



STRATEGIES FOR  
**SUCCESSFUL COMMUNICATION**  
OF SUSTAINABILITY IN EUROPE

# GUIDELINE SUSTAINABILITY COMMUNICATION

*Responsible authors:*

Inka Thunecke, Tina Bär



ViSdP: Inka Thunecke  
Heinrich-Boell-Stiftung Brandenburg  
Charlottenstr. 30, 14467 Potsdam, GERMANY  
[www.boell-brandenburg.de](http://www.boell-brandenburg.de),  
[www.sustainable-regions.net](http://www.sustainable-regions.net)

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Association of Estonian Cities ELL,  
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## **Guideline for communication on sustainability**

Sustainability strategies have been passed on all levels in Europe. In order to implement strategies for sustainability not only all administrative levels are needed but also citizens and entrepreneurs. To be successful, a firm rooting in citizenship is very important. Lack of good social cohesion and the difference in welfare in the EU member states is a special challenge.

In view of these conditions, strategies for sustainability are confronted with indifference or even rejection by the societies, especially in the economically weaker member states. In order to implement sustainability strategies it is of paramount importance that citizens on all levels participate, from European, national to local. To this end, communication strategies are indispensable. It is important to communicate that the implementation of sustainability strategies are first and above all for them. The citizens are the main actors who will benefit from a sustainable development. If the stress is upon citizen's welfare, even citizens in economic weaker situations can more easily be motivated to volunteer.

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The guideline/manual is directed to active volunteers and employees in NGO's, communal administrations, enterprises, research institutes and interested citizens to whom the dissemination of the subject sustainability is dear to their heart. With its transnational approach, the guideline shall give an insight into problems and give ideas for solutions for communicating sustainability in CEE countries as well as orientation points for practical and political local work. Following a brief introduction to the term communication on sustainability and what it implies, the starting points in the CEE countries are highlighted to then elaborate on building blocks for successfully communicating sustainability in Europe.

## 1. What is communication on sustainability?

What does the term communication on sustainability imply? What do we understand by sustainability? What by communication?

The final report of the “World Commission Environment and Development“- better known as „Brundtland report“ – which marks the beginning of the global debate on sustainability, defined sustainable development as „development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs“ (Brundtland 1987). The satisfaction of existing needs is in the foreground and at the same time the becoming conscious of certain environmentally set limits that may confront this satisfaction of needs (ibid). Despite this existing definition, different understandings of the terms arise due to differing linguistic and cultural characteristics in different countries, which at times are very far from the definition set by the Brundtland Commission. This discrepancy will be highlighted in more detail at a later point in this guideline.

Communication means an exchange of information between two or more people. We have to differentiate between interpersonal communication that takes place directly or indirectly between people, mass communication, which is consumed by many readers or viewers, as well as group communication within certain organised social groups, associations or parties (Schubert/Klein 1997). The aim of communication is understanding. Common solutions for problems can be seen as a function of communication.

Communication on sustainability therefore means an understanding of the concept and content of sustainable development and the exchange of related information in order to reach sustainable development. Within this framework, communication is a mutual process of sending and receiving. Not only does information have to be made accessible, but it also has to reach the addressees, i.e. the info has to be received by them. This means that communication contents have to be tailored to the particular needs of the desired target group.

The German sociologist Niklas Luhmann has articulated the need for communication on sustainability very accurately: „Fish may die or human beings, swimming in lakes and rivers may cause illnesses, no more oil may come from the pumps, and the average temperatures may rise or fall, as long as this is not communicated it does not have any effect on society.“ (Luhmann 1990)

## 2. Starting point/ current situation of communication on sustainability

What then is the starting point for communicating sustainability in Central East Europe. What is understood by sustainability? What sustainability strategies are in place? What approaches to communication on sustainability are already there?

### *a. Problem of the definition of the term*

A great obstacle for the development and implementation of sustainability strategies is in many countries the missing or wrong understanding of the term. In many places adequate translations of the concepts of sustainable development are lacking. E.g. in Poland sustainable development was translated as “ecologic development” for a long time to then be replaced by “balanced development”. In other countries, there is a juggling with descriptions, such as “continuous development”, “just or future-oriented development”. And even if an adequate translation is found, the understanding of politics and society has often little to nothing to do with what the Brundtland Commission had in mind. Integration of dimensions of environmentally just, social and economic development to a holistic development concept is pushed a back. Often only certain aspects are taken into account. On one hand, opposers to the model of sustainable development describe sustainability as environmental protection and play it out against economic development, sustainability as luxury which is not affordable in difficult times of economic and societal transformation as other problems are more pressing.

On the other hand, the term is instrumentalised and misused as a synonym for economic development and is thereby reduced to the economic dimension and therefore often turned into its opposite. On one hand the term sustainability is seen as too loaded and too little popularisable. On the other hand it is criticised to be too undetermined and general and too unclear. Until now it has been neglected to make clear to a broad public that it does not only concern environmental protection or nature preservation. This rethinking, away from the measure of exclusive conserving nature protection towards an integrated thinking and equal consideration of ecological, economic, social and cultural aspects of development is indispensable. The necessity for such a basic cultural change for a sustainable development however has been largely omitted in public discussions. (Wehrspaun/Wehrspaun 2005). Politicians fear to make themselves unpopular with this subject, scientists are reluctant to leave their traditional disciplines and publicists fear asking too much of their audience and by this contribute to decreasing market shares.

### *b. Strategies of Sustainability in CEE*

There are great differences in the development, relevance and state of the art of implementation of sustainability strategies in the different countries, even though certain problems are the same or similar in many places. E.g. in many of the participating countries there is a sustainability strategy in place due to the expectation of the European and international public without having effects on the practical work locally. Often, there is a sustainability strategy, yet only on paper. There are still difficulties in many places to communicate the necessity for sustainable development and the necessity of practical implementation of a sustainability strategy to decision-makers and the public.

Here, we want to give a summarizing overview of the situation in the participating countries:

In Lithuania the National Sustainable Development Strategy is in place in Lithuania since 2003, that does contain a long-term orientation and there are a pool of activities developed by experts. What is missing is a public participation, civil and NGO involvement during all processes of the strategy development and revision, also empowerment of the strategy is not sufficient and implementation is only under responsibility of the governmental agencies.

In Poland, an all encompassing sustainability strategy is missing, there are only sectoral approaches which most likely has to do with the low interest in the subject of sustainability not only in society in general but also within the political elites.

In Estonia there is a national long-term (until 2030) sustainable development strategy in place. Strategy Sustainable Estonia 21 was passed by the Estonian Parliament (Riigikogu) in September 2005. <sup>1</sup>Ten years before elaboration of national long-term strategy a framework law – The Act on Sustainable Development was passed by Estonian Parliament. Four Estonian cities have elaborated and approved municipal Local Agenda 21 strategic plans. Elaboration of all these documents has been accompanied by quite broad communication and created a lot of public discussions over the content of documents and meaning of sustainability. However, monitoring of the implementation of these strategies has been weak and regular reporting practically missing. National sustainable development report was compiled to Johannesburg conference in 2002.

In Germany, the sustainability strategy which has been in place since 2002 is very institutionalised due to the revisions required every two years, yet the aims are not ambitious enough. In the Czech Republic the Strategy for Sustainable Development (SSD) was adopted by the Czech government in 2004. Each year there is an annual review provided by the Government Council for Sustainable Development (GCSD) and also annual

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<sup>1</sup> The general development principle to be followed according to strategy is: "To integrate the requirement to be successful in global competition with a sustainable development model and preservation of the traditional values of Estonia". 4 long-term goals have been set: viability of the Estonian culture area, welfare growths of society and its member, social cohesion of the society and ecologically balanced development.

sustainability forums for sustainable development are taking place here. In January 2007, the Council started its work on revision of the Strategy. In May 2007, the first draft will be considered and presented for a broad public discussion at the Forum for Sustainable Development. In November 2007, the final draft of the renewed Strategy is to be submitted to the Government for adoption. For the first time there have been organised 14 Regional round tables under the auspices of GCSD in the process of updating that gathered information concerning SSD from different stakeholders from all of the 14 Czech regions. These information were implemented through a new information tool - HCCZ DataPlan – which is being used also for the whole public review process.

The sustainability strategy in place in Slovenia is being implemented in parts via local and regional development plans, yet the population and the officials have only a very weak understanding of the term sustainability. In Romania the first strategic approach is the document “Romania 2020” which was initiated by actors on national, regional and local levels and from NGOs, yet its implementation is strongly dependent on local politicians who often demonstrate little or no interest in the subject. In Bulgaria there is a sustainability strategy in place and the government feels morally and politically responsible for sustainability. The conversion into ruling law however is unsatisfactory and a functioning report system is missing.

In Hungary a sustainability strategy was still in work at the time of this project.

### *c. State of the art of communication on sustainability*

The subject of communicating sustainability still plays a minor role in many countries in Central and East Europe. The consciousness on the necessity of sustainable development is anchored only in a very small percentage of the population. The following summarized state of the art of communication on sustainability in Central East Europe depicts the perception of the project partners on the subject.

Who are the actors that deal with sustainability? In many countries in Central Eastern Europe it is mainly NGOs and communal organisations that deal with the subject of sustainability. In addition to this, there are some governmental organisations and ministries who in reports to the own government or the European Union have to make a statement on aspects of sustainability in certain activities. Some researchers are dealing with the subject, as well as some teachers, who elaborate on the subject in the frame of the school curricula. Increasingly, institutions who implement UNDP or EU programs are dealing with the field of sustainability. In addition, there is an increasing involvement of (especially international) enterprises in setting up sustainability reports on entrepreneurial activities related to the subject, yet often their composition is externalised.

Sustainability is mainly discussed within NGOs or in events and seminars that are organised by them. In some countries, schools consider the subject (e.g. Lithuania, Latvia). If governmental institutions do consider sustainability, then mostly in form of reports for higher posts or project evaluators. The offer of information through public institutions however is unsatisfactory in many places. Analyses concerning contents on the subject of sustainability are mainly provided by some pioneer researchers or NGOs. Often, sustainability discussions are extremely theory loaded and not very practice oriented.

On the other hand the subject is only dealt with in certain sectors (e.g. recycling/ waste separation) in some countries sustainability in itself is not discussed at all (e.g. Poland), if at all, ecological projects are discussed and these often only on a local level.

Even though public consciousness for sustainability is slowly increasing, it is generally still not perceivable. In some countries, the perception is more positive (e.g. Estonia) in others more problematic. Partly even the capacity to perceive ecologic issues is very weak and the understanding of responsibility is very low. Where the term is present in public consciousness there is often the problem that by sustainable development mere economic development is understood.

### **3. Elements of communication on sustainability**

In the following, elements of communication on sustainability that seem important to the project partners are elaborated and practical approaches for action are given.

#### *a. Contents of communication on sustainability*

Due to the lacking understanding of the term, the obvious problem for communicating sustainability arises, that it is not always clear, what in fact should be communicated. In this framework it can sometimes be useful to distance oneself from the term itself and to only discuss certain contents that lie behind the concept of sustainability. In case of existing resentments in the public, political decision-makers and other target groups or addressees the conscious omission of the term can sometimes be conducive to convince these people with contents and to reach them with good arguments without facing the anti-sustainability-barrier. At the same time one has to be wary of pushing the concept with its holistic approach in the background and of blurring the term too much. This difficult balancing is a great challenge for all sustainability communicators. In addition, certain subjects that are connected to it can be communicated without reference to the term sustainability, yet not the holistic concept.

In particular, the dissemination of the sustainability concept itself, as model, as development goal and as crosscutting principle in society is of great importance. Only if the concept is understood, can it be considered and implemented in different life situations and decisions.

Besides these factors the strengthening of understanding singular problems that arise in the course of a sustainable development naturally play an important role. In this context, subjects such as climate, demographic change, power and water consumption, private consumption, socially responsible activities, regional planning and development, waste, and also health related problems and the classic protection of natural living spheres can be highlighted. In communicating individual problems it can happen very easily that existing problems are viewed only one-dimensionally and do not do justice to their complexity.

E.g. necessary reductions of hothouse gases are often and willingly coupled to demands for more nuclear power and the strengthening of bio power with the usage of genetically modified species that are much higher in crops, without being very sustainable. Only when the economic, social and ecologic dimension are taken into account in an inter- and intragenerative equity, such seeming strategies for solutions dissolve into nothing.

*b. Target groups/actors*

Who are the actors that can communicate sustainability and who are the target groups or addressees? NGOs clearly belong to the communicators, such as environmental and nature preserve associations that lobby on local, regional and national levels and implement concrete projects and actions. There are public and private education institutions such as schools, environmental centres, liberal/free education centres that implement school and extracurricular sustainability education projects. Additional actors are environmental consultants that consult on certain subjects (building/construction, consumer consultation etc.) and are organised on a communal level or also free, as well as research institutions that set up expertises on sustainability subjects. Furthermore financing institutions should be involved, which fund small and medium size enterprises, and can include next to their funding a compulsory training about sustainable development in the area of the S&M size enterprises.

An important role is taken by the actors of the Local Agenda 21 who work towards anchoring sustainability principles on communal level. In addition, political decision-makers and economic enterprises should be won as multipliers. Until now however, these groups rather form a part of the targeted group of communication on sustainability than initiating communication themselves.

Communication on sustainability can only be successful if it considers the differing cultural backgrounds, life styles and communication habits of different population groups. Senior citizens are to be approached differently than young people, conservative people different than alternatives, rich ones different than poor ones, etc. Therefore it seems useful to approach different target groups differently. Young people e.g. are easily reached through new media, such as the internet or through practical participation opportunities that give them a sense that something is happening in their city or in their town and that they can contribute to the change. Senior citizens are better reached through traditional media and other needs. E.g. advice categories in magazines can be a possible access point to older people.

People that are strongly tied to family and career/jobs can be reached through showing them sustainable action options that are closely related to their usual habits. People in dire economic situations are less approachable for changes in their consumption behaviour if it implies direct additional costs. In all cases sustainable action options have to be applicable to everyday situations. Linked to this a special challenge is to integrate people in economic weaker situation in sustainable development and to communicate that sustainability can be implemented in everyday life even without major material resources.

To distribute the existing resources of communicators adequately it seems useful not to have the aim to approach all people in the same way. It seems more effective to approach different target groups differently and to develop according communication strategies.

### *c. Methods*

How can sustainability be communicated effectively and successfully? This question can not be answered off the bat. However, a list of assessed methods used in connection with activities in this field by the partner organisations should serve as orientation.

The Lithuanian Environmental Centre for Administration and Technology (ECAT) e.g. uses projects and campaigns to mainstream sustainable development organising seminars and best-practice sharing, publications and field studies, since 1998 it has involved around thirty percent of local authorities that has now included sustainable development principles in their development plans. Friends of the Earth Latvia (Zemes Draugi) acts via different action fields: 1. educational work via eco-schools and environmental projects 2. dissemination of information through environmental media, such as the monthly magazine of the association and events 3. lobbying in connection with national sustainability reports, approaching certain ministries and working in the national council for sustainable development, as well as 4. the institutionalisation of sustainability, where e.g. it is tried to initiate a civil society forum for sustainable development for the third year in a row. The Polish Centre for Environment and Development in its work tries to demonstrate the (materialistic) advantages that are connected to sustainability and that ecology and economic development are not necessarily mutually exclusive.

The Association of Estonian Cities as a national local government association, which membership comprises 70% of total population of Estonia, participates actively in providing conditions for balanced long-term development of public sector according to principles of sustainable development. Internal and international information exchange, targeted communication, participation in international co-operation bodies (CEMR, CLRAE, EU Committee of the Regions) creates a base for promotion of innovative ideas and practical tools for acting not only on association level but also on local level. Estonian cities and municipalities are active in sharing their experiences, learning from good practices of the municipalities of other countries and benefiting of EU structural funds, Cohesion Fund and European Regional Development Fund, available for Estonia. Association of Estonian Cities has promoted sustainability issues by target-oriented project work, networking activities, special publications and guidelines, electronic newsletters, organising meetings and round-tables, study tours to neighbour countries. Thematic co-operation in the frames of Nordic-

Baltic Aalborg Commitments Network has created a lot of synergy and by now 3 Estonian big cities (capital city Tallinn, Tartu and Narva) and 2 municipalities, Häädemeeste and Märjamaa, have signed the Aalborg Commitments, which main objective is to raise awareness and highlight the need for local governments across Europe to act in an integrated way to meet the growing challenges of sustainability.

The Public Environmental Centre for Sustainable Development (PECSD) in Bulgaria regularly writes a sustainability report for the local administrations in the communes, organizes different educational campaigns for young people and implements demonstration projects that depict different action options or that include people directly. The Romanian FocusEcoCentre contributes to communication on sustainability via flyers and printed articles, interviews and via direct contact with people in practical projects. Furthermore they are supporting local authorities, who can set an example by implementing best practices in their own communities. People are more skeptical toward the NGOs, might not have real faith in the authorities, but still consider their activities as an example to follow.

The Healthy Cities of the Czech Republic (HCCZ) try to reach media directly to report on sustainability, health and quality of life subjects, disseminate information on sustainability through their cities network and expert partners, foster a data base for best-practice projects and send out a regular newsletter on current subjects. The new dimension of communication of sustainability represents HCCZ Gate of Quality. It is a long term programme for cooperation connecting local and regional actions with national policies and strategies. One of its most important part is so cold Topic of the Year. That means that each year in Czech Healthy Cities and regions is dedicated to one main theme and all HCCZ members and other Czech cities may join this idea and realise concrete activities and projects on different levels of demandingness. The motto of this vision is “communication sustainability through its implementation”. The cities and regions are encouraged to start a real action, projects or to implement concrete measures which support sustainability, health and quality of life.

The methods for communicating sustainability can be very different. Two important aspects are the use of media and the activation of civil society potential, which will be dealt with in more detail in the following section of this guideline.

#### **4. The role of the media in communicating sustainability**

Until now, in Central East Europe the media coverage of sustainability subjects is very limited. Frequently the subject is only touched in reports on environmental issues or connected to larger events, such as eco fairs or scandals and civil protests. The lacking media representation is closely connected to the unsatisfactory understanding of sustainability of many journalists. If at all, then sustainability is not a subject in itself but rather related to sustainability subjects such as recycling, organic food, power saving houses and similar subjects. A trend can be seen that reporting has increased since EU accession of the CEE countries, the media coverage is nonetheless unsatisfactory.

Many people can be reached via media usage. Using mass media such as daily press, TV and radio to communicate sustainability can however also bear many problems. E.g. in radio and TV the entertainment factor/function is increasingly in the foreground, the informational function is pushed into the background. This means that the subject of sustainability has to also do justice to the format of brief, interesting and entertaining programs. For TV an additional difficulty stems from the visual preparation of the subject. Print media such as daily press and magazines allow on the other hand to demonstrate detailed argumentations and can do justice to the complexity of the subject of sustainability a lot better. However also here, it is not possible to post subjects arbitrarily and at each given time, but they have to rather be adjusted to the interests and needs of the readers.

Here the topicality of the subject plays an important role. In order to be present with a topic related to sustainability in media, there has to be a current point of reference, a concrete event, demonstration, vernissage etc.

Often editors fear that too much is asked of the readers and viewers with the complexity of the sustainability subject and that they will lose clients. Research in the field of mainstream TV have on the other hand shown that viewers do not change the program more frequently than normally when sustainability reports come on and that therefore much more sustainability programs could be shown. There is manifold potential for relating to sustainability in the media, be it cooking programs, life style magazines, knowledge shows or technical advice. It is important to determine these potentials and to deliver concrete points of reference to the journalists to post sustainability subjects in adequate spaces.

The internet as modern mass medium opens diverse communication possibilities. It enables dissemination of information independent of the moods of editors and program directors. Thematic forums enable an uncomplicated exchange of information and opinions and since many journalists use the internet as information resource, targeted information on sustainability can be made available.

Estimating the role of the media is not as easy as it seems. On one hand media experts say one should not overestimate mass media as they only represent a very small percentage of communication that can be used well in order to e.g. obtain attention of politicians but not so much to “convert” a broad audience which would be reached easier through concrete actions. On the other hand there are various good reasons to estimate the role of the media in CEE very high as many reform impulses were given by journalists in these countries as well as towards democratisation and with respect to public perception of environmental issues.

In any case it is important to highlight that the use of mass media for a successful communication on sustainability in Europe requires a mutual learning process. On the one hand, journalists have to be increasingly sensitized for the subject. On the other hand NGOs have to learn to understand the logic of the media and to make use of them for their purposes.

## **5. The role of participation in communicating sustainability**

The current situation in the countries in Central East Europe shows that civil society's participation is very weak. Most of the time, people only participate when they are affected directly and acutely. Most of the time the activity is temporarily very limited. Engagement takes place, if at all, on communal level. In some countries even the Local Agenda 21 process is very weak and formal with the exception of only a few small pilot regions (e.g. in Latvia). Participation models are still in their beginning in most places and especially for governmental activities participation processes are not very far developed.

Sustainable development is a social process of learning, communication and design of society that can only function if many actors are involved who contribute with their thoughts and ideas. Already at the environmental summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, local engagement in the sense of Local Agenda 21 was identified as being the most important success factor for a sustainable development of our societies which we ought to develop and strengthen. A strong and engaged civil society is both motor of sustainable development from the basis of societies and carrier of the implementation of global and national sustainability strategies.

On these premises, sustainable development can only be successful if a strong civil society with voluntary engaged actors is participating. In the frame of voluntary engagement,

different forms are possible: from voluntary work in an organisation to voluntary participation in certain projects or activities to participating in political decision-making processes.

It is necessary that politics frame a transparent participation process for engagement and participation in political decision-making processes, e.g. also in the frame of Local Agenda 21 or other communal areas. Often, participation sees itself confronted with the problem of superficial tokenism in which the ideas and concepts of engaged citizens are heard yet do not find any reflection in political decision-making processes. If the participation of citizens is to be strengthened there has to be a real form of participating in decision-making. Here the problem of course arises that the scope and depth of participation is highly dependent on the willingness of political decision-makers to allow it and to thereby agree to give away a part of their own competencies. Without participation in the sense of partaking in decision-making processes and only for a kind of tokenism it is rather difficult to motivate many people to engage voluntarily.

## **6. Challenges for a successful communication on sustainability in Europe**

A number of obstacles can be identified that are in the way of successful communication on sustainability that have to be overcome in the next years. One problem is still the long range of the sustainability concept and the various interpretations thereof. Often, clear national definitions and equivalents and clear priorities are missing. As a consequence, the term sustainability has been misused frequently and redefined for economic means so that economic interests dominate. The sustainability policies are too often declarations only and empty of content. In addition, the difficult economic situation of many people is still a great barrier as existential problems are often in the foreground and individual resources to engage are missing. An understanding of the importance of sustainable development is lacking and the debate on sustainability is thereby degraded to a luxury debate.

In many countries a communal consciousness is still missing and a sense of responsibility for the consumption of public goods and resources. A further problem is the lacking resources on national levels for the organisation of activities, as e.g. for education on sustainability no own resources are available and claim of funds from environmental programs is not possible.

The activities concerning communication on sustainability that stem from EU level are in many cases a useful help for local work. E.g. the European sustainability strategy is an important motor even if sometimes the only incentive for activities on local levels. The financial support for concrete projects is also viewed as very positive even though some countries have experiences that EU funds are used in certain regions without really

contributing much. In this view the strict regulation of project funding is viewed as being helpful in competition with only seemingly active NGOs.

The most urgent tasks to establish a real communication on sustainability are the promotion of integrative thinking to develop a culture of sustainability, a transfer of knowledge for sustainable life styles with the help of opening up concrete practical sustainability oriented action possibilities as well as a real activation of civil society potentials.

Of the three „magic“ sustainability instruments- enhancing the effectiveness of existing technologies, consistency in new development of technologies and sufficiency on an individual level- the last is not enough considered, technology related solutions are too much in the foreground. It is necessary to develop a different understanding of welfare, moving away from GDP as central indicator for welfare towards sustainable welfare. The role of the individuals whose private consumption behaviour makes out for a large percentage of the existing ecological and social problems is not being discussed enough. In this context the question arises whether life style change can possibly be anchored politically and socially.

Strategic partners for communication on sustainability have to be found. Cooperative acting is necessary, the continuance of pointing fingers between the different actors is not very goal oriented. In using mass media as medium for communication on sustainability a mutual learning process between journalists and promoters of sustainability has to be established and in place. It is important that for the different target groups of communication on sustainability differing communication strategies are developed. Real participation possibilities have to be created that are oriented to individual needs and opportunities of different population groups. The long-term objective of a successful communication on sustainability should be to establish a kind of sustainability-mainstreaming, in order to include the aspect of sustainability in all political, economic and individual decisions.

Possibly the current discussion on climate is a good point of reference to find access to more people that have traditionally not thought about the subject sustainability. This, because not only the political actors are increasingly sensitized, but for many people the personal consternation of the subject of climate change is obvious.