



2025 was another challenging year for sustainability transitions in Germany, Europe and beyond. In the run-up to the German national elections, climate action and sustainability questions were largely absent from public debate. Meanwhile, the US under the Trump administration formally withdrew from the Paris Agreement, and the EU signalled a slowdown in the transition away from fossil-fuel vehicles. At the same time, far-right populist campaigns have contributed to a decline in the prominence of climate science and evidence in public and political discourse.

The 2025 RIFS Conference Tough Conversations in Tough Times, held in Berlin from December 3 to 5, brought together more than 330 researchers, politicians, activists, artists and civil society representatives to address these challenges. In more than 55 workshops, panel discussions, interactive sessions and keynote speeches the participants analysed the backlash to sustainability policy, discussed counter-strategies and explored the role of research in promoting sustainability-oriented transformations. What are our main take-aways?

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

1.1 Is the backlash here to stay?

Manisha Anantharaman from Sciences Po in Paris highlighted in her keynote address that resistance to climate policies is rooted in a history of colonisation and dispossession and is a symptom of broader social, economic, and political developments. Yet, marginalised perspectives are pushed to the side. Only by understanding these perspectives and constructing a common “we” across classes and other divides will we be able to move towards just sustainable futures. According to Anantharaman this is



particularly important given the influence of powerful alliances between the wealthy and neoliberal theorists – forces we should not underestimate.

Seasoned climate lawyer and activist Farhana Yamin reminded participants of the resistance faced by climate activists thirty years ago and noted that much of what has since been achieved seemed unimaginable at the time. In her view, the current backlash against sustainability and progressive policies can be understood as a reaction to these earlier successes. While it should not be underestimated, she remains optimistic that it will pass. The amount of solidarity and activism she has witnessed at COP 30 in Belém demonstrates the possibility of forming alliances across countries, classes and sectors.

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1.2 Is it really societal polarisation?

We are witnessing a growing divide between groups with opposing beliefs, values, or identities. Dialogue is increasingly replaced by conflict, and compromise is seen as weakness rather than necessity. While this development needs to be taken seriously, focussing on polarisation can also reinforce perceptions of division and assist far right populists in garnering popular support. As RIFS research has shown, sustainability policies frequently enjoy broad support in communities and there is still a broad consensus that we need to stay on the path to achieving climate neutrality. In light of this, it is crucial to understand the mechanisms and extent of polarisation while also looking beyond and analysing the developments driving the polarisation debate. At the same time, the scientific community should share stories of climate mitigation and adaptation efforts that have succeeded and gained widespread backing.



1.3 Sustainability policies can work

Research findings presented throughout the conference clearly demonstrated that sustainability policies can and do work — from protecting biodiversity and restoring nature to driving transitions in the electricity and heating sectors. However, success is often uneven and remains fragmented. Many effective policies are implemented at the local or sectoral level but struggle to be scaled up or replicated elsewhere. Participants emphasised that understanding why certain policies work — considering the political, social, and institutional conditions — is just as important as documenting their outcomes. If sustainability transitions are to move beyond isolated success stories and become systemic transformations, we must take several essential steps: craft positive narratives around these successes, disseminate them widely in formats that are both accessible and compelling, adapt solutions to diverse contexts, and strengthen institutional capacity for replication.

1.4 The need for transdisciplinary research

The conference brought together diverse disciplines and analyses focused on topics such as political backlash, participation and governance instruments, sustainable consumption, war and sustainability or just transitions. Yet, what became clear is that as political developments accelerate, research on sustainability policy backlash is still in its infancy and requires further conceptual and empirical development. At the same time, veteran Green politician Jürgen Trittin reminded participants that evidence and facts are playing a diminishing role in public discourse. Right-wing politicians



and governments, he argued, are flooding the public sphere with misinformation designed to stoke fears of an economic downturn driven by climate policy.

What role can science play in this scenario? There is a strong need for positive counter-narratives grounded in facts, robust data, and clear evidence, but this is only useful if communicated effectively. Researchers must find ways to communicate their results promptly and in more accessible language. The 2025 RIFS Conference was an important milestone for discussing the grand challenges of our times. Participants valued the exchange, but also recognised that we, as a research community, need to venture even further out of our comfort zones and engage in truly tough conversations with diverse actors across different disciplines and sectors. That requires forging long-term and trustful transdisciplinary partnerships, which will remain one of the great challenges for 2026.