

# Sustainable behaviour

Four missions for  
the Humanities'  
contribution to the  
green transition



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## Four missions for the Humanities' contribution to the green transition

The faculties and departments of humanities at the Danish universities have drawn up four missions for environmental humanities research. The purpose of the missions is to describe and clarify how the Humanities can contribute to the green transition and facilitate sustainable behaviour.

While pursuing these missions, the humanities will also enter interdisciplinary collaborations with other research areas and external partners in order to ensure that the knowledge generated by the humanities is integrated into innovative and tangible solutions to solving the complex environmental challenges that we face today.

### The goals of the four missions are:

- Popular support and democratic legitimacy for green initiatives
- Clear and coherent visions for a sustainable society
- The scalability of green solutions from the local to the global level
- A high level of competence through green education.

These four missions are crucial for the green transition to succeed. They are also dimensions to be integrated into other green solutions – from new technology to legal and economic regulation of production and consumption.

## **Mission 1:** Generate popular support and democratic legitimacy for the green transition

The green transition will affect us all in the decades to come. In a democracy, the government needs popular support for green regulation and legislation. Generating that support requires insight, by both the electorate and the politicians, into the fact that society comprises many groups, interests, and values. Openness, dialogue, and clear communication are essential to the process.

The knowledge that the humanities possess of everyday life, social media, ethical dilemmas, and languages is key to generate this insight. It is also key in ensuring that the transition is locally embedded and based on the voice of the people. Humanities researchers will also deploy their knowledge of historical change and cultural differences – between generations, the urban and the rural, social classes, and religions – to devise initiatives that will endow democratic legitimacy on the transition and to gather popular ideas and suggestions for sustainable and just ways of living and organising society.

## **Mission 2:** Coherence and vision for the green transition: New narratives about humankind, nature, and possible futures

Climate change poses fundamental questions about how humankind manipulates nature, and it exposes the obvious vulnerability of current systems. What will humankind's new role in the world be, as we navigate our way toward sustainable futures? What visions have been outlined for these futures in fictional and non-fictional literature?

The humanities have a strong base in aesthetic, historical, and philosophical research, which shows the entanglement of landscapes, natural resources, humans, animals, and plants. Research provides insight into past, present, and potential future transitions and adaptations based on social innovation and resilience. The humanities ensure the knowledge of narratives and visions that can point to sustainable futures of which people will be able to relate.

### **Mission 3:** Local and global – scalable green solutions

A country like Denmark is not able to see the transition through on its own. Implementing sustainable solutions calls for countries and regions to work together, locally and globally, because ecosystems and natural resources transcend national borders. Local solutions must be translatable into other systems, cultures, languages, and economies. This will not be achieved by mechanical upscaling. In addition, the local effects of climate change and the regional priorities and preconditions for green transition are widely different and require knowledge of context and opportunities. The humanities possess extensive knowledge of the world's many languages and cultures, new and old, knowledge that is crucial if we are all to work together on the flexible and sustainable implementation of large-scale green solutions. The humanities' contribution to this includes cross-cultural studies of consumption patterns; research competencies in social inequality, tourism, climate migration, and the circulation of goods, labour, and waste; as well as knowledge of the cultural encounters and clashes that will determine the real outcomes of sustainability initiatives.

### **Mission 4:** Education and training for a green society

The humanities have unique competencies in green education and training for sustainability, both in terms of learning and of inclusive ways of working with children and young people, groups of consumers and citizens, employees, and businesses. The humanities can offer continued education and insights into sustainable leadership and policy development. The humanities have specific research competencies in the green curriculum at all levels of education and in the development of sustainable care practices. Sustainability must not be a separate theme in education and in institutions with civic responsibilities. It needs to be an integral part of all general education and practical knowledge about the environment. The quality of the humanities' pedagogical, didactic, and organisational research adds to the high level of competency throughout the education system – daycare, schools, and higher education – as well as in workplaces and in the public and private sectors. All of these areas require ethically informed actions, knowledge on habits and moderation in the use of resources, cooperation skills, as well as critical and long-term thinking.

# Background to the four missions

The sustainable behaviour of the future will entail changes to production, consumption, habits, and values – and not just in Denmark. Climate change is a global phenomenon and calls for solutions that involve interaction and solidarity between countries, regions, and cultures.

The global climate crisis has made it clear that human activities are an integral part of the evolution of important ecosystems. Humankind and nature are intertwined in all respects, and we must make practical use of that insight. The green transition will depend on wide-ranging social and cultural transformations, which must not only be driven by threats of disaster or be perceived as “setbacks”. Instead, we need to draw up new frameworks of understanding, bottom-up initiatives, and visions, as part of which the green transition must also accommodate progress based on new premisses.

The four missions develop these premises within an environmental humanities framework and under the collective term “sustainable behaviour”, which covers both the individual and society. The point of the missions is to clarify the contribution that the humanities can make to solutions that will facilitate green transition. They will also help raise Sustainable Behaviour and Societal Consequences – topic 7 in the Danish government’s research strategy – to the status of a separate, politically prioritised mission in the overall national research strategy.

Humanities research can facilitate the development of tangible solutions based on human behaviour – culture, values, history, communication, and cognition – without which green solutions will not work. In addition, the humanities encompass specialised knowledge of forms of organisation and communities that assure involvement, long-term horizons, balancing of ethical dilemmas, and co-ownership.

## Mission-driven climate and sustainability research

Environmental Humanities is a rapidly expanding international field of research. It covers multiple disciplines and requires collaboration across the humanities, social sciences, and other main scientific areas. The green transition will consist of technological, economic, and cultural transformations. Making them all work together is the challenge.

Mission-driven research (Mazzucato 2018) is based on setting clear and prioritised goals that will address major social challenges and bring together diverse actors, not just from all the sciences but also from across sectors such as the state, business, foundations, universities, and civil society. Mission-driven research incorporates the whole value chain from basic to applied research and commits the sciences to be creative and to seek solutions and evaluate their own impact and innovation in relation to the targets set by the missions. Research also has a duty to qualify, critically verify, and adjust the missions that society pursues.

Mission-driven research requires interdisciplinary collaboration, understanding, and shared forms of governance – as well as in-depth academic specialisation. These four missions for sustainable behaviour and green transition are not meant to imply that humanities solutions can stand alone – they are no more capable of that than technological ones. Rather, the missions clarify the contribution the humanities can make, and the areas they should target.

**Spring 2022**

Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Aalborg University

Faculty of Arts, Aarhus University

Department of Management, Society and Communication, Copenhagen Business School

Faculty of Humanities, University of Copenhagen

Department of Communication and Arts, Roskilde University

Faculty of Humanities, University of Southern Denmark

