

Without social sciences, humanities and arts, the goal of sustainability may never be reached

Eric Neumayer and Charles Joly argue that the key challenges posed by making a transition to a sustainable net-zero carbon economy are social, rather than technological. As such, instead of waiting for technological change to simply emerge, in the post-covid world, a new emphasis should be placed on *SHAPE* subjects (social sciences, humanities, arts) and the insights they provide into enabling and delivering change across every aspect of society and the economy.

The scale of change required for the transition to an environmentally sustainable world in general, and to a net-zero carbon economy in particular, is truly unprecedented. It will require a global industrial and technological revolution with wide-ranging implications for every aspect of society and the economy.

Many believe that only the engineers and the hard sciences can deliver the required solutions. Yet we submit that a focus on these areas and the relative neglect of the social sciences, humanities and arts is at the very core of why the transition to sustainability has been slow and shaky and, most importantly, may eventually fail.

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Put simply, without the “right” policies, taxes and regulations in place, too much innovation and too much long-term investment will go into continuing down the path of unsustainability.

Only the “social sciences, humanities and the arts for people and the economy” ([SHAPE](#)) subjects – and the social sciences in particular – can help us understand how we can get policymakers to adopt the policies, taxes and regulations that can shift the structure of our economies on to a path to sustainability.

Scientists are often puzzled why politicians do not pay heed to the clear and unambiguous scientific advice about the existential dangers of, for example, continuing to dump carbon into the atmosphere. Social scientists understand that politics is fraught with contestation as to “who gets what”, and unless issues of equity and fairness are addressed, we will get nowhere.

The *gilets jaunes* movement provides a case in point. France saw large-scale social unrest in reaction to fuel tax rises, which starkly demonstrated the need to carefully consider and mitigate the social consequences of environmental and climate policies to secure society-wide acceptance.



Shape subjects have a critical part to play in mapping a politically and economically feasible path to sustainability. In the UK, the Climate Assembly recently identified fairness as a top consideration for the path to net zero, recognising the need for a just transition that doesn't impact disproportionately the most vulnerable in society.

At a global scale, the challenge is to deliver a zero-carbon world together with climate justice for developing countries, which are most impacted by the effects of climate change yet have historically contributed least to the problem but, crucially, likewise are now the fastest-growing emitters. Without a better understanding of how international politics, much like domestic politics, is fraught with contestation about "who gets what", not much progress towards global sustainability will be made.

Beyond politics, a lot of our success in creating a sustainable world relies on individuals and their personal choices. In the West, our "take, make, waste" linear economy model is woven through society and ingrained in all aspects of everyday life and personal behaviours – from what and how we consume to the social perceptions linked to those.

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Although engineering and technical solutions are required to make consumption more sustainable and less wasteful, they will be effective only if they are embedded within how people behave across different social and organisational contexts, as well as their related norms, values and motivations to move away from unsustainable consumption in those contexts. Shape subjects help us understand ourselves, others and how human behaviour moulds the world around us.

Universities prepare the leaders of tomorrow, and students have been vocal advocates for urgent action on sustainability. The transition to sustainability requires new skills, upskilling for some and reskilling for others. This sustainability skills gap is a challenge but also an opportunity for further and higher education. And while the engineering skills gap is well documented, we have not fully grasped yet the scale of the challenge across other disciplines, including Shape.

Increasingly in the workplace, sustainability will be a shared responsibility across organisations, with everyone expected to have the knowledge and expertise to put it into practice in their role and their decisions, from economists, lawyers and accountants to architects, fashion designers and philosophers. Therefore, embedding sustainability in all areas of the Shape curriculum is critical to preparing our students for the workplace of tomorrow.

Because of our specialisation, we at the LSE probably employ more social scientists than any other university in the world. While taking pride in being the world's largest social sciences institution, we also recognise the duty that comes with it.

The transition to global environmental sustainability is probably the most difficult challenge humankind faces this century – let's shape the transition together.

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Note: This review gives the views of the authors, and not the position of the LSE Impact Blog, or of the London School of Economics.
