

# Policy Statement on Environmental Sustainability



Swedish Organization  
for Global Health

Author: Mathilda Rudén

Editor: Christina Boger

Date of creation: April 20, 2020

Last update: September 5, 2021

## 1 Introduction

For the first time in the 200,000 years humanity has been on earth, we find ourselves in a place where we have achieved many great improvements while simultaneously having a detrimental impact on the earth's system. Especially since 1950, we have seen life expectancy increasing, the mortality rate of children under 5 decreasing significantly, and more people jumping over the poverty line- with obvious variations between countries<sup>1</sup>. However, the Great Acceleration<sup>2</sup>, which is defined as the huge increment of human activities in the last 70 years, and the way we have built our economy<sup>3</sup> has pushed the earth into a new geological era, the Anthropocene, where human activities are changing the earth's system. Humanity has made many steps forward in public health, education, human rights, and reduction of inequalities during this period<sup>4,5</sup>. The problem is that leaving the earth's system out of the equation of progress has created an imbalance in those ecological and biophysical systems that humanity's survival and ability to thrive depend on<sup>6,7</sup>. Climate change, biodiversity loss, nitrogen, and phosphorus flows are just a few of the consequences we are facing, and because of which we have already passed the dangerous zone, as explained by the planetary boundaries framework<sup>8</sup>. These earth imbalances are already having a concrete adverse effect on human health around the world, following an unequal distribution, where the minor contributors in creating those imbalances now bear the highest burden<sup>9</sup>. The highly important debate around the concept of environmental justice addresses this imbalance.

### 1.1 Environmental Justice

Environmental sustainability is strongly connected with SOGH's policy on Decolonizing minds, in the question of environmental justice. As mentioned above, those countries who were – in the name of

capitalism – on the forefront of industrialization, are not the ones suffering most under the consequences of this development. Instead, it is the poorest countries and population groups that are hit hardest by extreme weather events, deforestation, soil degradation, and so forth. This is where the concept of environmental justice comes in. At SOGH we adopt the understanding of environmental justice as an equal access to a healthy environment for everyone. This includes equal access to resources across space and time but also equal responsibility for protecting and restoring our natural habitats. However, the long and unfinished history of colonization complicates this formula. Environmental justice must therefore be closely related to decolonization. This means that environmental justice cannot be attained without social justice.

What does this mean for our work? We have to constantly reflect on our position and impact on the environment. For our projects, specifically, we must always include the local population and the target population in all of the processes. Furthermore, we must keep updated on the discussions around these issues and reflect on how we can limit or improve our impact. On a larger scale environmental justice means that the more affluent countries should employ their advantage to help weaker states to mitigate the consequences of climate change. Importantly, a joint effort must not mean that the dominant global powers make the decisions. Instead we need a conversation that involves everybody. Moreover, this conversation should be held across generations as well: we neither want to inherit nor bequeath an inhabitable planet. As stated by a Lancet Countdown Report, published in November 2019:

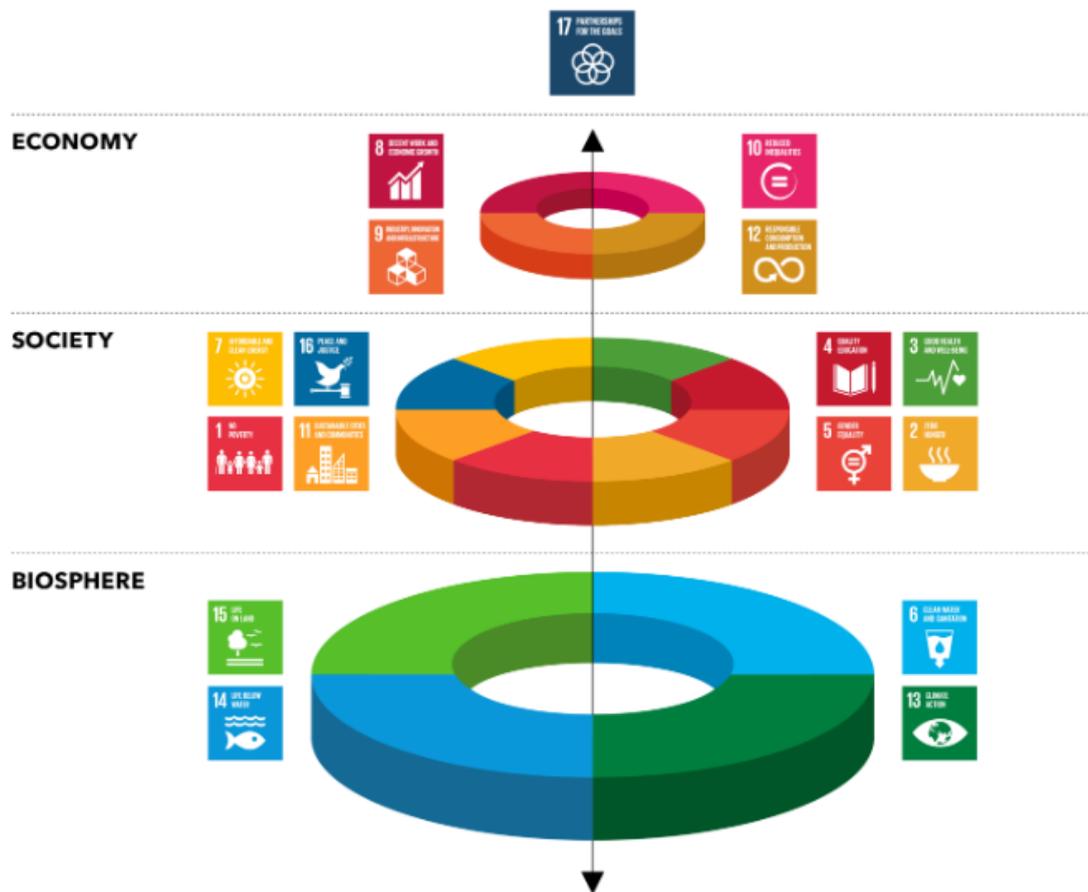
*“The life of every child born today will be profoundly affected by climate change, with populations around the world increasingly facing extremes of weather, food and water insecurity, changing patterns of infectious disease, and a less certain future. Without accelerated intervention, this new era will come to define the health of people at every stage of their lives”.*<sup>10</sup>

Many health and environmental scientists, as well as economists, are telling us we now have a narrow window of opportunity to avoid detrimental consequences for humanity. Below we specify some of the approaches that address ways in which this opportunity can be put to use.

## **2.1 The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)**

The Sustainable Development Goals are providing a framework (Graph 1) to make the shifts needed, both from an individual perspective and, most importantly, a societal one<sup>11,12</sup>. Despite the above mentioned achievements in regard to human rights and improved global and public health in general, there remain many issues that need to be addressed and there is much room left for improvement. The SDGs acknowledge the important role of health and mentions it concretely in goal 3 (good health and

well-being). However, health is strongly connected to most of the other goals as well. For instance, health and wellbeing is promoted by ending poverty (goal 1) and hunger (goal 2), by promoting quality education (goal 4), pressing for gender equality (goal 5), making clean water and sanitation accessible to all (goal 6), or by reducing inequalities (goal 10), to name just a few.<sup>13</sup>



**Graph 1.** Illustrating the 17 Sustainable Development Goals from a perspective of the biosphere as a precondition for social justice, economic development and sustainability; by Johan Rockström and Pavan Sukhdev, Stockholm Resilience Centre, Stockholm University.

## 2.2 Doughnut Economics

The Doughnut Economics were first brought forward by Kate Raworth in 2012. Raworth took the idea of the already established “ecological ceiling” as the outer circle of a doughnut and combined it with an inner circle, which describes the “social foundation”.<sup>14</sup> The ecological ceiling represents the limit to which humanity can use resources and produce emissions, etc. before causing irreparable damage to our planet. In other words, underneath this limit we can “ensure that humanity does not collectively

overshoot the planetary boundaries that protect Earth's life-supporting systems.” However, for Kate Raworth this idea of sustainability seemed incomplete, which is why she added a second, lower boundary to the model. This inner circle is meant to ensure that as many people (ideally everyone) can profit and thrive from the earth’s resources. Hence, the goal would be to achieve the perfect balance between shortfall and overshoot. Even though this concept is borrowed from economics, it plays an essential role in global health as well, and thereby for SOGH. For truly sustainable development we have to remain in between these boundaries. In our work we strive to find the balance between the caution of being as environmentally sustainable as possible, while remaining committed to our aim to improve health perspectives and opportunities for all members of the communities we engage in.

## 2.3 Planetary Health

In recent years the concept of planetary health has increasingly been adapted in global and local strategies within the disciplinary field of health. The message is as simple as it is urgent: “Without a healthy biosphere, there is no thriving human future.”<sup>15</sup> With climate change under way, which to a large extent is caused by human destruction, we see more and more adverse health effects in human beings across the world. Some examples are respiratory illnesses from air pollution, allergic reactions or chronic diseases due to toxins in the environment. But what exactly is meant by the term planetary health? Since its foundation in 2014, SOGH has primarily focused on the human aspect of health. However, it has become clear that human health cannot exist without considering the health of our planet. SOGH has, therefore, come to the conclusion that the only way to discuss health is in terms of planetary health. Planetary health comes in several definitions, but all incorporate the concept of sustainability. At SOGH we adopt the definition given by the Rockefeller Foundation-Lancet Commission in 2015:

*“the achievement of the highest attainable standard of health, wellbeing, and equity worldwide through judicious attention to the human systems—political, economic, and social—that shape the future of humanity and the Earth’s natural systems that define the safe environmental limits within which humanity can flourish. Put simply, planetary health is the health of human civilisation and the state of the natural systems on which it depends.”*<sup>16</sup>

In line with this definition SOGH shall continue to carry out its mission to strive for improving the quality and equitable accessibility of health care and health promotion. In this endeavor SOGH cooperates with local and international partners and strives to act within the planetary health frame, guided by SDGs framework.

### **3 Swedish Organization for Global Health's position**

Sustainability is the theme of our time and one of the core values at the Swedish Organization for Global Health (SOGH). SOGH, a Swedish non-profit and non-governmental organization composed of passionate students and young professionals, has the aim of promoting sustainable global health through evidence-based actions. The concept of *health* is broad and, most importantly, must include the health of the ecosystem and environment around us, as humans and the environment constantly influence each other. The following chapter will present a number of concrete steps SOGH is taking to reduce its ecological footprint and contribute to better planetary health.

#### **3.1 SOGH's steps towards Environmental Sustainability**

Our organization, meaning all our members when doing activities/actions in SOGH's name, shall:

1. Reduce the environmental impact of our projects/activities and take precautionary actions, if possible, to minimize any future detrimental impact for the environment and people's health;
  - If projects aim to aid a product or a service, preferably choose the one that is most socially and environmentally sustainable.
  - Avoid printing on paper if the material can be communicated through electronic devices and online platforms.
  - When traveling for SOGH, choose the most environmentally friendly way to travel, whenever possible.
  - Leftover-food served at SOGH meetings or events should either be brought home by SOGH members or arrangements should be made, beforehand, with a local organization that can reallocate the untouched food to people in need.
  - At meetings, events and other gatherings hosted by SOGH, avoid the use of disposables and sort glass, plastics, paper etc. afterwards .
  - At meetings, events and other gatherings hosted by SOGH where food is served, choose food with low carbon emission outcomes that follow the planetary health diet<sup>17</sup> and do not have a detrimental social impact (e.g. vegan or vegetarian options, locally produced and certified fair trade food).

- Minimize the energy waste from computers and other electrical devices, turn off the device and unplug them when not in use.
  - Try to find the most sustainable ways of financing our projects, including the reflection of what grants we apply for and on how money is transferred and kept.
2. Increase knowledge and awareness around planetary health;
- Discuss with and educate attendees about planetary health during events and meetings.
  - Use social media channels and blogs to promote planetary health and inform people about the involved concepts, consequences and effects.
3. Engage in activities that support and contribute to social and environmental sustainability;
- Attend meetings, protests or events promoting planetary health.
- Support other like-minded organizations by sharing their projects (on social media).
  - Avoid collaborating with organizations/companies that do not match our vision and do not put planetary health at the core of their activities.

These guidelines apply for SOGH's permanent projects as well as any other activities and events. More detailed information on the issues of environmental sustainability in regard to SOGH's individual projects can be found on our [website](#).

## References

1. Whitmee S, Haines A, Beyrer C, Boltz F, Capon AG, de Souza Dias BF, et al. *Safeguarding human health in the Anthropocene epoch: report of the Rockefeller Foundation-Lancet Commission on Planetary health*. Lancet, 2015.
2. Steffen, W., W. Broadgate, L. Deutsch, O. Gaffney, C. Ludwig. *The Trajectory of the Anthropocene: the Great Acceleration*. The Anthropocene Review, 2015.
3. *Doughnut Economics: Seven Ways to Think Like a 21st-Century Economist*. Kate Raworth, 2017
4. You D, Hug L, Chen Y, Wardlaw T, Newby H. *UNICEF Report: enormous progress in child survival but greater focus on newborns urgently needed*. New York: United Nations Data and Analytics Section, 2014.

5. Population Division of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the UN Secretariat. *World population prospects: the 2012 revision*. New York: United Nations, 2013.
6. Millennium Ecosystem Assessment. *Ecosystems and human well-being: Synthesis*. Washington, DC: Island Press, 2005.
7. DeFries R, Foley JA, Asner GP. *Land-use -Choices: balancing human needs and ecosystem function*. *Frontiers in Ecology and the Environment*. 2004; 2(5): 249–57.
8. Rockström J, Steffen W, Noone K, Persson Å, et al. *Planetary boundaries: Exploring the safe operating space for humanity*. *Ecology and Society*. 2009; 14(2): 32.
9. Watts N, Amann M, Ayeb-Karlsson S, Belesova K, et al. *The 2019 Report of The Lancet countdown on health and climate change: Ensuring that the health of a child born today is not defined by a changing climate*. *The Lancet*. 2019; 394 (10211): 1836-1836.
10. Lancet Countdown: Tracking Progress on Health and Climate Change. The 2019 Report. 2021 <https://www.lancetcountdown.org/2019-report/> (cited 2021-09-05).
11. United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. *Sustainable Development Goals*. 2020. <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/?menu=1300> (cited 2020-01-10).
12. Stockholm Resilience Centre. *Sustainable Development Goals*. 2020 <https://www.stockholmresilience.org/research/research-news/2016-06-14-how-food-connects-all-the-sdgs.html> (cited 2020-02-09).
13. See reference 11.
14. Doughnut Economics Action Lab. About Doughnut Economics. 2021 <https://doughnuteconomics.org/about-doughnut-economics> (cited 2021-09-05).
15. Stanford Center for Innovation in Global Health. *Human and Planetary Health*. 2021 <https://globalhealth.stanford.edu/planetary-health/> (cited 2021-09-05).
16. Whitmee S, Haines A, Beyrer C, et al. *Safeguarding human health in the Anthropocene epoch: report of The Rockefeller Foundation–Lancet Commission on planetary health*. *Lancet* 2015; 386(10007): 1973-2028.
17. Willet W, Rockström J, Loken B, Springmann M, et al. *Food in the Anthropocene: the EAT-Lancet Commission on healthy diets from sustainable food systems*. *The Lancet*. 2019; 393(10170): 447-492.

## Read more

### *Related articles*

Govia I, Guell C, Unwin N, Wadende P. *Air travel for global health: flying in the face of sustainable development?*. The Lancet. 2019; 394(10211): 1786-1788.

Horton R, Lo S. *Planetary Health: A new science for exceptional action*. The Lancet. 2019; 386(10007): 1921-1922.

***Also visit***

[SOGH Environmental Sustainability](#)

[The EAT-Lancet Commission on Food, Planet, Health](#)

[IPCC - The International Panel on Climate Change](#)

[World Health Organization - Environment and health](#)

[UNFCCC - United Nation Framework Convention on Climate Change](#)

[Planetary Health Alliance](#)

[Wellbeing Economy Alliance](#)