Healthy food has long been available in the supermarkets, consumers can now choose from a wide range of products. Many supermarket chains actively promote organic foods as part of their sustainability strategy.

Right: Workers from a plantation in Ethiopia sort the coffee beans. They have joined together to form a cooperative. They thus receive fair wages and social benefits such as health insurance. However, sustainability also means upholding social norms - along the entire production chain.
“It has something to do with the environment, right?” Answers to this effect were the standard response when passers-by on the street were asked ten years ago what sustainability was about. More profound statements such as “We should leave the earth to our children and grandchildren in the state we found it,” were rare at that time.

Thomas Loster
Today, roughly 40 years after the first work groups addressed the concept of sustainability, we are a good deal further. The principle of acting with ecological, social and economic awareness and of preserving resources is being increasingly better understood and given greater consideration — in advertising, in the media and in consumption behaviour. Companies have come to recognise that only sustainable economic management is future-oriented management. Sustainability has become an integral part of political debates. Not only when it comes to climate policies and the energy turnaround, but also in development policies and issues of demography and urban planning.

More than just an environmental topic
The agreement reached by almost 180 countries at the World Climate Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, namely the sustainable development of the world, is increasingly becoming a reality. This required not only countless further national and international conferences but also workshops and campaigns. Legions of committed people of all ranks dedicated their efforts over years, if not decades, to promoting better awareness of this topic too. With the result that the concept of “sustainability” has now been embraced in our daily lives.

For example at the shop counter: chocolate and coffee packaging displays Fair Trade symbols, and even in the discount supermarkets, almost no tin of fish can be found that does not bear the “Certified Sustainable Seafood MSC” label. OEKO-TEX Standard sustainability labels on bed linen, towels and t-shirts are intended to instil “confidence in textiles”. Talking about textiles: the efforts of the German Minister for Economic Cooperation and Development, Gerd Müller, to standardise labelling for sustainably produced clothing demonstrate impressively that environmental issues are far from being the sole concern. Social aspects and the right to fair development play the central role in this respect. The minister is calling for social standards along “the entire supply chain, from the cotton plant to the clothes hanger”.

Sustainability costs
For many people, this is taking things too far, they are afraid of higher costs. This is based on the idea that sustainability must inevitably succumb to the demand for low cost food and textiles in times of tight budgets. It is correct that low incomes make sustainable consumption more difficult. However, even those on a low budget can more and more frequently find respectively certified products if they look carefully.

Of course, the process of leading a whole society onto this future-oriented path of sustainability will take a long time. This should not deter us, as slow changes can also help us reach the goal step by step. In some areas, there has already been quite a lot of success. Whereas waste separation and environmentally-friendly laundering were formerly something practised only by environmentalists and nature activists, today they are taken for granted by everyone. Those who take an even closer look will find concessions everywhere: in hotels, shops and public buildings. A look at the Internet also demonstrates how important sustainability is. Entering the German term into a search engine returns more than ten million hits. Search results for the English word even exceed the 100 million mark.

The issue has with certainty been strongly advanced by the social media that are growing more dynamically than ever in our globalised world. They ensure that information about mistakes and detrimental developments spread like wildfire to the public. Violating the principle of sustainability can thus develop into a reputational risk. In a transparent world, lip service and greenwashing have ever fewer opportunities of success.

The next sustainability round
Have we reached the goal? No, there is still a lot to be done. The UN Decade “Education for Sustainable Development”, for example, has just pointed out that this guiding principle still does not appear often enough in curricula or teaching material. This applies not only to early childhood education but also to schools, professional life and life-long learning to an advanced age. It is clear, however, that the United Nations have at least recognised the problem and dedicated a whole decade to it. When the decade comes to an end at the end of 2014, we must not fear that the topic will vanish into thin air. The “Sustainable Development Goals” that will apply worldwide and follow the UN millennium goals ending in 2015, will give the discussion a new impetus. One thing is certain: goals alone will not be enough. Each person must take sustainability seriously and apply it in everyday life.
Gazipur in Bangladesh is known for its textile industry. Most of the clothes worn worldwide are produced here. Fair wages for the workers and compliance with safety regulations are also the responsibility of the big trading companies and of the consumers.