

RIFS-Blogpost

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RIFS researcher Lea Becker (centre) speaks with Jürgen Trittin (second from left) during a fishbowl discussion at the 2025 RIFS Conference.

“We need the pessimism of the mind and the optimism of the will.” With this quotation from the Italian philosopher Antonio Gramsci, which can be traced to the French humanist and writer Romain Rolland, Jürgen Trittin concluded his keynote speech. This appeal –

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to see the world as it is, whilst having the courage to believe it can be better and more sustainable – not only captures the attitude of many transformation scientists gathered at the 2025 RIFS Conference, but also reflects substantive and methodological explorations of the interplay between democracy and sustainability.

This blog post is part of a series on the RIFS Conference 2025, "Tough Conversations in Tough Times".

The question of whether and how democracy and sustainability are compatible is gaining increasing attention in the scientific community, alongside intensifying socio-ecological challenges. Pessimistic positions often argue that the two concepts are fundamentally incompatible – sometimes to the point of suspending normative ideals of democracy in favour of ecological sustainability. In contrast, more optimistic perspectives hold that the current failures of democratic processes to address sustainability challenges are not an expression of too much democracy, but rather of too little. Democracy can take many different forms – sometimes conflictual, sometimes dialogue-oriented – but at its core it always implies collective practices of self-government. Whether the term refers to forms of government or modes of social coexistence, democracy fundamentally always denotes a process through which citizens ultimately become the authors of the ideas guiding their societies.

Sustainability, in turn, is substantive in nature, aimed at enabling a good life for all and ensuring compliance with social and ecological limits. Yet the specific paths through which sustainability can unfold are open-ended. Reaching agreement on visions of sustainability therefore requires inclusive democratic processes to give meaning to the concept of a sustainable society and a good life for all. In this sense, democracy is not merely a useful instrument to achieve



sustainability goals – rather, a socially and ecologically sustainable society can only be a democratic one.

Many scholars who share this optimistic view of democracy's role for sustainability gathered at the conference and spoke primarily about one thing: Problems. Challenges. Gaps. What characterizes the crises of liberal democracy and sustainability? How are they connected? What can democratic innovations achieve in sustainability transformations – and what can't they? How can abstract democratic ideals be translated into concrete processes on the ground? How does populism jeopardize both democratization and sustainability efforts? And how can a just, democratic transformation succeed when powerful actors benefit from maintaining unjust structures? These issues were explored in numerous panels and presentations, highlighting the “pessimism of the mind.”

This contrasted with presentations and discussions in which democracy was accepted as a framework, as a given, as something that could be taken for granted. To be clear: a whole host of concepts, ideals, and factors matter in this context, and not every discussion must explicitly address the interplay of democracy and sustainability. From a political science perspective, however, the conference contributions that did engage this question made one point clear: Democracy can never be taken for granted. Just as exceeding social and planetary boundaries threatens the possibility of a good life for all, failing to ensure sustainability also undermines the very foundations of democracy.

Democratic systems are built to enable the common good and self-determination. They lose legitimacy if they can no longer protect the fundamental rights and well-being of citizens. Just as sustainable societies must be democratic, democracy itself requires



sustainability for its long-term flourishing. At the same time, democracy does not simply come about on its own. Democracy means collective self-government. Its functioning entails active, complex processes that are maintained continuously through institutions, procedures, and practices. For citizens to be the authors of their collective self-government, active participation, debate, dialogue, and consistent advocacy are essential – both to maintain a functioning democracy and to ensure sustainability is achieved democratically. From this perspective, reflecting on and discussing transformation as academics always entails believing in democracy and actively cultivating it. This is the “optimism of the will.”

My expectation for the RIFS Conference was that both practitioners and academics would approach it with a critical mindset and leave with democratic confidence and hope. Both are essential, hand in hand. A critical spirit, an intellectual pessimism, is necessary to analytically understand the challenges of these “hard times,” the threats to democracy and sustainability, and the tensions between them. Yet hope for democracy – optimism of the will – is not blind naivety. It is a disciplined, courageous stance that allows us to confront difficult realities while holding fast to the possibility of socio-ecological transformation.

This blog post draws primarily on the session “Root Causes and Remedies: Exploring Interrelations Between the Crises of Democracy and Sustainability”, and on a paper presented there by Lea Becker, Lars Berker, and Doris Fuchs (currently titled “Pursuing the Transformation towards 1.5° Societies in Times of Polarisation”), expected to appear in *Sustainability: Science, Practice and Policy* in 2026. It also incorporates reflections on the methodological self-



understanding of political theorists in the context of democracy and sustainability, from Lea Becker's doctoral research.