

## Building from the corona crisis to a sustainable future

Richard Adams, Sustainability First Trustee

**Richard Adams:** A Sustainability First Trustee, Richard is the founder of several successful UK social enterprises focused on ethical business, fair trade, international development and sustainability. He is now the Chair of both the Fair Trade Advocacy Office in Brussels and Age UK North Tyneside.

**Please tell us a bit about your background and what sustainability means to you?** My interest in sustainability probably started when I entered an essay competition for the Food and Agricultural Organisation, (FAO) back in 1967. In 10,000 words, you had to say how you would feed the world. I was an undergraduate at the time doing sociology and that really led me on to look at international development and then justice.

From that I started a business importing fruits and vegetables from smaller farmers in developing countries: India initially, then Africa. That grew into what later became the fair trade movement, starting with Traidcraft. Later, I started a small chain of supermarkets called 'Out of this World', trying to be sustainable in every respect: animal welfare, where the produce came from, human rights, et cetera – essentially broadening out the concept of trade justice to involve patterns of sustainable living.

**How do you think the corona crisis will affect people's attitudes and behaviours toward sustainability?** One thing that's already apparent is that in one way or another, this is encouraging people to reconsider what's important in life. People will come up with different answers to that. Some people will realise how important it was to watch Match of the Day, or go down the pub. But I think a lot of people will focus on that personal connection, on the value of local networks, and perhaps on trying to be a little bit more self-sufficient. Will all this lead to a more sustainable way of living? I'm not sure. Obviously for many people it's a personal tragedy, and for many others it has a significant financial impact as well. However, the very fact of these shocks and changes means people realise that alternatives are possible.

**How do we ensure that recovery is smart, fair, and green?** I still do quite a bit of work with people in the EU. I'm following with interest the efforts that are being

made there to try and hold on to, promote, and integrate what was put forward at the end of last year, the European Green Deal, which should be the cornerstone of strategic policy for the next five to seven years. There have been a lot of people saying that as we come out of this, all the aid packages, all the support packages, should meet sustainability criteria.

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Although I've heard it mentioned a lot in the European context, I haven't been picking it up in the UK. Clearly a strong political lead is necessary. Secondly, even if you had a political platform that was radically sustainable, it would only last as long as the voters allowed it to last. You've got to take the people with you. It may be that the Covid-19 crisis has enabled people to say, 'Well, change is possible.' The other day I came across a quote from W.H. Auden, who wrote that 'We would rather be ruined than changed'. I'm not sure that is true. I think people are seeing it's possible to make changes when ruin is on the horizon. We have an opportunity for a radical rethink about what the key focuses of our economy are.

On how you reconcile sustainability with the current economic model? Well, you can't. You've got to try and promote a new economic model based on wellbeing, on living within the planet's means. That requires public engagement, public involvement, transparency, and strong political leads.

**How do we ensure social, ethical, and environmental issues are not kicked into the long grass, given the economic repercussions of coronavirus on business?** It seems that the world we have created has laid us open to the pandemic that we're experiencing at the moment. This is the most immediate and shocking result of a combination of globalisation, a drive for production at any cost, disregard for all sorts of environmental safety conditions, and so on and so forth. I think you can

build a case there. I think one has got to take this environmentally moral high ground and say, 'We can't afford to let this happen again.' Extinction Rebellion and the school strikes were really gathering pace, but this sort of attitude has got to be internalised into mainstream politics now. Hopefully there will be people with political competence and mass influence to take that forward. In delivering a sustainable economy, there will be some significant costs and changes involved. If people aren't already, they will be forced to change the way they're living, how they've lived, their expectations, and their aspirations. It seems to me when you're making those sorts of demands, you've also got to try and change a life-view as well. It's a huge ask.

**How can government policy, regulations and institutions help enable the changes you have spoken about?** There's always this question of how much government can lead and how much it has to follow. For many areas in sustainability, government has followed. Now there has to be more of a lead. One of the issues is whether people will have sufficient confidence in government to lead. A lot depends on the analysis of how the government have handled this particular crisis, because that is bound to reflect on how they're going to deal with any future crisis. And this is the issue. Countries like New Zealand, a different situation, I know, provide a good example: the political credibility of their government is extremely high.

So what can be done? Ensure you get issues about a sustainable future translated into law. There has to be a legal framework that improves on the present ones. We would have to look at how taxes are collected and how they are applied. We'll have to look at a wealth tax, which is a very difficult area. Then when you put all these packages on the table, you realize many of them require international collaboration; a wealth tax is a particularly good example. It will mean a different approach regarding global solidarity.

**Given your extensive experience in social enterprise and ethical business, what do you think the governance and business practices look like, which can help build towards a sustainable future?** There's this sort of reflexive triangle between government, the consumer/voter, and business. They are all looking at each other and seeing who's doing what, who's taking what steps, how much, how do we respond? Do we go forwards or backwards or stay the same? The trick is to try and move sequentially around this. With the organic food movement, it was a process of consumers

influencing business influencing government. But business has to have a niche to dig its fingernails into before it starts climbing the rock face.

That niche is there when it comes to sustainability. We have seen plenty coming from business in a modest sort of way. There's a virtuous circle. But the big thing that is likely to put a dampener on this is whether the economy is so significantly affected in terms of impact. I don't think it will be a question of getting back to where we were, but it will be a question of saying, 'Let's just mark time and see where things are going.' Will people have the appetite for progressive new initiatives or not? Will they just want to see how things pan out?

**What role do you think consumers and citizens have to play in this green recovery and how do you think their consumer behaviour might change as a result of the crisis?** A sustainable way of life has to become the thing to aspire to, rather than going back to the old pattern. Quite how we do that, I don't know. I guess it's a question of communication, presentation, packaging and so on. There will be resistance to it, obviously, because still the driver in the economy is growth. And again, that itself needs to be challenged and replaced with wellbeing, with equity, and with sustainability.

The key thing is that people get down to engaging with real opportunities for change: that we build on what we've learned now and we use that creatively, so that we turn talk into action. As an example, trade in Kenya has been radically hit. There are a lot of fair trade flowers flown in and now the whole Kenyan flower industry has just gone into lockdown with over 50,000 people made redundant overnight. We're trying to say, 'How can we adjust to this? What is the real focus?' We're coming back to issues like cutting out the intermediary and more direct links with suppliers.

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Sustainability First is running an Essay and Art competition to address the theme of 'Building from the corona crisis to a sustainable future.' That should provide some good ideas, and hopefully inspire a new generation of civil society leaders/social entrepreneurs, as I was with the FAO essay competition back in 1967.