

Is it helpful to talk about thriving instead of sustainability?

By Wayne Visser

Part 1 of my interview by Panorama in Romania

Panorama: At one point you talked about CSR, 2.0 and now you talk about thriving. How does changing the language—the terms you use—impact how we implement these practices? Does it matter? Is it helpful to say thriving instead of sustainability?

Wayne: I think it's important because it signals something qualitatively different about how we tackle the issues. I don't get too caught up in the labels. I don't care too much whether somebody's still talking about CSR or sustainability or thriving or regeneration.

But I do think the language signals a change that has been happening, a realisation that for the last 30 to 50 years, the way that we've been tackling big social and environmental issues has mainly achieved an outcome that is just a little less bad. It's not actually getting us to the point where we're doing good.

Not only that, but because the impact of companies and economies has been so dramatic and has actually been increasing—the negative impact has been increasing over the last decades—there is a lot of repair that we have to do to even get back to a neutral position.

And so it just signals to business that they need to be more ambitious; that the less ambitious approach hasn't worked, hasn't been enough. It doesn't mean that they will necessarily meet that ambition.

We sometimes say “aim for the stars, and you might hit the moon”. I think we've been aiming for the moon and barely getting off the ground. So, so that's what it's about. It's about knowing where we're going.

The other thing it does is, if you are more ambitious, it forces you to bring innovation to the table. If you're only embracing incremental change—if you're just saying, “well, so long as we change a little bit every year, we just improve a little bit, we're okay”—then you don't need to do anything dramatic. You don't need to do anything terribly creative.

Then you're just trying to manage your way through the mess, to manage your way out of trouble. And it simply hasn't worked, for the reason that the challenges we face are large and urgent, and many of them getting worse very quickly. If you look at the climate emergency, or you look at biodiversity loss, or you look at growing inequality, these are very urgent, and so we need a more dramatic response.

That's the reason to change the language, but we also have to be careful of jargon. The different labels can be confusing, and people can get *label fatigue* or *jargon fatigue*.

That's one of the reasons I choose to talk about thriving, because thriving is something everybody can understand. It's the difference between what it means to survive and what it means to prosper. We know what that means for our family. We know what that means for our city. We know what that means for our country and for nature.

So let's use plain language. Let's talk about the health of our communities and the health of our cities. We know what those things mean. We must go beyond the labels to the common sense ideas behind them.

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