

**„I'm not cycling to make the air cleaner.”**

*Do we only do something for the Earth if it benefits us?*

**What individual benefit do we gain from sustainable actions? Are we environmentally conscious because of our inner motivation, or are we driven only by thrift and financial gain? A four-generation study by UniCredit Bank and SteiGen has revealed that the sustainable actions of each age group are often motivated by saving or financial gain, rather than sustainability.**

### **The pollution of our rivers and the sight of landfills are the most appalling**

The research found that the **concept of sustainability is most commonly associated with littering by Baby Boomers**, Generation X, Y and Z, and almost all of them have experienced anger or despair at the sight of their environment being polluted. *„We were on holiday at the Kisköre water reservoir, and I've never seen so much rubbish in my life, and it turns out that 80% of the pollution comes from across the border,”* says a Generation Z in her 20s, but Generation X, 40, is also angered by the fact that *„there's a huge heap of rubbish in Debrecen, and in 4 years the mountain of rubbish has grown brutally, so big that the machine on top is just a toy car”*. The contrast between the plastic pollution of our lakes and rivers, the Tisza and Zagyva, the destruction of the ocean as seen in the Attenborough films, the overcrowded living environment and the cleanliness experienced abroad, e.g. in Switzerland, is what most annoys respondents, but this experience alone does not spur the majority to action.

### **Sustainability requires both material and spiritual well-being**

An essential „entry point” to being open to sustainability is to be well: to have no material, livelihood difficulties and no marked, acute life situations to resolve. *„If our addictions were eliminated and we were not working for food and desire fulfillment, we could get off the merry-go-round and make progress on sustainable issues,”* say respondents.

### **Leaving the comfort zone is the key point**

If wellbeing is a given, then abandoning our comfort zone is the next thing that can be a barrier to sustainable living. Would we be willing to take our selective waste to the collection island 300 metres away if the one near us is abolished? Lack of infrastructure is holding 52% of respondents back from living sustainably, and 70% of Generation Z would rather dump their rubbish in the communal bin if nearby collection points were removed. Only 26% of respondents have nothing stopping them from living sustainably even if it means taking inconvenient, time-consuming and out-of-their-comfort-zone steps.

### **Individual profit or inner urge?**

46% of respondents agree with the statement that *„In reality, **people are only driven by material interests, not by concern for the environment**”*. Around half of the nearly 60 types of sustainability activities mentioned in the focus groups are driven by self-interest: financial (saving money) or personal health and well-being.

### **Generation Z (under 25)**

Generation Z claim that our sustainability actions should be driven by basic intelligence, an inner drive and not by profit: *„I've clearly been collecting selectively since I was a kid, it just doesn't fit into my life path to live any other way”*, says one 20-something, and he believes that change can be achieved by getting people interested in picking up their rubbish. Abroad, with PET bottles and aluminium can recyclers with 0.25 euro cents, this is a given, but here the basic infrastructure is lacking and if there is a recycling point, people just throw their rubbish away in an uncultured way.

## Generation Y (26–40 years)

*„People are not interested in protecting the Earth, but in increasing profits. We only do something for the Earth if we benefit from it,”* says Generation Y, who doesn't know if it makes sense to collect separately and is surprised that they really do sort rubbish and that some of it is actually recycled. Generation Y sees sustainable living as a very distant goal and is sceptical, saying that it can only be achieved *„if we stop doing everything, because every single thing we do destroys sustainability and the end result is unsustainability”*.

## Generation X (41–55 years)

Generation X also faces the dilemma of whether it is a waste to wash the plastic that goes into the recycling bin or whether they would rather throw it away dirty with the rest. Their actions are often driven by individual aims: *„I don't cycle to improve the air, I cycle to save petrol and get some exercise, I buy large containers because they are cheaper”*, and many need a green number plate for free parking. Leaving the comfort zone is the hardest for them because *„we are used to driving, we order from China, which is not sustainable, but we don't want to give it up.”*

## Baby Boomers (56–74 years)

Baby Boomers don't throw food in the trash by design and compost and recycle what they can. While they claim not to buy unnecessary products, research shows they are among the biggest hoarders, buying many things they didn't have the opportunity to buy when they were younger. *„If we are expected to do more and better, we need to be financially interested in doing so,”* they say.

## The results of our sustainable actions are only visible in the very distant future

According to generational researcher Krisztián Steigervald, sustainability is a *„difficult topic to engage with”* because in many cases we would have to give up our current comfortable life for a future *„something”*, a cleaner planet or richer wildlife. The *„harmful effects”* of foregoing now are immediately felt (because it is expensive, cumbersome, time-consuming to be sustainable), while the future benefits are very distant and intangible. All this is compounded by a sense of collective responsibility, or lack of it: if I give up certain comforts and the others don't, who ends up benefiting and who is right?

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Steigen and UniCredit used a representative online survey of 1,000 people, as well as focus group discussions with different residents and generations, and individual in-depth interviews to investigate the attitudes of four different generations towards sustainability.

The target group of the research was 4 different generations:

- Baby Boomers born between 1946-64, now aged 56-74,
- Generation X, born 1965-1979, now aged 41-55,
- Generation Y, born 1980-1994, now aged 26-40, and
- Generation Z, born 1995-2003, now aged 18-25.

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