Call for Papers
2026 ESIL Research Forum
Interest Group on International Legal Theory and Philosophy

Normalizing Sustainability
Theoretical Perspectives on Stability and Change in International Law

(8 April 2026, Online)

"Sustainability" has become one of international law's most successful travelling concepts. From climate treaties and trade agreements to peacebuilding mandates, investment contracts and human rights reporting, the language of "sustainable development," "sustainable peace," and "sustainable futures" offers an apparently self-evident orientation for governing the planet. Yet the concept's very plasticity invites further investigation. Sustainability names, at once, an economic program, an environmental ethic, a security strategy, a communicative style and a normative horizon—while rarely disclosing the theoretic labors that make these dimensions commensurable.

This panel approaches "sustainability" as a site of translation between disciplines and forms of expertise. Economic theory, political science, peace and conflict studies, rhetoric, and communication/media studies all provide repertoires—growth models, governance templates, conflict diagnostics, narrative and framing techniques, visual iconography—through which sustainability is rendered thinkable and actionable. International law then takes up these repertoires, sedimenting them into treaty language, institutional mandates, standards of review and professional common sense. In the process, specific visions of economy, security, temporality and social order are naturalized as if they were simply properties of "sustainability" itself.

The panel is convened by the ESIL Interest Group on International Legal Theory and Philosophy (IGILTP), with the organizing committee of Kevin Crow, Kostia Gorobets, and Nina Mileva.

The panel seeks to ask, in explicitly "international legal-theoretical" terms:

1. What happens to law's concepts—obligation, responsibility, harm, risk, entitlement, sovereignty, even legality itself—once they are re-centered around sustainability?

2. And conversely, what happens to the theories of economy, politics, peace, rhetoric and media that are drawn inside the legal form and made to speak as law?

Rather than treating "sustainability" as a neutral goal to be more or less effectively implemented, we invite papers that treat it as a contested epistemic and normative project. The focus is on how other disciplines are translated into international law through sustainability, and how those translations become entrenched—juridified, institutionalized, made to appear inevitable.

In selecting papers for the panel, we are particularly interested in contributions that:

1. **Interrogate economic theory in the sustainability register.**

    How have notions of sustainable growth, green economy, natural capital, discounting and risk management travelled from economics into international legal instruments? How do cost–benefit analysis, metrics of "resilience," or scenarios of "transition" reorganize legal understandings of environmental harm, responsibility or due diligence? What kinds of economic futures are presupposed when sustainability is framed as primarily an optimization problem?

2. **Trace political science and governance models in sustainability law.**

    Sustainability is often paired with "good governance," policy coherence, multi-stakeholderism and regime complexes. How do political science theories of governance, institutional design and compliance feed into legal constructions of, for example, "sustainable development goals," "sustainable peace," or "sustainable use" of resources? How does the sustainability agenda re-code classical international legal concerns—sovereignty, non-intervention, self-determination—as technocratic questions of institutional architecture and performance indicators?

3. **Examine peace and conflict studies in "sustainable peace" discourses.**

    The language of sustainability now pervades peacebuilding, statebuilding and security mandates. What is at stake when post-conflict orders are evaluated in terms of "sustainable peace" or "sustainable security"? How do conflict diagnoses and peacebuilding templates from peace/conflict studies become legalized in mandates, agreements, or Security Council practice? In what ways does sustainability discourse stabilize particular narratives of conflict, responsibility and repair?

4. **Analyze the rhetorical and communicative forms of sustainability.**

    Sustainability is also a style: a way of speaking, narrating and persuading. How do rhetorical strategies—balancing, proportionality, win–win storylines, emergency versus gradual transition narratives, or narratives of catastrophe —naturalize particular distributions of sacrifice and benefit in the name of sustainability? What kinds of temporalities (crisis, transition, permanence) and subject positions (responsible consumer, resilient community, green investor) are produced through sustainability rhetoric in international law and policy?

5. **Explore the role of communication and media studies in sustainability's visual and narrative economy.**

    Sustainability arrives with its own iconography: SDG wheels, carbon graphs, "hockey sticks," maps of planetary boundaries, ESG ratings, glossy images of wind farms and seedling-in-a-hand stock photos. How do these visual and communicative regimes mediate the authority of international legal claims about sustainability? How do media logics—virality,

branding, reputational risk—interact with legal forms such as soft law guidelines, reporting frameworks or due diligence obligations?

Across these lines of inquiry, the panel will take international legal theory as its home discipline and organizing lens. We are interested in what sustainability does to international law 'as law': its forms of argument, its sources doctrine, its allocation of authority amongst states, markets and 'stakeholders', its conception of the relationship between knowledge and normativity, etc. Possible theoretical approaches include (but are not limited to):

- Critical and post-critical international legal theory;
- Law and political economy;
- TWAIL, feminist and queer approaches to international law;
- Marxist, post-Marxist and materialist theories of law and the environment;
- Socio-legal and anthropological approaches to international institutions and expertise;
- Theories of discourse, rhetoric and ideology;
- Theories of temporality, risk and the future in law;
- Law and humanities.

We encourage contributions that work across doctrinal fields—international environmental law, international economic law, human rights, peace and security, humanitarian law, law of the sea, banking and finance, amongst others—to show how "sustainability" operates as a transversal concept. Case-specific or historical analyses are welcome but should engage explicitly with the theoretical stakes of translation and entrenchment: e.g. *which* disciplinary knowledges become law under the sign of sustainability, *whose* futures they secure, *what* legal forms, constructs, understands, framings, argumentations, and technologies are used *where* and *how*, etc.

Submission procedure

- Abstracts no longer than 500 words together with a short author bio (no longer than 250 words containing name, affiliation, email and phone contact details, whether they are an ESIL member, and relevant publications) should be submitted by **12pm (CEST) 2 February 2026 to the following email address: esilig.legaltheory@gmail.com**. No late submission will be considered.
- Abstracts will be selected on the basis of their alignment with the panel description and objectives above, as well as their contribution to the field from a particular theoretical perspective. Successful applicants will be notified no later than 15 February 2026.
- Selected applicants will be invited to prepare a draft paper, to be **presented on 8 April 2026** during the Interest Group panel. Presenters will be expected to send the **draft paper to the organizers no later than 1 April 2026**, so that it may be circulated to the other speakers. Please note that this panel will take place **fully online**.