Sustainability first

Personal Perspective

The independent charity and think tank shaping policy, regulatory and company agendas for UK utilities – to deliver social, environmental and economic wellbeing

Building from the corona crisis to a sustainable future
Phil Barton, Sustainability First Chair

Phil Barton: Sustainability First's Chair spent 35 years working in environmental regeneration within the UK, most recently as CEO of Keep Britain Tidy. He is now a practising artist doing a masters at Central Saint Martins.

What does sustainability mean to you? I have a lifelong commitment to the environment and sustainable development – ever since reading *Only One Earth* back in the 1970s at university and knowing ever since that we have been living beyond the carrying capacity of the earth.

I hope that finally – and there are some signs in terms of a growing awareness that we have a problem, which the pandemic is accentuating – we will take seriously the need to redesign the way we run our economies and our societies so that they value the right things: individuals, people, communities, education, learning, and creativity – and they do not simply value continually increasing GDP.

We need to restructure our societies whereby measurements of wellbeing – the health of both the environment and people, and the creativity, life satisfaction, and wellbeing of our population at large – are at least if not more important than GDP.

How can we reconcile the tension between economic growth and GDP and environmental and social wellbeing? The coronavirus crisis has caused many people to pause and reflect; it has made quite clear that our economic systems and the assumptions made about them are political constructs, not absolute facts. The pandemic could represent a step change for the ways in which fairness and sustainability are considered – a tipping point beyond which business cannot go on 'as usual'. Now is the time to leverage economics and society towards a new path.

There has been a real recognition during the pandemic that we do things better together. A communal spirit has developed across the country, with volunteering numbers increasing hugely and greater support offered to and from neighbours and friends. This is in contrast to the assumption made over the last 30 to 40 years that everyone is in competition with everyone else,

that the market will more or less 'sort everything out', and that it is the job of regulation to regulate excesses, not to regulate how services themselves are delivered. Following the outbreak, we may see an ongoing public shift in terms of how people value others – the value society gives to NHS staff versus stock market traders, for example.

How do we ensure that recovery is smart, fair, and green? Inevitably, businesses and governments will have to return to something like a pre-pandemic 'normal' in the short-term. But there is potential for price signals to be set in the right direction for the environment and wellbeing. Certain industries, such as airlines, can be driven towards much more sustainable models in the future – so that short haul flights are at least priced much 'harder' than at the moment, and where surface transport such as trains are priced much more 'kindly'. This will have to tie in with wider social and behavioural changes, clear leadership, and consensus building.

How do we move from a focus on 'transition' to 'transformation' – from nudge to radical? The assumption that the market alone can fix social and environmental issues has always been flawed; legislation and enforcement are necessary. The science is clear. We are living beyond the carrying capacity of the planet, and if we carry on in the way we are we will break it. Can we continue to rely on unlimited growth to sustain our current way of life and economic system? Clearly, we cannot do so ad infinitum, and the pandemic is making this visible.

What cultural, behavioural, and societal change is needed for a more sustainable future? We have to meet everybody's basic needs – and I do not just mean the west and the middle classes and upwards – in terms of food, shelter, heat etc. But then what we have to try to do is more self-actualising, so that people's lives are more fulfilling. Maybe everybody works three days a week instead of half the population working six or seven days a week and the rest not working at all.

There are opportunities here to be much more radical in terms of the values that have come to the fore, seeing if we can find ways to help and encourage

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people to keep those values in their minds, behaviours and approaches. Maybe that is being wildly utopian and optimistic. But, on the other hand, if we believe in people – and I do – then we have to believe that people in the round are interested not only in themselves but also in their children, grandchildren and the generations to come. I look at my grandchildren and I worry about the world they will inhabit. I would much prefer that, collectively, we decide that the world they are going to live in is one which is different - fulfilling, sustainable and fairer.

We need to bear in mind that the effects both of this crisis and the climate crisis will be distributed unevenly, borne mostly by those in the global south, and there are also issues of intergenerational fairness to consider. We have clearly not been acting according to the old definition of sustainable development to 'meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs'.

How do government policy, regulation, and institutions need to change for a more sustainable future? One of the challenges for us all is that wages for many people have been driven down, their entitlements have been taken away, and we will have an enormous pensions problem in 20 or 30 years. There are all sorts of things which were fought for and won by working people over many decades but which have been in retreat. We have to ask ourselves to what extent employers and businesses have a responsibility to their employees and wider society which overrides their responsibility to shareholders, which has been their dominant responsibility of recent years.

I am thinking, for example, about where I live in the north west of England. When I first came here 40 years ago there were still several multinational companies headquartered in the region; the people who ran them lived in the region and worked from the region, and the research and development was in the region. Now there are only one or two. We have lost that connection between business and the people they are there to serve, beyond serving them as consumers. We have to find a way of remaking that connection. That is where government must come in. One of the problems of the whole tragedy of the commons is that the first mover can have a disadvantage. Governments, companies, citizens and citizens' organisations, and regulators have to find the right middle ground for radical changes in values.

What does business leadership, governance, and practice need to look like in a sustainable world? As utility companies and government emerge from the pandemic and the semi-state-of-emergency it has created in terms of keeping lights on and taps flowing, the scale of public investment in both public and private sectors created by the crisis can work for us in new ways. It could be a driver for sustainable development, environmental improvements, and more equity in society – but there is also a risk that 'business as usual' reasserts itself until the next tipping point arrives.

The price of oil and carbon is falling as a result of the corona crisis. If we become more focused on communities and local impacts, these will serve as lessons for dealing with the climate crisis – because no one currently pays the real costs for the pollution they create and the carbon they emit. Any government bailout should focus on wider societal returns, which we singularly did not do in 2008 following the bank bailout. Institutions receiving grants or loans should be taking clear, measurable, and radical steps towards becoming more sustainable. Local part-ownership of utilities is one proven route towards this.

During the emergency itself, UK utilities clearly have a duty to keep their service running, continuing to provide energy and water and remove wastewater – all credit to them and their staff for doing this very well. They also have responsibilities to their staff and their communities. As we move out of the crisis, they must fulfil this responsibility by thinking radically about how the same functions could be provided in different ways, for example microgeneration or their core business being the provision of warm homes rather than the supply of energy. Companies should learn from this experience as we move towards a much more environmentally unstable world, thinking hard about their business models and whether there are more sustainable ways of carrying out the services they provide.

> "With the crisis, we need to think about different definitions of value and wellbeing, go back to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and also ask what makes a satisfying life?"