

Discussion entry 1/2025 by
the Finnish Expert Panel for Sustainable Development

Positive images of futures as sustainability transformation drivers

We construe sustainable future in the present. For the challenging task of envisioning sustainable future, images of futures provide us means to outline visions and pursue a just and desirable sustainability transformation. To facilitate societal discussion on visioning sustainable futures in Finland, the Finnish Expert Panel for Sustainable Development, in collaboration with Demos Helsinki, has created three outlines of positive and realistic images of the future. The outlines are based on a comprehensive data analysis conducted with a scoping review method. In the analysis, gaps in the existing images of futures were first recognised and three outlines of images of the future were then created to address the gaps. [The database consists of ca. 160 items and is publicly available to everyone](#) (the items include scientific articles, non-fiction and fiction books, policy reports and websites).

Why positive images of futures

Studies have shown that most people prefer a socially and ecologically sustainable future over an individualistic world of ever-tightening competition and overconsumption of natural resources¹. The future must align with planetary boundaries. To achieve this, we need to strengthen people's active agency and seek such images of futures that are experienced collectively positive^{2,3}.

Images of futures denote individuals' and communities' understanding of futures and their relationship to them. Studies can analyse and provide multiple alternative images of futures for common use⁴. Individuals' and communities' images of futures and actions influence organisational practices and societal structures⁵, while our perceptions of the future guide our behaviour and choices in the present^{6,7}.

Images of futures have an effect on what kind of futures people are able to imagine, what motivates them in relation to them, what they aim for, and what kind of agency they are willing to take in pursuing the future^{3,4,6}. The economy, politics and innovation activities also require images of futures for justifying the decisions they make (e.g. assumptions about market growth, price developments or the productivity benefits brought by innovations)⁸.

Typically, images of futures are justified by reflecting historical developments against futures. This approach partly overlooks the pending and uncertain nature of the future as well as the underlying assumptions related to societal goals and assumptions⁹. Such thinking reinforces the linear development and gradual change approach, even though sustainability requires a significant leap, a sustainability transformation. If there are not enough positive images of futures available in the public discussion, people will build their futures on history. This creates

a future that merely replicates forecasts on historical development, and values and solutions inherited from the past.

Positive images of futures and imagining them play an essential role in motivating decisions related to sustainability transformation and initiating societal discussions. Positive images of futures also have their significance in renewing political ideologies and supporting civic actions: they have enabled people to break free from their previous experiences and direct collective actions towards expectations of a better future¹⁰. Such process where images of futures have led to actions has driven many significant societal reforms in the past¹¹.

Gaps in the existing images of futures

In the comprehensive data analysis, **three key gaps** in the current images of futures used in societal discussion and policies were identified.

Current images of futures do not consider the changes needed in institutional or economic structures such as including the externalities of economics into the price of products. Although there exist multiple political initiatives and studies on reducing climate and nature impacts through market and price mechanisms, there are hardly any comprehensive images of futures that would address these initiatives and studies.

Current images of futures ignore the interdependencies between societal development and technical solutions as they build solely on known technologies (e.g. renewable energy, circular economy, sustainable urban solutions). Additionally, most images of futures used in politics test existing policy framework initiatives without attempting to ideate or identify new out-of-the-box openings. In such images of futures, the indirect and multiplier effects of the sustainability transformation or changes in institutions and cultural meanings are hardly recognised.

Current images of futures do not consider citizens as active actors but see them mainly as users of new technical or lifestyle solutions. There are fewer images of futures where citizens would be seen as creators, promoters or challengers of new operating models and technologies.

The three gaps are explicitly addressed in the positive images of futures outlines presented by the Finnish Expert Panel for Sustainable Development.

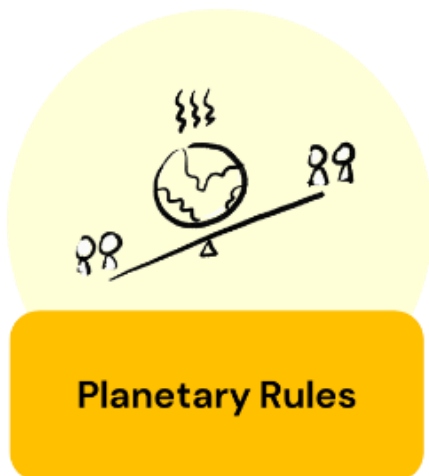
The three outlines of positive images of futures by the Finnish Expert Panel for Sustainable Development

Based on the comprehensive analysis of the source material, three outlines of parallel, complementary, positive and realistic images of futures for a sustainable future were created: **True-cost Economy**, **Planetary Rules** and **Sustainability Awareness Revolution**. The outlines address the gaps identified in the current images of futures and serve as a foundation for ideating and further developing the economic, political, societal, technical and cultural changes required for a just sustainability transformation.



The True-cost Economy considers the changes in the economic system occurring in the sustainability transformation. Here, new methods of the pricing of emissions, natural resources, and social harms and benefits change the global market, mobilise capital, accelerate innovations, create new jobs related to nature restoration and resource maintenance, ensure fair wages and eliminate the most harmful solutions from business and everyday choices.

Example: The product and service prices reflect the costs and harms caused by their production and use (e.g. impacts on biodiversity loss, climate change or the use of cheap labour). Thus, prices are informative; they help people to choose sustainable solutions. A total cost accounting method of including ecological and social harms and benefits into prices is in action.



The Planetary Rules examines changes in politics and decision-making in the sustainability transformation. Here, a planetary governance system, relying on science, planetary data and citizen panels, regulates overconsumption and restores nature more effectively than markets. Planetary governance is responsible for the principles of fair use of natural resources, the monitoring of artificial intelligence and weapon systems, and pandemic prevention. Other matters remain in the hands of national, regional and local bodies.

Example: Planetary rules have been defined in collaboration with different regions. The planetary Agreement describes the planetary boundaries-respecting rights and responsibilities of individuals and communities. The Planetary Agreement builds on the existing Declaration of Human Rights and human rights treaties. Local decision-making is concerned with the use of natural resources in accordance with the principles agreed upon in the Planetary Agreement.



The Sustainability Awareness Revolution examines changes that accelerate the sustainability transformation in civil society. Here, education and learning strengthen sustainability literacy, eco-social civilization and moderation in using resources. These serve as the key cornerstones for the worldviews of strong local communities and professional cultures. A change in values occurs between the current and next generations, whereby people redirect their interests, skills and resources in a way that supports the sustainability transformation.

Example: Sustainability awareness and collective expertise are reflected in the curricula of various educational institutions (e.g. primary, vocational and higher education, high schools, adult education centers), which include system, future, interaction and problem-solving skills, as well as training in ethical reflection and collective expertise. New sustainability-promoting professions are introduced to the labour market to enable and support the implementation of sustainability in various fields. Examples of such professions include solution teacher, interaction enabler, futures facilitator, supervisor of ethical reflections and greed challenger.

How the outlines of images of futures were created

The Finnish Expert Panel for Sustainable Development aimed to discover and map images of futures, scenarios and cultural narratives describing the world after the sustainability transformation, particularly from scientific publications, policy reports and fiction. The conducted study assumes that the sustainability transformation can be implemented with a mix of various technological, economic, cultural, social and political solutions. The study was carried out using the scoping review method that seeks to create a general understanding of complex phenomena based on literature. The analysed sources include ca. 160 items, divided into scientific publications, policy reports and fiction.

The database for the study was compiled from interviews, findings from the Google Scholar database, identified key sources and their reference lists, responses to LinkedIn posts and discussions with language model tools. Key search terms included “future society within planetary boundaries” and “society beyond sustainability transformation”. The search focused on sectors crucial to the sustainability transformation, namely food, housing, energy, mobility, cities and well-being. Additionally, images of futures describing sustainability transformation-related democracy, economic and inclusion solutions were sought. Particular emphasis was given for scenarios and visions that are based on reports from international scientific panels such as the IPCC and IPBES, as well as the European Commission's Joint Research Center.

Next steps

The outlines of images of futures presented in this document help us to ideate the key changes needed for the sustainability transformation. During the year 2025, the Finnish Expert Panel for Sustainable Development invites citizens and various societal actors to discuss the presented outlines and discover new ideas for building a positive, sustainable future.

[The database gathered for and used in the analysis.](#)

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Credits

The Finnish Expert Panel for Sustainable Development is an independent expert body that supports decision-making and societal debate related to the sustainability transformation in Finland. The Panel provides research-based systemic and cross-disciplinary understanding of the sustainability transformation and promotes the coordination of environmental, economic and social issues in it. www.kestavyyspaneeli.fi/en

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