

The Thinking Tank Report

Why is Sustainability Boring?

In this lively debate featuring participants from the World Bank, Insead, green organisations and business, Thinking Tankers joined together to identify their shared views on sustainability. Over 100 ideas were generated and considered.

The debate centred around turning sustainability into something for everyone rather than a specialist area just for the few. Sustainability is described as **boring, complex and confusing** rather than inspiring or motivating.

For Sustainability to “move ahead” (be less boring) participants identified the need for a clearer, simpler and shared meaning. The challenge is to engage a big enough group of people in an aligned fashion around some specific key issues. The group however was not able to find a common ground on **how** to create any sense of urgency - messages on the topic tend to be based on “future doom” rather than today’s practical issues or common vision.

Root causes of the problem

- **CONFUSION:** The shared view is that because the term sustainability has multiple meanings... and hence does not allow for a clear straightforward debate focused on solutions
- **INTANGIBILITY:** though sustainability may be relatively understandable at a conceptual level; translating sustainability into actionable solutions at a day-to-day level implies facing strong barriers and requires painful change that most of the population will not feel motivated to suffer

What can we do?

The participants proposed a number of ideas for possible actions, of which the following had the highest levels of support:

- develop a simple easy-to-grasp meaning for sustainability; which should enhance communication, be impactful and provide inspiration for change
- focus on a smaller number of key issues
- use down-to-earth (sic) language and address issues at personal meaning, acknowledging and harnessing self interest
- mobilise the larger part of the population – better to move the majority a little than the minority a lot
- those already engaged need to mobilise themselves as change agents
- leverage new media platforms such as the social networks on the Web

I think the issue is less that it is "boring" and more that it is "**confusing**" because it means so many different things to so many different people.

It is maybe more **difficult** then boring.. fundamentally it is about changing way of doing things and that is never easy

The language is all too academic and easy to feel remote from... we need real down to earth stuff that people can get their head around and feel inspired to make the change

I'm all for picking a couple of key issues, making it simple, widely understood and causing change (think drink-driving and how that shifted its social acceptability

.. we need real down to earth stuff that people can get their head around and feel inspired to make the change

Top 20 statements (ranked strongest first)

- *The language is all too academic and easy to feel remote from... we need real down to earth stuff that people can get their head around and feel inspired to make the change*
- *I think the issue is less that it is "boring" and more that it is "confusing" because it means so many different things to so many different people.*
- *A lot of "green" people I have met have been so sanctimonious about us (who know and are right) and them (the idiots outside) that I'm not surprised this has happened*
- *It is maybe more difficult than boring... fundamentally it is about changing way of doing things and that is never easy*
Elaborates on: In some circles, sustainability is akin to 'motherhood' but has little translation to concrete behaviour,
- *I don't think the "future" and the "here and now" are mutually exclusive. It's important just to demonstrate to people how the two are linked, and how what we do to benefit ourselves today is also good for future generations in the long-run.*
Elaborates on: This is a large part of the problem. People of the "baby-boom generation" and later generations seem to be less concerned with sustainable futures and more about things that directly impact them NOW. I understand that we need to focus on the here and now, but the future is also incredibly important.
Elaborates on: it does not seem to affect us directly yet (except when the barrel of oil reaches \$ 200)
- *Let's talk about what "sustainability" means, and how people can (or already are) doing things to achieve a sustainable way of living.*
Elaborates on: I think the issue is less that it is "boring" and more that it is "confusing" because it means so many different things to so many different people.
- *Sustainability is a BIG word and means many different things: environment, social wellbeing, social justice, etc.*
- *I realize I repeat but to me the main theme seems to be the need for a very clear message or clarity of what is meant by it/definition*
- *I'm all for picking a couple of key issues, making it simple, widely understood and causing change (think drink-driving and how that shifted its social acceptability)*
- *The problem is that most of us just live our lives. We are part of a complex social/economic system and a very tiny cog in a very big wheel. At an intellectual level we can understand SD but at a personal level, if it involves hard choices, it is much more difficult. "it's not easy being Green"*
- *This has been short, fast and furious... but that's still a lot more time than we have to convince anyone. We need to sharpen our arguments and focus on more (eg save the whale not save the planet)*
- *Which is why we need to make use of these newer/alternative sources of media... great point!*

Elaborates on: however the wider audience is divided in thousands of small communities, even on the big social networks (YouTube, Facebook, etc)

Elaborates on: the internet is a great potential medium for doing this and expanding the definition of "community" to a much larger, global audience

Elaborates on: Absolutely, I think most people participating in the conversation are fairly well educated. It is important to help people understand that it has an impact on EVERYONE

- *And the reducing of complex issues to single imperatives is highly questionable. I don't like being told to give up my comfy car!*
Elaborates on: I think the issue is less that it is "boring" and more that it is "confusing" because it means so many different things to so many different people.
- *Boring, confusing or difficult... all negative for something that is about maintaining life. How did we get in this place re messages?*
- *It's not just the perceived sacrifice, or injustice, - it's the likelihood that 95% of the rest of the population won't do it!*
- *Because it's something we talk about SO much but making combined headway is hard... this might be a way for us to find some common ground and take action*
- *I have always been fascinated by the prevalence of this word in both everyday conversation and "business-speak" despite the fact that everyone seems to have a different definition of the word.*
- *I joined in because I want to learn more about the Synthetron tool*
- *Make the impact and urgent need personal and real. "Sustainability" means different things to different people, but the definitional differences may not matter because they all lead to the same place - take action.*
- *An i-green type technology breakthrough that I have with me, is easy to use and gives me bite size info about what harm I'm doing and how to reduce*