

Review

Hold on Tight: A Review with Suggestions to Address Threats to Sustainability

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Abstract

Sustainability principles and practices are facing unprecedented opposition from some of the world's most economically and politically powerful nations. Public opinion polls in the United States and Europe show that age significantly affects responses to sustainability practices. Younger populations tend to be more supportive of efforts to manage climate change and other sustainability practices than their older counterparts. Variation in responses to actual and proposed sustainability policies and practices is not adequately explained by political affiliation. While some businesses are actively dismantling sustainability practices, others are moving forward with those that are profitable for their bottom line. Showing the benefits to businesses may help weaken opposition to sustainability policies and practices at the government level. A global-to-local framework describes demonstration projects that build support for sustainability. The local focus is the most practical, as it engages local political entities and yields local benefits that bolster the case for supporting sustainable practices. Such efforts may help counter higher-level challenges.

Keywords: business; government; local action; public opinion; sustainability

1. Introduction

The United Nations (UN) established the World Commission on Environment and Development in 1983 to examine the links between ecological health, economic development, and social equity. Then Norwegian Prime Minister Gro Harlem Brundtland led the effort to publish a 1987 report that has served as a standard for defining sustainability [1]. It calls for government policies and business practices to take into account the three Ps: planet (ecosystems), profit (economy), and people (social implications) [2]. Many meetings, conference proceedings, papers, and books also followed, supporting the building of a sustainable future [3–11].

The concepts and practices of sustainability face major challenges from some political leaders and their allies, who assert that national governments, not international bodies, should drive policy. Most prominently, the former U.S. Deputy National Security Advisor for Strategy argues that international agencies that guide public policy are a “delusion” that serves as a mechanism to avoid timely decisions [12]. For example, the United States has taken steps to dampen enthusiasm for sustainable practices by presenting selected information to the public, significantly reducing or eliminating funding, and enacting legislation that threatens sustainability principles and practices. Several conservative governments and their supporters are trying to take control of fossil fuels to increase their use, stall the adoption of alternative energy sources, and diminish fuel-efficiency technologies,



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which will disproportionately increase the impact on poor minority populations. This phenomenon has been termed “fossil fascism” [13,14]. Notably, Ratkowski et al. [15] do not view these aggressive nationalistic-grounded policies as temporary because of the growing complexity of the issues and the unwillingness of some governments to work together to pursue their common interests.

Rather than celebrating sustainability’s achievements, its principles are currently threatened by declared and undeclared wars, economic disputes, the rise of strong populist groups aiming to reduce or change governments, and the undermining of internationalism. How does sustainability overcome these threats? This essay contributes to that answer by (1) weighing multiple types of evidence about trends in how populations, nations, and businesses view sustainability and (2) suggesting a focus that, while not a panacea, we believe will present sustainability in forms that are persuasive for some businesses, voters, and local governments.

2. Methods: Measuring Pressure on Sustainability

Making a fair assessment of current threats to sustainability requires examining a broad range of literature from business, public, and governmental perspectives. How businesses perceive sustainability is important because they are the primary architects of strategies that produce sustainable products and practices. Public reaction to sustainability may not change government policies, but it can certainly have a major impact on businesses that invest in creating, selling, and adopting new sustainable practices.

Given that business, public, and governmental expectations, policies, and practices are all important, and given the accelerated pace of sustainability research, we used a “hybrid strategy” for this literature review [16]. We relied on our files and discussions with colleagues for historical information sources. We focused the new search on the last 5 years to ensure we did not miss key new developments. Our files yielded hundreds of sources, many of which were within the 5-year timeline. Overall, Google and Google Scholar queries were the most helpful for finding current information. We believe this is because of their extensive coverage of not only academic publications but also reports, websites, and public opinion polls. Below is the list of terms that yielded the strongest returns via the search probes.

1. “sustainability” + “trends”; “practice,” “case studies,” “principles”
2. “public opinion polls” + “sustainability”; “environmental protection”
3. “sustainability” + “industry,” “corporations,” “business,” “advocacy organization”
4. “sustainability” + “national government,” “state/provincial government,” “local government”

As part of our analysis of current threats to sustainability, we wanted to review at least one rapidly evolving sustainability issue in depth. Major sustainability issues identified by various organizations included biodiversity loss, deep-sea mining (DSM), food waste, plastic pollution, and soil degradation. We chose DSM as a global threat because of its potential international consequences that require national governments to take a position on the issue.

Employing the hybrid strategy yielded 25,500 sources from Google probes about DSM. Reading titles and abstracts (when available) and narrowing the time frame to the most recent 5 years allowed us to reduce the number to 437 to review in detail. Notably, 60 of these sources were from MDPI journals, with *Sustainability* and *Minerals* each contributing more than ten items. We found 110 that directly addressed DSM and sustainability, and these were selected for retention. Sources that did not provide information on impact and governance were dropped, as were items that were narrowly focused on a single region. We then added 116 items from the snowball and personal files searches, bringing

the total to 226 as the basis for considering DSM as a global threat to sustainability. A clear limitation of our approach is that actions related to governance and the impacts of DSM are occurring now, and updates may be required daily. Thus, we added an arbitrary stop point (15 April 2026).

3. Results: Challenges to Sustainability

Here we summarize the findings from several selected reports, public opinion polls, business, and international data.

3.1. Three Key Reports

We use three reports to illustrate the response to the attack on global sustainability by some national governments. The Cambridge Institute for Sustainability Leadership asserts that sustainability is under unprecedented attack, progress is being dismantled, and a new reality is emerging [17]. The report reminds readers that 15 years ago, the Copenhagen Summit collapsed, and financial pressures led governments and businesses to back away from commitments to reduce efforts to slow climate change. What emerged, however, was the Paris Agreement with international goals. The Cambridge Institute report calls for maintaining investments in green energy and pressing for a renewed understanding that sustainability is an economic necessity. Arguing that the world in 2040 will be what we do now, it calls for engaging doubters and opponents rather than talking to each other.

The second report covers the Asia-Pacific region, noting it faces disproportionate pressure on its sustainability goals due to large populations, rapid economic growth, and competing political and religious values [18]. The region is also under attack by economic, environmental, and social changes driven by climate change. Executive Secretary of the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), Armida Salis-Alisjahbana, gave an interview, stating that the region needs to choose actions that come as close as possible to meeting the 2030 sustainability goal. Promoting sustainable technological change is important for addressing education, health, and urban development needs in places with limited economic resources. These policies and practices can reduce economic inequalities, mitigate disaster risks, and increase resilience. The interview states that East Asia is outperforming the rest of the world in advancing sustainability, especially as many of the more affluent countries have pulled away from their sustainability commitments.

The third report by a senior editor of *Newsweek* advocates for less demanding environmental policies [19]. Contending that climate catastrophism is a hoax, the report states that its demise reflects sound public policy and good governance. Placing affordability and the cost of living among America's key issues, it applauds greater hydrocarbon extraction and cites billionaire Bill Gates as a sensible American who now rejects climate extremism.

The three reports suggest that sustainability, as defined and practiced for decades, may not survive, except among academics, scientists, and pro-environmental groups. While they differ in tone and origin from critical evaluations of sustainability, they are grounded in a central criticism: humans are too self-centered. They will always prioritize what they perceive as their own needs over those of ecosystems [20]. This criticism conflicts with the idea that sustainability produces happy, stable relations between human beings and the nonhuman environment. Indeed, a new logic might even emerge in which social interests outweigh economic ones, which many believe will not come to pass. Will enough humans recognize that they live on Earth and need to shift their positions and behaviors about consumerism and nation-centered policies?

3.2. Public Opinion Polls

Public opinion is an important place to look for evidence of change in sustainability preferences and evidence of support for their national government's sustainability policies. Reliable polling data on these issues is limited, but we reviewed the most recent polls in Europe and the United States. The first represents strong support for sustainability (see Section 3.4 for national scale data), and the second hostility to many sustainable practices by the National government.

European nations should be a core group in advancing sustainability principles, as a 2024 poll found that the vast majority of European respondents continued to support actions to address climate change [21]. That survey polled 8000 people in France, Germany, Italy, Poland, and Sweden in 2024, and the results were compared with those from 2020. The pollsters concluded that respondents were more recently focused on economic issues and conflicts, but that climate issues still ranked fourth among priorities. These results are disappointing because Sweden, Germany, France, Italy, and Poland ranked 2, 4, 5, 9, and 22, respectively, among 167 nations in sustainability (see Section 3.4). The pollsters argued that the public perceives that their governments are ignoring their views and are unable to address their economic, environmental, and social concerns. Eichhorn & Grabbe [21] also point to a decline in voter support for Green parties in these nations, from 10 percent to 8 percent between 2020 and 2024.

We note that these poll results occurred during the most serious threats to European nations' sovereignty since the Second World War. Furthermore, a substantial proportion of the population polled continues to support sustainable practices. A charitable interpretation is that European populations have prioritized other issues, such as conflicts in neighbouring countries, immigration, and economic stress.

In the United States, the second Trump administration instituted an agenda of increased fossil fuel use and loosened air quality standards. It withdrew from the Paris Climate Agreement and weakened many other environmental regulations. These changes are at odds with the tenets of sustainability. Polls suggest that the U.S. public is far more focused on economics than on addressing environmental issues. For example, a 2025 poll by the University of Chicago found that healthcare (80%) and the economy (78%) rank as the most critical issues for Americans. Immigration (52%), energy policy (50%), and climate change (47%) ranked lower. There is a substantial political divide about these issues. For example, poll results show that 69 percent of Democrats prioritize climate change compared to 28 percent of Republicans [22].

The Chicago poll has been cited as evidence that fewer Americans believe humans cause climate change and fewer support government action to reduce its impacts through personal sacrifice [19]. We have a different interpretation. The poll showed that younger Republicans (18 to 29) disagree with older Republicans (60+) on many climate and energy policies. For example, 80 percent of older Republicans agree with expanding fossil fuel use, compared to only 39 percent of their younger counterparts. Across a range of issues, including electric vehicles, support for local adaptation, and climate change, the study reports differences of 16 to 21 points between older and younger Republicans. In other words, simply looking at the polling results for Democrat vs. Republican responses is misleading.

A March 2026 Gallup poll fine-tuned U.S. public opinion on protecting the environment. Respondents were asked whether they think the U.S. government is doing too much, too little, or about the right amount to protect the environment [23]. Only 7 percent said the government was doing too much, whereas 63 percent said it was doing too little, and 27 percent said it was about the right amount. The 63 percent who responded "too little" is the highest percentage reported in the Gallup polls since 1992. Other questions in that

poll show that the majority of the U.S. public perceives the environment as worsening and that the trend needs to be reversed, even if it slows the U.S. economy. A clear plurality of independent (not Republican or Democrat) poll respondents are concerned about the environment, with the largest number among those aged 18–34.

This polling data suggests that the European and U.S. populations' concerns are not far apart when it comes to sustainability-related preferences. Older respondents place a greater priority on managing immediate needs than on addressing environmental threats and reducing inequities. However, this does not mean that they are not concerned about climate change and the state of their drinking water and air quality. We have seen similar results before. Historically, during wars and economic stresses, environmental issues have fallen on the public's list of priorities. Nonetheless, environmental priorities have reemerged with renewed vigor [24]. European and U.S. populations represent one source of support for sustainability; based on these surveys, they appear much closer to one another than their elected officials are in regard to sustainable practices.

Island nations face significant challenges due to their vulnerability to weather events, sea-level rise, oil spills, and other natural and human hazards. Their concerns are notably greater than those observed in North America and Europe, making sustainability vital to their survival. For example, a large sample of individuals ($n = 14,710$) living in climate-vulnerable states and territories across 55 small-island states, territories, and subnational regions in the Caribbean, Indian Ocean, and South Pacific found unusually high awareness and concern about sea-level rise and climate change. Those surveyed believe that large polluters, former colonial powers, and home governments all share responsibility for managing the climate crisis, regardless of their relative carbon emissions [25]. Section 4 revisits this issue in the case study on deep-sea mining.

3.3. Business Community

A third place to look for evidence of change in prioritizing sustainability is in the business community. Business support is essential because private enterprise plays a role in marketing research, product design, and sales. Similarly, if a business does not support sustainability, it is unlikely to succeed. Thus, corporate structures have embraced sustainability as a component of their corporate ethics in response to public concerns about long-term damage caused by a focus on short-term profits. Some businesses recognize the need for strong global protections. They label sustainable practices as viable corporate best-practice strategies, or as positive efforts to integrate human and technological factors for a more sustainable future [26].

Some businesses are committed to fossil fuels and oppose alternatives. They may also use greenwashing (a deceptive labeling practice) to capitalize on the demand for eco-friendly goods while hiding harmful environmental practices [27,28]. In contrast, some eco-friendly businesses call for greater investment in sustainable practices, especially artificial intelligence (AI), automation, ongoing innovations in energy, and positive investment trends in financing to support sustainability projects [29,30].

Many reports suggest that businesses are committing to sustainability in their strategic plans and operations [31–33]. For example, they developed risk-based assessments of their vulnerability to natural hazards, to supply interruptions related to conflicts, and to the benefits and risks associated with AI. Conference Board reports show that almost 60 percent of S&P 500 companies have a biodiversity policy, a figure double that in 2021. Water consumption is also a major business concern. The reports also show that water use among the S&P 500 declined during the period 2012–2024. Eighty-four percent note in their reports that climate change is a risk factor they consider, compared to 67 percent in 2021 [32–34].

In the United States, current federal policy choices have influenced industry's agendas in interesting ways, if not always in line with the administration's political desires. For instance, Conference Board reports confirm that more than half of reporting industries have narrowed or reframed their ESG (environmental, social, governance) communications, using "sustainability" and "resilience" instead of ESG-related language [32,33]. In other words, businesses are developing strategies that make sense for them, and what they do is increasingly being measured and reported.

Companies can point to measurable savings by switching to less energy- and water-intensive production and by adding longer-lasting appliances. However, there are impediments for businesses working to reduce their environmental impacts [32–34]. One is that it is difficult to isolate the impact of a single company and a single change. Furthermore, it is difficult to estimate how incentives influence outcomes. While sustainability can make a company more attractive to investors, it is a gamble to invest when the surrounding political and economic environments are uncertain.

3.4. International Data

The United Nations [35] reports on national sustainability trends through an index comprising 126 indicators across 17 categories. In 2025, scores were compiled for 167 nations. A score of 80 or above (out of 100) is considered the most sustainable group. Twenty-two nations fell into this category; 21 are European (Finland had the highest score of 87), plus Japan. Twenty nations had scores below 55; 17 of them are in Africa, with the lowest score for South Sudan at 49 [35]. The report says that conflicts, rising demographic inequalities, and debt service are persistent problems. Country-by-country reports show that the top-scoring nations have two to four issues out of 17 that need attention—typically climate action and responsible production and consumption. The nations at the bottom of the list have multiple serious issues, typically 4 to 7 of the 17 sustainability issues. These results are not subtle. While sustainability increased across most nations, the largest gains were among poor nations that have improved education and access to digital information.

India, China, the United States, and Russia are of global significance because of their economic power, size, population, and involvement in world conflicts. In 2026, the combined population of the four is estimated at 3.4 billion, or 41 percent of the world's 8.3 billion [36]. All, especially the United States and China, have massive economies. China and Russia face declining populations, and both have been directly and indirectly involved in major conflicts. India, the most populous, had an overall sustainability score of 67, ranking 99 out of 167 nations; Russia ranked 51, China 49, and the United States 44. The number of sustainability problems for these four was 7, 5, 3, and 7, respectively (across 17 categories). Each of the four lost ground in at least one category, with addressing climate change being a common issue.

There are several challenges these powerful nations face in achieving sustainability goals. One is that they have not made progress in overcoming social sustainability problems, which show up in the U.N.'s international database. Second, the propensity of their populations to consume resources has not diminished. Third, many developing nations face debt-service constraints that prevent them from investing in sustainability-enhanced infrastructure, education, and public health improvements.

4. Sustaining Sustainability: Global to Local

4.1. Global

Restoring national government support for sustainability principles and practices currently opposed by powerful governments in some countries may not be possible in the

near term. Institutions promoting sustainable practices have been diminished by budget cuts and political changes that contradict sustainability principles in some countries. We are in a period of economic and social uncertainty, with wars, tariffs, and supply chain disruptions threatening global commerce [37]. We need actions that the public and local officials will see as undeniably linked to sustainability. We label these as global-to-local, beginning with a global example: DSM.

DSM operations collect nodules of minerals (cobalt, copper, nickel, and other rare earth elements) from the seabed and from sediments. The unwanted material is returned to the ocean. DSM has become feasible due to new technologies and the need for these minerals, many of which support the green economy. Currently, the International Seabed Authority (ISA) regulates deep-sea mining and has issued licenses for exploring parts of the ocean [38–43]. The agency's governing principle is that oceans are a common heritage, that all nations have the right to share in the benefits, and that its goal is to achieve no net loss of biodiversity. However, DSM generates a chain of potential impacts that extends from physical disturbances in the mining areas to global environmental and economic consequences.

The ISA represents 171 member states and the European Union. Island nations and over 30 other nations have called for a moratorium on DSM to learn as much as possible about the science. The stated goal is to negotiate compensatory packages to distribute benefits more equitably than if larger nations and mining interests were to begin operations immediately.

An April 2025 Executive Order made it clear that the current U.S. administration wants to move quickly [44]. China also wants to move ahead, as do Norway and South Korea [45,46]. While international agencies have developed principles to manage international affairs, these principles create mechanisms that delay decisions. When uncertainty is high, nations often adopt a precautionary governance approach. In the case of DSM, it is not certain that the ISA's inclusionary principles will prevail, nor that any form of precautionary approach will either. Some nations call for a multi-decade study period, whereas others are already looking to start DSM as soon as possible. The issue serves as an international litmus test for assessing how seriously nations take an internationally created global sustainability agenda. This suggestion aligns with the sustainable practice of pursuing a circular economy [47].

We contend that efforts to reduce threats to sustainability are more likely to succeed at the local rather than global scale. Indeed, there may even be public and local government participation to compete for funding. For example, abandoned mining and quarry sites have been converted into new mass transit stations, retail opportunities, storage facilities, and recreation areas [48]. Other types of abandoned sites have also been converted into usable living and working places [49,50]. One government programmatic example is the U.S. brownfields redevelopment program, a federal initiative to support the remediation and reuse of contaminated and abandoned properties that were causing economic, social, and environmental impacts [49]. The brownfield program received federal government support, but it was competitive: local governments had to apply and compete for federal funds. It was not a federal regulatory-driven program, and both residents and their politicians saw the results. In other words, national efforts can try to target local needs to support sustainable policies and practices in ways that global efforts cannot.

4.2. Local

Local projects that achieve economic, health, and environmental sustainability fulfill the Triple Bottom Line (TBL) and will be visible to the public and local officials. The TBL framework measures performance in terms of profit (job creation, tax payments, and

sustainable investment support), people (how a company treats its employees, suppliers, customers, shareholders, and the community), and the planet (the company's ecological footprint) [51,52]. For example, the United Nations initiated the Principles for Responsible Investment program to encourage businesses to adopt practices consistent with sustainable investment. As of December 2024, 4600 businesses had signed the management principles [53]. Similarly, the *Harvard Business Review* reports increased investor commitments to TBL and related programs [54]. Some businesses understand that they can make a good profit by investing in historical cultural assets, including remediating contamination and designing sites to be resistant to coastal flooding. These practices need to be clearly acknowledged, with clear indicators of whether they are engaging in greenwashing.

It is important to promote neighborhood sustainability projects that align with sustainability principles and practices. An example would be building new residential facilities or renovating underutilized ones for seniors who wish to stay in their community but cannot manage their current situation. This fulfills the sustainability practice of intergenerational ethics. Another example is that of noise pollution, which can be extremely annoying. The U.S. government established a national noise program in 1970; however, elected officials decided that it was a local issue. While noise is not a priority issue for every community, it poses a threat to sustainability [55,56].

Local sustainability projects may include states, localities, and businesses that choose to participate. These entities tend to be less bureaucratic than global or national ones, and they learn from their mistakes, facilitating change as part of sustainability practices [57]. The downside of focusing on local programs is that their choices can widen inequities between people and places. To prevent this requires commitment and steady progress. Under duress, policies and practices that support sustainable practices can be delayed or ignored. This increases the threat to sustainability's very survival. At the global level, it requires avoiding wars, recognizing the impact of climate change, expanding data gathering, and releasing information about the state of the environment. However, we cannot dismiss the possibility that some national governments will become more adamant about their national prerogatives, leading to more aggressive national foreign policies that make little room for international cooperation and that polarize people, posing a serious challenge.

5. Conclusions

Some national governments, especially most recently the United States, have taken steps to undermine sustainable practices in pursuit of national agendas. We cannot dismiss the possibility that they will become more adamant about their national prerogatives, leading to more aggressive national foreign policies that would doubtless include more exploitation of resources with limited consultation. This will leave little room for international cooperation and further polarize populations.

People feel threatened by global unrest and rising living costs. However, polling data from the United States and Europe indicate ongoing public support for ideas and principles embedded in sustainability, especially among younger generations. Business as a whole is often quietly engaged in implementing sustainability measures that improve economic bottom lines. However, some businesses are narrowly focused on agendas that coincide with their access to and use of inexpensive fossil fuels and minerals.

Overall, sustainability is in a transition period, coping with the stress of survival. Reducing wars, recognizing the impact of climate change, improving data gathering, and releasing information about the state of the environment, health, and other issues would be good signs. We strongly advise proponents of sustainability to focus on local projects that deliver local benefits and to avoid non-sustainable policies and practices that will polarize.

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