

# SUSTAINABILITY BAROMETER 2025

**SOCIO-ECONOMIC ISSUES ARE GAINING THE UPPER HAND  
WE'RE PAYING THE PRICE FOR YOUR MISTAKES!**



## **Sustainability Barometer 2025**

Socio-economic Issues Are Gaining the Upper Hand

We're paying the price for your mistakes!

### **Author**

Dr. Dietmar Kress

---

### **Imprint**

**Greenpeace e.V.** Hongkongstraße 10, 20457 Hamburg, T 040 30618-0 **Press Office** T 040 30618-340, F 040 30618-100, presse@greenpeace.de, greenpeace.de **Political Representation** Marienstraße 19–20, 10117 Berlin, T 030 308899-0  
**Legally responsible for content** Dr. Dietmar Kress **Photos** Anne Barth (Title) Ingmar Nolting (P. 2) all © Greenpeace  
**Design** Janitha Banda / Spektral3000 06/2026



Greenpeace youth in Erfurt, Germany 2024

## Introduction

Most young people feel let down by politicians when it comes to environmental and climate issues. Generation Z now regularly engages with sustainability, education for sustainable development, and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) —at school, in vocational training, and at institutions of higher education. Yet instead of inspiring hope, this growing engagement increasingly leads to disappointment and anxiety. What particularly angers young people is the perception that high earners are responsible for a disproportionate share of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. At the same time, younger generations are left to bear the consequences. Among those surveyed, there is no longer any doubt: “We have to pay the price for your mistakes” has become a bitter certainty. These findings come from a new study, the Greenpeace Sustainability Barometer 2025, which examines how young people in Germany feel about sustainability.

Sustainability awareness is the understanding that the natural planetary boundaries are being exceeded, thereby endangering the living conditions and needs of present and future generations. It also encompasses the perceived capacity to help bring about change. (Michelsen et al, Greenpeace Nachhaltigkeitsbarometer 2015). In June 2025, 1,506 young people between the ages of 15 and 24 were surveyed by the ARIS polling institute—the fourth such nationwide representative survey since 2011. The survey is a collaboration between Greenpeace Germany, the Eberswalde University for Sustainable Development (HNEE), and Leuphana University Lüneburg. Academic responsibility for, and co-authorship of, this summary lies with Prof. Sonja Geiger, Dr Lisa Sophie Walsleben, Dr Marie Weiß, Prof. Matthias Barth, and Prof. Daniel Fischer.

## Sustainability has become an established concern

Since 2011, the number of young people who identify “sustainability” as a key concern has increased steadily. The 2025 survey indicates that it remains among the five most important issues, although its perceived relevance has declined slightly compared with the 2021 survey. The importance of “environmental protection and climate change” has also decreased by 12% compared with 2021, but still ranks among the top four issues overall.

A new issue, “cost of living”, ranks as one of the top three, with just under 30% of respondents identifying it as a key concern. Another new category in 2025, “democracy (in crisis)”, is regarded as important by 16.6% of respondents. By contrast, “unemployment/jobs” and “economic situation/poverty” have steadily declined in importance since 2011. Meanwhile, nearly a quarter of respondents now express concern about “terrorism and war”, representing a marked increase compared with 2021.

The findings suggest that sustainability, the environment, and climate change remain important concerns, but are increasingly viewed in the context of broader socio-economic and political trends.

## Environmental protection loses some ground

The latest barometer points to a clear shift in perceived importance away from environmental aspects of sustainability towards socio-economic issues. Respect for human rights is regarded as the most important sustainability-related issue overall, followed by adequate financial security for all citizens.

In 2015, regarding the economic aspect of sustainability, 58% of young people considered government debt of little or no importance. This perception has now reversed: nearly two-thirds of young people today say the state should not incur debt. Comparable figures indicate that the younger generation is no longer willing to accept that sustainability issues affecting the future are being sidelined in political discourse, and that young people are expected to bear the consequences. Over 80% agree that future generations are entitled to opportunities and resources and must not be left to fend for themselves.

Environmental aspects of sustainability remain very important to around 50% of respondents. However, this figure is slightly lower than in previous surveys. “Preserving biodiversity”, “responsible use of resources”, and “fair working conditions” are all rated as less important than in 2014 and 2021. Views on the importance of “intergenerational equity” are mixed, suggesting greater disagreement on this issue.

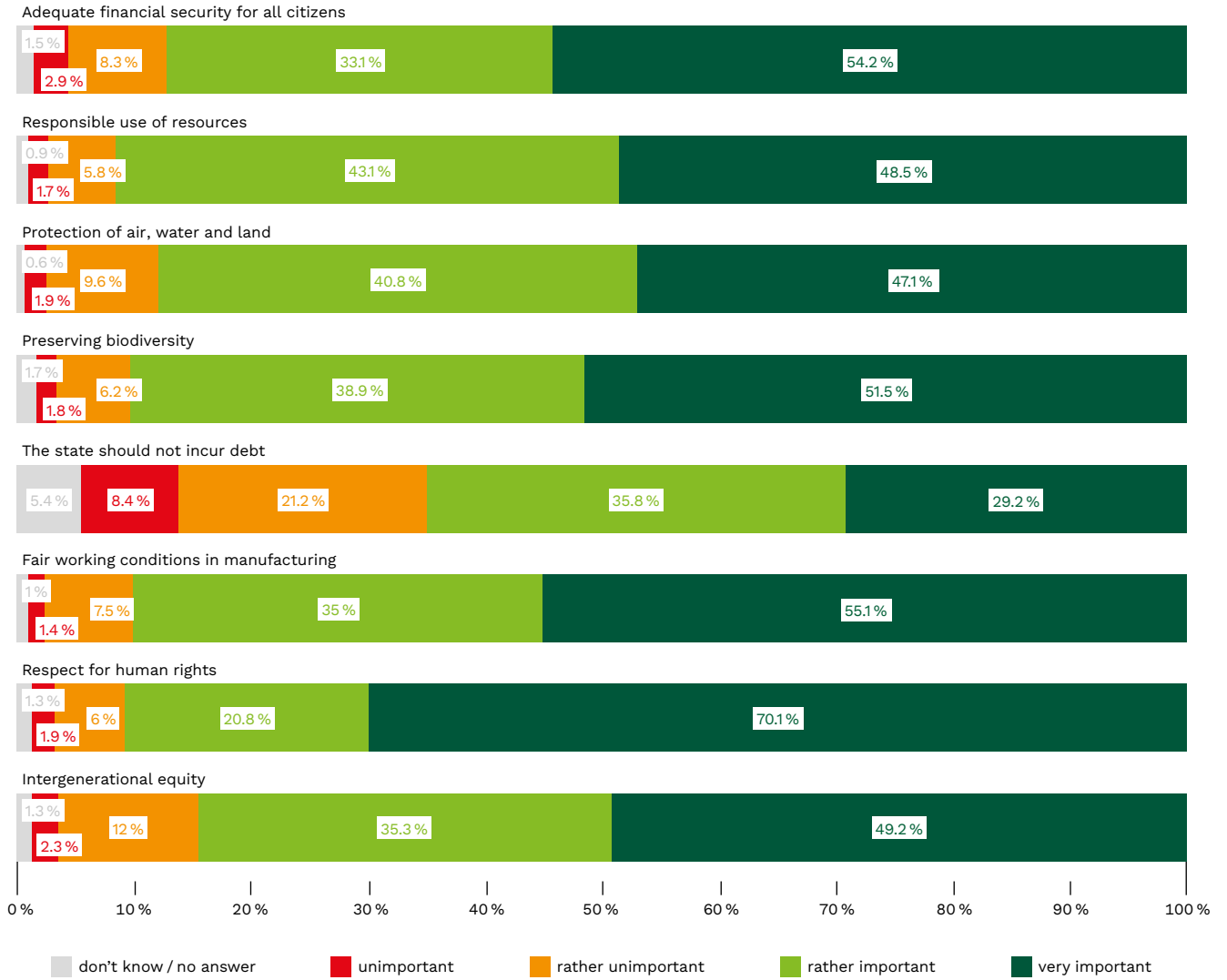
## High political expectations — and equally high levels of disappointment

The vast majority of respondents can clearly communicate their expectations of politicians and show a strong interest in politics. The greatest responsibility for advancing sustainable change is attributed to politicians, individuals, business and industry, the scientific community, and the wealthiest 10% of the population. Churches are seen as having the least responsibility.

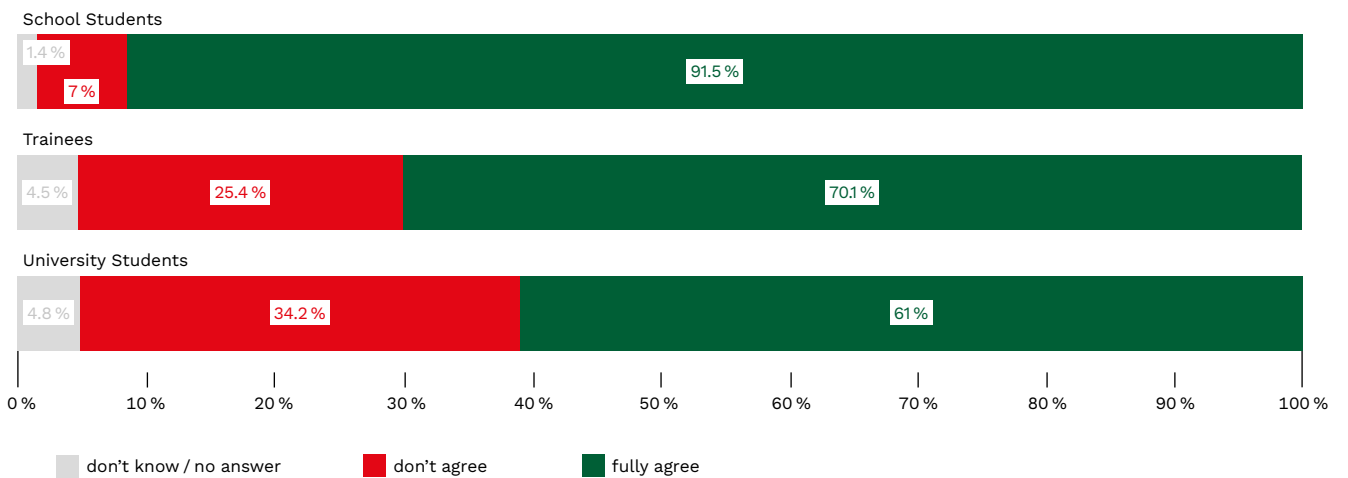
### Key issues over time

Topics (only selected topics are comparable)	2011	2014	2021	2025
Environmental protection / Climate change	45.1 %	56.1 %	40.6 %	28.6 %
Sustainability	8.4 %	12.6 %	29.2 %	21.6 %
Integration of people with migrant backgrounds	/	/	19.3 %	14.5 %
Economic situation / Poverty	37.3 %	30.8 %	16.9 %	19.3 %
Terrorism/War	36.7 %	33.4 %	18 %	24.5 %
Unemployment / Job	47 %	39.2 %	27.7 %	18.1 %
Pandemic / Health protection	/	/	28.3 %	/
Diseases	35.2 %	14.2 %	11.6 %	/
Equity / less inequality	/	/	20 %	/
School / Training / Higher education	43.5 %	46.4 %	42.5 %	40.8 %
Retirement security	9 %	17.4 %	16.6 %	10.2 %
Data security / Online privacy / Mobile devices	/	23.6 %	13.1 %	/
Cost of living	/	/	/	29 %
Democracy (in crisis)	/	/	/	16.5 %
Credibility of information	/	/	/	8.4 %

## Importance of environmental and socio-economic aspects of sustainability



## ENGAGEMENT WITH SUSTAINABILITY IN EDUCATIONAL SETTINGS



From a party-political standpoint, the greatest commitment to sustainability is attributed to Bündnis 90/Die Grünen (29.5%) and Die Linke (19.2%), followed by the AfD (11.4%). The current governing parties, CDU/CSU (9%) and SPD (6.6%), are widely seen as ill-equipped to tackle sustainability issues effectively—that is, to ensure both environmental protection and a good quality of life for people today and in the future. The younger generation does not view Germany's grand coalition as a champion of sustainable development.

## Education as a driver of sustainability

Sustainability awareness among young people increased between 2011 and 2025. They appear to be well aware of, and concerned about, environmental problems, climate change, and the overexploitation of natural resources. Schools and universities, in particular, now cover sustainability and education for sustainable development extensively. Depending on the type of institution, between 61% (higher education) and 91.5% (general education schools) of young people report having engaged with sustainability in their classes and studies. Compared with 2011, around 50% more schools now include this topic in their curricula.

Overall, around 65% of respondents rate aspects of sustainability and education for sustainable development as more relevant to everyday life than other subjects. Views on the professional relevance of education for sustainable development vary considerably. While around 54% expect it to be relevant to their future careers, around 42%—more among school and university students than vocational trainees—believe education for sustainable development will be of little or no relevance to their future work.

Young people generally demonstrate a strong understanding of sustainability: over 71% agree that many natural resources cannot be replenished once they are depleted. In contrast, only 11% of respondents—7% fewer than in 2021—expect technological developments to make new or alternative natural resources usable. Respondents largely reject the narrative that technology can replace natural resources.

## Only a third feel well prepared for the future

When asked how well their education has prepared them for the future, only around 17.3% of school students consider themselves very well prepared, and just 14.1% of university students say the same. By contrast, more than 27% of vocational trainees feel “very well” prepared.

More than a third of young people feel “fairly well” prepared. Among university students, the figure is 45.8%—up from 2021. Nevertheless, the share who feel “fairly poorly” or “very poorly” prepared still ranges from around 37% to 44%.

In terms of teaching methods, extended projects running over a full academic year are slightly more common than in previous surveys, with 36.1% of respondents reporting them. More than two in five have undertaken such projects in vocational education (44.7%) and higher education (42.1%). However, the implementation of education for sustainable development in higher education is rated less favourably than in schools and vocational training, indicating scope for improvement.

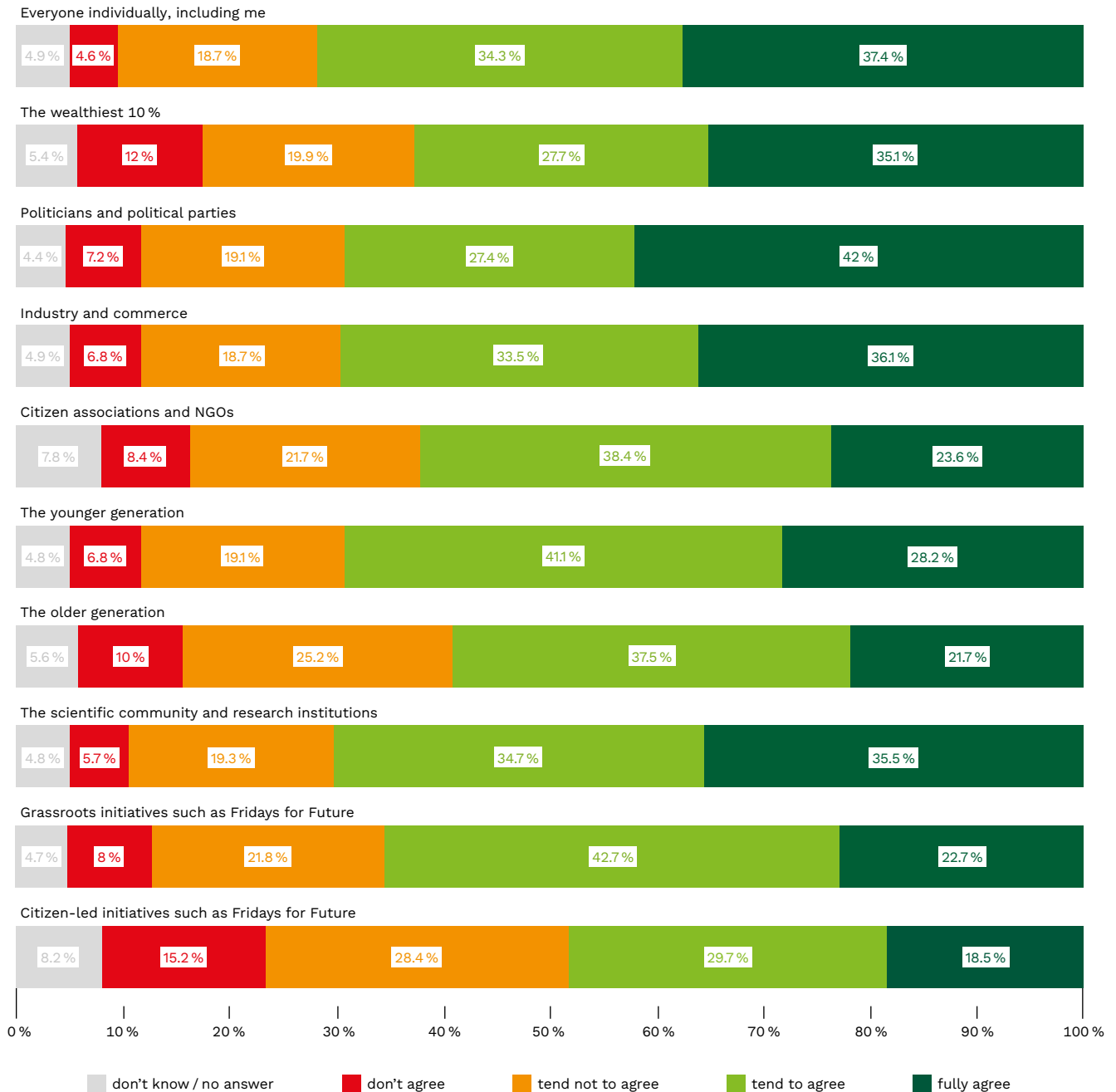
Between 60% and 70% of young people consider their teachers generally competent in sustainability-related issues. However, the fact that only around one in four fully agrees suggests that teaching staff still need further professional development in this area.

## Sustainability in education is now established, but the quality of implementation needs to improve

Respondents' answers indicate that education for sustainable development is now firmly embedded in many areas in all types of educational institutions. However, the quality of implementation is still uneven. Educational provision is often:

- limited to individual subjects. More than a third of respondents have so far had little or no opportunity to engage with sustainability across different subjects.
- restricted in duration. Fewer than half of respondents have had the opportunity to work on a longer-term sustainability project so far.

## Responsible for change

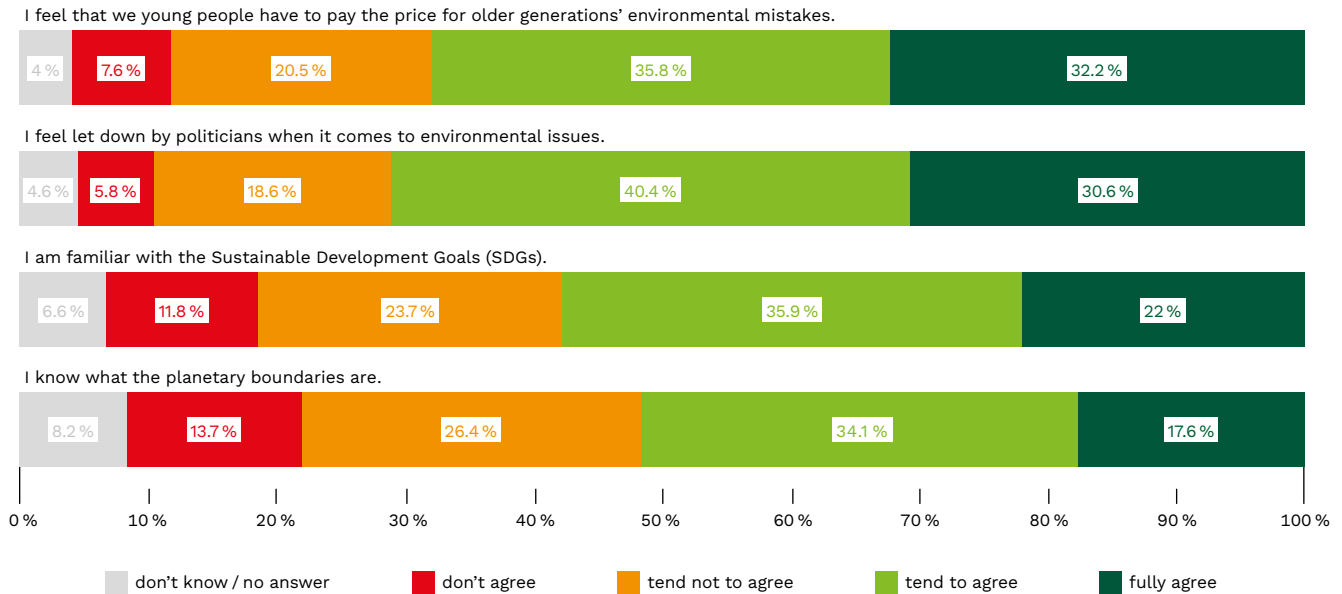


- excluded from assessment. Most respondents (except for vocational trainees, at 44%) reported that their level of knowledge about sustainability had no effect on their grades.

Progress has been made in embedding sustainability in various areas of educational institutions beyond lessons and courses. Yet only around one in four young people fully agree that sustainability is put into practice across the different areas of their school or higher education institution, while between 36% (vocational trainees) and 46% (university students) tend to agree that it is practised. This indicates that the

Whole School Approach has become established in schools and other educational institutions. However, there is still room for improvement in ensuring that what is taught is consistently experienced across the institution itself. Of particular concern is the finding that most students in general education schools believe that their schools are not doing enough to prevent overload. This highlights the need not only to include education for sustainable development in the curriculum but also to apply it consistently and comprehensively as a guiding principle for schools, vocational training, and higher education.

## SDGs, planetary boundaries and injustice



## Positive local outlook and very little willingness to break the law

Respondents tend to rate the environmental and overall quality of life in their local area more positively than in the rest of Germany or elsewhere in the world. They are most willing to act sustainably by conserving energy, shopping locally, and voting. Willingness to change their eating habits varies considerably, while readiness to engage in unlawful protest, such as glueing themselves to streets to block traffic, is very low.

## Mixed feelings and little room for them in educational settings

Various publications have noted that emotional topics are often overlooked in education and curricula. Therefore, this Sustainability Barometer included questions that asked specifically about trust, climate-related emotions, stress in everyday life, justice orientation, and climate justice. The scientific community, the younger generation, and citizen initiatives and associations enjoy the highest level of trust. Respondents' sense of personal responsibility and confidence in their own actions has declined, with around 46% reporting

a lack of confidence in their own commitment to sustainability.

The survey also underscores the generational tensions noted earlier and political disillusionment: about 70% of respondents feel let down by the government's handling of environmental issues and believe they will have to pay the price for the mistakes of their elders.

Two-thirds of young people report feeling concerned about the climate, and around 61% feel frustrated. Slightly fewer feel unhappy or angry. No respondents feel completely unconcerned about the climate, and only about a third report feeling somewhat at ease. Additionally, 40% say that climate-related anxiety causes them to feel significantly or moderately stressed in their everyday lives. Around a third feel that their concerns regarding climate change interfere with school, work, or university. These findings highlight the need to address climate-related emotions in curricula and educational settings, ensuring that young people are not left to cope with these issues on their own.

The 2025 barometer also examined different views on what constitutes a just society. Over 70% of respondents said it is fair for people who work harder to earn more. In comparison, only about 45% considered an equal distribution of resources (wealth, income) in society to be fair. At the same time, providing additional financial support and benefits for caregivers—those who look after children or family members in need of care—is seen as fair by

## General justice orientation

It is fair for income and wealth to be distributed equally among all people in our society.



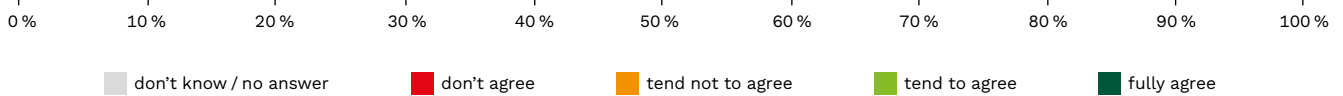
It is fair for caregivers of children or dependent relatives to receive additional financial support and benefits.



It is fair for if people who work hard earn more than others.



It is fair for if people from prominent families to have advantages in life.



## Sustainability is put into practice in various areas of my school / university

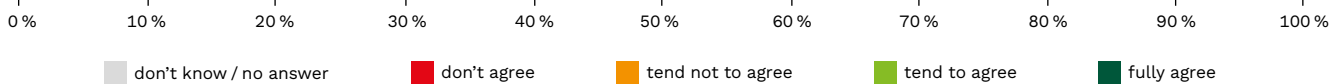
School Students



Trainees



University Students



three-quarters of respondents.

The survey also asked how fair respondents consider the distribution of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. The carbon footprint of an individual in the top 1% income group (83.3 tonnes per year) is about 15 times higher than that of an individual in the bottom 50%, who emits 5.4 tonnes per year. Just over 10% of respondents see this distribution as fair or very fair, nearly 30% are undecided, and around half consider it unfair or very unfair.

## Conclusion

Many students, trainees, and teachers have already taken steps to incorporate more sustainability and education for sustainable development in learning and teaching, and there are many good examples.

However, these efforts are not sufficient to counter the political and social devaluation of many aspects of sustainability and environmental protection. School operations, where sustainability remains more a topic in the curriculum than an integral and practical principle guiding everyday school life, clearly lag behind.

The findings also point to cause for concern: when significant socio-economic and environmental problems are not addressed due to unwillingness to change or populist negligence, young people's perception of political and institutional failure is likely to be reinforced, fostering mistrust, leading to resignation, and ultimately harming democracy.



## **Educational materials on current environmental issues**

Available for free download.

[www.greenpeace.de/bildungsmaterialien](http://www.greenpeace.de/bildungsmaterialien)

[greenpeace.de](http://greenpeace.de)