

Results from the Week of Engaged Sustainability in six quotes

Not an opinion but a viewpoint

In this collective search for sustainable solutions, it helps enormously if people are prepared to change their perspective from time to time. Instead of having an opinion, imagine that you have a viewpoint, she suggests, literally a point from which you view something. Then look at the field from your spot at the back, three stories high. And look at it again from three blocks down. Or imagine you are a tree that is about to be felled, or a cow in a pasture that the nitrogen problem is forcing into the barn. It's not such a crazy idea, because you and that tree and that cow are part of the same system. By changing your viewpoint, you gain a different understanding.

The meek ones in the middle

One of the participants describes them as 'the meek ones in the middle', a large group of people who want to be sustainable but aren't prepared to man the barricades for it. It's crucial to involve them in the transition. They can bridge the divide between what are at times wildly divergent opinions about sustainability, helping in this way to support, scale up and consolidate initiatives and, ultimately, force a breakthrough in sustainability.

Seeking harmony

Citizens' initiatives not only interact with the public, they also face the challenge of navigating the world of government systems. Rli member Annemieke Nijhof summarised it as follows: 'The government is not a uniform entity. There's the civil service, with its rationale of lawfulness, justice and equal treatment for all. There's also the political class: it has ideals and it tries to get things done. And then there are grassroots initiatives, which are also trying to get things done but don't necessarily feel that they have to consider other interests. Quite often, there are several initiatives with conflicting interests. All these groups have to work to reach consensus.'

'This is such a complex playing field that it's important to make agreements up front: how do we proceed, what is everyone's role, when does the government shift from facilitating to assessing, deciding, co-financing and claiming ownership. We are all responsible for seeking harmony.'

Debate requires emotion

How often, as rational professionals, do we not automatically believe that people are unwilling to adopt sustainable habits? How often do we find ourselves trying to convince people that we are right? Do we take residents' emotions seriously enough? 'Let me ask again' is a much better approach than 'let me explain again'. What are residents thinking, picturing and feeling when discussing a wind farm, for example? Asking them allows you to drill down to the underlying values and concerns, and that's where you can engage.

Slow down to accelerate

The in-depth conversation that this requires takes time. Be aware that if you fail to take that time, you will lose the people and, in the end, the political legitimacy for sustainability. 'If you want engaged sustainability, the speed at which you engage others must determine the pace.'

'Professionals often try to win residents over to their ideas in conversations with them.' Let's be less preoccupied with the plan we have in our own heads and more open to others.

One of the highlights of the week was the insight that you can communicate from a viewpoint rather than an opinion. A viewpoint represents a certain perspective and implies that you can also change your perspective.

We learned that understanding and insight into sustainability issues are at least as important as knowledge and skills. And that people often trust their neighbour more than they trust a professional.

We reflected on the importance of saying goodbye, for example to coal-fired power stations. 'If you say a proper farewell, you also create space for the new.' Rituals can help to do this.

The prerequisite for a better conversation, or dialogue, is to recognise our mutual dependencies. 'Unlike in a discussion or debate, a dialogue is not about winning. Every participant is respected, even if they think differently than we do.' 'Let's train everyone to engage in dialogue, even with those who think differently. This is how to create opportunities together for faster progress towards making society sustainable.'

On the importance of the dialogue:

Our attempts to convince others usually only impress people in our own group. Those who think otherwise are easily stigmatised: farmers hate nature, industrialists are only lining their own pockets, and citizens are driven by their emotions. Our everyday conversations only deepen polarisation as a result. In the Netherlands, for example, we are seeing this in the nitrogen emissions problem and the energy transition.

Lessons learned

The Engaged Sustainability event has shown that many parties working on sustainability are actively seeking ways to incorporate people's ideas and energy, but also their concerns and doubts, into their work. Whether we're talking about government, knowledge institutions, NGOs or grassroots initiatives, there is widespread awareness that the sustainability challenges that our society faces cannot be resolved 'behind the scenes' by technical interventions alone. Sustainability is inevitably a matter of larger and smaller choices that affect all our daily lives, either directly or indirectly. The conversation about these choices is wide-ranging and is being held in many different places, from kitchen tables to government offices. Engaged Sustainability Week has taught us that conversations are most valuable when they take the form of a dialogue with people outside our everyday personal and professional circles. It is precisely by seeing things from someone else's viewpoint - sometimes literally - that you arrive at a shared understanding and, from there, reach joint and workable solutions. It is important to how we approach our advisory role that we look at what are often major, urgent tasks in the physical environment from a variety of perspectives. That will allow us to come up with useful recommendations which, we hope, will not only serve sustainability but also help everyone feel at home in a sustainable society.