

## THE PROFESSIONALS' DILEMMA?

### Building Sustainable Development into Professional Practice

Stephen and Maureen Martin

Amongst the 5.5 million people in the UK who call themselves professionals, there is a growing realisation that they need help in understanding how to put the principles of sustainability into practice. Why is this happening? Why are doctors, lawyers, surveyors, civil engineers and belatedly, a growing number of accountants beginning to call for more help and guidance from their professional associations? The fact is that professionals in all sorts of roles must demonstrate their competency throughout their professional life, in complying with a growing and complex set of environmental, social and ethical issues. As the chairman of the British Medical Association's medical ethics committee stated recently, 'the days when patients simply left it to doctors to try what they thought best are over'. Another high profile commentator suggested that 'we have gone from a *trust me* culture to a *show me* culture' - which is why there is a new and growing emphasis on occupational standards, competency and codes of conduct. There is no easy solution to the diminishing public trust in professionals and their professional bodies. Their increasing reliance on rules, codes of practice and complex regulatory frameworks is also being questioned both for their lack of openness in terms of membership and the transparency of their procedures. What we need is a fundamental review of the professions and their professional bodies focusing on the role they should play in the economy and society at large.

Sustainable development is as much about ethics and values as it is about environmental protection and mitigating environmental impacts. It is important to distinguish between 'ethics' - which is a code of conduct which prescribes what professionals should or should not do and 'values' which refer to things professionals aim towards and regard as valuable or good in some sense. Any approach to sustainable development will have values and ethical principles embodied within it. For example, a transport engineer may ask why traffic pollution should concern us? The answer presumably is because it adversely affects human welfare. This raises a straightforward ethical issue about limiting activities which cause serious harm to others. There

is also explicit reference to human welfare as something we value. Every time a manager considers how to balance the value put on safety against the value put on reducing costs; they are dealing with an ethical issue and are being required to make an ethical judgement. Recent accounting scandals have led to criticisms of practices that permit accountancy professionals to provide additional consultancy services to the companies they audit. However, the underlying problem is essentially one of ethics – how can auditors maintain their independence if companies are paying them directly? Regulators and lawmakers will need to consider much more fundamental solutions to this vexed problem. Labour MP Austin Mitchell, one of the accountancy profession's most scathing critics says "The UK accountancy bodies have always behaved like trade associations, not guardians of public interest. They seek economic advantages for their members. They lobby government departments to protect their interests. They aim to shift the tax burden from the rich to the poor.... Rather than ethics, social responsibility and professional judgement, accountants shelter behind the latest accounting and auditing standards and their self protecting ingenuities." Hence there is a growing debate around the notion of professional social responsibility to match the developments in corporate social responsibility in a growing number of businesses.

A real dilemma for professionals is that ethics and values are not given the same priority as science and technology. A common but profoundly mistaken belief is that whilst science is 'hard', objective and based on empirical evidence, ethics and values are 'soft', subjective and entirely personal, like tastes. Issues of right and wrong, good or bad are not like a preference for red as opposed to white wine. Ethics are based on reason and reason can be subject to rigorous analysis. These are crucial issues for professionals, but if they treat them as superficially as taste, then they are unlikely to subject them to rational adjudication and debate.

It was Tolstoy who wrote that the greatest threat to life is habit. Habit, he argued, destroys the things around us by familiarising us to the extent that we can no longer see them. We become incapable of bringing the familiar furniture of our personal and professional lives into focus. In a similar vein, we often take for granted the ideas and concepts as well as the intellectual frameworks within which our ideas and concepts exist. Concepts such as the environment, nature, civil societies are familiar, yet they are difficult to define, partly because they carry with

them a baggage of assumptions, which influences the way we think about a range of contemporary issues. Professionals are no different, their beliefs and values are largely defined by their long education and training in their basic discipline. So our university system is part of the problem and not the solution! Yet in spite of special government commissions, national curriculum initiatives and concerted efforts by powerful NGOs 'a typical university graduate does not recognise that the consumer lifestyle is ecologically unsustainable'.

It is important to recognise that a significant number of professional bodies play a key role in defining the curricula of higher education programmes which prepare students for a specific profession. This is because many professions have been phasing out their own examinations and now rely on 'accredited' degrees as the educational route to membership.

In the UK a number of professional bodies have begun to recognise that sustainable development is a key issue to their members. Some, like the Engineering Council are actively revising and updating their 'Code of Professional Practice' and setting up working groups to discuss topics such as ethics, values and the sustainability agenda. The Institution of Environmental Sciences with 12 other Professional Bodies has developed a range of sustainable development training support materials for professional practice and the Royal Town Planning Institute have been a major player in developing a European Sustainable Development Guide for practitioners in the EU. This is good news, because most of the professional institutions and educational institutions have, until recently demonstrated considerable indifference to this issue.

The Government's sustainable development education panel has also set out a number of strategic goals for the professions. It recommends that by 2010 all professional bodies and industry lead bodies should have sustainable development criteria included within their course accreditation requirements.

Professional bodies are increasingly being asked to review their traditions and practice both radically and urgently to meet the needs of their existing membership. This has far reaching implications for universities. Many universities in Europe ratified their commitment to 'a leading role in developing a multi-disciplinary and ethically-orientated form of education in

order to devise solutions for problems linked to sustainable development' in the Copernicus Charter (1993). However, implementation of these principles has proved to be much more difficult and progress is frustratingly slow.

The challenge of sustainable development has profound implications for the engineering, planning, chemical, environmental, accounting professions and many others, in both the practice and role of the professional. Professionals are responsible not only for the safety, technical and economic performance of their activities, but they also have responsibilities to use resources sustainably; to minimise the environmental impact of projects, wastes and emissions; and to use their influence to ensure their work brings social benefits which are equitably distributed. These responsibilities heighten the importance of ethics in curriculum design and will require greater emphasis on codes of conduct and the role of professionals as social change agents.

Stephen Martin is vice-chairman of the Institution of Environmental Sciences and a visiting professor at the Centre for Complexity and Change, The Open University. He is also a member of the Professional Practice for Sustainable Development (PP4SD) Initiative, [www.ies-uk.org](http://www.ies-uk.org). uk  
Maureen Martin is a sustainable development consultant and campaigner for social justice.