OPTIMISM, PESSIMISM & HOPE

Personal responses to the professional challenges of sustainability.

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WHO WE ARE

We are a group of friends and colleagues who have worked together in various ways over the years on different aspects of social change for sustainability:

Osbert Lancaster, changemaking

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We decided to carry out the survey described below. The survey was designed, analysed and written by Osbert and Margaret. The report was designed and edited by David Key.

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HOW THIS REPORT CAME ABOUT

We've all been working for years on sustainability, environmental and social issues, and have been involved in some projects which have really made a difference. But recently we realised that we shared a feeling that, in the bigger scheme of things, the pace of progress is disappointingly slow. We knew that we weren't alone; we'd all had similar conversations with others which challenged the way we approach our work and engage with others.

To find out whether these concerns were shared more widely, and to understand them more deeply we carried out a simple survey. We sent out the survey in May and June 2014, via our own email lists and social media accounts. We received nearly 800 responses - way beyond our expectations.

The report asked five questions, and invited people to comment on any aspect of the survey. While the five questions revealed some surprising results, the real richness of what we found was contained in the many detailed comments that people left - nearly 20,000 words of comments.

The first part of this report presents the results of the five questions, the second part summarises the main points arising from the comments.
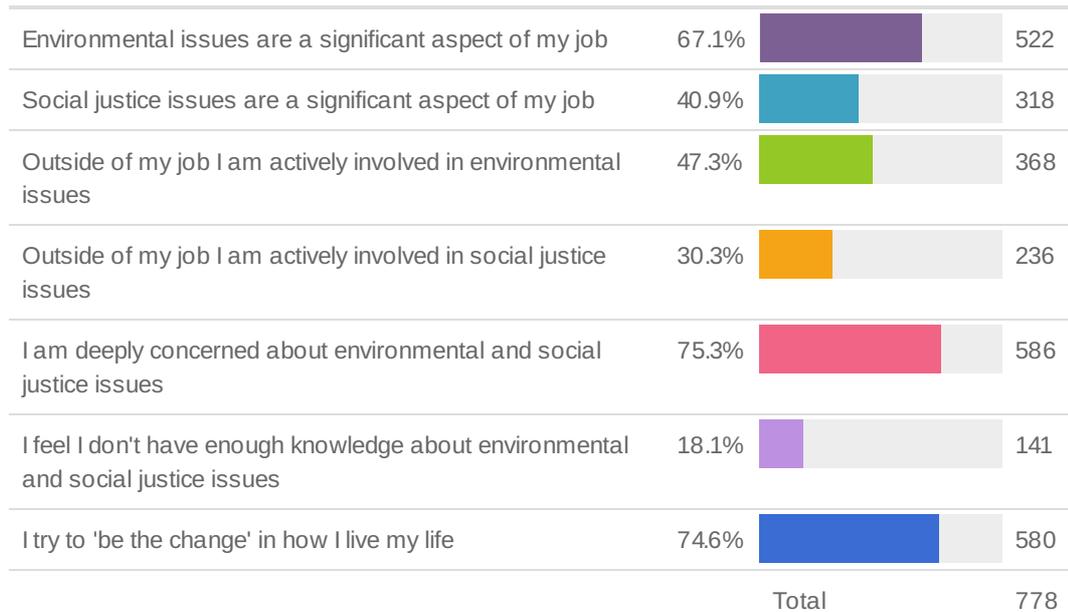
Methodology

This started as a simple survey to satisfy our curiosity and to help inform our work. Although we always planned to share the results with respondents and anyone else who was interested, we never intended this to be a rigorous piece of academic research.

Almost by accident we got a large number of responses and many heartfelt and insightful comments. All of this adds up to a very rich picture on what we, and many respondents, feel to be an important issue. If we'd realised what the level of response would be, we would have trialled the survey and taken more care with the design. We recognise that some of the questions may be inadvertently loaded or ambiguous. For that reason, we offer our findings as only the start of an exploration - and some very interesting food for thought.

THE FIVE QUESTIONS

Q1: Who completed the survey?

We wanted to understand something about the background of people completing the survey. We asked: Which of the following statements describe you? (multiple options possible).

Environmental issues are a significant aspect of my job	67.1%	522
Social justice issues are a significant aspect of my job	40.9%	318
Outside of my job I am actively involved in environmental issues	47.3%	368
Outside of my job I am actively involved in social justice issues	30.3%	236
I am deeply concerned about environmental and social justice issues	75.3%	586
I feel I don't have enough knowledge about environmental and social justice issues	18.1%	141
I try to 'be the change' in how I live my life	74.6%	580
	Total	778

The majority of respondents were actively engaged in sustainability and related issues. We used the response to this question to filter some of the following questions.
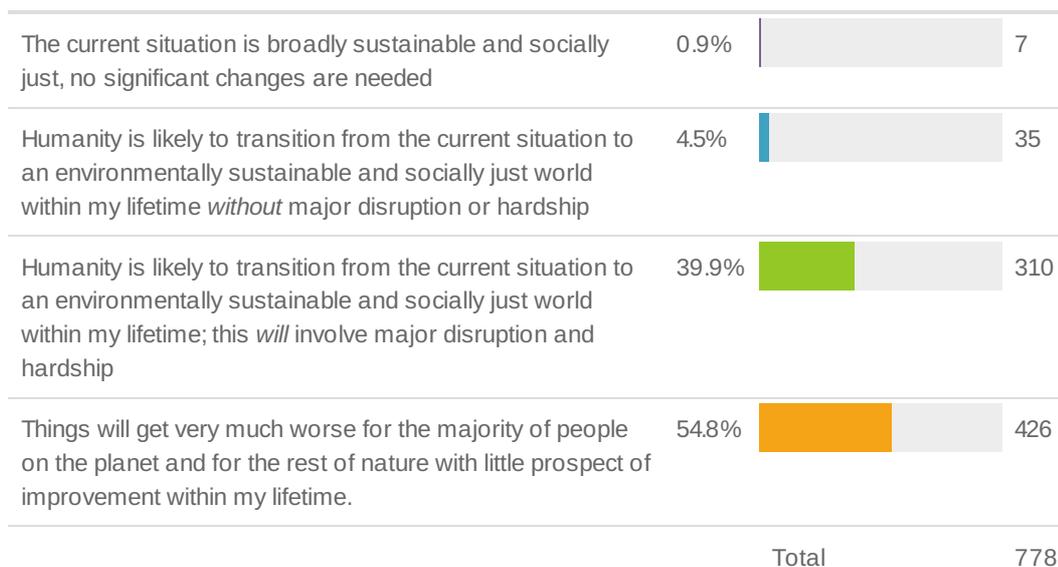
Q2: Views on the future

We showed this quote from Paul Hawken:

> 'When asked if I am pessimistic or optimistic about the future, my answer is always the same:
>
> If you look at the science about what is happening on earth and aren't pessimistic, you don't understand the data.
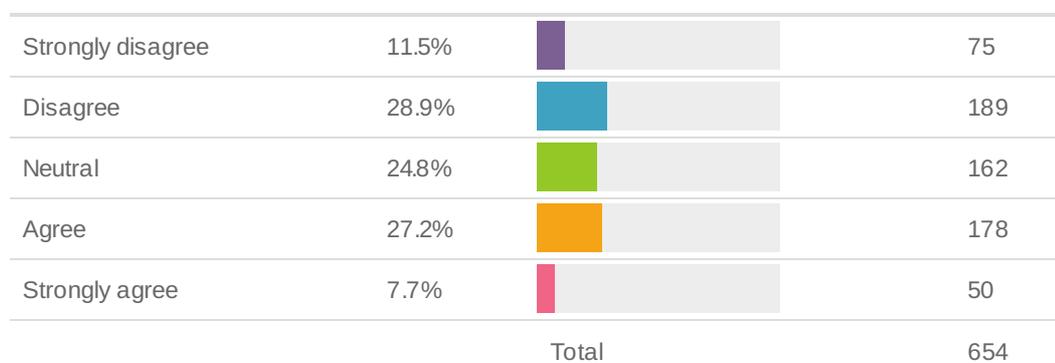>
> But if you meet the people who are working to restore this earth and the lives of the poor, & you aren't optimistic, you haven't got a pulse.'

And asked: Considering what Paul Hawken calls 'the data', which of the following statements is closest to your view:

The current situation is broadly sustainable and socially just, no significant changes are needed	0.9%		7
Humanity is likely to transition from the current situation to an environmentally sustainable and socially just world within my lifetime *without* major disruption or hardship	4.5%		35
Humanity is likely to transition from the current situation to an environmentally sustainable and socially just world within my lifetime; this *will* involve major disruption and hardship	39.9%		310
Things will get very much worse for the majority of people on the planet and for the rest of nature with little prospect of improvement within my lifetime.	54.8%		426
		Total	778

Q3: Burnout

We said: People working for environmental and social causes can suffer from 'burnout' - a state of physical, emotional or mental exhaustion combined with doubts about their competence and the value of their work. To what extent do you agree with the statement, 'I am suffering from burn out'?

Strongly disagree	11.5%		75
Disagree	28.9%		189
Neutral	24.8%		162
Agree	27.2%		178
Strongly agree	7.7%		50
		Total	654

This question was only asked of people who selected the following statements in Q1:

'Environmental issues are a significant aspect of my job',
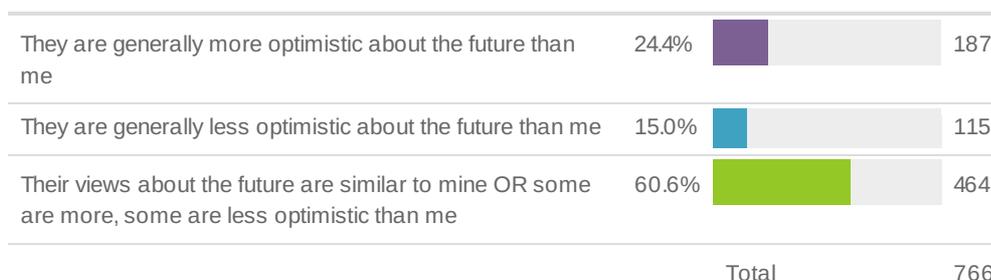
'Social justice issues are a significant aspect of my job',

'Outside of my job I am actively involved in environmental issues',

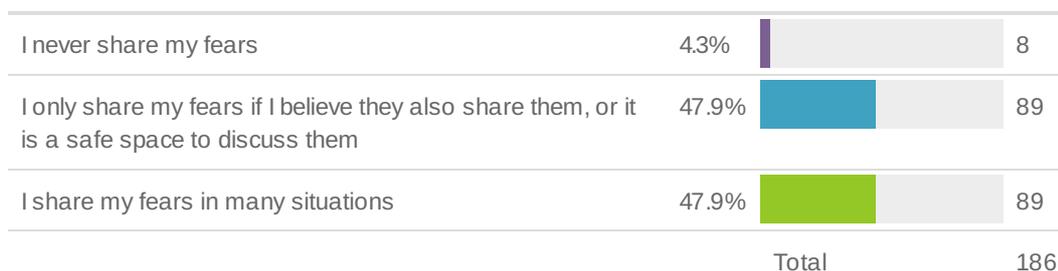*'Outside of my job I am actively involved in social justice issues'*

Q4: Are other people more or less optimistic?

We asked: When you talk with people who are concerned with environmental and social issues, how do their stated views about the future compare with your private views? (If they don't state their views explicitly, consider the views you assume they hold based on their attitudes and behaviour.)

They are generally more optimistic about the future than me	24.4%	187
They are generally less optimistic about the future than me	15.0%	115
Their views about the future are similar to mine OR some are more, some are less optimistic than me	60.6%	464
	Total	766

Q5: Sharing fears

We asked: In what situations do you share your fears about the future with other people engaged with environmental and social issues?

I never share my fears	4.3%	8
I only share my fears if I believe they also share them, or it is a safe space to discuss them	47.9%	89
I share my fears in many situations	47.9%	89
	Total	186

We only asked this question of people who said, in Q4, that other people are 'generally more optimistic than me'.

Where are respondents based?

The survey service automatically determined respondents location based on their IP address, where possible. This was possible for 83% of respondents. Of these, 82% were in the UK. The next largest locations were: US, 3%; Australia, 2%; Netherlands, 2%.

THE COMMENTS

We invited people to leave comments, expanding on previous responses or making additional points. Over 300 people left nearly 20,000 words of comment. We read these carefully to identify themes and have summarised the main points under these themes below.

OPTIMISM & PESSIMISM

Pessimism about the future was attributed to a feeling of powerlessness, and a reaction to political and public denial of responsibility for change. Exhaustion and exposure to negative life events were also associated with pessimism.

As well as being a result of denial and inaction, pessimism was also seen as causing denial - creating its own vicious circle.

Some respondents were pessimistic about human beings' capacity to change or live sustainably, and one reflected that humans have lost touch with the fact we are part of nature.

Optimism about the future was attributed to hopes for a radical change in human society and consciousness as a result of crisis; faith in the potential of grassroots movements; and respondents' experiences of working with people towards change.

Several respondents suggested that optimism leads to action and determination.

While some respondents described themselves as solely optimistic or pessimistic, the majority reported that they experienced optimism coexisting with pessimism.

Many described this co-existence as a fluctuation between poles.

> *'On a good day, I have faith that we will all pull together to deliver the solutions that are needed. However, on a bad day, I think about finding a hut, high in the mountains and learning how to fight.'*

We found that respondents had many diverse ways of describing and managing this polarity, and we have listed these below as themes with a sample of illustrative quotes.

Pessimism in the head and optimism in the heart

> *'My brain is pessimistic but my heart is optimistic.'*

> *'I am an optimist emotionally but intellectually it seems pessimism is the only rational response.'*

> *'I very much feel like the climate scientist in Cambridge who in response to my question whether with all the science he understood he was optimistic about the*

future he replied: "Every morning I wake up an optimist and go to bed every night as a pessimist. And I wake up again as an optimist".'

Optimism as denial; pessimism contains hope

'Sometimes I feel numb or not engaged because I've just been feeling optimistic, and the pessimism can actually wake me up and urge me on and reconnect me. This is a recent experience and feels like a process. Sometimes its easier not to to talk about environmental and social justice issues, like it switches people off from me. But engaging with my actual feelings about these things, which is hopelessness and sensitivity and hope feels important and makes me feel more alive, with a pulse.'

Commitment to the future, and hope for future generations

'It is very difficult for us to FEEL this: Oren Lyons, Chief of the Onondaga Nation, writes: 'We are looking ahead, as is one of the first mandates given us as chiefs, to make sure and to make every decision that we make relate to the welfare and well-being of the seventh generation to come…' 'What about the seventh generation? Where are you taking them? What will they have?'

A focus on hope

'As I look around, engage in conversation, and learn, it's the search for and creation of grounds for HOPE that is more important than being either optimistic or pessimistic.'

'I expect the worst but hope for the best.'

'All there is is hope. I don't know where to apply effort so I apply effort where I best can in the hopes it will all come out in the wash. Maybe any substantial change will be a little to do with my nudge. Most likely it won't be. The point is to try and to let everyone you can know you are trying and support them whenever they show the inclination to do the same. It may just be a lot to do with their nudges.'

Spiritual practices and perspectives

'I hope more of us can see the light in each and every one of us and respond in a positive way to these challenges sent to test us…'.

Encouragement and inspiration from working with peers

'I am in my early 60s and although I think I 'get the data' too, I am still optimistic about what could be done to improve things - the important thing for me is to be 'moving in the right direction' and in my time so far, I have seen the world travel a

long way in the 'wrong direction', but there are more people going in the 'right direction.'

Focusing on the present

'Living and giving in the present moment is key to our ability to do something beneficial on this earth.'

Attention to scale

'I am pessimistic at the large scale and optimistic at the smaller scale.'

'Thinking we're off to hell in a handcart isn't necessarily pessimistic! I know that sounds strange but I've come to a place of believing/accepting this, while still feeling optimistic about the positive changes, however small that can happen. I think we have to keep acting as if everything matters because it surely does, even if the impact of our actions isn't as great or transformative as we might wish.'

Working together

'The more time we spend together dynamically attempting to co-create a better world the more optimistic we can all feel about what's going on.'

'I feel that more steps to engage the wider community in environmental and social justice issues are necessary, possibly going back to traditional methods of community engagement and investigation. Enabling people the gain access to the knowledge, know how and means to bring about change to the benefit of all. Keeping the 'data' simple and the messages direct - small steps that everyone can take and small changes everyone can make regardless of status and means.'

Acceptance of loss and honesty with feelings

'My thoughts are apocalyptic, my body full of fear, my head awash with data, my heart is trying to hear the whisper of hope I catch on the breeze. It's the rasp of the dying as they let go of life, the belief in the eternity of an afterlife. But what of the earth on which we stand? The body is dying, inevitably. I want to face this death, not hide in a lie. I need to feel the pain, the anger and the grief. I need to mourn with others with this same belief.'

Use of the will

'Gramsci had it right with his pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will… most people's optimism about the future is really now willed optimism (that is, optimism kept up by force of will in the face of realities tacitly recognised but denied), a state of mind which is not the opposite of despair but actually a form of it.'

Continued effort and determination

> *'You remain realistic whilst open to trying to change things - good combination in my book.'*

PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

Many people viewed the wider public outside the environmental movement as being in denial. They cited a lack of public understanding, engagement, knowledge, information and concern.

But some also speculated that denial enabled people to keep going and prevented disabling depression and anxiety.

> *'Most people have a head-in-the-sand view (me included) otherwise there would be general and maybe un-constructive panic.'*

They cited people's focus on their immediate circumstances, and the pressure of economic and financial concerns as a factor which reduced public willingness to engage and conflicted with personal values. Some also saw this tension operating in those within the environmental sector.

> *'I am still at an early career stage, without a permanent job, and every time I go for a job interview I am worried that in the new job I might be pressured to fly for work purposes, which I don't want to do, but I need to earn my living so I've never yet dared say that in an interview.'*

Although some respondents noted more public concern about environmental issues than previously, others felt that a lot more engagement was needed to get the message across.

Some saw children and young people as a source of optimism hope for the future. Others were frustrated by what they perceived as young people's lack of confidence that behaviour change would be effective.

STRUCTURAL & CULTURAL CHANGE

In general, respondents saw structural barriers as significant, and felt pessimistic about the slow pace of top-down change. They saw denial among leaders and failures of government understanding and engagement. Some experienced this as obstruction.

In particular, they cited a focus on economic growth as a major barrier to change. Other factors cited as causing structural barriers were a focus on short term gain, lack of a holistic worldview, fear of activism and a focus on power.

They called for courage from those in leadership positions, and stressed the importance of targeting people with power and influence to achieve change. Some also held that a grassroots perspective would bring more urgency than a professional perspective, and emphasised the importance of community action.

The emphasis on personal behaviour change was seen by some as a distraction, and these respondents emphasised the need for larger scale structural change.

Cultural change was seen as necessary to facilitate change for individuals. Some respondents cited the negative role of the media, and a need for transformation of the media. There was widespread recognition of the need for a change in worldview, among those in power and among people in general - as one respondent said, to counteract fear, guilt and competition.

ENVIRONMENTAL & SOCIAL JUSTICE MOVEMENTS

Some respondents fed back a view that the environmental and social justice movements need to reach out and include people beyond their immediate communities and to avoid alienating people.

There was a view that the sustainability movement needs to be linked with political ones, and there was an awareness of the need to raise consciousness of the links between environmental, political and social justice issues.

A number of respondents saw environmentalism and social activism as a vocation, with some remaining active throughout their lifetime, and others giving up and turning to alternative work.

While some described the need to keep fighting for social and ecological justice, others saw the discourse of 'fighting' as perpetuating problems, and spoke of the power of softness, gentleness and spirit in campaigning.

BURNOUT & RECOVERY

A number of respondents had experienced burnout, and some had made the choice not to engage any more.

> 'I wanted to be an ecologist since 15. I was at the top my my profession, representing the UK Government with a significant international reputation in my field but yet the power to affect change was in the hands of MBA holders and individuals whose ambition far outstripped their ability; whose ego and narcissism was more important than environmental gain; and whose souls were black. The aping of the corporate world killed conservation. I have been forced to retrain in a different profession to my eternal bitterness. I am burnt out and sad for what I could have achieved.'

Others described internal conflict

> 'I want to believe that if I do 'my bit' then it will encourage others to do theirs. Sometimes I doubt if we will make a difference but know that by not acting then we can't even hold back the tide let alone make progress. But it is hard pouring mental and emotional energy into what seems like a huge chasm without positive feedback other than the internal knowledge that I am trying to do what I can. I

also have to fight the guilt of thinking I should be doing more, more activism, stronger language, more pressure on myself and my peers to act more. It is hard to balance living in the unsustainable world (with some degree of harmony with daily life) while trying to create a more sustainable one. Internal conflict is part of my daily existence.'

'I don't work for environmental causes, but I do try to 'live the change.' Even so, I feel 'burn out' in terms of believing that diverting an environmental catastrophe is possible - but I can't stop living as I do, mindful of the planet and other life forms. I try to live a kind of constant 'double-think', i.e. deep concern about the earth's environmental future, but which does not eclipse a moment to moment appreciation and joy in what is now. Sustaining both of these modes of feeling in parallel, for me, takes inner resolve and resources - and I frequently give in to either defeatism or deliberate dissociation from the environmental crisis.'

Some respondents said that burnout is not static, it comes and goes. Some suggested it can be linked to duration of engagement, while others reported working for a lifetime in the field and maintaining hope and commitment.

Many respondents had found ways to recover from burnout by:

- taking time out

- changing their job

- varying the type of work they were engaged in

- shifting focus

- adapting to their own capabilities

- self care

- kindness

- getting the distance right

- working together

- adjusting their lifestyle, thinking and action

- drawing on values

- drawing on a deep sense of trust

- being in wild nature

The quotes below illustrate how people brought these ways together to maintain their commitment and activism.

'At times I feel dispirited and weary but then someone does / says something that reinvigorates me.'

'I veer from wildly optimistic to wildly pessimistic regularly. Often it can feel like there are so many things 'wrong' with the world that I'm pouring water into a holey bucket. Engaging with sector peers really energises me though, there is a feeling of momentum in the sustainability sector.'

'Burnout is a very real issue, but by working together, rather than taking things on as a personal mission, one can recover.'

'I've always worked in the environmental and social justice sector and yet haven't suffered burn out, I think because I don't have an activist energy if that makes sense. I have a deep trust that things will work out as they need to. I just try to do my best in the present.'

'I do agree we can suffer burnout… I take notice of the signs of this now and take care of myself so I can continue… taking a step back maybe, self-care, so I can carry on. I strongly feel that things will change for the better - even if it is because humanity is forced into that situation when they finally realise we cannot carry on using and abusing the world, each other and our fellow species… I hope I will see at least the start of that in my lifetime and I most certainly am doing all I can to do my bit in helping that day come along. I am passionate about creating a more compassionate future for all, no matter their species and no matter how hard that work is I will do everything I can to help make things better for all. When things get me down and the cruelty and indifference we can see hurts a bit too much, I step back and when I do, I see all the good work people are doing, all the kindness and all the compassion and it restores my faith… it helps me carry on.'

'While I generally feel very pessimistic when considering the future, I try not to give into despair and actively try and find joy in small daily encounters with wild nature.'

'In my journey I have found that I have had to learn lessons to stay on track without getting burnt out. It is a combination of learning to have the right lifestyle, and the right process of thinking and responding to any situation or happening. It is not about it being easy for anyone. It is also not about the goal. It is about the journey.'

'Our world matters too much to allow 'burnout'.'

'I consider that the future will be painfully turbulent but this doesn't displace my joy at being alive at this time and able to contribute. To meet my life with joy, reverence, and a determination offer my gifts generously while simultaneously feeling often moved to tears, grief, and vulnerability seems to me to be a sane response to the wonder and tragedy of this extraordinary time.'

SHARING FEELINGS

There was a diversity of views about where it felt safe to share feelings about ecological and social justice issues. Some shared with friends but not at work; for others, it was the other way round.

While some saw it as vital to share fears more widely, others thought it was wiser to stay positive in public so as not to create despondency. Some experienced a conflict within themselves about whether to share what they knew more widely.

> *'The data provided by science is often so bleak I think that it might provide a barrier to change so I hold back in what I share.'*

In sharing, there were many reports of looking after others rather than self.

One respondent asked 'where do environmentalists go to share their feelings?' There was a perception that a safe space was needed for people to explore what they feel.

> *'For me it is essential that we create containers in which we can express our grief, anger, fear, etc. in order to live with hope rather than despair.'*

CONCLUSIONS: WHERE DOES THIS LEAVE US?

Hopes and fears

For the majority of people in the survey, social justice and environmental issues form a significant part of their personal and professional lives. Most people were deeply concerned about these and sought to live their lives in ways that would create positive change in our social and environmental situation.

About one third of people agreed that a transition to an environmentally sustainable and socially just world was possible within their lifetime. The majority however, felt that this was unlikely. Major disruption to our present way of life was seen as inevitable, regardless of the scale and rate of change.

Lacking power to engage political and public bodies was seen as a major root of pessimism. Pessimism itself was seen as part of a vicious circle, in which denial of our social and environmental situation becomes a way of coping with it.

Optimism was largely based on hope for radical social and psychological change. In general pessimism fostered deeper denial while optimism led to hope about the future. Most people described optimism and pessimism co-existing and described a wide variety of ways to hold this paradox in themselves.

Working together, having hope for future generations and being committed to making things better were all strong narrative themes. Keeping perspective and working on different scales (for example, local, regional and national) were referred to as important. Acting from present moment awareness was also a recurrent theme. Openness to feelings and emotions and being able to express them were both evident in the thematic and in the language many respondents used in their commentary generally.

There was a feeling that the public at large were in denial about social justice and environmental issues. However, this was also seen as a way for people to cope effectively with fear, allowing them to continue to function in their daily lives. Economic and financial concerns were regarded as significant in reducing public willingness to act.

Cultural barriers to change, especially the unquestioned focus on economic growth, were seen as very significant. Respondents suggested that courage and leadership was essential from those in situations of agency. Large-scale cultural change was seen as more important than personal change and as a way of facilitating greater change at a personal level.

A change in worldview was recognised across the narrative as essential. The media's role was seen as important in the generation and maintenance of world views.

Burn-out

There was an approximate balance between people who thought they suffered from burn-out and those that did not. About a quarter of respondents were neutral. This suggests that around 200 of the people surveyed felt they were suffering from burn-out.

In some cases, burnout resulted in people disengaging from the social justice and environmental movements. In others it led to internal conflicts filled with doubt and guilt. Recovering from burnout was achieved in a diversity of ways.

Sharing and caring

There was an exact split between people who shared their fears quite openly with others and those that chose to do so only in situations that felt 'safe'. For example, where others would sympathise with their fears.

Some people felt it was important to share feelings publicly, while others thought it was better to keep a public face of optimism. There was conflict about choosing to share feeling or not and in which contexts to do so. There was also conflict about self-care being neglected in favour of caring for others.

Where do we go from here?

We haven't analysed the official public narratives of relevant international agencies, governments and NGOs, however our impression is that while they highlight the challenges of climate change etc, they imply these can be overcome, and that the transition will be smooth and painless.

If this impression is correct, it stands in direct contrast to the majority view in this survey - that major disruption is inevitable. If the views of survey participants are typical, it suggests that the official views of many organisations may be radically different from the views of the people working on these issues - and perhaps even for these very organisations.

This, in tandem with the other points above, raises a number of related questions:

• What are the implications for people working on these issues when their personal views may be very different from those of the organisations (perhaps their employers) with responsibility for addressing them?

• How can they find the right balance between being honest about their fears for the future and conveying positive and motivating messages to the organisations and communities they work with?

• If denial of the implications of our situation is both a coping strategy and holds back the chance of addressing it effectively, how do we move forward?

- How can people working and campaigning on these issues best look after themselves and support each other?