

# Why sustainability is rarely about just one thing

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*‘Wider impacts’ thinking, systems literacy, and hidden trade-offs*

For a long time, my understanding of sustainability was relatively linear. Reduce waste. Lower carbon. Recycle more. Use less plastic. You know the script.

Most sustainability discussions seemed to revolve around identifying a “better” option and moving towards it. A product was either sustainable or it wasn’t. A material was either environmentally friendly or environmentally harmful. A process was either “green” or “bad”.

The more I worked and studied within the sustainability space, however, the more I realised that reality is rarely that simple.

What changed my thinking most profoundly was being introduced to the [United Nations Sustainable Development Goals](#) framework during my studies at [CISL](#). Not because the SDGs themselves provide *perfect* answers — they don’t — but because they fundamentally changed the way I looked at impacts.

They revealed something important: Sustainability impacts almost never exist in isolation.

## **The Realisation**

Before encountering this way of thinking, I often evaluated sustainability claims through a single lens at a time. If something reduced plastic waste, that was good. If something lowered energy use, that was good. If something recycled materials, that was good. But the SDG framework forced me to look wider.

A drinks company reusing glass bottles sounds unquestionably positive at first glance: less virgin material extraction, less packaging waste, less single-use plastic.

But what if the bottle-washing process consumes huge quantities of water in a water-stressed region? What if the labour supporting the process is underpaid or unsafe? What if the energy required for sterilisation comes from carbon-intensive electricity generation?

The initiative may still be beneficial overall but suddenly the evaluation becomes much more complicated than simply: “recycling = good”.

That moment genuinely changed how I think about sustainability.



### **‘Wider Impacts’ Thinking**

I now think of sustainability less as a search for simple answers and more as a *process*, of understanding interconnected consequences.

Every intervention creates ripple effects. Some are visible, others are displaced geographically, socially, economically, or temporally. This is where I think many public sustainability conversations become

oversimplified. We often optimise for one metric while unintentionally worsening another.

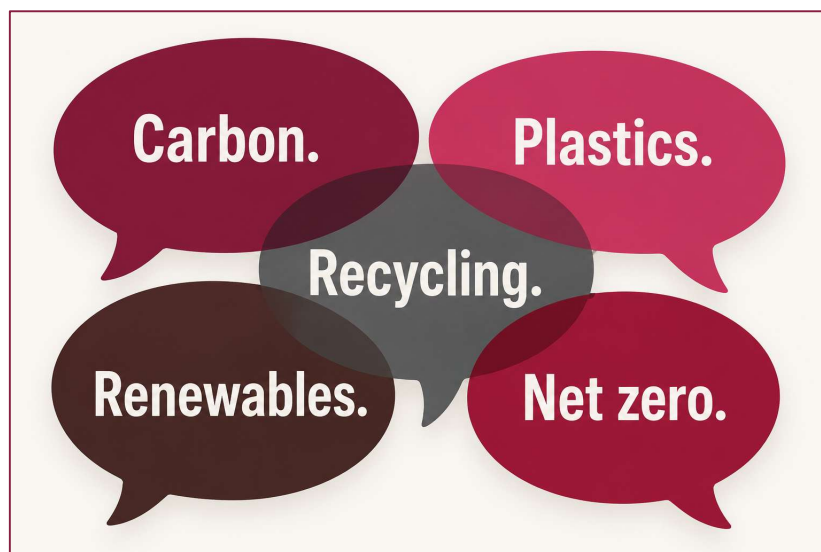
Take something as ordinary as a carrier bag.

Is a lightweight plastic bag — made from fossil-fuel derivatives, and prone to flyaway littering, but which may be reusable multiple times — better or worse than a paper bag that requires greater water and energy consumption during manufacture but is easier to recycle?

The point is not necessarily that one is definitively “right” and the other “wrong”. The important thing is learning to ask the wider question in the first place, so we can balance benefits in some metrics against impacts in others.

### **The Problem with Single-Metric Sustainability**

The success of messaging in the modern sustainability discourse often rewards simplicity.



Public sustainability debates often focus on isolated headline issues: plastics, emissions, recycling or waste.

These are important topics but real-world systems do not operate in isolated categories.

Reducing one environmental burden can increase another. Improving one social outcome can create economic pressure elsewhere. Short-

term gains can produce long-term consequences. Yet many sustainability claims are still presented as though improving one selected metric automatically produces an overall positive outcome. **Reality is far more interconnected than that.**

### **A Better Way to Think**

I increasingly believe that one of the most valuable things we can teach people is not *what* to think about sustainability but *how* to think about it.

Not everyone will become a sustainability specialist. Not everyone needs to perform full lifecycle assessments before making everyday choices, or feel guilty about small-scale choices they make if the planet-scale context is hidden from them.

Introducing people to **‘wider impact’ thinking** changes the quality of questions they ask.

Sustainability is not simply about finding “green” solutions. It is about understanding systems *holistically and as interconnected*.

### **What to take away?**

The goal is to not let the ‘perfect’ be the enemy of the ‘good’, yet not become paralysed by complexity. The goal is to become more intellectually honest about the trade-offs that exist within almost every sustainability decision. In many ways, the most important lesson sustainability taught me was not that the world has simple answers, but that good intentions alone are not enough.

What matters is learning to see the wider impacts that sit just beyond the headline claim and developing the habit of **asking better questions**.

### **About the author**

[Andy Gibson](#) is the **Technical Director** at **Merronbrook Ltd.**, a UK-based manufacturer of engineered wood products and timber framed buildings. Andy has a Master’s Degree in **Sustainability Leadership for the Built Environment** from the [Cambridge Institute for Sustainability Leadership](#), at the University of Cambridge. Andy’s dissertation on the impacts of forest management on the net carbon benefits of timber in construction is available [here](#), and the follow-up journal paper published in *MDPI: Sustainability* is available [here](#). He also co-authored a paper on pandemic-resilient neighbourhoods, which was presented at the 2025 AMPS: Livable Cities Conference and can be read [here](#).