

Sustainable futures

The year is 2022. A building crowned with wind turbines and glistening in solar panels towers over the city. No-one lives here, and only a handful of people work on its eight floors. It used to be a high-rise car park. Now it's a farm - a shining example of the new "urban agriculture" that generates its own energy, harvests its own rain water and sells produce in a marketplace on the ground floor.

That's one vision of 2022. Here's another. Picture this: shopping today takes place in two very different ways. Part of it's entertainment, a social activity, where visitors sample foods, watch cookery displays and enjoy some retail theatre in vibrant local high streets.

But they don't shop at all for everyday items. Instead, milk, bread, pasta, and household goods simply turn up whenever they are needed, triggered by automatic messages from their cupboards and fridges, delivered by an efficient fleet of electric vans and stored in a password protected bunker where they're kept fresh until the owner returns home.

Those are just two visions of the future from some work we did on low carbon living.

Of course, no-one can predict the future – that's impossible. Think back to when you were a kid, what did you think the future would be like? Who today is eating meals in tablet form, wearing the jet packs or living on the moon?

But just because we can't predict the future, it doesn't mean we can't prepare for it. We can think about the possibilities, make informed guesses and find ways of dealing with uncertainty. We can help prepare for what might happen. And perhaps most importantly, we can help to shape it.

The importance of 'futures' for sustainability

Anyone can benefit from having some sense of what the future might hold. If you are setting out on a journey, it helps to have an idea of where you are heading.

But most importantly, you'd want to have an idea of where you want to end up, and the opportunities and the pitfalls that may lie along the way.

We need long-term thinking. In no area is this more true than with sustainability. Short-termism is the enemy, the very opposite of sustainability.

Having a clear idea of the trends just makes good sense. Whether it's climate change or consumer buying habits, regulatory changes or resource shortages, looking ahead helps develop preparedness, open-mindedness, and resilience.

Our experience has shown that pushing that extending time horizon out, extending it by only a small degree, can be a huge wake-up call for an organization. It can raise awareness of critically important issues as well as bringing countless benefits.

But more than just looking ahead, what about where you want to end up? Having a positive and inspiring image of where you want to be – an ambitious but realistic vision of the type of world you want to see - can open up opportunities to thrive and shape that future. It can sharpen up strategy; inspire innovation; and build inspirational leadership.

Why environmentalists are not good at talking about the future.

So are environmentalists any good at talking about the future? You'd think that with all our rhetoric of "future generations" and "our children's children" that we'd make some great futurists.

Unfortunately, when environmentalists talk about the future, it often suffers from three problems: it sounds negative; unrealistic; and doctrinaire.

From many environmentalists, the narrative is overwhelmingly pessimistic – a story of apocalypse, disasters, doom and gloom.

Most normal people find this very unattractive. It turns them off. They disengage. They stop listening.

But we have a real conundrum here: we need some negativity and fear to raise awareness of some quite frightening prospects. But too much becomes counter productive.

So we need to find a balance between fear, and inspiration. But that positive message is so often the missing bit. Martin Luther King didn't stand up and declare: "I have a nightmare".

Secondly, when Greens do talk about the future we often sound naïve or unbelievable. There's a sort of 'hippy utopianism', the idea that we will all live like 'Little House on the Prairie'. That rightly turns many people off who simply don't buy into that narrative. So we need to be credible and accessible in our images of the future.

Finally, environmentalists often sound too doctrinaire. Because we are passionate about our cause and firm in our beliefs, we tell people there is only one future, whether that's a spiral to chaos or one true path to enlightenment. But that's neither helpful, realistic nor democratic.

Yes, some of the issues are unavoidable: our planet's heating up. Yes, some of the trends are unstoppable: we're using more resources and they're running out.

But how we respond, how we cope, the opportunities we seize and those we ignore, will depend on our awareness, our dreams and our actions.

Telling people there's only one true future just stifles that debate, shuts down the discussion and then we wonder why people don't feel motivated to act.

Forum for the Future's approach

Futures thinking underpins a large part of the work we do at Forum for the Future to promote sustainable development.

We try to build stories of the future that are aspirational and credible. And in painting these pictures we work with the organisations who can help shape that future.

We've recently published scenarios on the future of retail with Tesco and Unilever and the future human responses to climate change with Hewlett Packard. And we've got exciting new projects looking into the futures of tourism, fashion and population.

But in order to create the future we want to see, we know it's essential to really embed that thinking. It can't just be an academic exercise or a report that sits on a shelf. That's why we use a partnership-based approach to embed the thinking, resulting in real actions and creating real change.

Concluding Remarks

So how well we tell our stories will determine not just whether people listen, but whether they act.

The challenges of sustainability are immense.

But we need to tell stories that are positive and inspiring, not negative.

We need to be credible and believable, not fanciful.

And we need offer a range of futures and not declare there is just one.

That way, I hope we can help people to realise that they too have a role to play in shaping a more sustainable future.

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