

Building from the corona crisis to a sustainable future

Tim O’Riordan

Tim O’Riordan: An Emeritus Professor of Environmental Sciences at the University of East Anglia, Tim is an expert on the institutional aspects of global environmental change, policy and practice. He is also the European Advisor to the UK Sustainable Development Commission and sits on the Growth and Climate Change Panel for the Anglian Water Group.

Please could you tell us a bit about yourself and your background, and what sustainability means to you?

Well, I began as a geographer and I taught for 40 years as a professor of environmental science, at the University of East Anglia. Even in the days of The Brundtland Report in 1987, Sustainability was considered something that could fit within growth: it could fit within development, it could fit within human endeavour and human prosperity. Now we realize that Sustainability has shifted to encompass inequality and injustice and it requires a systemic change, a fundamental transformation from everything that we've ever done. And so all the governing institutions: all the regulation, technological advancements, means of evaluation, and measurement - anything you care to mention -, all of these things which define change, have to be completely reformulated and redesigned, using different metrics. Covid-19 has helped illustrate fundamental system failures. For example, there is systematic evidence emerging, that Covid-19 is affecting the most vulnerable groups. People in low-paid jobs, who have to go to work and be in close proximity to others, through no fault of their own. Sustainability as we define it now, can become a guiding force to ensure we build a fairer society as we emerge from this pandemic.

How do we ensure that recovery is smart, fair, and green? In particular how do you think we can reconcile the tension between economic growth, GDP and environmental and social wellbeing?

In terms of reconciling economic growth with social well-being, the concept of wellbeing is now becoming, for many people, the most important feature of what we define as improvement, or betterment of their lives. People are starting to reject the view that growth in its own terms is somehow good. In terms of a smarter, fairer, greener recovery, there are a few key points. Firstly, a focus on personal health, collective community health and global health will be crucial. The virus has made this

overwhelmingly important, especially as it probably won't be the only crisis of its kind. Secondly, it's the idea of security. Security of the self, security of the family, security of the neighbourhood, security of the community. Security means being able to live together without damage and harm. It leads to collective improvements, through what might be called compassionate engagement. We are seeing this with the Covid-crisis because lots of people are doing wonderful voluntary things spontaneously. The third thing is to realise that prosperity brings with it sufficiency. We don't need mass consumption. We can reuse products, we can circularize our economy and we can actually have prosperity which is about giving and sharing. Concepts like the sharing economy are becoming much more relevant. Other ideas like basic national income, which still have an ill-formed focus, are becoming more interesting and are being given more consideration than before.

How do you think the corona crisis will affect people's attitudes and behaviours toward sustainability?

One thing I have noticed is that when you actually ask people to do something for the common good and they can see that their personal good and the common good become unified, there's no limit to what people will do. Some might argue, that this will only last as long as the Covid fear envelops us and then once we have a vaccine we'll continue as usual. That need not happen. Organisations like Sustainability First need to feed into the argument that we should build on what we've learned during this crisis and start the process of delivering this common good. The Pope has called it an epiphanal revelation of ecological wellbeing, or a new damascene revelation. A realisation that ecology is essential: that a good ecosystem and a healthy and nurturing planet are essential. The common good isn't just the health of your neighbour or your grandchildren. It's actually also the health of the planetary ecosystem that gives us life as it stands now. I think that kind of thing, given the right attention over the next six to nine months, will change perceptions.

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How can government policy, regulations and institutions help enable the changes you have spoken about? We need two bookends. At one end we need global connectivity, which really began with the famous Rio Conference in 1992. This brought a common approach to sustainability and to development, as well as important steps like Agenda 21. We need a global renewal of this, because we cannot solve these challenges without global cooperation. The thing that is missing, is the other bookend i.e. the local, which has constantly been removed from all discussion. There is no institution, at the local level that provides any kind of semblance of sustainability. It's where 99% of people's lives play out. We need the local to become what we call nurturing and sustainable. We need institutions of governance which give 'the local' much greater salience, so that people can get involved and see it delivering for them. An example might be a local carbon contribution. A process where people pay a due, which is based upon the damage done to each other and to the planet, which will then go into funding specific, local sustainability initiatives. I think the key to governance is the linkage between the global, which is being fragmented at the moment and the local, which has never had a chance at being recognised. How can we achieve this?

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Firstly, through information technology. It's an amazingly efficient way of getting people to converse and generate ideas. Secondly, there is this idea of a listening circle. The Welsh came up with it when they were planning their 'Well-being of Future Generations Act' in 2015. Essentially getting lots of people to meet and discuss key questions, such as: what kind of society would you like to see in five years time? How can we protect the wellbeing of future generations? What changes to our way of life, value systems and institutions might give rise to that? It has been one of the greatest attempts to place well-being and the needs of future generations at the heart of local thinking and local action. What we haven't really got is the political drive, at the level of the nation state, to bridge the divide between the local and the global.

What are your thoughts on the utility of deliberative engagement processes, such as the Climate Assemblies which have been running throughout Spring 2020?

Firstly, you have to have a government which is trusted. There is no point in government setting up a participatory democracy, if people think it's not going to listen, or not going to care, or not going to respond. Governments generally set these things up to try and manipulate their best way out, without actually changing anything. Secondly these activities tend to attract the usual suspects. People who are naturally gifted at speaking: people who have time on their hands, professionals, people who like the idea of influencing and the eco-orientated of society. This means certain groups are shut out of any participatory project. They aren't even identified, nobody knows they exist. They're what I call the quiet shadows. They're not seen, they're not heard. However, they are the ones who are most likely to be helpful in terms of getting this transformational governance towards sustainability, but the least likely to have a voice in allowing that transition to place. This is why you need a very different model. A model where community organizations deliberately go out to the groups who are the quiet shadows and start to give them light, air and the microphone. You need to have much smaller groupings, not the citizen assemblies, which become massively difficult to handle. Thirdly, you need direct engagement from an early stage with key players in government, for them to show they are interested in the outputs of the discussion and that they will be responsive. The only successful experiment is the Irish abortion debate.

What do you think our governing institutions would have to do to rebuild public trust, sufficiently enough to be able to deliver a sustainable future? As we're going about it now, we're going to lose trust in government and we're going to find it very hard to get people to respond to the huge transformational shifts, which will be required as we come out of the Covid crisis. But if we were to start these listening, or conversation groups, to begin connecting people, we might be able to develop a shared vision for the future and for how we move forwards. To ask questions like, 'how do we emerge from this in a way which improves wellbeing for society and for future generations?'. To have this as a parallel exercise, beyond narrowly focussing on the day to day, could prove useful. We should be thinking about what kind of society we want to become and what values we hold. This vision of hope is desperately needed and Covid is a lightning rod for the beginning of this transformational process, with the sustainability movement being central to enabling a better world, where we act differently, organise ourselves differently and measure differently.