

Has The Green Door Been Bolted?

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Image credit: [Breno Peck](#)

The Rio+20 Summit has been and gone, was largely considered a failure, and has barely registered in the consciousness of the average person. We are no closer to any co-ordinated, serious global approach to addressing sustainability at the international level than we were in 1992 at the first Rio Earth Summit, which set out the 'sustainable development' agenda (itself a contested concept among sustainability activists).

Kumi Naidoo, the executive director of Greenpeace International, called Rio+20 'a failure of epic proportions' and bluntly described the 253-paragraph Summit statement as 'the longest suicide note in history'.

[George Monbiot](#) noted the absence of a popular movement:

It is the system that needs to be challenged, not the individual decisions it makes. In this respect the struggle to protect the biosphere is the same as the struggle for redistribution, for the protection of workers' rights, for an enabling state, for equality before the law.

So this is the great question of our age: where is everyone?

The monster social movements of the 19th century and first 80 years of the 20th have gone, and nothing has replaced them. Those of us who still contest unwarranted power find our footsteps echoing through cavernous halls once thronged by multitudes. When a few hundred people do make a stand – as the Occupy campers have done – the rest of the nation just waits for them to achieve the kind of change that requires the sustained work of millions.

While there is an increasing number of environmental and social groups around the world doing this work – involving more people than ever before in history – it seems that Monbiot’s observation is also correct.

In many OECD nations, a combination of budget cuts, austerity measures and increasing costs of living associated with the GFC fallout appear to have diminished popular concern with environmental and sustainability issues. Data collected from the UK, US, Germany has shown that environmental issues are not top of mind for these populations, and according to a recent research report ‘What Matters to Australians’ cited in [The Australian](#):

A study of what matters to the average Australian found environmental issues “mattered intensely” in 2007 but had dropped to being of “middling” importance today. The resulting picture was one of a conservative society intensely concerned about day-to- day issues.

Global sustainability dropped from third in 2007 to eighth in 2010, the only category to see any big movement either up or down...tangible things such as health and family “always were and always will be the things that really matter”.

Leaving aside the not-insignificant question of what people understand by ‘sustainability’ or ‘environmental issues’, and whether or not they see connections between issues (for example, food and health issues rated as the biggest concern, and yet sustainable food systems are intricately connected to a plethora of environment/sustainability issues), it is clear that for many people, all things environmental have fallen off the radar. The report does note that the high profile around climate change 2007 may have been an aberration.

With pressing day to day concerns around cost of living, access to basic services and local crime prevention, abstract notions of invisible gases causing major atmospheric and geographical changes at some undefined point in the future are simply not the immediate worry for citizens.

Similarly, just as people do not experience 'the economy' – they experience availability of work, fuel and food prices and mortgage repayments – the scale at which most sustainability advocates are attempting to communicate issues is beyond the realm of many people's experience and therefore seen to be irrelevant. If people feel no sense of agency about how their individual efforts can effect change, and if daily demands leave little spare time to contemplate, let alone plan to enact change, it simply will not be a priority for most people.

For businesses facing economic downturn, and governments facing budget cuts, any initiative that involves investing money and employee time to become more resource efficient – even if it can ultimately save them money – is off the table as organisations retreat to focusing on 'core business'. Sustainability is still being perceived as an add-on rather than an integral part of how organisations work.

If the general public and organisations have gone into siege/survival mode, then sustainability advocates need another approach to find their way in than exuberantly flinging open the 'green door' carrying a basket laden with all kinds of messages about carbon, climate, energy, waste, water and efficiency.

Because by and large, the 'Green Door' to the wider public is bolted.

What to do?

We could start with what's going right, what is working using an assets-based approach, rather than talking about insurmountable problems.

Then there's the packaging – 'sustainability' might work better if it's more subtle and less overt, a bit like hiding vegetables in the kids' pasta. It might be good for them, but they're doing it because they enjoy it, or because they identify it as meeting their needs, not because someone told them it would be good for them and/or the planet.

A cynic might say we need a Sustainability Trojan Horse – to conceal the intent in a different guise. But we really do need to start where people are, with what they value.

In the broader collaborative economy, people are finding ways to meet their needs through sharing, not because it is a government policy about reducing consumption, not because sharing – and therefore needing to buy less – is good for the environment, but because it makes sense to people, allows them to meet their needs, and has been enabled by technology, the social web and the ‘currency’ of reputation.

Is the Blue Door of the sharing and collaborative consumption approach the one we should be knocking on? That’s where people are.

We might find that progressing sustainability could be more effective if we treated it like acupuncture – subtly channelling the flow of energy through providing a platform for encouraging the existing momentum out there – rather than the major surgery of international action that we keep putting off.

Sustainability advocates can always carry the spirit and intent of sustainability into their practice, but present it in ways that are relevant and meaningful for people. Find the door that opens for them, rather than the one we want them to enter through.

Have you had any experiences where a message couched in ‘green’ or sustainability terms has been rejected, but a similar message framed in a different way has been accepted?

What other ‘doors’ are there through which to reach people?