

Agriculture and Climate Change

SAOS's Emma Patterson Taylor thinks it's time to leave the ostriches to their sand

It's September 2020, and in this Covid-19 world I predictably find myself on yet another webinar, with a renowned academic telling us all that it's impossible to define sustainability because it means so many different things to different people. I am tempted to raise my hand, virtually, but think better of it; there's no way he can't be aware of the following:

"Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." *WCED Brundtland Report 1987*

I would argue that defining and understanding the concept of sustainability isn't hard, it has been accepting the reality of what that means which has proved to be so challenging for all of us.

As a cultural phenomenon which emerged at the dawn of our civilisation, it has been difficult for farming to understand its role in relation to Climate Change. How can a traditional industry that has been practised for over 12,000 years, and is critical for human survival be touted as auguring an 'age of doom'?

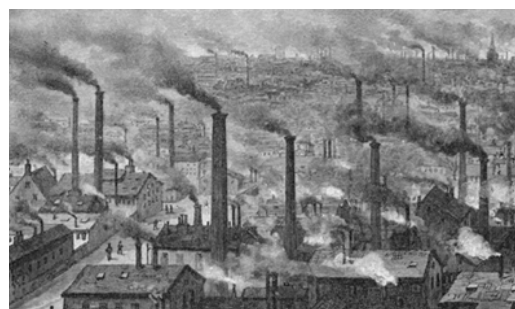


The First Agricultural Revolution was a seismic shift that brought about huge positive change for humanity, and was the beginning of society as we know it. Around 10,000 BC, our ancestors decided to settle down and began domesticating not only themselves, but the land and animals around them. In a bid to secure their future, humans identified ways of procuring a food supply from the Fertile Crescent that stretched across land that is now known as the Middle East. The cultivation of plants began with crops including wheat, barley, peas and flax. Livestock

breeding was also introduced with the domestication of wild boars, the Persian ibex, along with the sheep and cows we commonly find on farms today.

Farming formed one of humanity's earliest building blocks and played a pivotal role in our evolution. Without the emergence of settlements and the increase in food security that agriculture provided, our forebears would have had little time to share ideas or think about much beyond their basic survival. As food supply potential was unlocked and settlements provided stability, populations soared and civilisations grew and evolved.

From the late 1700s to the early 1800s, another horizon-expanding, epoch-defining moment in history took place. The Industrial Revolution transformed economies, previously based on agriculture, into systems where large-scale manufacturing and heavy industry predominated. Populations boomed again and innovations in extraction and exploitation of fossil fuels powered society towards many of the achievements and challenges we are experiencing today. Over time, people moved further away from the land as agriculture mechanised and fewer workers were needed to manage each farm. Society saw industry as the new future, and young people, seeking to make their fortune and build a better life for themselves, went to cities to fulfil those dreams.



The fossil fuel powered innovations that emerged during the last 200 years have fundamentally changed our lives. Huge wealth was unlocked for many, and power companies enjoyed vast profits which, in turn, have underpinned the personal pensions of today. A dependency on power became built into the fabric of society, which most of us would find it unimaginable to live without. Meanwhile, over the last 20 years, a growing realisation of the true cost of that power has begun to emerge. Slowly but surely, the evidence has persisted, until even the oil and gas companies were forced to accept that their industry had bequeathed an ominous legacy, in the form of CO₂, that nobody wants to claim.

Dealing with the threat of Climate Change, and restructuring our businesses and livelihoods so they can be sustainable, is a challenge no sector is finding easy. Climate Change is like the unwanted dinner guest everyone thinks someone else should pay for, despite all of us having eaten at the restaurant for years without asking for a bill, let alone paying up.

Let's consider how farming could decide to deal with that bill

We could say that we didn't know. That no one told us there were Climate Change impacts relating to agriculture. We weren't aware there was a problem and don't really understand why someone is saying there is. Agriculture feeds the world so what are we meant to do? People need to be fed somehow. (*cont overleaf*)

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We could blame others. Our revolution was a great contribution to civilisation, it isn't our fault if another one took place centuries later and had all these unintended consequences. It's unfair that we are being penalised. Why should we pay the price?

We could make excuses. It's impossible to rear livestock without them belching out methane so there's no point trying. They've done it for millennia and won't stop now no matter how many seaweed supplements they're fed.

We could wait and hope. We could say it's worrying that this is happening, but we have seen so much change come and go over the years. It is a concern, but we're sure a boffin in some university and/or a clever bit of technology will come along and take care of things.

Or we could choose to be accountable

We could acknowledge reality. We could accept that Climate Change is everyone's concern and everyone's responsibility. Never mind who caused it, we have a huge challenge facing all of us. Every sector will have to work to reduce their emissions, we all need to do everything we can.

We could own it. We could say agriculture has had a part to play in causing Climate Change and we are committed to mitigating that impact and being part of the solution. We are proud of our industry and are willing to take ownership of that task.

We could find solutions. Clearly there are inherent emissions associated with food production, but let's find out what is possible and pursue that. There are so many resources out there, as well as other likeminded organisations and farmers – we'll work together and identify what can be done.

Make it happen. We could own and take responsibility for tackling the issue of Climate Change in agriculture. We could demonstrate our commitment to mitigating our impact, even if no one helps us. We could say that as a sector we are going to prioritise Climate Change action and do whatever it takes to play our part.

Let's choose to be empowered and leave the victim card for others to play. Denying there is work to be done will not help us negotiate. Let's choose to keep our heads out of the sand and show the world that we know how to sit around the table and do our bit.

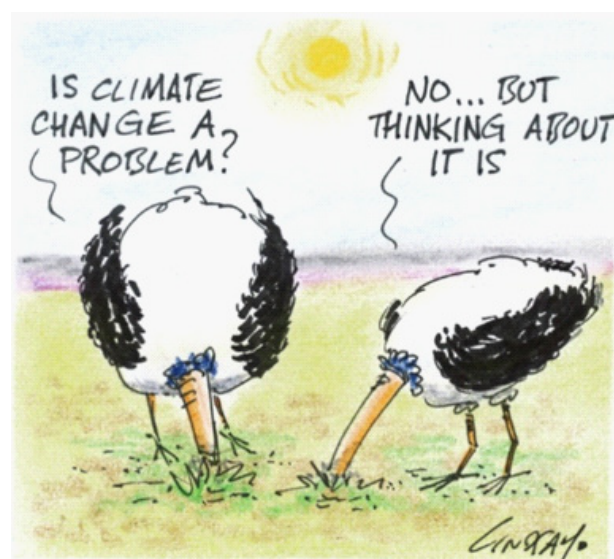
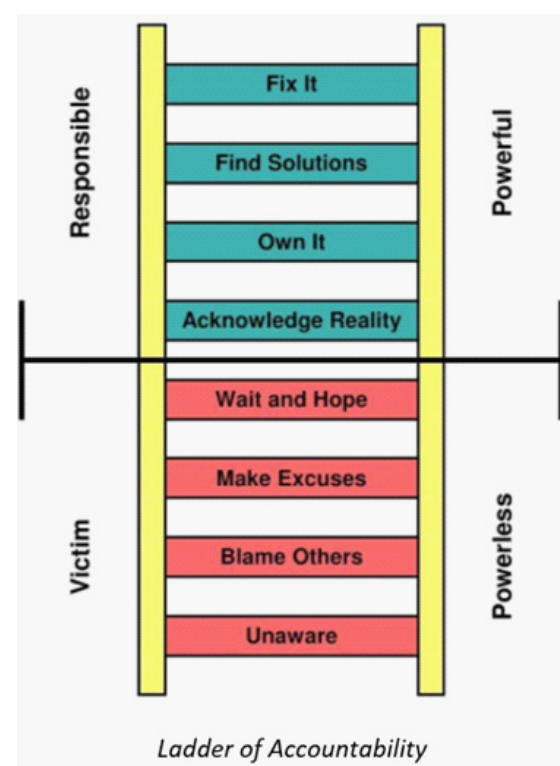
With the target of Net Zero set, it has become increasingly convenient for sectors struggling to clean up their own act, to have attention and focus sit elsewhere. Agriculture has become easy prey during a crisis that is not of its making. For an industry renowned for a 24/7, 365 days a year work schedule, rather than 'mega bucks' bonuses, it has been devastating to discover that agriculture has ended up in the hot seat. Somewhere, somehow, a Machiavellian move has been played. There is a profound irony to the narrative "change your diet to save the planet" when meaningful solutions that need to be considered lie elsewhere. When the spotlight is shining on institutions that can make the difference, not individuals deciding what to have for lunch, we will know real commitment to Net Zero has arrived.

Setting these distractions aside, let's remember that in farming we inherently understand preserving what we have and handing it down, uncompromised, to the next generation. Now is the time to use that knowledge, work together and play our part in securing a sustainable future. Here's hoping a few others may join us.

"The one institution in the world that has the capital, the cashflow, and the engineering capability of solving the climate change problem, is the global fossil fuel industry." *Myles Allen, The physicist behind Net Zero*

Emma is SAOS's lead on climate change and sustainability, and is developing our CarbonPositive programme.

Find out more at: www.saos.coop/what-we-do/carbonpositive



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