum within policy and societal dialogue. The Council is supported in its activities by an administrative office based in Berlin.

RNE collaboration for this statement:

This recommendation paper from the RNE is the responsibility of the Council members and was produced in collaboration with the following experts:

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