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# Thinking and Acting Sustainably: Profile of a 21<sup>st</sup> Century Professional

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## Background

The 21<sup>st</sup> century is presenting a range of inter-connected economic, social and ecological issues that professionals are expected to address. These appear in various guises including Corporate Social Responsibility, Sustainability and Environmental Management. Finding effective solutions requires a cross-professional approach to ensure problems solved in one area do not become problems elsewhere.

This 1-day workshop will bring together up to 20 professionals from different professional areas to engage in practical activities and dialogue on sustainability and sustainable development. It is intended to explore ideas on how best to integrate sustainable development principles into professional practice.

The reading material is to help you think about some of the issues around sustainable development and sustainability before the workshop.

## Using this material

Please read this material before the workshop. Use the information, the questions and your own knowledge and experience to bring ideas to the workshop on:

1. What professional skills and qualities relating to sustainability would you look for in a person working in your profession?
2. The key features you would look for in a company or organisation that was working towards sustainability.
3. Some likely opportunities and obstacles for your company or organisation when implementing sustainable development principles in daily practice.
4. Any special items you would like covered in the day.

## Draft Programme

09.30 - 10.00		Registration
10.00 - 10.25	0:25	Introduction
10.25 - 11.05	0:40	Introductory Activity
11.05 - 11.35	0:30	Drivers for Change
11.35 - 12.25	0:50	Case Studies & the Case for Sustainable Development
12.25 - 12.50	0:25	Professional Challenges
12.50 - 13.15	0:25	Joined-Up Thinking
13.15 - 14.00		Lunch
14.00 - 14.20	0:20	Applying the Systems Approach
14.20 - 15.10	0:50	Joined-Up Thinking and Planning Activity
15.10 - 15.40	0:30	Your Profession in 5 Years' Time
15.40 - 16.10	0:30	Action Planning
16.10 - 16.30	0:20	Final Questions, Evaluation, Close

# Thinking and Acting Sustainably

## Climate change more frightening than any science fiction movie.

United Nations secretary-general Ban Ki-moon was speaking in Spain at the release of the fourth report from the UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) November 2007.

The IPCC's latest report is a distillation of their previous work and states the evidence for climate change is "unequivocal". It says there is a 90 per cent chance that climate change is caused by human activity and may bring "abrupt and irreversible" effects. It warns that deep cuts in greenhouse gas emissions are needed quickly to avert more heat waves, melting glaciers and rising sea levels.

Climate change can be difficult – you could ask the dinosaurs, if they weren't extinct. The prevailing theory is that they didn't survive when a giant asteroid struck the earth 65 million years ago, spewing so much dust into the air that sunlight was greatly reduced, temperatures plummeted, many plants didn't grow, and the food chain collapsed. What happened to the dinosaurs is a rare example of climate change more rapid than humans are now inflicting on themselves. . . but not the only one. Research on ice cores and lake sediments shows that the climate system has suffered other abrupt fluctuations in the distant past -- the climate appears to have "tipping points" that can send it into sharp lurches and rebounds. Although scientists are still analysing what happened during those earlier events, it's clear that an



overstressed world with 6.3 billion people is a risky place to be carrying out uncontrolled experiments with the climate.

### To think about

1. How would you order the following key issues for humanity to resolve?

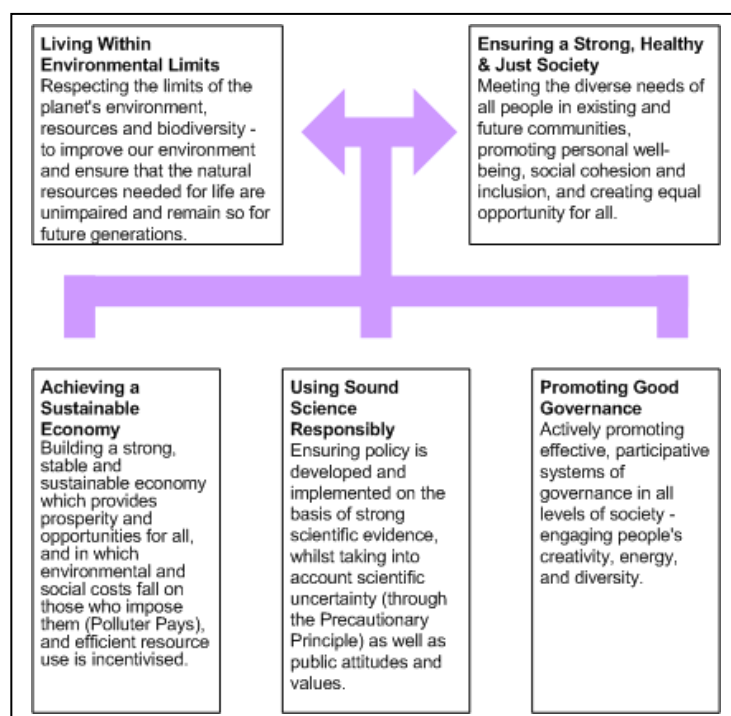
Terrorism threats; Loss of biodiversity; Climate change; Third world poverty; Economic growth; Corruption; Lack of democracy; Religious and cultural strife. What would you include in a Top Ten?

## What is sustainable development?

In 1987 the Brundtland Commission<sup>1</sup> defined sustainable development as,

*"Development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. ..."*

The UK Government identified the following 5 sustainable development principles.



The UK has identified four priority areas for immediate action:

### Sustainable Consumption and Production

- Climate Change and Energy
- Natural Resource Protection and Environmental Enhancement
- Sustainable Communities

<sup>1</sup> *Our Common Future - The report of the World Commission on Environment and Development* Oxford University Press 1987

Atkinson<sup>2</sup> said the following about sustainable development:

*“Sustainability is an ideal end-state. Like democracy, it is a lofty goal whose perfect realisation eludes us. For this reason, there will always be competing definitions of sustainability. We know the definitions will always include the wellbeing of people, nature, our economy, and our social institutions, working together effectively over the long term. But as the process of attempting to achieve sustainability will continually reveal new challenges and questions –pushing back the horizons, as it were – a definitive definition is impossible. Any indicator framework, therefore, needs to be flexible and adaptable to those changing definitions. It needs to grow as our understanding grows, while continuing to serve its purpose as a simplifier and guide to complexity. It needs to maintain a trail of continuity from year to year and decade to decade. Most important, it needs to speak to people in ways understandable both to the rational mind and the intuition.”*

#### To think about

2. **How necessary is it to have a precise definition of sustainable development or sustainability?**

## Sustainable Development and professionals<sup>3</sup>

**A high profile commentator suggested that ‘we have gone from a *trust me* culture to a *show me* culture’ - which is why there is a new and growing emphasis on occupational standards, competency and codes of conduct.**

There is no easy solution to the diminishing public trust in professionals and their professional bodies. Their increasing reliance on rules, codes of practice and complex regulatory frameworks is also being questioned both for their lack of openness in terms of membership and the transparency of their procedures. What we need is a fundamental review of the professions and their professional bodies focusing on the role

they should play in the economy and society at large.

#### To think about

3. **Is sustainable development an appropriate professional concern?**
4. **Is sustainable development an ethical or technical issue?**
5. **What skills and qualities are needed by professionals if they are to operate sustainably?**

## You shop! We drop!

**Britain's favourite supermarket Tesco has teamed up with The University of Manchester in a £25 million investment that will bring together the world's leading experts to tackle climate change and help deliver a revolution in green consumption.**

The Sustainable Consumption Institute will promote fresh thinking and explore vital areas of research such as how customers can be empowered and incentivised to buy green products and services, how business can adapt to meet customer needs and how we can train the next generation of environmental leaders and experts. Its research and conclusions will be shared freely.

Tesco Chief Executive Sir Terry Leahy said the Institute – one of the key elements of Tesco’s climate change strategy announced in January – was further proof of the company’s long-term commitment to making a positive contribution to tackling environmental issues.

*“At Tesco, we know our customers are concerned about climate change and expect us to be taking the lead in helping create a greener future.”*

<sup>2</sup> Atkinson, A. *The compass of sustainability: Framework for a comprehensive information system* Version 1 1998

<sup>3</sup> *The Professionals' Dilemma? Building Sustainable Development into Professional Practice* Stephen and Maureen Martin



However, a report from the Sustainable Development Commission<sup>4</sup> shows that shopping is not making us any happier. The report argues that government should focus on what will lead to greater well being and satisfaction. Current levels of consumption cannot be maintained and will increasingly lead to greater inequality, environmental damage and debt-ridden insecurity.

#### To think about

6. **Are consumerism and sustainable development compatible goals?**
7. **Should personal wealth be the main criteria for gaining access to goods and services?**
8. **Should retailers have any responsibilities for implementing sustainable development?**

## The risks of avoiding the issues

**Direct action campaigns can be an extremely effective way of using the media to embarrass companies by washing their dirty laundry in public, usually on a single issue basis.**

Big brand owners tend to face the fiercest of confrontational campaigning because brand value is fast becoming the most important asset on the balance sheet, and any damage to brand value can be long lasting and serious.

<sup>4</sup> *Policies for Sustainable Consumption* Tim Jackson and Laurie Michaelis Sustainable Development Commission 2003.

Nike was one company whose brand image took a battering with campaigns accusing the company of using suppliers that employ child labour, pay low wages and provide very poor working conditions.

The company took notice of the bad publicity and has been addressing the issues raised. Nike produces corporate social responsibility reports and lists its contract factories making Nike products.

Nike says it did so because it believes the potential benefits to the industry and factory workers outweigh the possible competitive risks.

Scott Nova, executive director of the Workers Rights Consortium, a labour rights advocacy group, says it is the kind of information industry watchdogs have been asking major companies to disclose for more than a decade. He says it is a demand that has been "*resisted with great vehemence by the industry*" with Nike historically being one of the strongest opposed to such disclosures.

So, Nova says that although it is something Nike should have done a long time ago, the company deserves credit for taking the lead in the industry on releasing the list.

Yet it is still hard for Nike to shake off the image that the bad publicity created. They remain a focus of attention and have requested that people look towards their competitors and see how many of them have taken the kind of measures the company has over the last few years.

#### To think about

9. **Has any company you have worked with suffered damage to its brand by ignoring sustainable development issues?**
10. **What other risks are there for a company or organisation that ignores corporate social responsibility and sustainable development?**

