

*In the summer term 2019, sustainAbility supported three students with a scholarship to write their Master/ Bachelor thesis. One of the students was Miriam Gerstberger who finished her Master in Plant Molecular Biology in December 2019. For her Master thesis, “Sustainable Agriculture in Germany – A bioethical evaluation of Potentials and Limits of New Genome Editing Methods for Different Approaches in Organic Farming”, she received the sustainability award of the University Tübingen in 2020 (“Nachhaltigkeitspreise für Abschlussarbeiten”).*

*In her thesis she evaluated whether genome editing (e.g. CRISPR/Cas9) can have potentials or limits for organic farming by studying the four principles of organic farming (health, ecology, fairness, and care). In her work she was able to show that the use of genome editing can possibly complement organic agriculture in individual cases. But she highlighted that each application has to pass an “extended case-by-case analysis” that takes all three dimensions of sustainability equally into account.*

*More than one year after finishing her Master we interviewed Miriam on our scholarship, sustainability and her social commitment:*

### **How did the scholarship help/influence you?**

The scholarship helped me a lot in developing a more comprehensive and accessible definition of sustainability. The term is used often and in all kinds



Miriam Gerstberger was supported by our scholarship in 2019.

of contexts, but it tends to refer to only one aspect of sustainability, e.g. ecological sustainability. By discussing very different topics in the broad field of sustainability research, the importance of looking at all three aspects in an integrated way became clear. Through the scholarship programme, I also had the opportunity to present my work to a larger audience during the writing process and thus to integrate valuable feedback directly into the thesis.

### **What did you do after you finished your Master? Where do you work currently?**

A short time after I finished my Master, Covid-19 appeared first in the news and then in all our lives. As there were not that many job offers available in the early stages of the pandemic, I was able to focus on voluntary work and started a project that supplied people, who suffered from the closing of local food shelters, with basic food (“Initiative Grundversorgung”). This project ran for a few months and made two things very clear for me:

1. Nutrition and food security are topics that I am confronted with every day in my direct neighbourhood.

2. I want to put my knowledge and experience into projects that help people here where I live to regain access to the local food system and have a democratic say in how our food system should look like. This led to my being part of the founding movement of a "Food policy council for the region of Tübingen and Rottenburg". Of course, voluntary commitment gives a lot to society, but doesn't pay your rent, so I had to find myself a paid job in Tübingen to be able to do what I want to do. Fortunately, I found a great job in Hinrichs Teehus in Tübingen. It is a totally new field of work, but I really like it and the team there is very supportive for my focus on voluntary work.

### What motivates you to work in the field of sustainability? Do you have a social commitment in the field of sustainability?

Covid-19 has once again made it very clear: There is no real alternative to a profound change in many human behaviours, if we want to survive as global humanity. This can seem very threatening at first, but often small steps can lead to a huge impact. I was especially motivated by our project "Initiative Grundversorgung", because on the one hand I experienced once again how bad things are in many areas of our food system, and on the other hand I was very touched by the incredibly large number of volunteers who gave 100 per cent to the project and thus directly helped so many families. The knowledge that we can do



*In line with Miriam's thesis, sustainAbility organized a panel discussion on gene editing and sustainable agriculture in 2019.*

it together motivates me to continue to be active also at the political level in order to create the conditions for a sustainable food system. I am now part of an initiative in Tübingen and Rottenburg, that prepares the founding of a so called "food policy council". There are already many such councils worldwide, 40 alone in Germany and many more on the way. The aim of food policy councils is to bring together different stakeholders of the food system (consumers, traders, farmers, ...) to create a sustainable local food system together and to bring the topic into politics. It is a lot of work to get such a huge project running, and I am glad I have the possibility to be part of it!

### How did your opinion about sustainability change during the last year / while writing your thesis?

My opinion was – and in parts still is – that a great deal has been said about sustainability, but very little is done. Especially on the political and economic level, a lot of things are labelled “sustainable”, but at a closer look reveal themselves as being only slightly “greener”. I also have to admit that during my time at the university, I was often disappointed by how little sustainability aspects were relevant in my course of studies. Thankfully, the Studium Oecologicum was able to provide interesting courses and bring people from different degree programmes together. And by attending the sustainAbility colloquium, that exchange was taken a step further. Thanks to these two programs, my opinion about sustainability has changed in a way that I now see less of the frustrating “nothing happens anyway”, but more of the great projects and people who are involved in practicing sustainability. They are maybe not getting the attention they deserve, but they are there, and they make an impact!

### **What do you think is the most pressing issue regarding sustainability?**

For me it is the topic of sustainable food systems, which is directly linked to climate change. Industrialized agriculture, which relies on fossil fuels, cheap labour forces and endless water supplies will not be an option for the future! How can we make our agriculture more sustainable in a way that supports local farmers, enhances biodiversity, and supports food sovereignty - That is the question that needs to be tackled now!

### **What would you like to tell younger students?**

Look left and right outside your field of study! Don't be afraid of studying longer than the official timetable tells you and use the time to get involved in projects that really inspire you. Try out different courses that are not part of your course program, even if you don't get any credits for them. They just might be the courses, that shape and influence you more than seven years of your main subject 😊