

UNDERSTANDING SUSTAINABILITY

'Enough, For all, Always' is the most apt definition of sustainability according to Victor Branagan, Founding Partner of SustainEd who says organisations need to develop a clear understanding and a common language around sustainability in order to formulate a meaningful and effective plan of action. As guardians of the common good and with vast experience at collective decision making, the public sector is ideally placed to lead a national effort towards a sustainable future.



Sustainability is a very big idea, it spans waste management, energy efficiency, water and resource use as well as a range of social issues in relation to how we organise our communities and how we work. This all-encompassing nature of the term presents difficulties for many people when first engaging with sustainability.

Given that public sector organisations are experienced in handling such multi-stakeholder ideas the sector has a key role to play in how we move towards sustainability. Our problem is not really in defining sustainability as many of us can do that really well at this stage; the problem is one of leadership and working out the steps we need to take to get there from where we stand at present.

Personally, I see sustainability as a deeply moral issue, my favourite definition being: - "enough; for all; always". This is rooted in the old fashioned idea of the common good and (the) public sector organisations are the holders of the common good and as such are vital to sustainability. That may sound a little idealistic because change can seem so difficult at times, but when it is properly framed, sustainability can offer a very engaging story and as a shared goal it can be extremely motivating to strive for.

When we spend a little time and effort in organisations on agreeing what sustainability means, then we can tap into that new narrative and so have clear direction. The public sector is a vital instigator for practically all things sustainable and it is skilled in acting for the greater good.

The word for Sustainability in Irish is – inbhuanaitheacht - which translates as stewardship or guardianship - and that sheds a subtle but very different light on the term. The public sector organisations are natural stewards and guardians.

SHARED VALUES

Sustainability is about doing things differently and not just doing different things; so it is also a change management issue. Most efforts aimed at moving towards sustainability come up against the idea that we can't reach sustainability alone, it is a shared goal. That is as true for businesses as it is for individuals or communities. The public sector is a key player in helping different stakeholders to act together. For example, our efforts to reduce waste significantly cannot be achieved without the leadership of local authorities in supporting all the players and this has been done throughout the country for years now. Other actions such as community development, local and social economy initiatives, health projects all need the public sector to play a central role.

Sustainability can therefore be perceived as a rallying call for the public sector, a coherent message through which the public



Sustainability requires a collaborative approach to collective decision making and sharing value.

sector can show its strengths. Sustainability is a sort of narrative glue which relates disparate initiatives towards shared goals.

For the past twenty years we have seen the 'cult of the entrepreneur' which has focussed our discourse almost exclusively on the individual effort in achieving goals. Now, I say this as an entrepreneur myself, as someone who teaches entrepreneurship, it is time to pull back from this unquestioned dominance of the entrepreneur. Sustainability requires a rethink of how we can be enterprising without being just entrepreneurial - with the implied single goal of increasing profits. Social enterprises are providing some great examples of this new distinction and there are many public sector organisations that support and facilitate these new enterprises.

The public sector is in a key position to facilitate the necessary changes by creating the service conditions and conduits which foster the change in behaviour to allow us to do things differently. We have seen this in the efforts at recycling which require both individual behaviour change and public service provision changes. Looking to the future and taking the example of car pooling as a means of reducing carbon footprint – we might have Local Authorities working with their insurers to design policies which could facilitate this. Pilot schemes might start first with council staff and their private vehicles, move onto local social enterprises and community initiatives and eventually out into the wider community. Just look at how the Dublin Bikes scheme has shifted attitudes and behaviours towards cycling in the city and commuting. Another example is how An Bord Bia established the new sustainability mark



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for food businesses 'Origin Green' that allows all businesses to share the value of a sustainability initiative.

Developing the correct and shared language around these changes is really important. Changes are more easily adopted when we understand why the change is being made. SustainEd works with organisations around re-framing what sustainability means for them so that the wide, big-picture gets translated into a meaningful message. We help organisations make sense of sustainability.

A COLLABORATIVE APPROACH

Sustainability involves moving collectively towards goals and this, inevitably, occurs at a slower pace than moving individually, but it is equally relevant. In our time obsessed culture it takes confidence to slow down in order to aim for the longer term goals. Collective decisions require a radically different skills set to ensure that all parties are included. Public sector organisations are equipped and skilled in taking these kinds of decisions and they need to actively promote how they are the keepers of our long term sustainable futures. Collaboration is such a skill, it is far more than just new term for networking; it is a deep change in how we engage with each other to attain shared goals based on shared values. Collaboration must form part of our essential social capital for a sustainable future. This must be combined with innovative changes which can provide the pathways towards sustainability.

There are loads of interesting projects happening around Ireland despite the doom and gloom and some of them are about creating change for a more sustainable future. I am a judge on the Local Authority Management Awards and it is obvious to me that if we properly harness the energy of such innovative projects, with the support of public sector organisations, it is possible to make a real drive for positive change. For the common good.

Because of the link with environmentalism, sustainability has inherited a negative image in the public mind, implying restrictions, going backwards and extra costs. I see it as far more pro-active, as a re-imagining of possibilities and of focusing on a sustainable future rather than a sustainable past. In SustainEd we are excited about being part of that change.

Sustained is planning two free webinar sessions on the relevance of sustainability for Public Sector organisations, expanding on the ideas in this article. The first session will be on defining sustainability for the Public Sector and the second will be on developing opportunities for moving towards sustainability. The sessions will be 40 minutes in duration and can be accessed from your desk. They will be held over lunchtime from 13.10 to 13.50. The dates are Friday 6th September and Friday 13th September. To register your interest in attending these free webinars please visit here - <http://bit.ly/sustainedweb>.

SUSTAINED

SustainEd is a collaborative consultancy of individuals who are passionate about sustainability and who practice what they preach, they describe themselves as a 'not just for profit' company. They each bring a range of skill sets to their work and the focus is on helping organisations to make sense of sustainability. SustainEd consultants are all natural educators interested in holding conversations for change with many different groups that will help lead towards a more sustainable future. SustainEd can offer bespoke educational/training programmes, in-depth consultancy work, one-to-one coaching and they are interested in partnerships and collaborations with others who share our values. Their international experiences can bring new perspectives to strategic sustainability within the Irish context. See www.sustained.ie for more details.

