



Centre for

**Global  
Cooperation  
Research**

UNIVERSITÄT  
DUISBURG  
ESSEN

*Offen im Denken*

## Call for papers

Conference at the University of Duisburg-Essen, Germany

8–9 December 2025

### **The Politics of Limits: Sustainability and Democracy in Times of Changing Climates**

The passing of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015 reflected a broad international political consensus on the detrimental effects of human-induced ecological change and the urgency to contain it. From the outset, the design of the SDGs was questioned, and the ways in which they were implemented were always controversial. However, beginning with Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the rising fear of energy shortages, there has been a considerable backlash, resulting in reduced sustainability ambitions and watered-down policies across various jurisdictions. This trend has coincided – and interlocked – with a notable resurgence of populist and extremist political forces that, often openly, attack fundamental pluralist values and undermine the democratic institutions built upon them. We are thus witnessing how economic and military 'necessities' replace sustainability policies with astonishing speed while polities themselves are being pushed towards less democratic forms. This pressure on both sustainability and democracy demands new discussions on how to address unsustainability within new political practices that reimagine and readjust nature-society relationships to ultimately move beyond 'carbon democracy' (Mitchell).

Against this background, many authors discussing the transition towards a more sustainable society agree on some version of 'less resource consumption'. This theme is especially prominent in literature inspired by ecological economics and political ecology, often manifesting itself in calls for 'degrowth'. However, similar to what Charbonnier discusses for affluence as a precondition for freedom, democracies' promise of general freedom and equality may be at odds with proposals that current societies need to politically restrict economic growth (if and insofar as growth equals resource consumption).

To engage with this possibly intrinsic tension, this interdisciplinary conference focuses on a political concept that potentially offers a framework to conceptualise necessary limitations: the idea of republican freedom, where individual freedom is limited by 'the freedom of others', as well as the rules and policies upon which the political community as a whole has agreed. We seek to explore the relationship between republican restrictions of individual freedom and possible economic limitations, and the relationship between democratic justice and economic growth (at the level of both ideas and practices). We invite scholars from across the humanities, social sciences, natural sciences and life sciences to present ongoing work that engages with these or similar relationships that involve certain forms of limits in the pursuit of sustainability and democracy.

In line with the event's interdisciplinary format, we embrace epistemological, theoretical and methodological pluralism. Interested colleagues are invited to submit paper abstracts of no more than 200 words to [sustainability-democracy@uni-due.de](mailto:sustainability-democracy@uni-due.de) by **31 July 2025**. Decisions about acceptance will be communicated by 15 September 2025. While we strive to cover conference-related expenses for all participants, we will prioritise early-career scholars without institutional funding.