

Course Globalisation and Sustainable Development 2025-2026

Lecture 2: 23/10/2025 - Navigating tensions at play in the conceptualization of sustainable development

Lecturer: Prof. Dr. Thalia Stough, Open University, The Netherlands

Abstract:

This lecture explores tensions in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as a globally endorsed agenda for addressing urgent social, environmental, and economic challenges. While the SDGs present these dimensions as mutually reinforcing, their implementation frequently reveals tensions and trade-offs between ecological integrity, human well-being, and economic growth.

Drawing on the work of Stough (2022) and through interactive discussions during the lecture, we will explore tensions in the conceptualization of sustainability and examine how competing value systems shape divergent approaches to the SDGs and competing rationales for policy trade-offs. As knowledge is an important antecedent to future decision making (Montaño and Kasprzyk, 2015), students are invited before the lecture to measure their knowledge of sustainability using The Assessment of Sustainability Knowledge (TASK) tool (www.sulitest.org/task; session code: T-F009-819B).

It takes about one hour to take TASK, but offers a rich assessment of your knowledge of social and environmental boundaries and the levers of change that can help ensure a safe a just space for humanity (Raworth, 2017). However, knowledge is not the only important determinant that can explain divergent decision making in the context of sustainability, therefore we will also explore divergent norms by employing the Moral

Foundations Theory during the lecture (Haidt & Joseph, 2004; Graham, Haidt, & Nosek, 2009). We finish the lecture by exploring how differing normative assumptions could be contributing to recent pushbacks to the sustainability agenda, and why good people disagree about what constitutes the “right” path forward. In doing so, the session highlights the importance of critically engaging with both the knowledge base and the normative foundations of the SDGs, encouraging students to reflect on how sustainability goals are negotiated, contested, and enacted in practice.”

Related **reading**: Stough, T. (2022). Critical Reflection on Discourses of Sustainable Development. In Brinkmann (Ed.) The Palgrave Handbook of Global Sustainability. Cham, Switzerland: Springer International Publishing.