RIFS-Blogpost

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How Can I Live Sustainably?

For just over 11 years, from October 2011 until the end of 2022, I worked as a scientific director at the Institute for Advanced Sustainability Studies (IASS) in Potsdam, helping to build it up from an experimental idea into an established institution. Now the IASS has become RIFS: the Research Institute for Sustainability – Helmholtz Center Potsdam (you can read more about this exciting development in our recent news item).

During this time, I've learned a lot, and have also puzzled over many challenging questions. One of these seems quite simple:

"How can I live sustainably?"

Of course, the simplicity is deceptive. This is one of the most difficult questions that we've encountered over the years at the IASS. Several of my colleagues have addressed this question in various ways, including interviews, articles, and even in a small booklet of answers to questions like this that were posed by children in Potsdam.

Over the years I've found that my own answers to this question (in talks, panel discussions, emails, etc.) have begun to crystallize around a few issues and principles. Now, at this time of transition from IASS to RIFS, it seems a fitting moment to reflect on, consolidate and share some of the insights and perspectives that I've developed so far. This is just a momentary glimpse into my thinking on this topic – not a scientific analysis. I hope to have the opportunity to develop this more deeply with my colleagues at RIFS and our many partners over the coming years.

There are at least two main reasons why this seemingly simple question is so difficult to answer. First, the answer depends on how you define "sustainability". And second, we are not alone: nearly all of us live in societies that are far from what most people would call "sustainable," so that "living sustainably" is not just a matter of individual lifestyle choices, rather would also involve fundamentally changing our societies as a whole.

There are many different definitions of "sustainability" in use. Some time ago, RIFS (then as the IASS) went through an internal process to develop and adopt its own perspective on sustainability. The resulting definition builds on many others, especially the well-known Brundtland definition, but focuses on the aspects most relevant for RIFS:

In the perspective of the IASS, sustainability is a guiding concept to secure and foster humane living conditions for all people worldwide, in the present and future, and to facilitate restoring and preserving the environmental foundations to enable this.

While this does not "solve" the first issue – since you may perfectly well choose to apply a different definition when you are considering how to live sustainably – it at least allows clarity about what I mean when I use the term "sustainability" throughout this article.

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The second issue is considerably more difficult. Even our best efforts at "living sustainably" will not single-handedly change our societies into being "sustainable", in the sense of fitting to our own preferred definitions of sustainability. Even large groups of sustainability-oriented activists, scientists, policymakers and others have only had limited success over the past decades in helping societies transition towards being more sustainable.

So if our societies do not yet provide a setting in which we can really "live sustainably", what choices do we have? Certainly one possible answer, as individuals, would be to leave our modern society and live very simple, sustainability-oriented lives in the wilderness (like Henry David Thoreau in _Walden_, Chris McCandless in _Into the Wild_, Miriam and Peter Lancewood in _Woman in the Wilderness_ and _Wild at Heart_, and numerous other examples). Needless to say, that would not work well for most of us urbanized city-dwellers (now over half of the world's population), and even if it did, billions of people all trying to live off the wilderness as described in these stories would probably also not be sustainable for very long.

Another possibility would be to bluntly answer the question with: "You can't live sustainably, so simply give it up!" But that is not very satisfying. In particular, it puts everything in black & white – either you live sustainably, or you don't – while there are certainly varying degrees of sustainability.

Thus, over the years, I have begun to pose the initial question a bit differently:

"How can I live in a way that supports sustainability?"

Reframing the question this way provides a bridge between individuals and societies, helping to remind us that individual actions alone are not going to bring about the transformation to sustainable societies. Instead, we will also need to do the hard work to support overarching systemic changes in our societies, in the many different ways that we can contribute to that. I often point this out in my talks and speeches, referring to Mahatma Gandhi's encouragement to "Be the change we want to see in the world." In the context of highly complex, interconnected sustainability issues, I suggest that we need to rephrase this as well, too: "Be the _agents of the change_ that we want to see in the world".

Agents of change can work in many ways, including being inspirational through their actions, sharing knowledge and insights with others, voting and being politically active, and developing or investing in sustainability-oriented businesses.

While agents of change cannot individually conjure up sustainable societies, or even live individually as "personal sustainability islands" within the turbulent waters of the societies around us, there are many small communities worldwide who have been working hard to create larger "sustainability islands" in the form of ecovillages. These have taken on many different forms and have had varying degrees of success. Ecovillages provide very valuable examples of how far groups of people can and will go to create such "sustainability islands." That's a topic of its own, which has been covered extensively in various analyses, including a book written by one of our former IASS Fellows, examining ecovillages around the world. In this article I'll stay focused on addressing the question above in the context of individuals like me who are grappling with how to come to terms with the issue while living in larger, quite unsustainable modern societies.

My thinking about this issue has developed into three key levels: _objectives_, _principles_ and _practices_. In this case, the _objective_ that is implied by the question above is straightforward: living in a way that supports sustainability. The next level, _principles_, are ideals that one can try to keep in mind whenever making decisions, as a way of trying to fulfill the desired objective. I'll focus on the level of principles in the rest of this article. These principles can be supported by concrete _practices_, which are aimed at incorporating the principles into one's daily life. These are much more detailed and lead to much more extensive discussions, which I will leave for future articles.

Over the past years, my thinking about this has begun to crystallize into a set of key principles that I think cover most of what needs to be considered in order to live in a way that supports sustainability (as it is defined above):

My current thinking about these principles can be summarized as follows:

1. _Being mindful not to let the perfect be the enemy of the good;_

2. *Striving to focus my use or accumulation of material, energy and economic resources on what is specifically needed to enable me to follow the remaining principles, along with being mindful of how, where and by whom things that I consume or own were produced;*

3. *Being mindful of the human resources (skills, time and energy) that are required for the responsibilities that I take on, by what I plan or hope to do, and what I ask others to do;*

4. *Taking extremely good care of my body-mind-spirit system;*

5. *Striving to excel at everything I do, but to never compete; this especially applies to avoiding competition when it would be aimed at advancing my state at the cost of others, rather doing everything possible in the spirit of cooperation and mutual reinforcement (and, where competition is an unavoidable aspect of games and other forms of social interaction, then competing in the spirit of play and mutual reinforcement towards excellence);*

6. *Striving to do nothing that knowingly causes harm or hardship for other humans, and to minimize the harm and hardship I cause for all other sentient beings;*

7. *Striving to exist as a conscious and constant manifestation of an exalted human existence, with characteristics that I associate with visions of a sustainable world in the future, including being lovingly kind, generous, sincere, morally courageous, harmonious, peaceful, and joyful.*

Some of these may seem rather obvious, almost overly simplistic (though that makes them no less valid), while others might be a bit surprising or even counterintuitive to you. And you may completely disagree with some or even many aspects, which you are perfectly welcome to do. These are the principles that I have distilled for myself at this point in my life, based on over a decade of frequent and often intense discussions around this topic. The principles that fit best for you will depend on your own life situation, and also on the definition of sustainability that you choose to apply.

Really adhering to these principles is extremely hard work (and I admit to failing at it all the time!). This is especially so, since the structures in our society are not yet set up to support living by such principles. This is the reason for the first principle – and for putting it first. One may be frequently frustrated or disheartened by how difficult it is to follow such principles. Nevertheless, these principles are – to me – what needs to be considered constantly in order to live in a way that supports sustainability, and even if they cannot be followed perfectly, it is still worth continually trying to follow them as closely as possible, acknowledging whatever limitations are posed by one's current life situation. But there is also a corollary to this: don't let the "good enough" be the enemy of the excellent, and indeed, principle 5 encourages striving for excellence in all of your activities.

These principles can largely be supported by a very wide range of concrete practices, such as: gathering and carefully considering information (to the extent that it's available) on the footprints of consumer products and energy resources in terms of impacts on individuals and the environment; careful time and activity planning; dietary habits and exercise routines; and meditation and other spiritual practices. As you can imagine, it's possible to go into extensive detail on these, with books having been written about all of them – though usually from a different perspective than taken here. I am hoping to follow up on this article with a more extensive article, or perhaps series of articles, going into more detail on the understanding and perspectives I have developed on these over my years as scientific director at the IASS, which will certainly continue to grow as a scientific director of RIFS.

For now, I'll say "stay tuned." In the meantime, you can consider carefully whether these principles fit well to your own perspectives and perhaps help you to structure your thinking about living in support of sustainability, or whether you would come up with a different set of principles, or even go about addressing the question in an entirely different way. In any case, at this special transition time from the IASS to RIFS, I hope these consolidated reflections have provided useful impulses for those who have puzzled over this question themselves, and I'm looking forward to continuing the discussions around this topic and developing these ideas further in the coming years.

Epilogue and Acknowledgements

Epilogue note:

Part of the hard work that is needed to support overarching, systemic changes for more sustainable

societies involves academic research (as well as other forms of knowledge generation). The question that this article addresses, as I've reformulated it above, is actually quite close to a core question that drives us at RIFS: "How can we conduct research in a way that supports sustainability?" For those interested in reading more about that, we'd invite you to have a look at a [perspective paper](#) that we published last year, focusing on a key aspect of that question, namely the ongoing development of the field of "transdisciplinary research". The paper is open-access and written to be broadly understandable by a generally educated readership.

And finally:

I'd like to close with a thanks to the many people with whom I've discussed the many aspects of this topic over the years! These are far too many and disperse to even begin to name here. Some of you might recognize your various inputs and reflections here and there; mostly I've been able to express my thanks for these reflections personally, but I'll also express a general thanks here as well!