

Call for Papers

Workshop on Social and Ecological Transformation: Identifying and Addressing Inequality and Conflict

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In the face of interconnected crises, such as climate warming, biodiversity loss, resource depletion, public health risks, and social dislocation, urgent social and ecological transformations are needed to address unsustainable patterns of production, consumption, and governance (e.g. Brundtland, 1987; IPCC, 2025). Consequently, a socio-ecological transformation is essential to create resilient, equitable, and sustainable systems for both people and the planet (Brand, 2017, Görg et al., 2020). However, socio-ecological transformation is not only a technological challenge but also a social challenge that must account for inequalities and the risk of exacerbating them (Brand, 2017; Pichler et al., 2017; Schlosberg, 2009).

Social inequality and ecological destruction are structurally intertwined. While a small minority of affluent individuals account for most emissions, billions of people continue to face constraints in meeting their basic needs (Hansen & Bo Nielsen, 2023). This capitalist system generates multidimensional and intersectional inequalities at societal, global, and intergenerational levels, sustaining environmental harm, while sustainability initiatives often risk reproducing these injustices rather than addressing them (Carlile et al., 2025; Chancel, 2020). Distributional burdens (who pays, who benefits), recognitional gaps (whose knowledge and needs count), and procedural inequities (who decides, who participates) can create fault lines that polarise societies, entrench power asymmetries, and undermine democratic legitimacy (Fraser, 2009; Schlosberg, 2009, 2013).

At the societal level, these inequalities are rooted in everyday practices and social stratification, including classed and culturally valorised forms of consumption and distinction (Bourdieu, 2018; Hansen & Bo Nielsen, 2023; Veblen, 1973). Processes of socio-ecological transformation are conflictual. The dominant eco-habitus of privileged groups can operate as a normative benchmark of sustainable conduct, while socially disadvantaged groups are often positioned as eco-powerless, lacking the material, temporal, and symbolic means to align with these norms (Kennedy & Givens, 2019). Perceptions of sustainable behaviours may generate social tensions by fostering feelings of ethical superiority, judgement and alienation among those unable or unwilling to comply. For groups already burdened by everyday social and economic pressures, sustainability narratives can act as social triggers, prompting rejection in response to the unequal shifting of responsibility to disadvantaged groups, despite the disproportionate environmental impact of high-income groups and corporations (Mau et al., 2023).

Affluent consumption patterns are sustained by the underpayment of workers and ecological exploitation in the Global South, with production shifting environmental burdens and social costs to low-income countries via extractive supply chains, unequal trade, and the offshoring of high-risk, high-pollution stages (Brand & Wissen, 2021).

Intergenerationally, resource- and waste-intensive systems lock in emissions, biodiversity loss, and degradation of soil, water, and air, narrowing ecological space and quality, as well as the resources available to future generations (Brundtland, 1987; Görg et al., 2020).

Interspecies inequality manifests in the disproportionate allocation of land, water, and biomass by humans, constraining the habitats, life chances, and ecological niches of non-human animals, and in their exploitation. Non-human animals are systematically subordinated and deprived of autonomy, creating a structural form of inequality that parallels social and ecological injustices among humans (Weis, 2013).

These considerations of multidimensional inequalities raise questions about what sustainable futures mean across sectors, societies, and species; how resilient, affordable, and just options can be designed; and how the social sciences can diagnose conflicts, the risks of reinforcement of inequalities, identify leverage points, and co-develop strategies for equitable socio-ecological transformation. This call invites contributions that investigate the relationships among social groups, regional and intergenerational, as well as interspecies inequalities in social-ecological transformations (where social inequalities can both be drivers and consequences of social-ecological transitions) and/or propose pathways for social-ecological transformations that mitigate the risks of social inequality.

We welcome papers presenting theoretical and empirical (quantitative, qualitative, mixed-methods) work in the social sciences. Presentations may address, but are not limited to, the following topics connected to inequalities and/or social ecological transformations:

- Food and nutrition
- Meat and/or milk consumption and/or production
- Gender, LGBTQ+
- Social class, socio-economic groups
- Social justice
- Interspecies relations and justice
- Trigger points, reactance, and societal conflicts
- Moral superiority, eco-habitus
- Barriers and enablers for consumption reduction
- Participatory, inter- and transdisciplinary strategy
- Activism and social movements
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Please submit abstracts for presentations (max. 350 words) by the **30th of April 2026** to:
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Organisation by Thea Wiesli, Rike Stotten, and Wilfred Uunk, Research group Social and Ecological Transformations: <https://www.uibk.ac.at/de/soziologie/forschung/social-and-ecological-transformations/>

The workshop will be on-site. No registration fees required. Accommodation costs might be eligible for reimbursement.

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