

# Enough Report

The response so far...

Dear 'Enough' readership,

Thank you for your interest in our report. If nothing else, you have made a small group of sustainability professionals very happy; entrusting your questions and perspectives to an anonymous email address is a true act of good faith, and we have been delighted by how many of you were kind enough to do so. We feel a real responsibility to honour this with a substantive response. While we work towards this, we wanted to share some of the questions and feedback we have received so far. In this 'no frills' report, we have collated some of the more common and/or distinctive queries and reactions we received over several months of consultation, along with a response from the team. As ever, we warmly welcome further feedback.



How has the report been received, particularly from the corporate community?

Surprisingly well. While it is entirely possible that those we have ruffled simply refuse to engage, the report seems to have been received in the manner in which it was intended: as a deliberate provocation to fix problems, not point fingers. We have not had a single corporate entity object to our depiction of the standard model of corporate sustainability, or to our criticism of corporate management theory more broadly. This could be interpreted in a number of ways, but we like to believe a couple of things. Firstly, that the corporate sustainability world, conscious of the challenges ahead, finds little to defend in the status quo and is open to change. Secondly, that sustainability people have less to fear from the status quo than we thought, and perhaps our greatest censors are really ourselves. Either way, no one has told us that we're self-sabotaging a model that was doing more good than harm, or that we are biting the hand that feeds. Whatever its origin, this receptivity is a door we feel obliged to keep pushing.

One common criticism we received was from entities within the sustainability community that questioned the right of people from a large professional services firm to comment on the problem of systemic unsustainability, given that we are a major component of 'the system'. This is a legitimate question, and it is right that people wonder if we practise what we preach; however the point of the Antithesis initiative is to help de-homogenise corporate sustainability to cultivate new ideas and self-critique, and so the incongruity between what we say and where we sit is a large part of what this is all about.

Did you come across many new ideas or solutions targeting the problems you raised in the report?

We were contacted by, or referred to, several sustainability NGOs spread around the world that have been trying to solve the problem of how to define and implement genuinely sustainable business models. These organisations were extremely giving of their ideas; indeed the number of people willing to put competition and cynicism aside in the interest of the common good is incredibly encouraging.

These organisations are each approaching the problem from slightly different angles, most of them are in a 'build' or 'pilot' phase, and all are seeking partners to support their efforts (we will look to profile some of these organisations, with their permission, in due course). We asked these groups how the Antithesis team could best support their ongoing efforts and the consistency of their responses surprised us. We thought our most effective contribution would come through methodological support for new science-based approaches to environmental accounting and business model reorientation; however, this hasn't been the view of the people we have spoken to so far. Instead, we found a widely held perspective that there is enough intellect being funnelled into concept development already, and that in any event, it was not the best application of this project specifically.

What we were commonly encouraged to do was help mobilise the collective urgency and enthusiasm of the corporate sustainability community to give these, and other ideas, a genuine try.

We encountered a widespread view that the corporate world already has most of the resident intellect to realise

sustainable development one experiment at a time, but it is constrained by the notion that a better model of capitalism needs to be fully realised and universally endorsed before we can risk applying it. Clearly the greater risk lies in waiting for a perfect alternative to exist on paper before experimenting with implementation, we simply do not have the time. And while it is inevitable that there will be missteps as we bend the corporate model to fit the boundaries of the biosphere, each realignment must be seen as a learning experience on the path to success. To do this, the corporate sustainability community needs to cultivate the persistence - and the power - to break the current cycle of pathological delay. It is towards this aim, we were told, that the Antithesis team might best apply itself. What that means at this point, we are not entirely sure, but we are becoming clearer on some points.

Firstly, there is a very large portion of the corporate sustainability community (with a particular concentration in Western Europe) who are sick of being privately passionate but professionally patient. They are tired of negotiating from a position of permanent weakness born of

the atomisation of sustainability across reporting lines, and budgetary cycles, and management KPIs, and shareholder appetite, and any other of the reasons why the present is never the right time. They are interested to see what could be made of the 'guild' concept (which was more commonly referred to as a 'movement') that empowers its members through weight of numbers and clarity of argument.

Counterbalancing this is a wariness of common approaches to sustainability networks, which in the minds of many are often light-weight, self-congratulatory and indistinct from one another. So, if we are to explore the concept of a movement, it needs to look and feel very different from the traditional model. One clear point of difference we were encouraged to consider was to make it feel like more of a school of thought than a professional network, one that is more intellectually experimental and aesthetically distinctive than would commonly be the case. This might not sound like a very prospective way to cultivate influence in the corporate world, but a key desire of our readership was to mobilise the humans within corporations more so than the corporations themselves.

## Is trying to change the corporate system from the inside wasted energy? Should we not accept that the status quo is incapable of self-correction and focus our attention on what we build when it collapses?

We were surprised by the number of people who put this hypothetical to us, most of whom were corporate figures and not fringe agitators, as some might have expected. But while we understand why someone might arrive at this position, we disagree with it.

Clearly a key motivation for the Enough Report was a fear that an illusion of progress might calm agitators that might otherwise push for more systemic change. We definitely need systemic change, and we acknowledge that corporate self-regulation is a highly imperfect basis from which to affect this change. But it does not follow that reform from within the corporate model is wasted effort, it does not follow that a better system can only be born from the complete failure of the one that preceded it.

Without question, there are powerful vested interests who will try their best to stymie the internal reform of the corporate system. But the idea that

they should succeed relies on the trope that the rest of us in the corporate world are compliant underlings who are unable to organise into an effective countervailing force. This excuses millions of educated, liberated people who work inside corporations from exercising their agency and moral responsibility. It also glosses over what it would mean for the world economic system to hit rock bottom.

For all that some corporations might have linear and imbalanced power structures, for all that some may compartmentalise and pressurise the roles of the people within them, corporations are still mostly just people agreeing to cooperate; many of whom are very aware of the incompatibility of their private ethics with their professional pragmatism.

And that is why it is far too early to say that the corporate world is beyond reform. We have barely scratched the surface of what it might look like for us

to really attempt to reform ourselves from within. We have never seen anything like a genuine insistence by sustainability allies that the necessary transformation will occur on our watch, regardless of the friction costs or unpopularity. Nor have we come remotely close to a material portion of the world's consumers actually refusing to fund unsustainable business modes. So this is why, for the time being, we are applying our energies to the system from within the system rather than simply waiting for the failure of the system to prove us right.



## Your report doesn't talk much to the current state of world politics and its bearing on corporate sustainability. How worried are you by the increasing politicisation of ESG?

In the short term, it seems clear that the ESG agenda will be an increasingly popular target of culture warriors who will portray it as an elite conspiracy against hard-working [insert nationality here]. They will convince certain partisan institutions to intervene in markets to counteract the flow of investment away from unsustainable practices and attempt to bully major financial institutions into downscaling responsible investment programs. A growing number of corporate entities will jump on this bandwagon and rebrand their unsustainable practices as an act of principled patriotism - none of this will help the sustainable development agenda in the short term. However, it is also not without its benefits.

It's unclear if the anti-ESG movement made a conscious decision to trade free-market puritanism for economic nationalism or if they were just going with the flow. Either way, they have done the sustainability movement a service by proving that no one ever really believed that markets always made the right decisions. Neo-liberalism had simply had its way for so long that it never encountered a decision it didn't like. Now that we can finally discard 'perfect markets theory' we can stop arguing about if we should address the externalities of markets and start arguing over how, and this an argument that the sustainability community should be much better placed to win.

## Your report seems to leave the concept of 'growth' unexamined. What are your thoughts on the degrowth agenda and its chances of success?

The title of our report was not just a reference to the need to stop persisting with a flawed model of corporate sustainability, it was a reference to the darkest taboo of our agenda - that for sustainability to succeed, the world's privileged people need to know when we have consumed enough.

Yes, economic growth has been the greatest contributor to increased living standards in human history but that does not make it a cure-all. You cannot grow your way out of a problem of over-consumption, at least not when you are already in a state of vast ecological overshoot. Some form of 'degrowth', therefore, is a physical necessity of our current predicament. The trick is achieving this degrowth within those populations whose living standards are already so high that their quality of life is not legitimately impacted by reduced consumption of raw materials. To the uninitiated this might sound like a constraint on 'progress' but proponents are quick to point out that degrowth does not necessitate a reduction in the value of

economic output, it is a reduction of economic 'throughput' to achieve that value. Or in cruder terms, you can still increase the quality of your life, just not through buying a second yacht.

Opponents will still say that it is through the pursuit of growth that the rich world invents the things that benefit the less fortunate: medicines, the internet and whatever breakthrough technology comes next. But it is a very pessimistic view of human ingenuity to think that our greatest technological breakthroughs must simply tumble out of the blind pursuit of more. The premise of degrowth is simply the pursuit of quality over quantity, of better valuing the things that matter and better sharing the bounty that this planet provides. Or at least this is how we understand it. We didn't really succeed in engaging with the degrowth community through this report, nor other allied agendas such as decolonisation. We certainly hope to in the future.

Whether or not the degrowth agenda will succeed is uncertain, what is

certain is that it will need a much stronger philosophical and popular narrative to get there. There would appear to be no practical or palatable way to implement degrowth from the top down, so the only way of achieving a sustainable retreat from privileged over-consumption is through the mass adherence to ethical principle. It's at this point that people throw up their arms at the seeming hopelessness of getting hundreds of millions of privileged autonomous people to self-regulate in the common interest. And yet that is something that most of the world's population does every day, otherwise no society could function. Most human beings have a facility for self-restraint and the origin of this is a collectivist ideal, however unconsciously it might function. So there is no real reason to be defeatist about the capacity for an idea to rapidly change the world; nothing changes the world faster than ideas (for good or ill) and so it is ultimately in the contest of ideas, not simply economics, that sustainable development will succeed or fail.

## Your report doesn't speak much to the human rights agenda, but isn't it a better vehicle through which to compel behavioural change?

Human rights are, of course, integral to the sustainable development agenda and the rationale of environmental sustainability is largely that it serves human ends. Recently, by virtue of UN Resolution, the relationship between biodiversity and human rights has been made explicit and this relationship is reflected in a growing legal recognition of the injustice of environmental harm. All of this is to say that we are very conscious and encouraging of the link between biosphere sustainability and human rights.

The funny thing about the way the sustainability movement uses human rights, however, is that it takes a universalist concept and interprets it in utilitarian terms. In other words, environmental sustainability is generally considered complementary to human rights because a healthy planet (as opposed to an unhealthy planet) represents the greatest good for the greatest number of people. This makes complete sense, but it avoids the fact that human rights are not founded on utilitarian logic; human rights are founded on the belief that some concepts are inherently just and true.

This preference for utilitarianism over universalism plays well in a corporate setting but restricts environmentalism's access to the existential realm - it restricts our ability to argue that sustaining the biosphere doesn't just extend life, but also brings meaning to it.

Yes... the meaning of life... that most famously intractable question that any action-orientated agenda should do its best to avoid. Except, perhaps, when you need to reach humanity at a depth that common sense seemingly cannot grasp.

Human rights represent the boldest philosophical leap of the secular world. Without recourse to a god or any other article of faith, human rights were deemed inherent and inalienable, written into the logic of the universe. Sustainability needs more of this philosophicalchutzpah. Not just to cite moral truths but to construct a notion of planetary duty that is drawn from this same moral logic and inspires action, not out of enlightened self-interest, but through a quest for enlightenment itself.

We could go on forever, but the year is ending in a hurry, and we want to get this out before it does. Thank you again for all of your ideas and interest. Please continue to find us at [antithesisproject@au.ey.com](mailto:antithesisproject@au.ey.com) as we work on some other ways to engage in 2023.

Yours sincerely,

The Antithesis Team

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