



**Critical issues in sustainability**

*Part III*

Lars Moratis and Frans Melissen

## Table of contents

<b>Preface</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Part I. Perspectives on the pandemic</b>	<b>4</b>
Don't let the climate suffer from this crisis	5
Back to normal is not an option	7
Opportunities for the 1,5-degrees-economy	10
Be critical for the right reasons	12
<b>Part II. Changing management education</b>	<b>14</b>
Business schools must stop teaching the oxymoron of green growth	15
Are business schools silents partners in pandemic parasitism?	18
The coronation of Responsible Management Education	21
<b>Part III. A world of sustainability?</b>	<b>26</b>
Five lessons the SDGs teach us about sustainability	27
The planet as outlet center	29
Preventing climate catastrophe requires renouncing economic growth	31
<b>About the authors</b>	<b>33</b>

## Preface

If the words ‘challenge’ and ‘change’ were to be applied to one year in recent history, it must be 2020. The COVID-19 pandemic has shaken societies worldwide to the core. For some, 2020 may have felt so intimidating that it must be hard to look beyond it. For others, it must have been scary to actually look beyond 2020 since the pandemic has, in a sense, functioned as a magnifying glass showing profound flaws in our societies and economies that cast shadows over the future. And, for sure, 2020 has been a year that has brought about change in some form or another for everyone.

While we recognize all of the above, for us, 2020 was also the year that we took up our positions as holders of the Chair in Management Education for Sustainability. Being a joint initiative of Antwerp Management School and Breda University of Applied Sciences and supported by a host of organizations from the Netherlands and Belgium, the Chair aims to make a contribution to the development of Responsible Management Education. Here, many different challenges converge, ranging from approaches to sustainability and conceptions of what constitutes proper education to perspectives of the roles of business and business schools in society. In our ambitions regarding the functioning of the Chair, critical studies, moral imagination, and systemic activism play an important role as part of the change that is needed within management education – and this booklet pays tribute to that.

Next to bringing these themes together in this booklet, we also integrated them in an [‘inaugural movie’](#) that was part of our inaugural event on December 15, 2020. In this inaugural movie, larded with visual materials such as the spoken word video [‘Your Ancestor’](#) by Dutch fado singer Nynke Laverman, we argue that sustainability in the context of management education has become part of the problem it set out to solve. As a consequence, and accelerated by the pandemic and its root causes, business schools have been catapulted into an existential crisis and should step up their game by embracing a political agenda that not only revolves around sustainability, but also around redefining their own roles in it. This goes well beyond some of the responses we have seen in the business school community to the pandemic, such as innovative educational delivery and the development of agile supply chains. The real challenge is much more profound and our Chair aims to take a central role in engendering discussion and change regarding the societal role of business schools and management education.

Such an approach is inherent of taking a critical perspective: indeed, we try to be critical of our own work, our own field of expertise, our own institutions, and our own professional

communities and relations, too. And there is a simple but important reason for doing so: taking a critical perspective is a central underpinning of learning and progress. Ideas and actions can therefore be considered as two sides of the same coin. As the late Brazilian educational reformist and professor Paulo Freire once said: “Critical reflection on practice is a requirement of the relationship between theory and practice. Otherwise theory becomes simply ‘blah, blah, blah’ and practice pure activism.” One way we interpret this is that changing the world indeed starts by challenging it.

This booklet is the third of its kind and, as such, the sequel to [‘Critical issues in sustainability – part I’](#) and [‘Critical issues in sustainability – part II’](#). It contains several of our reflections as they have appeared in writing throughout 2020, notably but not exclusively through opinion articles. We should mention here that when we re-read some of our own writings in the process of composing this booklet, we noted that 2020 went by at warp speed. Some of the contributions that you will find in this booklet were written early in the pandemic and, obviously, a lot has happened since (both for the better and for the worse). Still, we decided to include these writings here as we feel the analyses they contain may be relevant for understanding what is going on at the interface of sustainability, economy, organizations, and education – and why.

Just as much as we hope this booklet will challenge your ideas and actions and will provide you with the inspiration to change our world for the better, we hope it will be the ancestor of our and others’ future work. In any case, we invite you to let us know what you think about it and how we might join forces.

Lars and Frans

Marval / Bosschenhoofd

March 10, 2021

## **Part I.**

---

# **Perspectives on the pandemic**

### **Don't let the climate suffer from this crisis**

It is perfectly understandable that all of our attention is directed towards the corona crisis. Still, it would be wise to not lose track of or ignore other crises that we are confronted with. Of those, the climate crisis is undoubtedly the most serious one.

The good news is that CO<sub>2</sub> emissions are now dropping remarkably as a consequence of reduced air traffic and international trade slowing down. In a bizarre twist of fate, that might well result in the Dutch government being able to comply with the mandatory additional climate efforts resulting from the so-called Urgenda verdict.

At the same time, the corona crisis will also lead to negative climate effects. For starters, just think about delays in anticipated and planned climate action. The government of Czechia has already suggested to postpone the European Union's Green Deal, while Poland wants to decommission the ETS emission trading system. Also, financing projects for the generation and storage of sustainable energy is getting increasingly difficult, as the MIT Technology Review noted. Having plummeted to historical lows, oil prices are making fossil energy even more attractive than the oftentimes more expensive electric alternatives. The production of solar panels, wind turbines, and batteries for electric vehicles in China has receded and companies are experiencing problems in the supply and shipment of parts needed for realizing these products.

If the COVID-19 pandemic will lead to a worldwide economic recession, the political will to tackle the climate crisis with public investments will almost certainly decline. It is everything but a bold prediction that industry, when the corona crisis has faded, will catch up again with support from governments and politicians. That will lead CO<sub>2</sub> emissions to rebound to pre-corona levels – or even higher. This is already visible in China where the government has been taking a more lenient position towards complying with environmental regulations in order to quickly get business production levels back on track again.

While being fundamentally different, the corona crisis and the climate crisis have a common denominator: they both show the limits of a socioeconomic system that has been built on a neoliberal capitalist foundation. In this system, ecosystems are production factors, valuable public services such as healthcare and education are being reduced to an expense, and the climate crisis is a business case depending on the economic climate. The underlying crisis can hence be best described as a moral crisis.

When the climate crisis accelerates, it is plausible that pandemics such as the one we are living in now will occur more often. As a result of the destruction of animals' natural habitats viruses have a better chance to jump from animals to humans. In addition, old viruses escaping the melting permafrost can become a real danger.

If we want to pay tribute to the age-old adage 'never waste a good crisis' it would be good to not just use this period for securing the health of as many people as possible, but also for reassessing the values that guide us in organizing our societies and that underpin our civilization. That means thoroughly scrutinizing the relationship between humans and nature, our solidarity with people that are most vulnerable, and the social contract between citizens and the State.

To be clear, the above is not a call for paying less attention to the corona crisis and all measures and interventions that are needed to cope with this crisis effectively. On the contrary: it is a call to use these times of social distancing to come closer together regarding the values we should prioritize in our society.

*(This column was published on March 24, 2020 in Het Parool.)*

### **Back to normal is not an option**

If the corona crisis teaches us anything, it is the resilience and sense of togetherness of citizens, that the public sector – in particular healthcare, education, and other public services – is a crucial and reliable foundation under our society, and that politicians, when they are forced by circumstances, are able to quickly and decisively respond to a crisis with appropriate action. Only together, to use the slogan of the Dutch government campaign to combat the pandemic, can we overcome this crisis.

Because of the massive societal and economic consequences of the corona crisis there seems to be a widely shared feeling that we are in the midst of a so-called reset moment – that now is the time to start doing things differently. What we should prevent in any case is that we go back to normal. Normal, in fact, has been precisely the root of the problem.

With that in mind, there seems to be momentum to make choices aimed at improving the way in which we, humans, relate to Earth, nature, and, for instance, the way in which we have been trying to tackle the climate crisis. Various economists and politicians have already called for CO2 reduction conditions to the financial support that polluting companies demand from the government. In situations where the government has the upper hand, choices can be made that lead to spurring the transition towards a truly sustainable economy.

However logical and tempting such proposals may sound, the chance that that we will witness an acceleration in the reduction of CO2 emissions seems slim. That is not thinking gloom and doom or merely theory; signals can already be observed that that is the case. On a European level, Czechia – with its predominantly nuclear- and coal-fueled economy – has already argued that it will be necessary to suspend the EU Green Deal in order for our attention to go undividedly to the corona crisis. For similar reasons, Poland has suggested to sideline the European system for emissions trading.

In fact, chances are that even worse scenarios will materialize. François Gemenne, director of the Hugo Observatory, a research centre on the interface of climate change and politics, expects that the corona crisis will turn out to be disastrous for our climate.

Although the effects on CO2 emissions and air quality will be positive in the short-term, he expects these to be insignificant or nullified in the long run. One lesson that we can learn from both the oil crisis in the early 1970s and the 2007-2011 financial and economic crisis is that emissions tend to go up again after a period of crisis. There is every reason to think that this will happen again, not

only because businesses will restart their activities as soon as they can, but also because governments have a short-term interest to boost the economy in order to avoid or dampen the effects of a recession. The Chinese government has already relaxed environmental regulations to ramp up its economy as it awakens from the strict lockdown.

In the meantime, in Europe, various airlines have already insisted on postponing emission reduction measures for the sector. The governments of the United States and Canada have been willing to help the oil and gas sector with billions of dollars in support. It seems that climate policy always has to foot the bill in times of crisis.

Finally, Gemenne points out that the current lockdown strategy can feed the idea that truly effective climate policies will also boil down to shutting down society and the economy. Whether or not that is true, people will not look back on this period of lockdown with great joy – they will more likely remember it as a painful and inconvenient time. The question then is whether people will accept such stringent climate action.

The way in which governments have approached the corona crisis should hence not be seen as a dress rehearsal for a transition towards a carbon neutral economy. In fact, we should realize that the corona crisis and the climate crisis are two fundamentally distinct problems, both in terms of their temporal dimension and in terms of the solutions they require.

However, there is a more important reason to expect that the corona crisis will not offer the much-hoped-for momentum for tackling the climate crisis. It is the omnipresence and the resilience of the neoliberal ideology in which the power, interests, and privileges are rooted that largely determine in which way our economy and society are going. The system that hails the short-term over the long-term, that encourages privatizing profits and socializing costs, that has promoted economic growth as the single most important measure for progress, that has reduced humans and nature to production factors and that has put a price on the commons will prove more robust than many are perhaps hoping for.

Of all people, Milton Friedman, one of the most influential neoliberal thinkers, once posited that responses to crises depend on the ideas that are lying around at that moment. It is for that reason that we simply cannot expect that the corona crisis will lead to a historical momentum for the transition towards a sustainable economy. Feelings that we are witnessing a reset moment – however sincere – are not going to change that. If we want to prevent that we will return to normal

again, we will first and foremost need to develop different ideas about the meaning of living together, nature, and progress, how we want to relate to these ideas, and which values we want our lives to revolve around.

That, too, will require a huge effort that we can only undertake together.

*(This column was published on April 7, 2020 in Brabants Dagblad.)*

### Opportunities for the 1,5-degrees-economy

We need to learn the lessons of the corona crisis to effectively counter the climate crisis and spur the sustainability transition. To phrase it in a popular way: the 1.5-meter-society thrives best on the 1.5-degree-economy.

An important point of contention in this context is whether or not the corona crisis is the perfect moment for policy interventions aimed at a sustainability transition. Various renowned economists have argued for prioritizing the development of an economy that is designed on sustainability principles. Now should and could be the moment to restructure our economy and make the economy serve society rather than the other way around. Green politicians are churning: 11 European climate ministers want to build economic recovery on the principles of the European Union's Green Deal.

Reality has so far been sobering, though. There does not seem to be any prospect of corporate bailouts conditioned by accelerated CO<sub>2</sub> reductions. Climate policies are being delayed despite (inter)national commitments, preying on the fears that such policies may even be abandoned. The corona crisis is seen as an opportunity by some European countries to revise or defer climate policies. In order to speed up economic recovery, environmental regulations are being relaxed. Except for a temporary reduction of CO<sub>2</sub> emission levels, the rapidly developing economic crisis is a bad harbinger from the perspective of the climate crisis.

While economic, political, and psychological reflections are rivalling in the debate about what the best choices are in times of crisis, sociological perspectives fade into the background. That is a pity, because analyses of power, interests, privileges, culture, and social movements can offer a much-needed perspective on life after the corona crisis and can shed light on strategies to tackle the climate crisis.

From this perspective we can be certain that the corona crisis will not lead to an *Umwertung aller Werte*. Interests and privileges are the first to be secured in times of crisis. In our current socioeconomic system the incumbents and vested interests have very deep pockets, work along the axis of waiting out and exhaustion, and have influence up to the highest political echelons. As proud as we are now (and with good reason) of the ordinary citizen's level of resilience, as vigilant should we be about the resilience of neoliberal ideology – the ideology that is responsible for sanctifying economic growth, reducing the public good to an expense, and degrading the commons to nothing

more than a production factor that can – and, indeed, should – be used without restraint for private gain.

Exactly here lies the key to actually turning the corona crisis into a catalyst for sustainability-oriented economic restructuring and climate action: to come to a coalition of the climate movement, healthcare, and education, all in the name of the public good. Not so much because the future will show that there are many connections and overlaps between these three domains, but because healthcare, education, and the climate crisis form the three pillars that our future society will rest on.

In the name of the public good, the climate movement, healthcare, and education could come to recognize each other as unexpected, but long-hoped-for bed partners that can support each other effectively in realizing each other's agendas. The climate movement can benefit from her new partners' increased power, because it has become a lot less probable that politicians will have the guts to cut back on healthcare and education in the coming years – not just because they are vital sectors (which they have always been), but also because it will probably not be morally acceptable to do so against the background of the appeal society has made to these sectors. At the same time, healthcare and education can learn from and piggyback on the professionalization of activism that is clearly visible within the climate movement. If these societal actors join forces and support each other when it really matters, then the public good will be better and more strongly represented on the neoliberal battlefield.

Imagine how powerful such a coalition for the public good could be in the coming years. Recognizing each other as partners is the beginning of an effective bundling of forces that will benefit the agendas of healthcare, education, and the climate movement – and against neoliberalism. Fighting together for investing in vital professions, focussing on the quality of living together instead of economic growth, counter all forms of inequality, limit global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius, and protecting ecosystems. Fighting together for a future for everyone and a future in which we are no longer dependent on the vagaries and shortsightedness of white men with very deep pockets.

And it doesn't even have to end here: everyone who wants to turn the tides on the undermining and erosion of the public good and who wants a revaluation of what really matters to take center stage can be invited to join. That, by far, would be the best outcome of this crisis.

*(This column was published on May 15, 2020 on the website of Sociale Vraagstukken.)*

### **Be critical for the right reasons**

The COVID-19 pandemic has reached a remarkable phase: very soon, multiple vaccines will be available, but around 40 percent of the Dutch people appear in doubt when it comes to the decision whether or not to get vaccinated or have already decided to not get vaccinated. That is a percentage that goes far beyond the squadron of so-called anti-vaxxers and supporters of the Dutch movement called 'Virus Truth' and that may cause a handful of problems for the authorities in their efforts to bring the pandemic under control.

Despite the encouraging findings of clinical studies into the effectiveness of the vaccines that have been developed, many people are skeptical about their safety and reliability. Their concerns seem to relate particularly to the speedy development of the vaccines. Normally, developing a vaccine takes 10 to 15 years; this time around, multiple vaccines have become available within one year. Whereas this pace can be explained perfectly well (think of the global spread of the virus, the effects on economies worldwide, and the fact that the type of virus is relatively well-known), many people wonder whether corners have been cut in the development process and whether the vaccines have been sufficiently tested.

People are also strengthened in their skepticism based on several other reasons that the media have hardly reported on – reasons that originate from the history and the behaviors of the pharmaceutical industry. Although Big Pharma has been invited as a saviour and do-gooder by numerous television talkshows, they have built an everything-but-flawless reputation over the years. The essence of this goes back to the tensions between private interests (profits) and public interests (public health) that is a defining characteristic of this sector. Among other things, this has led to fines of astronomical proportions for illegally marketing opioids and the raffling of 100 doses of the world's most expensive medicine for a muscular disease in babies in the recent past. It is just the tip of an iceberg full of controversies.

Regarding the corona vaccines, Pfizer, which was the first to communicate publicly about its 90 percent effective vaccine, did not serve itself well over the past couple of weeks. After Moderna shortly thereafter claimed its vaccine was no less than 94.5 percent effective, Pfizer quickly commented that its vaccine was even more effective than it had initially communicated. In the meantime, the AstraZeneca vaccine, that was also found to be pretty effective during the test phase had to be reinvestigated: flaws were discovered in the process of administering the vaccines during

the trial phase and the process of collecting test results appeared to have deviated from the way it is supposed to take place.

The fact that press releases about the results were issued before these companies and their partners had published them in scientific journals also speaks volumes in this regard – that is highly unusual. And if skeptics needed any more grist to their mills, the CEO of Pfizer sold 4.5 million euros in stock on the same day his company communicated the effectiveness of its vaccine. How encouraging the results of testing the vaccines may be, it should be clear that it is the type of behavior that runs counter to what these times ask for. Indeed, it only adds to the arguments of skeptics.

Being critical serves an essential function, especially when big corporate interests are at stake. However, it is also important to realize that the developed corona vaccines are the result of an unprecedented, globally coordinated effort – a true and amazing feat of scientific progress. Perhaps one of the best illustrations of this is the fact that the genetic sequence of the Moderna vaccine was already developed on January 13, 2020, only two days after Chinese authorities shared the genetic sequence of the virus with the World Health Organization. Undoubtedly, the process of developing the vaccines was not mistake-free, witnessing for instance the controversy about data that was used in a scientific article in the renowned medical journal *The Lancet*. And, of course, not everything is known yet about the virus, its long-term health effects, and the treatments that have so far been developed.

Despite the fact that a corona vaccine should not be seen as a panacea, the progress that has been made over the past months has been nothing short of impressive. Finally, there seems to be some light at the end of the tunnel. If skeptics want to target anything, it should not be the development of corona vaccines at warp speed, but the lacking development of effective vaccines for viruses that we have long known and that merely make victims in countries that hardly play a relevant role in the world economy. It is high time to take a hard look at that.

*(This article was published in Brabants Dagblad on 12 December, 2020.)*

## **Part II.**

---

# **Changing management education**

### **Business schools must stop teaching the oxymoron of green growth**

It did not take long for business schools to be dubbed the ‘academies of the apocalypse’ after the 2008 global financial crisis. In their 2009 paper, *The Roots of the Global Financial Crisis Are in Our Business Schools*, Robert Giacalone and Donald Wargo claimed that the crash resulted from the “cult of profit maximization and a pessimistic view of human nature as totally self-interested” promoted by purveyors of MBAs. Their views resonated and institutions had little choice but to change. Many quickly introduced mandatory modules on business ethics and corporate social responsibility (CSR).

While business schools are less obvious culprits for the COVID-19 pandemic, the crisis has nonetheless catapulted business schools into an existential crisis yet again. This time ‘pandemic parasitism’ has been put under the microscope, after global multinationals cashed in on schemes to stem job losses. For instance, online reservation platform Booking.com, which bought back some U\$4.5 billion in stock in 2019, has sought financial support from the Dutch government: a prime example of corporations’ urge to privatize profits and socialize costs.

At the same time, corporate obligations to staff and suppliers have fallen by the wayside; in the fashion sector, firms used the small print of contracts to cancel their orders for their summer collections, burdening factories in low-income countries with losses from massive numbers of unsold products. With such wide interpretations of acceptable corporate conduct on show, some wonder whether the time has come to once again scrutinize how business subjects are taught, with special emphasis placed on CSR.

But the soul-searching triggered by the pandemic runs deeper than a few examples of corporate sharp practice. Some scholars see the COVID-19 pandemic as a symptom of a deeper malaise in capitalism. In essence, the pandemic appears to have arisen out of a deeply disturbed and unsustainable relationship between humans and nature, fuelled by an obsession with growth and short-term economic gain. Under this paradigm, all natural resources are fair game; even animals – such as the pangolins, in which the coronavirus may have originated – are reduced to raw materials in a culture of institutionalized exploitation. Climate change, biodiversity loss, and poverty are the inevitable collateral damage.

Opposition to this worldview has given birth to a new language of sustainability that includes the concepts of true pricing, ecosystem services, and nature-positive economic recovery. The problem is that such newspeak implies that sustainability is only acceptable if and when it *has* a

business case, such as building a corporate reputation, and when it can be translated into monetary terms. It still sees societal challenges first and foremost as business opportunities.

Similar thinking feeds into the obsession with the concept of green growth in business, government, and NGO circles – an oxymoron that revolves around growing economies serving sustainable development without fundamentally changing economic models. It is time for business schools to take a radical step away from such discourses.

In order to do so, first, critical studies must become a central part of the curriculum in management education, allowing students to scrutinize the assumptions of ‘normal corporate conduct’ and successful business models. This may include studying degrowth, a theory explored by several, notably young, scholars aimed at restoring the balance between the global economy and the living world in a way that reduces inequality and improves human well-being.

Second, students’ moral imagination should be stimulated. They should be challenged to build empathy and solidarity with those who might not be considered parts of our community – for instance, precarious workers, future generations, and natural ecosystems. Developing this ability by experimenting with new narratives about the role of business in society can help envision new approaches to our world’s grand challenges. For instance, outdoor company Patagonia could serve as an interesting example of a business that has developed itself into a blend of a profitable company and a social movement. Management educators should not refrain from confronting their students with controversial opinions and stances.

Third, business schools should embrace activism as a new role beyond their traditional *modus operandi*. Systemic activism – as opposed to issue-based activism – recognizes the complex and interconnected nature of modern problems and assumes that change is necessary on many levels. The way the pandemic has unfolded, touching virtually all realms of life, is a vivid illustration of how a crisis can impact on poverty, which affects gender equality, which affects education, which affects the availability of decent work, and so on.

Of course, opponents will argue that business schools should take a neutral position towards challenges of a moral and political nature – including the transition to a more sustainable economic model. But neutrality also enacts a political agenda, particularly in the face of a rampant ecological and social breakdown. Sustainability is fundamentally a deeply moral and political question about how we want to live. And, by the way, who could plausibly argue that teaching and research are

value-free anyway? Discussions about the hidden agenda of management education should sound all too familiar to anyone working in a business school.

“Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew”, wrote the Indian novelist Arundhati Roy earlier this year in the Financial Times. This pandemic is a gateway between one world and the next, and we must enter that new reality as soon as possible. The post-pandemic business school must be an activist one.

*(This column was published on October 25, 2020 on the website of Times Higher Education.)*

### **Are business schools silent partners in pandemic parasitism?**

It is becoming ever more clear that the COVID-19 pandemic is a symptom of a systemic crisis. The pandemic flawlessly exposes how societies worldwide are failing – whether it relates to policies aimed at cost-cutting in the healthcare sector, tendencies to invest in the old economy, or not responding adequately to multiple ecological crises.

In the quest for uncovering the more fundamental causes of this systemic crisis, management education gets off scot-free. This should strike as remarkable, because business schools have an important – though oftentimes indirect – role in the development of such crises. That has been the case with earlier crises, too, including the corporate fraud scandals that occurred around the turn of the century (such as Enron, Parmalat, and Ahold) and the economic malaise following the financial meltdown in 2007-2008. Since the upper echelons of many large companies consist of managers that have had their education at renowned business schools, management education can be easily identified as an accomplice in causing these crises.

It has been suggested that management education contributes to the development of toxic business cultures. The American management professors Diane Swanson and William Frederick wrote a provocative article in 2002 titled ‘Are business schools silent partners in corporate crime?’ In this article, Swanson and Frederick pointed at the “new levels of selfishness, greed and dishonesty in business” and the “inexplicable silence” of the most important accreditation organization in the field of management education. Seven years later, professors Robert Giacalone and Donald Wargo in a similar way pointed out that the roots of the financial crisis were to be found in management education: the determinism, the materialism, the glorification of profits, and a pessimistic view of humans grounded in self-interest that is the foundation of many theories taught in business schools clearly had had a huge influence on managers.

Each time, this led to business schools engaging in soul-searching and an increased attention for sustainability within management education. Sustainability was thought to be the antidote for the all too narrow conceptions of the roles and responsibilities of business in societies worldwide (and the type of leadership that would fit these conceptions) that have dominated discourse in management education. By now, it is hard to find a business school that does *not* have attention for sustainability or the broader roles of business in society in its curricula – ranging from elective courses called ‘Business & Society’, ‘Sustainability Strategy’, and ‘Social Impact Management’ to

educational programs that revolve around sustainability, such as an ‘MBA in Sustainability Innovation’ or an ‘MBA in Purpose Economy’.

Meanwhile, a new global crisis has presented itself. And precisely because the COVID-19 pandemic is a symptom of a systemic crisis, this crisis, too, urges profound reflection on the role of business schools. While the verdict is not less harsh than in the case of earlier crises, this time around the analysis points at sustainability being the problem. Or, put differently: the dominant interpretation of sustainability within most management education programs.

Whereas the core idea of sustainability revolves around the importance of ecological quality and social justice, and hence concerns the very foundation of a healthy relationship between humans and their natural environment, modern sustainability discourse has degraded sustainability to a means to ‘higher’ ends that businesses are striving for. There is a business case to be found in sustainability; it offers opportunities for reducing costs, to enter and develop new markets, to accelerate innovation, and to build a better corporate reputation, to name just a few things. Societal challenges have become potential sources of corporate profit and other economic benefits, this discourse posits.

This has led sustainability to be encapsulated in the economic reality of the exploitation of humans and nature, onbridled expansionism aimed at boosting short-term profits, deeply rooted in a neoliberal worldview. This worldview revolves around depleting natural resources, exploiting people, reducing animals to raw materials, and seeing society as serving corporate interests instead of the other way around. The corporate norm is privatizing profits and socializing costs. Hence, it should not come as a surprise that, despite the increased attention for sustainability, it appears that the pillar that is supporting the sustainability strategies developed by business school-bred managers predominantly consists of self-interest. And in pursuing that self-interest lies the basis for ruthlessly colonizing and exploiting nature – with all its consequences. Pandemics are the direct consequence of the destruction of nature by mankind, according to scientists. It is for this reason that the United Nations have labelled the corona virus as an SOS signal to humanity. When we refuse to change, we will meet more of this on our path into the future.

As everyone has been able to see over the past months, this discourse of institutionalized exploitation has led to all sorts of ‘pandemic parasitism’: from Booking.com shamelessly groping the financial arrangements that have been made available by governments, to fashion companies that have cancelled orders with suppliers with the latter paying most of the bill, to more nuanced

examples. Despite the shiny sustainability statements of such companies, they tend to hide behind the argument that from a legal perspective, there is nothing wrong with such behaviors and with externalizing the costs. It is characteristic of the primary conception of sustainability that is being taught in management education programs, positing that sustainability is voluntary and supra-legal. A more nuanced example of pandemic parasitism has been the brand campaign of Unilever's Dove brand during the Spring infection peak that relied on the iconic images of healthcare workers, visibly marked by their safety masks and other protective gear, after a day of tirelessly treating COVID-19 patients. Part of the campaign was Unilever offering its Dove products free of charge to healthcare workers – a familiar strategy called 'cause-related marketing' in business schools.

Unfortunately, most business schools are silent and passive when witnessing such corporate behaviors. If they cherish hopes that their increased attention for sustainability would automatically translate into responsible and appropriate corporate behavior, that hope is nothing less than wishful thinking. In fact, their way of paying attention to sustainability may well have the opposite effect.

The COVID-19 pandemic therefore is the umpteenth wake-up call for business schools that not only urges profound reflection on their societal role, but should also incite thinking about how to pay attention to sustainability in a different way. Business schools will need to embrace a political agenda that recognizes the complex interdependencies between the most pressing social and ecological challenges of our time and assert their influence in an active way. We call this systemic activism. Through becoming systemic activists business schools could and should acknowledge their central role in understanding and influencing unsustainable lifestyles, exploitative supply chains, toxic business cultures, and systemic crises, as well as their role in offering solutions for this. Being critical of the predominantly neoliberal business moral and stimulating the moral development of (future) managers are an integral part of this.

And that cannot be done as a silent partner.

*(This article was published in Neerlandia 2020-3.)*

### **The coronation of responsible management education**

The COVID-19 pandemic has hit countries hard and shaken industries to their core. While it remains to be seen what the long-term consequences are for societies and economies, it is clear that the coronavirus is triggering crises that go beyond immediate healthcare and economic concerns. It is putting democracies to the test as parliaments in several countries are sidelined; it may wreak humanitarian havoc when fragile states and poor urban areas are affected on a large scale; and it is pulling attention and resources away from pressing sustainability problems such as climate change. As the corona crisis unfolds in a truly systemic fashion, it is accelerating the convergence of issues related to capitalism, democracy, and sustainability.

Business schools around the world have rushed to respond to the challenges that the corona crisis presents. Initially, business schools closed down campuses, brought most courses online, and began organizing virtual meetings and conferences. Since the pandemic has coincided with a key period in recruitment activities, some schools have relaxed admission requirements and worked around their standard registration procedures. In addition, business schools have attempted to help outside organizations survive by offering faculty webinars on a range of immediately relevant topics.

Disasters provide exceptionally fertile soil for obtaining new insights into, for instance, the way businesses conduct themselves during societal upheaval and the expectations firms have about post-crisis trends. Business schools already have started to redirect research efforts to examine the impact of the corona crisis. In our own field of sustainable business and Responsible Management Education (RME), colleagues quickly circulated questionnaires aiming to track how the virus will affect companies' commitment to sustainability. Others have started to investigate the best ways to use the crisis to more rapidly decarbonize polluting industries and redirect economies onto more sustainable paths.

However, we think business schools that have embraced the RME agenda should do far more. The corona crisis should challenge them to go well beyond their current efforts to make sustainability an integral part of their educational offerings, research activities, and community projects. They should evaluate their contributions to responsible management – and they also should reflect on their interpretation of the RME agenda and the role they take in advancing it.

We see the current crisis as an opportunity for schools to champion the uptake and further development of RME in their programs, research, and thought leadership. In particular, they can

undertake three tasks to extend and enrich their RME initiatives in response to the ongoing pandemic.

The first task is embarking on critical studies. Critical studies essentially help us understand society in more profound ways as we examine the assumptions that underlie its functioning. More specifically, in critical studies we explore existing power structures, social structures, and cultural assumptions.

COVID-19 represents much more than an immediate health crisis. Its impacts will force us to investigate the assumptions that underpin our socioeconomic systems—including the elements that interconnect us globally and the axioms that guide and legitimize business conduct. Only then can we fully grasp the origins, the unfolding, and the consequences of this and future pandemics. Only then can we start building resilience for future events.

For instance, management educators should realize that many businesses were already imperiled within a few weeks of the virus's outbreak. Even firms that had been making substantial profits just before the pandemic soon queued up for support from the government. Critical scrutiny of this phenomenon could lead scholars to identify the ideology of neoliberal capitalism as the main culprit for many of the social and ecological problems the world is witnessing today. In fact, early research appears to support the contention that our exploitative relationship with nature – driven by a culture of short-termism, deregulation, and free trade – has allowed for the COVID-19 outbreak. When we engage in critical studies, we also attempt to understand business-society relationships from an integrated perspective as we bring in disciplines such as anthropology, political science, and sociology. When we don't address problems from a multiplicity of viewpoints, we promote disconnectedness rather than inclusiveness.

One of our first steps should be to examine sustainability from cultural perspectives other than a Western-oriented one. If we don't, we will end up with limited or one-sided progress on the agenda represented by the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals.

We also should be more critical about taking instrumental business case approaches to sustainability. These approaches tend to degrade the concept of sustainability as a means to an end, rather than treating environmental quality and social justice as ends in themselves. They also reduce the concept of value to sheer monetary terms through methodologies such as true pricing (which takes into account the social and environmental costs of any policy) and environmental profit-and-loss accounting (which encourages companies to analyze the environmental impacts of their business operations). We may find that these approaches only worsen our relationship with the planet, rather

than guiding us toward solutions. From this perspective, the pandemic might even be considered an existential crisis.

The second task is to encourage moral imagination. RME encourages students to envision new ways to address moral problems and solve ethical challenges. In his book *Moral Imagination: Implications of Cognitive Science for Ethics*, philosopher Mark Johnson writes that we “must be able to imagine new dimensions for our character, new directions for our relationships with others, and even new forms of social organization.”

We must use what we call ‘naïve intelligence’ to look beyond the traditional institutions and practices that we consider normal so we can experiment with new approaches. We must examine the values that characterize contemporary management education. We must challenge students to apply these values in situations that pose extreme dilemmas – such as this era defined by the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, we must develop new narratives and vocabularies that will help people develop enthusiasm for finding paths into the future. Moral imagination is stimulated when we combine experimentation with reflexivity.

Hence, management education should be open to play and provocation. These approaches invite students and educators to develop novel ideas for understanding ethical challenges, cultivating business-society relationships, and addressing sustainability issues. Moral imagination also challenges us to build empathy and solidarity with those who might not be considered parts of our community – for instance, precarious workers, future generations, and natural ecosystems.

Management educators should therefore encourage discussion around a number of provocative questions: What if future generations had a voice? What if we would consider nature as our partner as we combat climate change? What if reciprocity was the north star guiding all of our actions? Answering such questions could help us imagine a new social contract among citizens, governments, businesses, and the planet.

The third task concerns engaging in systemic activism. This task is perhaps our most controversial suggestion. We should clarify two things here. First, we consider business school activism an indispensable effort in realizing the RME agenda, beyond all other functions that business schools have. We think that management educators should not only embrace the idea that sustainability is a moral and political agenda, but also actively and relentlessly campaign for achieving the goals of that agenda. Indeed, we believe that educators who think they are taking an amoral

stand toward sustainability – who see it as a concurrent perspective to others, meaning that they regard it as optional – actually have taken an immoral position.

Second, we think it is important to explain what we mean by systemic activism. Whereas activism is usually issue-based, systemic activism recognizes the complex and interconnected nature of modern problems and assumes that change is required on many levels. The way the corona crisis has unfolded, touching virtually all realms of life, is a vivid illustration of this. The same is true for the climate crisis, which has impacts on poverty, which affects gender equality, which affects education, which affects decent work and economic growth.

We need to realize that systemic problems – from the global pandemic to racial tensions in the U.S. and elsewhere – do not have single-issue solutions. Rather, they require a rethinking of economic, political, social, judicial, and cultural systems. To paraphrase American civil rights activist and writer Audre Lorde: “There is no such thing as a single-issue struggle, because we do not live single-issue lives.” Nor do we live in a single-issue world.

This is particularly relevant for management education because business is the proverbial spider in the web when it comes to both understanding patterns of unsustainability and designing solutions to sustainability problems. Because business interests are omnipresent, and because business influences all realms of our socioeconomic system – including politics and culture – business is an intensely powerful actor and driver of change when it comes to sustainability.

In turn, business schools are well-positioned to influence the intricate architecture of business-society relations – through their research activities, education programs, and community projects. To be systemic activists, business schools should make it their mission to examine root causes of underlying problems. They should work to identify the leverage points and develop strategies for planting the seeds of change. Then, they should nourish these seeds until they grow and ultimately overtake current beliefs about conducting business. To achieve this goal, business schools that engage in systemic activism will need to partner with the institutions they aspire to remake.

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to a convergence of capitalism, democracy, and sustainability. At the same time, it has prompted business schools to engage in intense reflection on what they stand for and how they should contribute to the well-being of society. We hope that many

will choose to advance the RME agenda – and assume new roles and responsibilities in the coronation of RME as a reigning force.

We realize that business schools that heed our call and adopt RME will have to become much more political in terms of the agendas they aspire to follow and influence. In turn, educators will be compelled to expand and reconceive the key functions of business schools. The three tasks we outline here highlight a rich palette of opportunities for business schools to advance the RME agenda. Schools not only can respond effectively to current and future sustainability crises, but they also can lead us in creating a better world.

*(This article has been published in BizEd July/August 2020.)*

## **Part III.**

---

# **A world of sustainability?**

### **Five lessons the SDGs teach us about sustainability**

Ever since their ratification, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have become an important point of reference for national and international sustainability discourse. The 17 global goals, with no less than 169 targets and 230 indicators to monitor progress, are being used by business to model their sustainability policies onto and – to more or lesser degrees – align their policies with international agreements in the ecological and social domain. In addition, the SDGs have taken central stage in more holistic ideas about prosperity (in Dutch: ‘Brede Welvaart’) that have been explored by the Dutch government and numerous public organizations now map the effects of their comings and goings on the realization of the SDGs.

The SDGs are subject to critique as well. Partly because the SDGs have a non-binding character, adoption of the goals is usually limited to selectively prioritizing the SDGs based on a narrow conception of what are relevant sustainability topics for organizations. Also, organizations are using the SDGs to show in what way their existing sustainability policies have already had a positive impact, without resulting in an actual reassessment of that policy. Moreover, the SDG agenda is thought to be too broad and therefore too complex to apply in practice for individual organizations. Hence, it is all but certain that the SDGs will have been achieved by the end of this decade.

Still, all things considered, the SDGs offer a more profound perspective on sustainability and sustainable business than ‘merely’ offering an agenda of 17 widely supported priorities on the sustainability spectrum. They offer us at least five lessons – some being more inconvenient than others.

The first lesson is that sustainability is truly an all-encompassing agenda. The SDGs show that sustainability concerns everyone and everything in this world – from hunger and gender equality to biodiversity and climate change. By implication, the SDGs are interdependent and influence each other in all kinds of ways. That means that the SDGs represent a universal, integral, and indivisible agenda; not some grab bag containing sustainability topics from which you can opportunistically cherry pick what suits your organization.

The second lesson relates to learning to cope with paradox. Precisely because the SDGs are interdependent and influence each other it is an agenda of trade-offs and paradoxes. This becomes especially clear from the tensions between economic development and the more socially oriented SDGs on the one hand and any of the ecologically oriented SDGs on the other. Sustainability is a

complex challenge that requires taking thought-through decisions and continuously keeping a finger on the pulse, knowing that it is never finished.

Lesson three is that sustainability does not thrive on instrumental thinking. Sustainability is a goal in itself, not an investment one makes to get some kind of economic or monetary dividend. Put differently: business case thinking does not help in realizing a better world – it hampers sustainability. The SDGs force us to develop a different perspective on materiality. Relevant sustainability topics cannot be determined by direct or indirect economic considerations and certainly not from the perspective of an individual organization.

The fourth lesson the SDGs teach us is that sustainability requires radical initiatives. The societal challenges illustrated by the SDGs are way too big to solve through incremental thinking. We need entirely new business models instead of improving sustainability performance based on guidelines or standards. Transformational thinking should replace thinking in terms of existing frameworks, structures, and systems – and should become the norm as soon as possible.

Lesson five is that sustainability is overwhelming. The SDG agenda shows the urgency, extent, and complexity of our world's problems. Sustainability is a systemic challenge that can only be tackled when having our eyes on the long term and on partnering with many other parties. And, still, the outcome will be all but certain. That means that working on sustainability can be a precarious endeavour that not only puts one's patience to the test, but also asks for resilience and perseverance.

The lessons above show that the contribution of the SDGs to sustainability thinking is potentially very big. To realize that potential, organizations will need to work with the SDGs in the way they have been intended. For many a sustainability policy that means: back to the drawing board. And for sustainability professionals it means that they had better take good care of themselves, too.

*(This column was published in Kwaliteit in Bedrijf in February 2020.)*

### **The planet as outlet center**

While many Dutch people were enjoying their holidays and politicians were in summer recess, several media reported on a remarkable event: ABP, the Dutch pension fund for employees in the government and education sectors reported that it, through its pension provider APG, had acquired full ownership of a company called VIA Outlets. VIA Outlets runs 11 outlet centers in nine European countries that together harbour over 1,100 stores. APG already owned half of this company and, according to a spokesman, it was the perfect moment to acquire full ownership of VIA Outlets. At a discount, of course – a real opportunity to snatch a bargain. “Consumers are very much willing to go to outlet centers, perhaps now in particular”, the explanation read.

Against the background of the ecological disaster that is visibly and invisibly taking place on our planet, qualifying this acquisition as a highly remarkable investment would be the euphemism of the year. It could also have been an excellent April Fool’s Day joke. In any case, it is a beggars belief, void of any sense of reality, that in the interest of the planet and future generations, every employee in the government and education sector, and the credibility of ABP’s own sustainability policy should be reversed as soon as possible.

Speaking of which: in its own position paper from 2017, ABP formulated the 2020 goal to only invest in companies that rank sufficiently on its criteria for sustainability and responsible entrepreneurship and of which it expects that they will make progress on these criteria. That, ABP posited, is the essence of its so-called inclusion policy that revolves around selecting businesses that have more attention for sustainability and responsible entrepreneurship than comparable businesses in their sector. The fact that these principles, similar to the polished sustainability statements that can be found on the VIA Outlets website, offer a lot of room for interpretation, is only part of the problem. The real question here is what kind of thinking led to the conviction that investing in outlet centers can somehow be reconciled with sustainability. Is it really ABP’s idea that retired people can do future generations a favour when ‘fun shopping’? How outlet centers fit into a positive inclusion strategy is truly mindboggling, especially when one can also invest in organic farming, circular economy, or renewable energy, to name just a few. Against the background of the news that many well-known fashion brands have cancelled their orders because of the pandemic and have their suppliers take the fall, things quickly become even more ugly.

Whereas the attention for divesting stock portfolios is usually aimed at excluding businesses from the oil and gas sector or other so-called vice industries such as the tobacco and weapon

industry, it is good to be reminded of the fact that stirring up unbridled consumerism – which is the essence of outlet centers – is no less harmful for the well-being of humans, the environment, and animals. Such consumerism is symptomatic of a system that is aimed at depleting natural resources, exploiting people, and reducing animals to a raw material, all in function of one overarching goal: economic growth. Each and every argument that (sustainable) consumption can contribute substantially to solving the huge societal challenges that we are confronted with is nothing short of a *fata morgana*. The recently published book *Less is More* about degrowth by sustainable development expert and anthropologist Jason Hickel is a powerful illustration of the fact that we have to do things totally different, as is the conclusion drawn by several prominent scientists in an article about prosperity in the leading scientific journal *Nature* that every true sustainability transition will need to be accompanied with far-reaching changes in our lifestyles. We are not going to consume our way out of social wrongdoings. We are not going to grow our way out of the climate crisis.

The acquisition by ABP deserves the disapproval of everyone, notably of those that work in the Dutch government and education sector and who have their pension contributions invested through this organization. Parliamentary questions are even called for, if you ask us. That sustainability is put on sale by ABP is already bad enough. But let's draw the line here and use our common sense to say once and for all that our planet is not an outlet center. This is a 'shop 'til you drop' strategy – in its most literal meaning.

*(This column was published on August 27, 2020 in Brabants Dagblad.)*

### **Preventing climate catastrophe requires renouncing economic growth**

Election time normally is a period for politicians to jump the queue, pit against each other, and overpromise. In the ideological battle for the future, these are the times when they really need to decide which side they are on. Fact-checking, then, is not an unnecessary luxury.

The leader of D66, the social-liberal party in the Netherlands, Sigrid Kaag, seemed to show her true colors in a recent speech. Her idea to take the Dutch economy into the future is getting rid of subsidies for fossil energy and tax exemptions on kerosine, shutting down coal plants before 2030, and – referring to the famous Urgenda climate verdict – preventing that citizens need to take their own government to court in order for the government to stick to its own mission to protect citizens from ever happening again. Clearly inspired by climate activist Greta Thunberg, Kaag said: “We don’t have time to lose. It is time to act as if our house is on fire, because it actually is.”

Although these insights seem to have penetrated the thinking of the social-liberals somewhat late and despite the fact that they have been part of the legal bickering between Urgenda and the Dutch government, there is every reason to applaud them for prioritizing the climate crisis in the upcoming elections. Especially because scientists are now speaking of a climate catastrophe instead of a climate crisis. That is not just because government pledges and policies worldwide have set us onto a trajectory of a 3 °C global temperature rise by the year 2100, but also because the changing climate is destabilizing other natural systems on our planet. And we have not even begun to delve into the social upheaval of this development. If we will not be able to change course soon, the most likely outcome is no less than societal collapse, according to leading scientists.

Despite the fact that such information does not always reach the electorate, climate change does appear to be an important factor in people’s voting choice: a study commissioned by the Dutch NGO Milieudefensie (Friends of the Earth Netherlands) shows that around 70 percent of Dutch citizens worries about climate change and more than 50 percent want the next cabinet to (strongly) up the ante on climate policy. Without a doubt, such a policy for increasing the wellbeing of people nationally and internationally needs to go way beyond the focus on adjusting to the consequences of the climate catastrophe. The political emphasis on adaptation that showed from the recent international climate summit in The Hague cannot be qualified other than being void of any societal and scientific reality.

What is also *hors discussion*, is that, based on the political party programs, only the Partij voor de Dieren propagates policies that are in line with climate science. Also, this is the only party that dares to make a plea for degrowth, reducing consumption and production instead of sticking with striving for economic growth. From a societal perspective, the realization that we have encountered the limits to growth is a difficult message; from a political perspective it is an impregnable fortress. From a scientific perspective, however, it is the only right choice to keep things from getting worse. Therefore, it is nothing short of courageous that this party is doing this. Painfully, it is the only one.

Despite Kaag's rhetoric and some sound proposals, D66, too, is stuck in denial by hoping and aiming for green growth. Research, however, has already shown that this is not just wishful thinking, but also a false promise. Against that background, we cannot understand that the name of Esther Ouwehand (the leader of the Partij voor de Dieren) is missing in the list of female party leaders on GroenLinks's eye-catching election poster. Jesse Klaver, the leader of GroenLinks, maintains that he leads a movement, but in which direction is this movement heading? This poster looks more like a leftist expression of hoping for green growth than a statement that does justice to the situation we are in.

Climate scientist Will Steffen described aptly this situation last year when he said "Don't come to me for hope." Climate science shows that hope is useless – it is courage that we need. The question then is which political parties before and after the elections have the courage to acknowledge the climate catastrophe and follow the climate science when making policy. All the rest is nothing more than false promises, based on alternative facts.

*(This column was published in Het Parool on March 4, 2021.)*

### **About the authors**

Lars Moratis *PhD* and Frans Melissen *PhD* are the holders of the Chair in Management Education for Sustainability, a joint initiative of Antwerp Management School and Breda University of Applied Sciences. They are both actively engaged in research, teaching, and projects in the field of sustainability and Responsible Management Education. They have published several books as well as academic and practitioner-oriented articles on these and adjacent topics in journals (including *Resources, Conservation & Recycling*, *Management Learning*, *Business Strategy & The Environment*, *Kwaliteit in Bedrijf*, and *BizEd*) and national and regional newspapers (including *Het Financieele Dagblad*, *Het Parool*, and *Brabants Dagblad*).

Their inaugural lecture on the future of (responsible) management education is available on Vimeo: <https://vimeo.com/489322758>.

If you want to get in touch with them, please send an email to [lars.moratis@ams.ac.be](mailto:lars.moratis@ams.ac.be) or [melissen.f@buas.nl](mailto:melissen.f@buas.nl).

*"You say growth was my Holy Grail*

*Yes it was and it failed*

*It couldn't last I do agree*

*But in the middle of the hustle*

*You cannot really see"*

Nynke Laverman (from 'Your Ancestor')