

# Engaged sustainability: Five issues to consider<sup>1</sup>



**ANNEMIEKE  
NIJHOF**

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More and more people are realising that sustainability is not a 'mere' technical operation that will 'get worked out' somewhere in the background. Rather, it is a transition that is having a profound impact on how our society is organised and on what we consider to be 'normal'.

Major changes usually meet with resistance, as we can see in the public debate concerning sustainability. Some believe that we cannot change quickly enough, whereas others wonder why change is needed at all and whether they too will have a say in how, and how quickly, it comes about.

Sustainability can only succeed if every member of society contributes. After the P for Planet, which had experts and policymakers seeking solutions, and the P for Profit, which involved the business community and the economic viability of the energy transition, the focus of attention since concluding the Netherlands' National Climate Agreement has been on the P for People. Without broad political support, public funding will be inadequate, and without broad public support, private initiatives will fall short.

But how do we achieve an inclusive transition? How do we ensure that sustainability does not exacerbate the existing divisions in society? The Rli has spoken to various parties about this over the past year. Our conversations have so far yielded a set of issues to be considered by those aspiring to engaged sustainability, which we have grouped into five clusters:



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1. *Individual interests versus collective solutions*: Sustainability solutions often require collective choices that can potentially compromise individual interests and involve trade-offs. Does our vote mean that we are authorising our elected officials to take far-reaching decisions? How much will their solutions need to be tailored to the local situation? And can we accept that the outcomes will vary from one group or region to the next?
2. *Dealing with different cultural value orientations*: Engaged sustainability requires us to be clear about and open to different cultural value orientations. Are we in this together or is it every person for themselves, and do we feel responsible for our neighbourhood or for the world? Does society have a broadly shared understanding of what 'sustainability' means and what is needed to achieve it?
3. *Empowerment and leadership*: Engaged sustainability also requires us to reflect on the division of roles between individuals, local initiatives, public servants and politicians. Leadership is not reserved for politicians and government administrators. In fact, engagement may well be a question of *informal* leadership. What can the municipal councillor and the community leader do to empower each other?
4. *Knowledge and expertise*: Engaged sustainability involves drawing on community knowledge. A professional who is short on time does not necessarily possess better or more reliable knowledge than a 'google expert' who has plenty of time for

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research. Are we transparent about the knowledge we use, and are we open to ideas from society?

5. *Images and bias*: Finally, engaged sustainability also requires us to be aware of the power of the image, and of where images come from. Are we unbiased enough, and what role does the media play in this?

Considering these five issues can help the public and sustainability professionals to engage when working on sustainability. There will always be conflicts of interest between groups in society, but if we can do a better job of channelling these conflicts, we will make significant progress on both engagement and sustainability.

The Council for the Environment and Infrastructure (Rli) is organising the Engaged Sustainability Week from 25 to 29 May 2020, see [www.rli.nl](http://www.rli.nl).