



UiO • **Faculty of Law**
University of Oslo

Reflections on the future of legal & interdisciplinary research for sustainability

PhD seminar on Sustainability Law 2023

Professor Beate Sjøfjell, 20 October 2023



[Beate Sjøfjell](#)
[Sustainability Law](#)



Key takeaways

- Sustainability is complex, interconnected and messy. It cannot be decomplexified down to simple metrics
- Objective research is a myth. The key is transparency
- We can all contribute to research for sustainability
- Legal research for sustainability is by definition interdisciplinary
- Sustainability is the grand challenge of our time



United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (the SDGs)

We resolve, between now and 2030, to end poverty and hunger everywhere; to combat inequalities within and among countries; to build **peaceful, just and inclusive societies**; to protect human rights and promote gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls; and to ensure the **lasting protection of the planet and its natural resources** (Agenda 2030, Introduction para. 3)



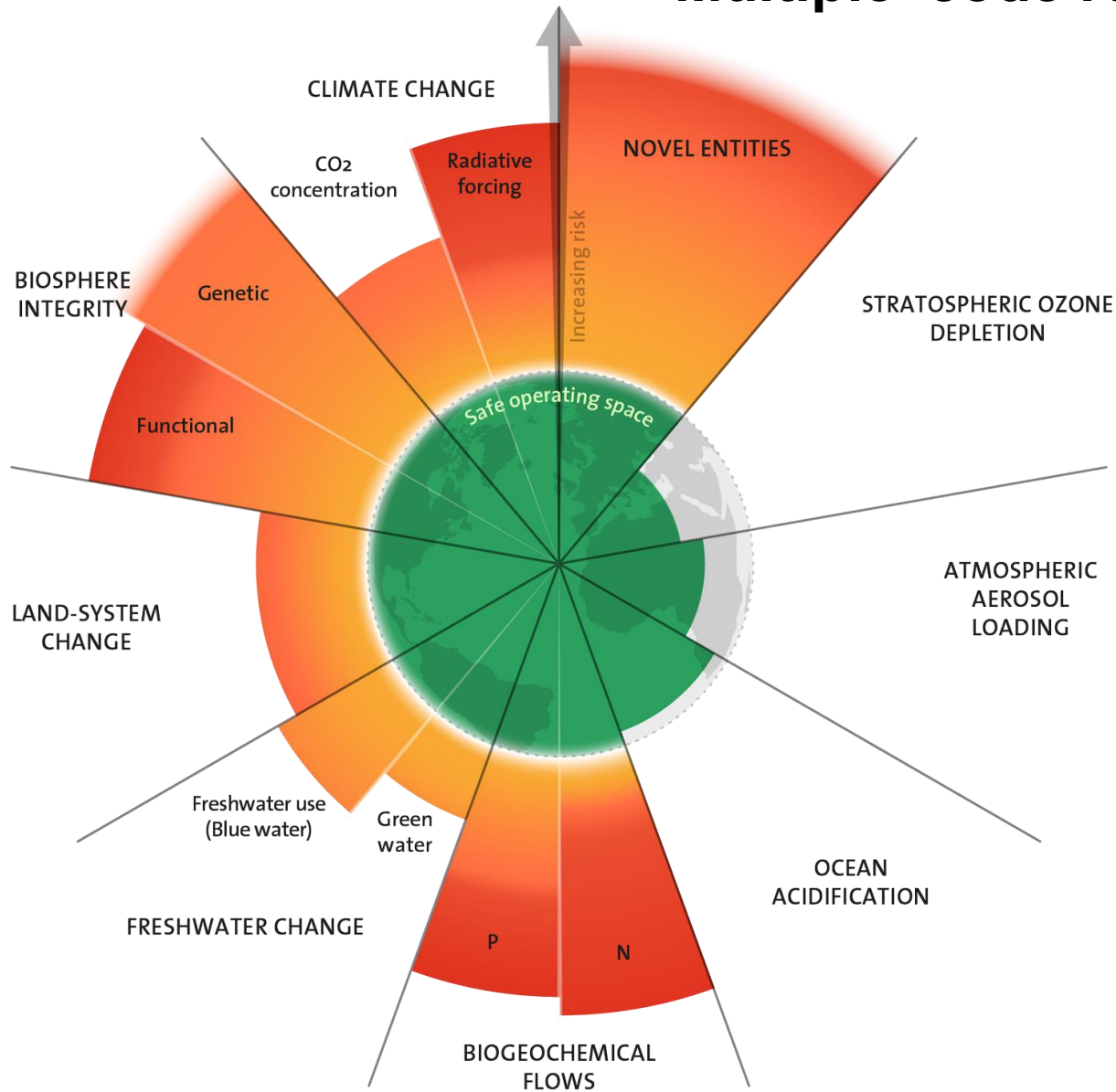
Source: un.org:
About the Sustainable
Development Agenda

‘Code red for humanity’



Photo: Michael
Held

Multiple 'code reds' for humanity



Credit: Azote for Stockholm Resilience Centre, based on analysis in Richardson et al 2023



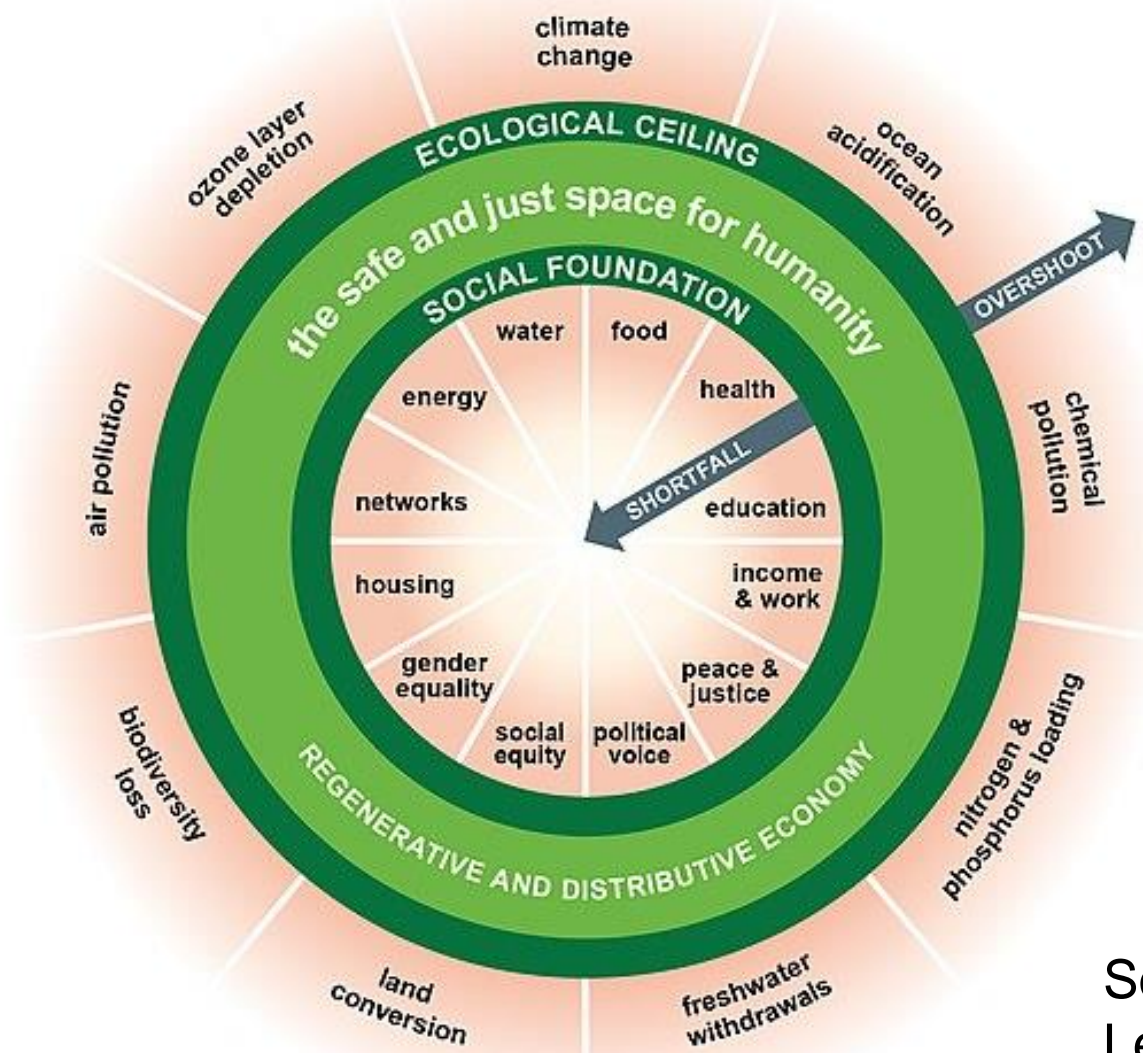
Leaving no-one behind?

Photo: [The Carter Center / G. Dubourthoumieu](#). Source: <https://industryeurope.com/sectors/metals-mining/5-tech-giants-sued-over-use-of-child-labour/>

Photo: [Euractiv](#) 14 November 2019, file photo from protests at Moria refugee camp, Lesbos, Greece



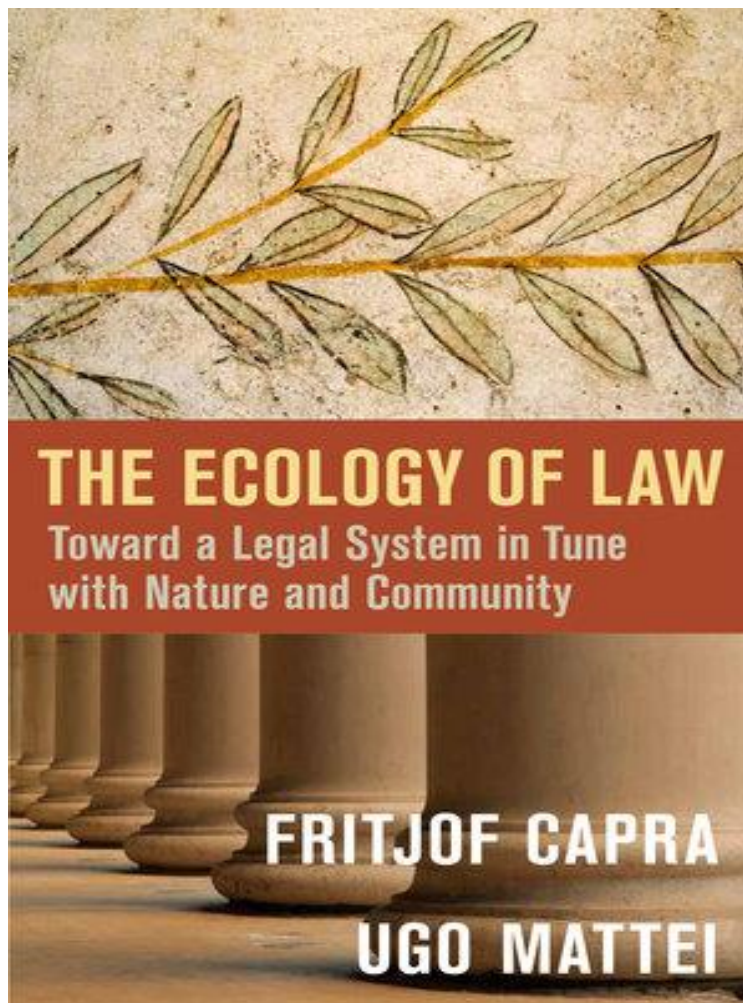
A safe and just space for humanity



Source: Raworth 2017;
Leach, Raworth &
Rockström 2013

What is the role of law for sustainability?

- Amongst society's most powerful tools
 - The constitutive role of law
 - The conceptualising role of law
 - The norm-changing effect of law
-
- And yet law also has limitations



The failures of law

- A mechanistic and siloed approach
- Horizontal and vertical silos
- Rigid, backward-looking
- Path-dependent perpetuation of inequality
- Property and power – rather than commons and community
- Inverted relationship between competence of law and need for regulation

Sustainability Law

‘An emerging field of law that aims to identify, analyse and propose normative solutions to the fundamental environmental, social and governance problems of our time’



What is the role of research for sustainability?

- Theory development
 - Includes questioning the dominant theories (or postulates inspired by theory)
- Analyses of law
 - A starting point can be: What are the overarching objectives of your area of law? What are the objectives of the piece of legislation you are working on? Are they fit for purpose?
- Transdisciplinary work
 - Publishing academic articles is not the only or a sufficient way of contributing to change. We can contribute to change (also) through dialogue and coproduction of knowledge.



Source: [A Sustainable Europe by 2030](#) (2019 Reflection Paper)

Source: [EU holistic approach to sustainable development](#) (Commission website)



Sustainability on the EU agenda

A European Green Deal

Striving to be the first climate-neutral continent

FINANCING A
SUSTAINABLE
EUROPEAN ECONOMY



Buying green!

A handbook on green public procurement
3rd Edition



Circular Economy Action Plan

For a cleaner and
more competitive
Europe

Sustainable corporate governance

European Commission conference
24 January 2019
Brussels



Business as usual & drivers for change



Plastic: Photo credit: Westend61/Getty Images. [The Guardian](#), 2023.

Deforestation: Photo credit: Michael Dantas/AFP/Getty Images. [The Guardian](#), 2023.

Children: Photo credit: The Carter Center / G. Dubourthoumieu. [Industry Europe](#), 2019.

Finance as usual & drivers for change



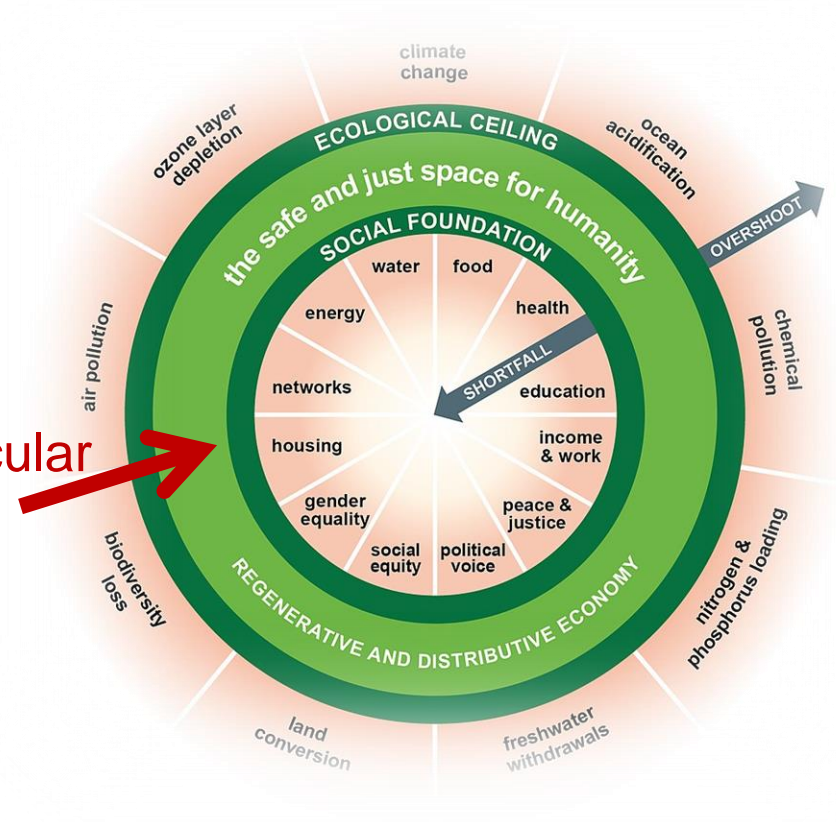
A coal mine in Jharia, India. Banks have continued to finance the fossil fuel industry, despite net zero pledges
© Tripod Stories AB

[Banking on Climate Chaos: Fossil Fuel Finance Report 2023.](#)
[More on the report here.](#)

From the linear economic model of business as usual...



to a Sustainable Circular Economy?



Ensuring sustainability is the greatest challenge to our common future

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