Zurich, August 26, 2025

BUILDING RESILIENCE IN THE AGE OF UNCERTAINTY
Z-Forum on Sustainability and Innovation, January 15-16, 2026, Zurich Switzerland

The conference "Building Resilience in the Age of Uncertainty," to be held at Technopark Zürich from 15 to 16 January 2026, and supported by numerous public and private sector partners, addresses a growing demand in academia, business, and government to understand sustainability in a broader, future-oriented context. It posits that sustainability should encompass the ability to respond to global environmental changes, migration, and geopolitical shifts that may disrupt value chains and threaten food and energy security.

In this context, the current sustainability discourse, particularly in high-income countries, which focuses primarily on protection and conservation, may need to be supplemented with an opportunity-driven approach, which aims at enhancing societal resilience through investments in scalable innovations that promote inclusive and sustainable change in the long run.

The challenge of reconciling the Paris Climate Agreement with the UN SDGs

Recent empirical research and practical insights underscore the necessity for an opportunity-driven approach to resilience management. They point at the urgent need to reconcile the greenhouse gas emission reduction commitments made by signatory states of the Paris Agreement on Climate Change with the social and economic objectives of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (UN SDGs). These goals aim to improve food and energy security through investments in inclusive and sustainable growth by 2030 (WHO/FAO 2023). This urgency is reflected in the SDGs slogan "leave no one behind."

Moreover, several UN SDG targets related to combating hunger, poverty, and gender inequality emphasize the importance of investing in local entrepreneurship, innovation, and job creation for inclusive and sustainable change (Juma 2015, Aerni 2018, UNCTAD 2024). This is particularly critical for low-income countries experiencing high rates of rural-urban migration and youth unemployment (Aerni 2016, Saunders 2010). These countries tend to adopt a pragmatic and solution-oriented approach to sustainability, recognizing that prosperity is vital for social resilience and protecting the environment (Aerni 2025).

Learning from successful policy initiatives in the past and present to overcome crisis

Many European countries have historically pursued pragmatic and opportunity-driven approaches to cope with emerging social and environmental challenges stemming from early industrialization and population growth in the 19th century.

Switzerland, in particular, emerged at that time as a strong, resilient, and inclusive economy at the heart of Europe, thanks to collaborative public-private investments in infrastructure and innovative solutions that foster inclusiveness and competitiveness (Aerni 2021a, Jung 2020).

Today, numerous economic ecosystems outside major Swiss urban centers continue to excel in highly specialized fields. This will be illustrated by the case of the economic region of Baden, a small town in the Canton of Aargau, which has evolved into a high-tech production cluster with global reach.

Chair of the Steering Committee

Prof. Dr. Philipp Aerni

Director of CCRS
Sustainability Foundation
Technopark Zurich

Chair of the Adivsory Board

Prof. Dr. Max Bergman

Chair of Social Research and Methodology,
Director of the Social Transition Research Group
University of Basel

Further Readings:

Aerni P (2025) Innovation in times of crisis: a pragmatic and inclusive approach to cope with urgent global sustainability challenges. Frontiers in Environmental Economics 4:1498138. http://doi.org/10.3389/frevc.2025.1498138

Aerni, P. (2021a) 'Decentralized economic ecosystems in Switzerland and their contribution to inclusive and sustainable change'. Sustainability 13(8), 4181. https://doi.org/10.3390/su13084181

Aerni, P. (2021b) Business as Part of the Solution": SDG 8 Challenges Popular Views in the Global Sustainability Discourse'. MPDI Book Series on Transitioning toward Sustainability, pp 67-101). https://doi.org/10.3390/books978-3-03897-779-7-4

Aerni, P. (2016) Aerni, Philipp (2016). Coping with migration-induced urban growth: addressing the blind spot of UN habitat. Sustainability, 8(8):800 https://doi.org/10.3390/su8080800

Basso, B., Tadiello, T., Millar, N., Robertson, G. P., Paustian, K., Maureira, F. S., et al. (2025). A multi model ensemble reveals net climate benefits from regenerative practices in US Midwest croplands. Scientific Reports, 15(1), 24881.

Cakir, I., Aerni, P., Bergman, M. M., & Cakir, B. (2023). esg2go: a method to reduce bias, improve coherence, and increase practicality of ESG rating and reporting. Sustainability, 15(24), 16872.

Doug Saunders (2011) Arrival city: How the largest migration in history is reshaping our world. Random House, New York.

Jin, K. (2023) The New China Playbook. Beyond Socialism and Capitalism. Viking, New York.

Juma, C. (2016). Innovation and its enemies: Why people resist new technologies. Oxford University Press.

Jung, J. (2020) Laboratorium des Fortschritts: die Schweiz im 19ten Jahrhundert. NZZ Libro.

UNCTAD (2024). Global cooperation in science, technology and innovation for development. Report to the Secretary General by the Commission on Science and Technology for Development. E/CN.16/2024/3. Economic and Social Council of the UN, Geneva. (Available online: https://unctad.org/system/files/official-document/ecn162024d3_en.pdf).

WHO/FAO (2023). The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2023: Urbanization, Agrifood Systems Transformation and Healthy Diets Across the Rural–urban Continuum (Vol. 2023). World Health Organization/Food and Agriculture Organisation, Rome, Italy.