

KLAUS TÖPFER, CO-FOUNDER OF T(ÖPFER)MG - THINK TANK FOR SUSTAINABILITY, PASSES AWAY



Photo credit: Alexander Müller

Co-founder of T(öpfer)MG - Think Tank for Sustainability, Klaus Töpfer, a thought leader and political practitioner of sustainability and personally a very good friend, passed away on 8th June, surrounded by his family.

Anyone who followed the news and public expressions of grief in the media on 11th June 2024 could see just how many institutions, parties, associations, clubs ... mourned him. We at TMG - Think Tank for Sustainability are deeply saddened by the loss of Klaus Töpfer as a person and particularly his inspiring spirit that has repeatedly challenged us in the years since our founding. Our thoughts are with his wife and family at this difficult time.

It speaks for Klaus, for his life's work, for his tireless willingness to engage in discussion and for his intellectual acuity, that there is an overwhelming and honest commonality across the democratic spectrum in all obituaries: We will miss him! His many successes and achievements in his many positions are honoured - as head of the environmental programme UNEP, as Germany's 'first' environment minister (officially the second, but for many the first 'real' environment minister), as founding director of a scientific institute in Potsdam, but also 'as the oldest founder - with two partners - of a think tank for sustainability called TMG'.

Never before have I received so many emails and messages from all over the world within so few hours all with one question: 'Is it really true that Klaus Töpfer has died?' And almost all the emails contained a common message: **'We owe him so much!'**

That's true - not least for us at TMG. It was Klaus who, building on our joint work on the topic of soil during Global Soil Week, came up with the idea of setting up a separate organisation for this work; together with Jes Weigelt and others, he laid the foundations for the first project funding for this work. Klaus used his worldwide network to invite exciting people and to identify new ideas, not only about land and soil. And it was also Klaus who repeatedly reminded us of the concept of transdisciplinarity as the basis of our

work - he always reminded us to use all available knowledge, 'classical' science as well as traditional, cultural and practical knowledge to solve problems. He was always prepared to stand up for what was right, no matter how uncomfortable. Heiner Geißler is reported in the Tagespiegel as putting it this way on Klaus' 75th birthday: **"Töpfer took the incredibly annoying view that science and ethics have to do with politics."** What a valuable foundation on which we stand and which we must utilise.

In the last few hours, what has reminded me most of the Klaus Töpfer as I know him are the many statements made by the many people he met in the course of his life. On social media, in individual comments under newspaper articles, and also in personal messages and emails, so many people talk of personal encounters with him and share pictures from meetings with him. Klaus is not only valued as a politician, scientist and pioneer of sustainability, but also as a personal counsellor and 'simply' as a person who was a pleasure to meet. That doesn't happen to too many politically active people! On behalf of many, I would like to quote here from a personal message: 'I remember his seemingly endless energy just a few years ago' and 'I am grateful that I was able to get to know him at least briefly over a glass of wine'.

It was almost impossible to sit on a train with Klaus, go to an appointment on the street or enjoy a dinner without being approached by people. Almost everyone knew him and wanted to talk to him or share a memory, often from a long time ago. And sometimes people saw something in him that he had almost become. A taxi driver asked me some time ago, after Klaus got out of the car, 'That was the Federal President, wasn't it?' There was also a bit of truth in this. Klaus was twice very close to being nominated as Federal President – that's why the saying goes that 'Klaus Töpfer was the best Federal President Germany never had ...'

We consider ourselves fortunate that we were able to accompany Klaus Töpfer on his journey for a number of years, especially after he founded TMG, that we were repeatedly challenged by him and were able to benefit from his knowledge in discussions. Like so many others, we will miss him and his ideas! It is a special obligation for us to further develop the central idea of transdisciplinarity that Klaus Töpfer brought to TMG. He was firmly convinced that there must and could be a place where transdisciplinary science, politics and society could meet to develop new answers to the growing global challenges. Klaus always said that **'politics should not be the art of the possible, but rather the art of making the necessary possible'**. He wanted to work on this art together with us and for that we are eternally grateful.