

„I can't watch a turtle with a straw in its nose” Why do the four generations think differently about sustainability?

Which generation has the biggest burden to save the planet? Who is doing what for sustainability? Research conducted jointly by SteiGen and UniCredit Bank has mapped the views of four generations – Baby Boomers, X, Y and Z – on sustainability: what they think and do about it, what activities they associate with it. The research revealed that not only do they all have different understandings of sustainability or very different motivations for sustainability, but they also all consider themselves to be more active than their peers.

What is sustainability, anyway? Sustainability = not littering?

According to the research, **sustainability means different things to different people**: the interviewed associated it with **more than 50 activities**, ranging from selective waste collection to conscious shopping. They identify it with ideas such as the balance between desires and opportunities, reducing waste and living a non-exploitative lifestyle. Littering is the most difficult spontaneously mentioned problem – regardless of generation. 89% of respondents cite selective waste collection, 80% use less plastic and 89% save electricity as activities they themselves do for sustainability. Although no one considers their own generation to be at the forefront of these activities, when it comes to their peers, only 47% are concerned about collecting waste, 33% about public transport and cycling and 42% about saving electricity,

Sustainability or personal benefit?

We do many sustainable things in our daily lives, many of which are not consciously done for sustainability. Actions for **financial benefit** (e.g. turning off the lights, turning down the heating to save electricity) or for **personal benefit** (e.g. cycling in order to lose weight not to make the planet greener) are often stronger drivers. 46% of respondents agree with the statement that „*people are really only driven by material interests (saving money) and not by caring for the environment*”.

The 4 generations have very different backgrounds when it comes to sustainability, so it is no wonder that their reactions are very different.

Baby Boomers are frugal, members of generation X fears for their comfort zones

„*What's my grandchild going to walk in if I walk in garbage now?*” – **Baby Boomers, aged 56–74** ask, adding that it's the next generation that's driving them to changes. „*We are the age group that had to go through the biggest changes, we had to learn that sustainability is something that 'has to be done',*” they say. For them, it goes without saying that **food shouldn't go to waste** and if something breaks, they don't buy a new one, but they **try to fix it** instead. They are critical of their own generation highlighting their role in heating modernisation, food recycling and saving electricity, but criticise them for often **being driven by thrift** rather than environmental awareness. Sustainability is very much a material story, Baby Boomers admit. In their youth, climate change was not an issue, sustainability was not taught in school. Saving, composting or recycling food (buns into breadcrumbs, fruit into jam) is a staple of their nature and they are setting a good example today. However, they find it difficult to change their habits (taking home and collecting plastic bags, not giving up meat) and expect younger people to take action on sustainability.

Generation X, 41–55 years old, are tough on sustainability: „*we are falling into a gap and we need to find a handhold so that our descendants can inherit adequate water and food*”. Their sustainability actions require **extra effort** and often fall **outside their comfort zone**. „*Sustainability is a sacrifice so that my poor child can still see green and eat salmon*” or „*what's healthier is also more expensive*”, says Generation X, so often their wallet is driving them when they buy frozen baked goods in plastic wrap. Generation X is **reluctant to give up his car or flying** for the sake of sustainability. They no longer want to live in a world of bottled chemicals,

protecting the environment in many ways, but reluctant to let go of the hard-won comfort and convenience zone. As one says: „if canvas bags are available, fine, but if you have to invest more energy, you're obviously not as motivated”.

Y is anxious, Z is enthusiastic, but both are carrying the burden of saving the Earth

Generation Y, 26–40 years old, is all about a **simpler living, conscious consumption, zero waste**, and the need to **recycle materials** (used clothing, recycled plastic). **Surprisingly, this generation is the least interested in sustainability.** They are full of doubts, for example, about whether the waste collected is actually recycled. The generation's anxiety is also fuelled by the fact that others are looking to them to solve sustainability problems. Y is **under pressure**: they feel that their future is at stake and that they have to do something about it, but they are convinced that change does not depend on one person, because together we can achieve more with cooperation, education and government involvement: „*alone, whatever we do, we can achieve nothing,*” they say. The Ys, with their changing sensibilities, are buying into the environment, are keen to lead by example and can make a difference in their own spheres, but they blame the world for the lack of collective action. In addition to individual action, they want to see the power of a cohesive community, without which they feel powerless.

Sustainability is the sword of Damocles hanging over the heads of **Generation Z** under 25. 57% of the age group **feel they will have to solve this issue.** Many want a chemical-free, self-sufficient garden, a break with fast fashion and animal-tested products, status symbol cars and PET bottles forever. They take inspiration from **zero waste groups**, clean with vinegar and citric acid, use canvas bags instead of plastic ones. But they also have plenty of anxiety: the first question **they ask themselves is whether they dare to have children in this world.** „*For me, the word sustainability is positive, but it also makes me feel anxious, it makes me feel like I have to do something because I can't just stand by and watch the turtle with a straw in its nose.*” They believe in public transport, prefer domestic travel, seek out packaging-free shops, carry their tap water in a canteen, all the while carrying the burden of 'you'll sort it out'. Generation Z, who learn about sustainability from a very early age, make sustainable choices easily, but do not yet have a lot of responsibility: their actions and purchases are still mostly for their own needs (56% of respondents are educated and supported by their parents). The key question is whether their positive habits will be maintained when they become independent.

The research

SteiGen and UniCredit used a representative online survey of 1,000 respondents, focus group discussions with different generations and different places of residence, as well as in-depth individual 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 between 1965–79, now aged 41–55
- Generation Y, born between 1980–94, now aged 26–40
- Generation Z, born between 1995–2003, now aged 18–25