



By: *Emre Alkin*

# Sustainability: Is it a Fashion or a Lifestyle?



Recently, there was an international brand meeting in Istanbul focused on sustainability. Within a week, I had the opportunity to speak at a second international conference.

I realized that when it comes to sustainability, people are often not fully aware of the topic. For example, a friend who saw me in the lobby of the hotel where the conference was held asked, "You're attending that environment-related meeting, right?" This alone showed me that we have a long way to go.

If I tried to explain to him that only a few of the 17 sustainable development **goals** set by the United Nations are being tackled, I would have missed the conference, so I left, hoping he would learn in time.

Most of the time people think that, as economists, we find the ability to talk about everything, but believe me, we don't attend these meetings unprepared. However, when I saw a serious number of well-dressed professionals and executives attending the meeting, I thought it appropriate to take a different approach for these valuable women and men.

First, I said, "Those named Kerem and Dilara, please raise your hands." I saw at least 50 people among the audience raise their hands. Then, I told them a nice city story:

## Kerem

I reminded them that 17 million people in Turkey live alone, and described one of them, Kerem, like this: His first job in the morning is to take a shower, but he has a habit of leaving the shower running for five minutes until the water warms up.

He does the same when shaving, then applies deodorant and perfume that he has never researched for environmental friendliness. He picks one from ten similar suits and wears the least worn one from among twenty shirts.

After all, he has to be careful because his deodorant stains the armpits of his shirts. He

has numerous pairs of sneakers on one side of his shoe closet, with at least ten pairs of work shoes on the other side.

## Kerem goes to work with a driver who is paid minimum wage

Today, he prefers the laced ones and finishes his look by choosing his tie jungle, the appropriate one. Below, there's a car that indicates his status, with a driver waiting inside.

To ensure Kerem does not get hot or cold, the driver idles the vehicle for 30 minutes without moving. Since Kerem is a high-level professional at a young age, he chooses everything from his clothes to his car to project the image he wants to give.

He goes to work with a driver who is paid minimum wage. To strengthen the company's international position, he is working hard to meet the United Nations' 17 sustainability goals.

## Dilara

The same applies to Dilara. She has also reached important positions at a young age. To show that she aligns with her company's sensitivity regarding sustainability, she writes policies and implements procedures.

Living alone, she often leaves the lights on and behaves similarly to Kerem as soon as she gets up in the morning. She leaves the water running while brushing her teeth, and being environmentally conscious is not a detail she considers when choosing her perfume.

## Dilara has bought many items but has never worn them

She selects her handbag from the bag jungle. She chooses one piece of footwear from what can be described as a shoe library. She has bought many items but has never worn them.

In the morning, she selects one suitable for the theme from about 30 similar work dresses. Her driver is waiting downstairs, and of course, the car is electric, but it is heated or cooled 30 minutes in advance according to the season. She uses her driver day and night, and since she lives alone, the driver has become like her right hand. This means huge amounts of work for a very low wage.

## A career objective

Kerem and Dilara share another common feature: they were raised by parents who said, "Since we don't spend time with our children, at least let's allocate money for them." Therefore, they lack much empathy. They see the sustainability issue only as a duty or a career objective. In summary, they view it as a competitive factor with their colleagues or other companies.

Of course, while I was explaining this, I noticed that the conference attendees both laughed and reacted with "Come on, no way!" to my comments.

But they knew that my observations were right. The names Kerem and Dilara are just examples; I don't think it would be wrong to illustrate with other names from the United States to Australia.

The truth is that many people confuse the concept of sustainability with stability or consistency. The 17 items meticulously prepared by the United Nations are actually complementary to each other.

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The only problematic issue here is that, despite knowing they could elevate to a different level with these principles, firms in

countries facing economic difficulties should not make it a priority due to resource shortages.

On the other hand, we understand that professionals in firms with financial capability view the issue not as a new life course or model, but as items on a checklist.

Still, we are pleased to see that there is significant interest and that regulatory authorities are imposing conditions related to these 17 principles in commercial life.

Bernard Shaw once said, "Democracy is the guarantee that a nation will not be governed better than it deserves." This simple sentence shows us that if, from the most intellectual to the simplest citizen, a sense of responsibility regarding these 17 principles has not awakened in a country, it is inevitable that the state will have a similar approach.

Investments, expenditures, and approaches of the governments will reflect the lifestyle of Kerem and Dilara.

## Responsible consumption

Now, let's take a look at the global situation: urban populations have outnumbered rural populations by billions; more than 90% of urban centers are located near water. These vulnerable coastal areas are at great risk due to climate change.

We see that the number of people living alone is increasing not only in Turkey but in many countries around the world. Therefore, it would not be wrong to say we are going through a process where key decision-makers in companies face risks.

I will not explain the 17 Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations item by item here. However, it is clear that very little is being done in the name of "responsible consumption."



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It is a fact that the depreciation of the Yen has led the Chinese to come with expensive Yuan and explode luxury consumption in Japan, while we observe that Americans continue to consume without slowing down.

Issues such as gender equality, access to food for children and young people, environmental disasters, failures in quality of life, problems in the quality of education, fruitless efforts regarding clean water and sanitation, and perhaps most importantly, the failure to establish a model for decent work and economic growth, have raised many question marks.

Even economists like me, who believe in all 17 principles, are convinced that for some countries it is imperative (mandatory), for some countries it is qualitative (based on education), but for some countries it is only decorative.

I must confess how difficult it is to achieve these goals. Particularly, with the European economy facing difficulties, starting with Germany, the ongoing uncertainty about the post-election situation in the U.S., and the focus of developing countries on growth rather than development, there is still much work to be done in this area.

However, it would not be wrong to say that the revolution can succeed not from the top down but rather from the bottom up—specifically through individuals' belief and application.