

Sustainability: the end game for the next generation

Written by Marit Hendriks

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'Sustainability' is a word all too often borrowed to decorate the public presentation of government policies but in its purest form it means avoiding the consumption of limited resources.

'Sustainable Development' (the phrase coined by the 1987 Brundtland Commission Report, Our Common Future) has been on the agenda for 20 years, following acceptance at the 1992 Rio Earth Summit. Now, as we head towards the [UN Conference on Sustainable Development](#) the indications are that this concept has become stuck, with the net result that achieving progress has become more complex.

Sustainability is about ensuring that our generation does not compromise the ability of future generations to a decent and happy life. The basic question is 'How on earth can we keep [things] going without using up essential ingredients?' We live in a world that thrives on constant change and innovation - so sustainability in that context must not be confused with preservation of 'last generation' ways of doing things. In fact these 'last generation' ways of doing things has largely been the cause of the serious environmental, social and economic problems we face today.

It is clear that, despite laudable commitments, our current way of life is not following the path of sustainable development and must change before it is too late.

Economists argue that the growth and competitiveness that governments seek is now critically dependent on investment in digital infrastructure. Report after [global report](#) identifies the ready availability, affordability and take-up of 'next generation' broadband access as the essential life-blood of economic development – even if the quality of that digital access might sometimes be better described as 'last generation'. Such is the pace of digital development that with very few exceptions most of us live in digitally 'developing economies'.

Business leaders seeking the roots of innovation, say likewise.

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Societal developers – those whose focus is directed wholly towards creating better, more equitable and harmonious communities - increasingly understand the empowerment of people, that comes with high-quality connectedness.

Even traditional media outlets (newspapers and broadcasters) are beginning to understand that in a progressively digital world there are huge benefits of being on-line.

Politicians are at last sensing that there may be [votes in digital investment](#) on a scale that only 6 months ago would have been 'unthinkable'.

But the short-term rationales and accommodations of politicians the media, community or business leaders, or even 'rational' economists, do not come close to the commonsense mustered by those who would justify massively higher digital investment now as a simple matter of global survival.

In an increasingly interdependent world 'Causes' such as Ellen MacArthur's campaign for a circular economy (where all manner of things are '[made to be made again](#)') come together with some force under the banner of Sustainability and this is what high quality connectedness enables.

This focus on enabling sustainable development through digital connectedness may not be immediately obvious, but the forthcoming global focus at the Rio+20 conference provides an opportunity for energy experts, transport specialists, educationalists, health campaigners, environmentalists, unions and labour, food retailers, home insulators, and water utilities to demonstrate how sustainable development can be achieved.

The problem is that they will argue their cases from their silos as if the corners of the world were not joined.

But the underlying digital enablement, that makes progress for each faction far more than a

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fraction easier, means that all these are [‘Connected Causes’](#) and should add their weight to the fundamental need for a digital infrastructure fit for next generation.

Not my bag? Well, in whose bag? Sometime soon the pass-the parcel funding game, the limitations and compromises, the technological short-term fixes, will be found out - patches are for pirates. Then, of course, the blame game can begin and the folks from energy, and education and food and manufacturing and builders and the media and politicians and business leaders and societal developers and economists can say, ‘If only’

As achieving sustainability goals becomes more challenging we all need ever better tools for managing complex interdependencies. Connectedness – and the flow of information it enables – makes the digital infrastructure a key element in the way we live.

The signs of our current unsustainable society are everywhere, from increasing global poverty and inequity to ecological dysfunctions, economic breakdown and fragility. Sustainable Development is more than a global wish – it is fundamental. And digital connectedness is a key.

Fortunately for the next generation some governments understand that this investment is far too important to be left to the changes and chances of this fleeting world.

Marit Hendriks is a director of NextGen Events Ltd and an Associate of Groupe Intellex.