

# **How to effectively communicate sustainability issues to politicians**

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## Table of Contents

Title Page	
Table of Contents	
Abstract	
Acknowledgements	
1. INTRODUCTION .....	5
1.1. Problem formulation.....	5
1.2. Need for the study .....	5
1.3. Research Questions .....	5
1.4. Purpose of the study .....	6
2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK.....	6
2.1. Tactical steps in effective sustainability communication.....	6
2.1.1 Persuasion .....	7
2.1.2. <i>The Elaboration Likelihood Model</i> .....	7
2.1.3. <i>Source characteristics</i> .....	8
2.1.4. <i>Message characteristics</i> .....	8
2.1.5. <i>Message content</i> .....	8
2.1.6. <i>Message style</i> .....	9
2.1.7. <i>Recipient characteristics</i> .....	10
2.2. Lobbying.....	10
2.2.1. <i>Personality characteristics of successful lobbyists</i> .....	11
2.2.2. <i>Effective lobbying techniques</i> .....	12
2.2.3. <i>Agenda-setting</i> .....	12
2.2.4. <i>Outreach to the public</i> .....	12
2.2.5. <i>Framing</i> .....	13
2.3 A paradigm shift for sustainability.....	14
2.3.1. <i>Transition to sustainability</i> .....	14
2.3.2. <i>Paradigm shifts in public policy</i> .....	15
2.3.3. <i>The importance of effective communication for a policy paradigm shift</i> .....	16
3. METHODOLOGY .....	17
3.1. Choice of research mode .....	17
3.2. Choice of respondents.....	17
3.3. Research procedure .....	19
3.4. Validity and reliability .....	19
3.5. Ethical considerations .....	20
4. ANALYSIS & DISCUSSION .....	20
4.1. Tactical steps in effective sustainability communication.....	20
4.1.1. <i>Source characteristics</i> .....	21
4.1.2. <i>Message characteristics</i> .....	23
4.1.3. <i>Language used in effective sustainability communication</i> .....	24
4.1.4. <i>Emotions and fear appeals</i> .....	25
4.2. Organizing a strategy for effective communication .....	28
4.2.1. <i>Understanding politicians – Recipient characteristics</i> .....	28
4.2.2. <i>Agenda-setting</i> .....	32
4.2.3. <i>Outreach to the public</i> .....	32
4.3. A paradigm shift for sustainability.....	34

4.3.1 Reframing sustainability.....	34
4.4. Obstacles in effective communication.....	39
4.4.1. A shift in economic thought.....	39
4.4.2. A shift in decision-making.....	41
4.5 Summary of findings.....	42
4.5.1. Source characteristics.....	42
4.5.2. Message characteristics.....	42
4.5.3. Understanding the recipients of the message.....	43
4.5.4. Process of communication.....	43
4.5.5. Reframing sustainability.....	44
4.5.6. Obstacles on the communication process.....	44
4.6. Recommendations for future research.....	45
5. CONCLUSION.....	45
References.....	47
Appendix A.....	50
Informed Consent Form.....	50

### **Abstract**

Although sustainable development has become an important part of the political agenda in many parts of the world, the course of today's modern society still remains unsustainable at large. Part of the problem in making a transition to a sustainable society is a communication deficit apparent on behalf of sustainability proponents, who frequently fail to persuade effectively the need for such a shift. This paper examines how sustainability proponents should communicate relevant issues to politicians with maximum effectiveness. It is argued that there is currently a persuasion deficit in sustainability communication, augmented by the lack of pertinent research in the field. In order to create a framework of effective sustainability communication, a literature review in the fields of social psychology, communication theory in relation to lobbying and public policy was conducted. This theoretical framework was combined with interviews undertaken with experts, in order to come up with practical suggestions that sustainability communicators should follow. It is suggested that effective communication of sustainability issues poses several tactical benefits, while it is also an integral part of a long-term paradigm shift for sustainability, although not the only one due to certain important limitations in its implementation. Recommendations for future research are also discussed.

**Keywords:** Sustainability Communication, Persuasion, Lobbying, Paradigm Shift

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## **1. INTRODUCTION**

### **1.1. Problem formulation**

Sustainable development has been embraced as a new concept that can help modern society face the grave environmental, social and economic challenges it currently encounters. It has been widely accepted by states, corporations and civil society organisations alike. Or has it? Current trends and scenarios about the future indicate that our course still remains at large non-sustainable. There seems to be a problem with a concept that is so widely used in parliaments and boardroom tables across the world but fails to be implemented to the extent needed. Or perhaps while the concept itself might be accepted, in many cases as a useful and ‘catchy’ phrase, the principles and ideas that form it may be not be clearly understood. The course of action modern society still pursues does not point to a significant shift in thought and practices, at least as fast as required, and indicates that sustainability at its core remains unable to touch politicians in a satisfactory degree, convincing them of the need for change. One of the main reasons behind this problem is a serious communication deficit between sustainability proponents and decision-makers: sustainability fails to convince for the wisdom of its notions and this shortage thwarts the transition to a sustainable society. Thus this deficit must be scientifically studied and properly addressed.

### **1.2. Need for the study**

It is argued that coming up with a general framework of effectively communicating related issues to politicians is absolutely vital for a long-term transition to sustainability but also an integral part of successful implementation of sustainability initiatives that are more tactical in nature. However research on the topics of ‘sustainability language’ and the general provisions and methods of communicating sustainability is virtually non-existent, constituting the need for this study paramount. The long-term paradigm shift in politics needed in order to open the way for a sustainable society cannot be pursued without a coherent framework of communication that is based on sound research and scientific analysis rather than on common sense, intuition or simple experience of the past. When experience is combined with rigorous research, then the result is the birth of a new framework that can function as the basis for further steps into research but, most importantly, as a landmark for realizing sustainability initiatives.

### **1.3. Research Questions**

The main issue this paper tackled is how an interested party can effectively and persuasively communicate sustainability issues to politicians. In order to achieve this, knowledge deriving from the fields of social psychology and public policy was utilised. Sufficient data was also drawn from the literature on communication theory especially as far as lobbying, the ‘art’ of persuasively conveying information to policy-makers, is concerned. The research methods utilised were an analysis of the pertinent literature and interviews with experts.

In order to come up with a thorough understanding of the process of communication two research questions were addressed:

- **How should sustainability messages be conveyed in order to induce policy changes at the tactical level.**
- **How should effective sustainability communication be framed in order to bring forth a long-term paradigm shift in politics.**

The tactical level refers to specific policy decisions, e.g. the managing of a watershed or a five-year transportation action plan; the strategic level tackles the broader forces/paradigms that guide our society and the influence that the tactical level of communication has in them. An ‘interested party’ is defined as a lobby group, a concerned citizen who possesses access to politicians, or any like-minded business or civil society organisation.

#### **1.4. Purpose of the study**

This study did not focus on general aspects of communication; sustainability issues possess certain unique characteristics and their persuasive communication frequently stumbles upon many difficulties. The research performed in this paper discusses how to overcome these specific difficulties and address the core characteristics of sustainability issues, meanwhile providing a general understanding of persuasive communication within this context that aids in facilitating the process of conveying information. The idea was to outline how one should communicate sustainability issues, why this is important, what should be taken into consideration in the process and what general properties of demeanour the source of the message should ideally uphold in order to be as persuasive as possible. The target audience of this study is any related party that wishes to promote sustainability into a political setting. The precise content of the message is not discussed, since this relies heavily on the exact nature of a particular issue.

The need for a coherent communication framework that aims specifically into showing effectively the need for transition into sustainability, generally but also into specific cases, is overriding. This paper is a first step that aims to initiate a general discussion, but also come up with simple advice that can be utilized by any interested party wishing to further promote the idea of sustainability in modern society.

## **2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

### **2.1. Tactical steps in effective sustainability communication**

The purpose of this literature review is to provide insights on what constitutes a communication persuasive through a social psychological perspective and also to present how communication should be pursued to political figures, as has been studied by the specific branch of communication theory that deals with lobbying.

It aims to provide a theoretical framework which will be later combined with the interviews conducted, in order to come up with a specific course of action that should be followed in sustainability communication.

### **2.1.1 Persuasion**

Research on persuasion expanded greatly during the late 1970s within the field of experimental social psychology (Cooper & Croyle 1984), largely due to increased interest in consumer behaviour. The ideas that surfaced have helped to understand further the processes that guide attitudes and behaviour, while their application is relevant to many aspects of modern society, not the least its transformation to something new. The study of persuasion is of extreme importance when studying sustainability communication, since it holds extreme relevance for the modern political reality (*ibid.*) and politics govern to a great extent the status quo of the modern world. In this paper, it was necessary to filter the relevant research and present the themes that directly relate to the issue at hand – the literature on persuasion is comprised of much more than the current discussion, which revolves around the main theoretical framework.

### **2.1.2. The Elaboration Likelihood Model**

The main theoretical framework discussed in the persuasion literature is the Elaboration Likelihood Model developed by Petty and Cacioppo (1986; in Olson & Zanna 1993). The basic premise of the model is that there are two persuasion routes: the central and the peripheral one. In the central route of persuasion, the recipient is perceived as being able and motivated to listen closely and elaborate on the arguments of the message. If the arguments used have merit and make sense, they will persuade, otherwise they will not (Crano & Prislin 2006). In the peripheral route of persuasion, the recipient does not elaborate much on the content of the message but is rather influenced by superficial cues or heuristics – e.g. number of sources cited, appearance of the source, length of the message and number of arguments etc. (Brehm et al. 1999)

These two routes focus essentially on the cognitive and affective processes within the recipient of the message and both are important aspects of effective communication. The ‘choice’ of route depends not only on the recipient’s abilities and motivation to receive the message; the characteristics of the source and the message itself (both in terms of content and style) are of substantial importance. For instance, if a source is eloquent and speaks clearly or if the message is of importance to the recipient, the ‘strenuous’ (in cognitive terms) central route of persuasion is chosen (Brehm et al. 1999). If the source of the message speaks too fast, if the message is unimportant or unrelated to the recipient, then the less ‘strenuous’ peripheral route is the one dictating whether the message becomes persuasive (*ibid.*). In the ensuing discussion of the three aforementioned components of communication it must be kept in mind that the importance of their characteristics depends on which route of persuasion is in effect.

### **2.1.3. Source characteristics**

Perhaps the two most important characteristics determining whether a source is persuasive or not are its credibility and likeability. A source is viewed as being credible when it is considered to be competent to deliver valid information on a topic and when it is trustworthy, honest and presenting a balanced argument (Brehm et al. 1999).

Likeability is influenced by a source's similarity to the recipient in beliefs and values and by physical attractiveness (*ibid.*), including vocal pleasantness and facial expressiveness (Burgoon et al 1990; in Olson & Zanna 1993). Cialdini et al. (1992) have also suggested that a source which appears to be compliant and yields some points to a discussion is more persuasive than a source which acts dogmatically. A source is usually particularly persuasive when it appears to argue against its own interests and when it acts as if it's not actually trying to change the recipient's opinion (Brehm et al. 1999).

### **2.1.4. Message characteristics**

Research has indicated that there are very few noticeable differences between a message's substance and style (Sparks & Areni 2008), but this applies only in relation to the recipient's perception. In terms of analysis, there are distinct differences that allow for a thorough examination of the effects of each characteristic of the message. It cannot be stressed enough that both style and content are very important for effective communication, not only because they directly affect the choice of route of persuasion, but also because under both high and low elaboration they dictate whether a message will be convincing or not.

### **2.1.5. Message content**

Arguments that are well-structured, coherent and make sense are more persuasive than messages which are irrational and unfounded (Crano & Prislin 2006). A well-established feature of message content that affects its validity and hence its persuasion is the originality and novelty of the presented information. According to the informativeness principle, recipients expect the source to have something new to say when it wants to communicate with them (Olson & Zanna 1993). When information is new, the validity of the argument is increased; however, if the information presented is not new but common knowledge, then, according to Olson and Zanna (1993) a "boomerang effect" (137) of decreased validity and even suspicion concerning the truthfulness of the argument may arise.

Another aspect of message content that has been extensively studied is fear appeals. Fear appeals must be taken very seriously into consideration when communicating sustainability issues such as climate change, that warn of destructive consequences if proper action is not taken to mitigate them. Roger's (1983) protection motivation theory remains the most expansive theoretical model of understanding how these affect communication (in Olson and Zanna 1993). Olson and Zanna (1993) summarized Roger's findings by saying



that “threatening messages will be effective to the extent that they convince recipients that (a) the problem is serious, (b) the recipient is susceptible to the problem, (c) the recommendations will effectively avoid the problem, and (d) the recipient is capable of performing the recommendations” (139).

A very important characteristic of the message is the overall framework within which it is presented, or its framing. The importance of framing cannot be overstated. More details will be discussed in the chapter that deals with lobbying (see section 2.2.5.). As far as social psychology research is concerned, Maheswaran and Meyers-Levy (1990) found that messages framed in a way that stresses what is gained by following the argument were more persuasive under conditions of low elaboration, while messages showing what is lost by not following the argument were more persuasive under high elaboration. Research also suggested that messages should be framed in a way that matches some interests, values or characteristics of the recipient – e.g. providing information that matches the portfolio of an interested politician. However, in this case, “if the information is cogent, matching would enhance persuasion, but if not, it could reduce persuasion” (Petty et al. 1997: 633), most probably because a knowledgeable recipient can discern misleading information that hurt the reliability of the source. The source’s persuasion is obstructed when the positions he/she chooses are extremely different from that of the recipient (Brehm et al. 1999). Finally, research shows that two-sided communication, in which the source addresses two opposite points of view, is more persuasive than one-sided communication (Schultheiss & Brunstein 2002).

#### ***2.1.6. Message style***

A distinctive feature of the message’s style is the order in which arguments are presented, which leads to primacy or recency effects, in which arguments that are presented either at the beginning or at the end of the communication have a stronger persuasive effect. Igou and Bless (2007) suggested that the importance of an argument’s timing depends on the expectations that recipients have about where important information should be placed in the communication. Their research indicated that in one-sided communication, where the source presents only a single view of an issue, recipients expect the most important arguments to be placed in the beginning of the process, while in two-sided communication, where the source delivers both sides of an argument, the most important claims (and thus the ones which the source wants to stress as having more merit) should be placed at the end of the communication.

Language style can also be used to effectively make an audience elaborate more on the message and lead to more resistant attitude change. For instance, metaphors aid in high elaboration, but, as suggested by Ottati et al. (1999), only when the metaphor used is in accordance with the recipient’s interests (i.e. a metaphor about sports for a football fan). Metaphors also influence the direction of the recipient’s thoughts: “positive metaphors will elicit positive evaluations of the topic, whereas negative metaphors will elicit negative

evaluations of the topic” (Ottati et al 1999: 688), but their overall effectiveness depends mostly on the strength of the arguments.

### **2.1.7. Recipient characteristics**

Recipient characteristics undoubtedly influence whether a persuasive message comes across and how it is received. Since it is very difficult for the communicator to alter those characteristics except under rigorously controlled conditions (with the possible exception of mood), then the focus should be mostly on having awareness of the recipient’s personality and current state of mind as much as possible.

One of the recipient characteristics that have been studied extensively is mood state. Drawing from the vast (and sometimes contradictory) literature on the issue, Petty et al. (1997) concluded that “people in sad or neutral moods spontaneously process information more effortfully [*sic*] than people in happy states” (625), mostly because “good moods typically reduce cognitive elaboration and blunt the importance of argument strength” (Olson & Zanna 1993: 140). Meanwhile, Petty et al. (1993) suggested that manipulating the recipient’s mood towards more positive states leads to higher persuasion under both the central and peripheral routes.

In order to understand resistance to persuasion and bias, Olson and Zanna (1993) discussed the concepts of selective interpretation, through which a recipient’s attitude can influence how information is labelled and interpreted, and of selective memory, the idea that information that help us re-affirm our own attitudes are easier to recall than counter-attitudinal ones. Moreover, Petty et al. (1997) commented that “a biased processing outcome can be produced by unbiased motivation but biased ability, or by unbiased ability but biased motivation” (616). In some cases, some people do not want to have their attitudes changed and there is little that can be done about it.

## **2.2. Lobbying**

While the knowledge deriving from the persuasion literature can be utilized tactically in face-to-face meetings with policy-makers in Brussels, which is “still the preferred and most commonly used form of lobbying” (Terry 2001: 267), effective communication is much more than that. There is an entire art of how to get your point across, how to define and frame it, how to make it relevant to policy-makers, how to pursue its transformation into legislation and how to oversee its implementation. Such a mammoth task is termed ‘lobbying’ in the United States of America, a term that carries negative connotations widely in Europe where ‘public affairs’ is preferred. Within the European Union (EU) lobbying is defined as “activities carried out with the objective of influencing the policy formulation and decision-making processes of the European institutions” (European Parliament 2008a: 4), therefore sustainability proponents who try to communicate effectively to politicians are essentially engaging in lobbying. Regardless of terminology, the essence

remains the same. Although choice of particular, persuasive language and demeanour during discussions and meetings is of paramount importance, on the strategic level much more needs to be done – “the ‘who’ says ‘what’ to ‘whom’, ‘when’ and ‘how’” described by Mack (2005: 342).

Although there is significant overlap between the two fields – after all, as McGrath (2007) put it, “at its heart lobbying is also an exercise in persuasive communication” (278) –, in order to understand fully and into all levels the process of effectively communicating sustainability issues to politicians, this paper will draw from the substantive research that has been conducted on lobbying issues. Most of this research is of qualitative nature and does not necessarily carry with it universal truths; experience, intuition and values shape the pertinent literature, but this is unavoidable: experience, intuition and values are important features in this field.

### ***2.2.1. Personality characteristics of successful lobbyists***

One of the most important aspects of successful lobbying is the characteristics and demeanour of the communicator. The positive personal reputation which is a prerequisite for gaining access to politicians is built first and foremost by the personality traits and the behaviour of the lobbyist. The actual choice of who will approach specific politicians is of extreme strategic importance (Mack 2005). Overall, the literature in lobbying agrees on certain characteristics that lobbyists should possess if they are to build a good reputation and eventually be persuasive.

In accordance with the research on persuasion, two of the most important attributes of lobbyists must be honesty and credibility. To that respect, lobbyists should present both sides of the argument, not merely their own side, but appear to be as objective as possible (McGrath 2006). The information presented to politicians must be balanced, accurate, ideally supported by independent research, transparent and acknowledging that there are opposite views to the matter at hand (*ibid.*). If the lobbyist is exposed as presenting biased or false information, his reputation will be diminished not only in the eyes of particular politicians, but also to the eyes of other professionals – resulting in the possible removal of the pass that a lobbyist is granted in order to enter the European Parliament building (European Parliament 2008b).

Furthermore, knowledge of the relevant issues is also of extreme importance, as well as eloquence and a good command of language (Mack 2005, de Lange & Linders 2006). McGrath (2006) commented also that a lobbyist should as much as possible listen to (and watch) the politician with whom he/she is speaking, not only in order to understand the exact position of the interlocutor, but also to see if the point they are making gets across. This is what de Lange and Linders (2006) termed “the art of ‘reading the signs’” (133) that they deemed vital for successful communication.

### ***2.2.2. Effective lobbying techniques***

Lobbying is a long-term process that must be characterised by tactical and strategic goals. Mack (2005) stated that the three “core elements” (341) of effective lobbying campaigns are intelligence, strategy and implementation. Gormley (2007) emphasized the role of sound organization, adequate financial resources and persistence. But perhaps the most important aspect of lobbying is a thorough “knowledge and understanding of the prevailing political culture and dynamics of decision-making” (Titley 2003: 83). The current political culture differs drastically from that of just two decades ago, with the advent of globalization and the emergence of sustainable development as a viable concept in the political agenda. According to Titley (2003), one of the most important changes that characterise today’s political reality is that politicians are more susceptible to public opinion and do not as much shape it as follow it. Therefore effective communication to politicians must be supplemented with corresponding action to make public opinion favourable towards one’s cause. Issues such as agenda-setting through reaching out to the public have gained renewed importance.

### ***2.2.3. Agenda-setting***

According to Carter (2001), “[t]he agenda-setting stage of the policy process is a critical point at which policy change can be initiated” (178). Titley (2003) commented that while lobbyists casually consider as success their ability to influence an amendment of a Commission directive, “[i]t never seems to occur to them to ask how or why such a directive arrived on the agenda in the first place” (87). Agenda-setting is a complex process that is both long- and short-term in nature, depending on the subject at hand and its repercussions. Carter (2001) presented various theoretical approaches to agenda-setting, such as Baumgartner’s and Jones’ (1993) ‘punctuated equilibrium’ model, which deals more with long-term paradigm shifts. In this model, public opinion, framing of issues and effective communication techniques are emphasized.

### ***2.2.4. Outreach to the public***

In agreement with the persuasion literature’s stress on promoting issues that are of importance to the recipient of the message, Koepl (2001) stated that lobbying communication “must be factual, relevant and especially of personal interest to the recipient” (70). Thus, the effective lobbying campaign must raise awareness of an issue in the public opinion and put it on the news, or take advantage of such opportunities, so as to show to politicians that it is of importance to them. In this respect, mass media becomes “an important intermediary institution that shapes the agenda-setting process” (Andrews & Edwards 2004: 493), effective by shaping the reality in which discourse takes place (de Lange & Linders 2006). As McGrath (2007) put it, “unless you are the front page topic of the week, it is difficult to persuade Congress [ed. or the European Parliament, for that matter] that this is the week to act on your concerns” (277).

In order to do this, lobbying groups must shift away to a certain extent from traditional practices that focus solely on lobbying the elites and embark on a wider dialogue with various grassroots stakeholders, thereby linking their agendas with public concerns and demonstrating that their issues are popular (Titley 2003). Coalition building at different levels of action becomes of paramount importance. Thus, effectively communicating sustainability to policy-makers needs “complementary skills in stakeholder relations and coalition building, grassroots and Internet campaigning, media relations, and Internet-based intelligence gathering/analysis” (Titley 2003: 88), without of course refraining from still pursuing to persuade politicians face-to-face. Moreover, an increased attentiveness to emotional appeals that resonates more to the public is crucial and must complement recourse to reason (*ibid.*). Thereby, issues of framing a topic in accordance with social needs must be carefully considered in order to infuse “a long-term political resonance” to the agenda at hand (Hasanagas & Shoesmith 2002: 218).

#### **2.2.5. Framing**

Framing is a conscious process undertaken by lobbyists in order to “encourage policy makers both to share the lobbyist’s perspective on a given policy problem, and to suggest to those policy makers what policy solution ought to be adopted” (McGrath 2007: 269). Mack (2005) commented that communication must be not only based on reason and credibility, but must also appeal to emotions and be closely tied to a politician’s interest, convincing him/her that a substantial percentage of voters also hold the same idea. Mack (1997) as well commented that framing should underline the benefits that appear for the public by endorsing a proposal and thus sometimes it is very effective to appeal to moral principles such as discrimination or justice in order to get your point across (in McGrath 2007).

The framing of an issue should not be confused with its content. Framing is the process of creating the context within which the balancing of arguments (i.e. content) takes place, for instance if it is more important to look at economic or environmental considerations on a given issue (Chong & Druckman 2007). If a frame is successful in convincing, for example, that environmental considerations are more important, then a second level of communication takes place into deciding the specific environmental principles that should be followed.

In attempting to identify the characteristics of strong frames, Chong and Druckman (2007) commented that these often “rest on symbols (...) and may be effective in shaping opinions through heuristics rather than direct information about the substance of a policy” (111). Therefore, it seems that an important role of a given frame is to ‘cover’ the communication aspect under conditions of low elaboration. Ideally however, they should attract the recipient’s attention into showing the relevance of the issue and in a second level they must be supplemented by strong arguments that persuade the audience using the central route of persuasion.

Regarding the specific language that should be used when framing an issue, Tierney (2002) commented that complicated language and jargon should be avoided, while repeated the claim that it must appeal both to emotions and to logic: “it must win both the hearts and the minds” of the electorate (in McGrath 2007: 277) and thus of politicians. Moreover, framing should use positive language. It is not accidental that both sides use the ‘pro-’ argument in various issues, e.g. ‘pro-choice’ or ‘pro-life’ regarding abortion. A campaign that held at its banner the slogan of ‘anti-life’ or ‘anti-choice’ would be bound to failure. Seconding the notion that complicated language should be avoided, Chong and Druckman (2007) suggested that in order to have an effective framing effect, the information conveyed must be stored in memory in such a way that it becomes readily available for retrieval and use. A possible way to achieve such an outcome is by increasing exposure to the frame – indicating that the process may be long-term in nature.

### **2.3 A paradigm shift for sustainability**

It is beyond doubt that the decisions adopted by policy-makers affect deeply our world and are extremely important in assessing whether we move towards a more sustainable society or not. While governance and institutional practices are just one facet of society’s puzzle, they are very important in shaping the world. O’Riordan (2004) commented for instance that several European directives “will profoundly affect the politics of waste, water, energy, planning and coastal protection in years to come” (242). This section will present the literature regarding the required paradigm shift needed in our society for a transition towards a high degree of sustainability and the extent to which effective communication to policy-makers is important in this process.

#### ***2.3.1. Transition to sustainability***

Perhaps we are already well within that process of transition. Although the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment Board (2005) concluded that the planet’s life-support systems are under immense stress which if unchecked might result in severe impact for the world’s wellbeing in the not-so-far future – or maybe because of this – there is evidence of a shift in thought. Sustainability has become an issue of the global political agenda; several trends within economic thought are beginning to question the wisdom of conventional economics, while civil society is emerging as a champion of sustainability, with thousands of non-governmental organisations dedicated to that cause (Leiserowitz et al. 2006). It is still debatable however if such a shift represents a true change of course. Our society is still unsustainable, there is no doubt about that; however sustainability is acknowledged by citizens, states and business alike as desirable. How can so many people desire sustainability but there is so little of it around?

At the heart of this on-going debate is the definition of sustainability itself. Several scholars have commented that ‘sustainability’ as a term is deeply flawed, being open to wide interpretations and failing to provide with a coherent vision of a sustainable society. The definition of sustainable development provided by the World

Commission on the Environment and Development (1987) as one that “meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (24) has been criticized as being vague and an attempt to reconcile economic growth and environmental concerns (Carter 2001). Clark (1995) argued that the term has been essentially hijacked by interests who wish to continue having relentless economic growth without being ‘bothered’ by environmentalists and commented that this is because proponents of strong sustainability do not communicate effectively the need to promote social justice, equity and an increase of decision-making at the local level.

It is not really known whether it is desirable to construct a universal meaning of sustainability that can be applied to each case. O’Riordan<sup>1</sup> argued that “we cannot properly get to a universal meaning, and we can only approach a more universal definition through the circumstances of many initiatives aimed at governing economic change and experimenting with shifts in social values” (9). However, it seems to be of importance to have a recognisable concept of sustainability that incorporates some core principles that Carter (2001) identified as common in most schools of thought: equity, democracy, the precautionary principle, policy integration and planning. Leiserowitz et al. (2006) meanwhile commented that “there are no survey data on public attitudes towards ‘sustainable development’ as a holistic concept” (418), indicating that sustainable development – let alone sustainability – has not been clarified in the collective mind as a tangible entity. How can we expect politicians to adopt with fervour related initiatives when their impact on public opinion cannot be measured?

The need for effective communication of sustainability is shown to be paramount once more, not the least to induce a policy paradigm shift that will lead to long-term changes. As Wironen (2007) showed using a Habermasian perspective, the advent of a new ‘communicative sustainability’ is important in order to facilitate a truly sustainable development. Tactical issues but also sustainability as a whole must be framed effectively and persuasively in a way that will induce politicians to implement such measures; this process can be significantly aided by adopting to the fullest the insights stemming from the literature on persuasion and lobbying. This is needed in order to counter the actions of lobby groups in Brussels and Washington which “exist primarily to ensure that environmental excitement amongst the supportive lobbies does not get too out of hand” (O’Riordan<sup>2</sup>: 12). It is pertinent to examine how paradigm shifts happen and what is the exact role of effective communication in this process.

### ***2.3.2. Paradigm shifts in public policy***

A policy paradigm is defined as a “framework of ideas and standards that specifies not only the goals of policy and the kind of instruments that can be used to attain them, but also the very nature of the problems

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<sup>1</sup> Unpublished manuscript.

<sup>2</sup> Unpublished manuscript.

they are meant to be addressing” (Hall 1993: 279). The literature regarding a policy paradigm shift is far from conclusive (Campbell 2002); however one point of agreement is that the process is long-term in nature. In his inclusive study regarding the shift on Britain’s economic policy from Keynesianism to monetarism, Hall (1993) commented that the process begins when anomalies which cannot be countered by the existing paradigm surface. When the policies that are trying to deal with the problem fail, the authority of the dominating paradigm becomes undermined. Campbell (2002) agreed that “when shocks, crises, and other disturbances create policy problems for which prevailing paradigms provide little guidance, policy makers search for new ones that help them envision new policy solutions” (23).

Such anomalies are abundant in current times. The wide disparities between developed and developing countries – as well the various risks for everyone this creates – cannot be denied. The consensus of climate scientists has concluded that anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions already disturb the global climate, with deep uncertainty on how this will evolve during the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The Millennium Ecosystem Assessment Board (2005) has noted how “the world is experiencing a worsening trend of human suffering and economic losses from natural disasters” (2). Indeed, Nelson (1995) commented that “it is no coincidence that the emergence of sustainability as an issue comes at a time when faith in economic progress is waning” (145). Currently these signs indicate that there is indeed a chance for sustainability to emerge as a contesting, inclusive paradigm that can provide solutions for contemporary challenges. However, in order for this to occur it is imperative to develop a coherent communication framework which will persuade for the need to adopt sustainability initiatives as soon as possible.

### ***2.3.3. The importance of effective communication for a policy paradigm shift***

Even though persuasive communication is only one of the resources that should be utilised in this process, its importance cannot be questioned. Hall (1993) stated that “politicians will have to decide whom to regard as authoritative” (280) of the proponents of different alternatives, therefore persuasiveness through credibility and relevance are of utmost importance. Moreover, as was shown by the pertinent literature on lobbying, it is important to reach to the public and turn the issue into a newspaper headline. Hall (1993) agreed that the shift in Britain’s economic policy was “a societywide affair, mediated by the press, deeply imbricated with electoral competition, and fought in the public arena” (287). The problem is the inertia of the system; as Campbell (2002) commented, once “paradigmatic ideas are institutionalized (...) they generate constituencies that defend them whenever they come under attack later” (31). This inertia is what is witnessed today and the goal of sustainability communication should be to reduce it as much as possible.

Apart from the obvious tactical gains of effectively communicating to politicians the need to take concrete action on a number of appropriately framed issues, Dennison (2008) recommended that science communicators must become effectively trained to “capitalize on the paradigm shift toward environmental



problem solving for sustainable solutions” (195). New modes and new channels of communication between experts, politicians and the public must be developed. According to van Kerkhoff and Lebel (2006), the traditional method of transferring and translating knowledge to political figures is ineffective under current circumstances. Sustainability requires more inclusive methods of communication, based on participation, which will intend to include more people in the decision-making process. The road is far and persuasion may only act as a catalyst that will enhance the communication process further until it can reach the desirable level of “multi-agency governmental and public involvement at a host of levels of political scale that simply cannot be created in present-day bureaucracies, nationalistic political endeavours and inadequate participatory approaches” (O’Riordan<sup>3</sup>: 14).

The on-going dialogue about sustainability indicates that we have already entered the phase of a significant paradigm shift and it must be discussed in which direction this process should lead. Nelson (1995) argued that a process of transition from ‘efficiency’ to ‘sustainability’ is already under way as part of the long history of our species: “terms such as ‘providence’ in the medieval era, ‘natural law’ in the Enlightenment, ‘efficiency’ in the progressive era, and now ‘sustainability’ at the end of the century, tell us more about our basic value systems” (145).

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

The purpose of the chosen method of research was to come up with empirical material that would supplement the theoretical knowledge so as to lead to a wider framework from which palpable conclusions and suggested courses of action can be drawn.

#### **3.1. Choice of research mode**

It was decided that since this paper constituted a first approach to the issue, it was required to conduct a broad research, consisting solely of qualitative measures that can provide a general framework on which further research can focus. Beyond a thorough analysis of the pertinent literature, the method of data collection chosen in order to pursue an in-depth understanding of the research question was the interview. The empirical data gathered would then be combined with the theoretical framework in the ensuing analysis.

#### **3.2. Choice of respondents**

Given that the results of the research were not intended for generalizing to the entire population, it was not necessary to enact probability sampling techniques (Shaughnessy et al. 2000). The choice of respondents was conducted using purposive sampling in which “[t]he individuals selected are commonly those who have an expertise or experiences related to the purpose of the study” (Shaughnessy et al. 2000: 154). The sampling technique used in this study aimed into providing with a strategic sample of acknowledged professionals who

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<sup>3</sup> Unpublished manuscript.

possess significant knowledge within the subject of persuasive communication and/or sustainability. The explicit aim was to gain specific information from each individual that would cover the research questions from different sides.

Six individuals from various related backgrounds were approached; five agreed to offer interviews. The respondents were the following:

- **Barbara Bernardi**, policy office mobility at Eurocities, is a lobbyist employed in the sustainable transportation sector and pursuing her work in Brussels. It was expected that she would provide significant information on how to communicate sustainability issues to politicians on a practical, day-to-day basis.
- **Stathis Efstathiades**, senior foreign editor of the Greek newspaper “To Vima”, is one of the most influential figures of Greece’s foreign affairs, being among other things member of the Board of Directors of the Hellenic Centre for European Studies, of the Board of Council of Emeritus Members of the Hellenic Foundation for European and Foreign Policy, and of the Board of Directors of the Diplomatic Academy of the Hellenic Ministry for Foreign Affairs, where he also teaches Communication Diplomacy. It was considered that through his vast experience on diplomatic negotiations he would provide valuable inside knowledge on the world of persuasive communication within political decision-making. Moreover, it was calculated that he would offer insights regarding issues of etiquette and demeanour.
- **Conor McGrath**, lecturer in Political Lobbying and Public Affairs at the University of Ulster, is the author of various articles and books regarding lobbying and persuasive communication. It was expected that Mr. McGrath would provide substantial information on both the theoretical and practical aspects of lobbying.
- **Tim O’Riordan**, a renowned expert in sustainability, whose research interests include governance issues. It was intended that Mr. O’Riordan would offer insights of what is needed in terms of communication in order to achieve the transition to sustainability on an institutional level. Moreover, his contribution was expected to highlight the specifics of sustainability governance which must be reached on a long-term basis and to which communication for sustainability should aim.
- **John Whitelegg**, a prominent figure of sustainable transportation who is moreover currently active in decision-making at the local level as councillor in Lancaster, UK and leader of the UK North West Green Party. It was considered that an interview with him would provide valuable information on contact with policy-makers from a person who has substantial experience both as a sustainability consultant/academic and as a politician.

The interviewees presented their own personal views, which were not meant to be representative of their affiliated organisations.

### **3.3. Research procedure**

Given the differing backgrounds of the respondents, it was decided that the interviews should be of semi-standardised nature, as described by Berg (1989). Some of the questions were framed so as to elicit particular responses from the interviewees and to create a general framework revolving around the element of persuasion in communication, and in particular regarding the characteristics of sustainability issues. Depending on the exact knowledge of the respondent, a move was made towards an informal pattern of interviewing, trying to gain more insights on the exact field of expertise of each participant. Such a pattern was elicited through the use of probing questions (*ibid.*).

Standardisation was pursued through the use of the same medium for all the interviews: the telephone. Although it would be more desirable to have face-to-face communication with the interviewees, time and financial constraints did not allow for this possibility. According to Breakwell et al. (1995), “telephone interviewing seems to yield similar data to face-to-face interviews” (235) – perhaps because of the sense of protection provided by the lack of visual contact. It was proposed to the respondents that the researcher would contact them, so as the cost of the telephone would not intervene with their desire to offer their time for the interview.

Unfortunately, it was not feasible to reach Mr. McGrath through the telephone, due to time limitations. Therefore a set of questions was instead emailed to him. Although the author understands that this deviates from the desired outcome of standardised research, it was decided that the information Mr. McGrath had to offer was of bigger importance.

It must be taken into consideration that not all of the respondents were fully aware about sustainability issues. Therefore, care was taken to avoid jargon. Moreover, all care was also taken as well to avoid affective words, double-barrelled and/or complex questions, as described by Berg (1989) and Breakwell et al. (1995).

### **3.4. Validity and reliability**

Breakwell et al. (1995) noted that there is no evidence suggesting a lack of reliability or validity of interviewing in comparison to other methods. Since the respondents in this case were carefully chosen and are qualified professionals related to the research at hand, it was expected that their answers would be related to the subject and thus the validity of the method was ensured. Regarding reliability, it was consciously attempted to use to a satisfactory degree extra questions (Berg 1989) in order to discern whether the respondents’ attitude on an issue remains consistent or was influenced by wording. Although this brought the

undesirable effect of interviewees commenting that “this question has been asked before”, the answers indicated a high degree of reliability.

### **3.5. Ethical considerations**

It was decided that the interviewees were in a state of minimal risk during the entire length of the interview; the research subject can hardly be perceived as threatening for the psychological state of a respondent. However, since in some cases the respondents were asked to disclose professional practices that may be considered to be guarded secrets, it was constituted clear from the beginning that the transcripts of the interviews will be held under lock and key. Moreover, the interviewees were offered the option of remaining anonymous – all of them declined.

In order to make sure that no ethical mishandling would arise, all respondents were e-mailed prior to the interviews with an Informed Consent Form (Appendix A), instructed to reply positively to this if they wished to participate in the research. The Informed Consent Form was structured according to the provisions provided by Shaughnessy et al. (2000) and declared: the full purpose of the research at hand in plain language; that the respondents participated voluntarily in the interview and that they may withdraw at any time from the procedure without prejudice or penalty; what was required from them during the procedure; that the information provided would be treated confidentially and that the interviewees would have the option of answering the questions anonymously; and, finally, that the respondents would have access to the completed research from June 2008, along with an electronic address of correspondence where they could ask for a copy.

## **4. ANALYSIS & DISCUSSION**

Since the research of this study has been qualitative in nature, it was decided to group together the analysis of the interviews and the ensuing discussion, aided by the theoretical framework. This section is structured according to the two main research questions of the tactical and strategic effects of effective communication in order to bring forth a policy result that adheres to sustainability. As aforementioned, the tactical scope rests on the exact details that constitute a communication persuasive in sustainability terms, while the strategic effect is based on how sustainability should be framed in order to induce a long-term paradigm shift. The analysis consists of the ideas stemming from the substantive expertise of the individuals interviewed, juxtaposed with the notions of the Elaboration Likelihood Model which dictate what makes communication persuasive, the insights gained by the literature on lobbying and the discussion behind policy paradigm shifts.

### **4.1. Tactical steps in effective sustainability communication**

This section examines how a communication intending to persuade that a sustainability alternative is desirable should be pursued. A clear finding that surfaced from the interviews was that all of the respondents who are active in sustainability issues stressed the importance effective communication possesses in bringing

forth a desired policy outcome. Moreover, all of the respondents inadvertently proposed communication techniques that aim to satisfy both the central and peripheral routes of persuasion: comments regarding the honesty and reliability of the message source were abundant, as were also remarks on the importance of appearance and heuristics. Everyone agreed that is of very extreme importance to understand the agenda of politicians, their concerns and desires. Therefore it becomes clear that the characteristics of the communicator, proper language usage and the lobbying techniques discussed are of paramount importance in this sense.

#### ***4.1.1. Source characteristics***

The analysis starts with the characteristics of the communicator, since these are the catalyst that either opens or closes the doors to a politician's office. These characteristics are not restrained into whether someone argues for sustainability or not; they seem to be universal in nature and a prerequisite of any communication attempt. Nevertheless, they must be discussed because they form an integral part of the communication process and anyone who wishes to succeed in this endeavour must possess a fair amount of those traits.

The literature on persuasion and lobbying has made clear that for a source of communication to be effective, it must be characterized by reliability, likeability and honesty. Mr. Efstathiades indeed commented that "someone who tries to persuade must be an upstanding character, honest (...) and reliable". It is very important to have a reputation that opens doors and doesn't shut the ears of the politicians. Since Brehm et al. (1999) discussed how extreme ideas hinder the persuasive appeal, it becomes clear that sustainability communicators must strive to have a clean record and to avoid radical ideas that might marginalise them and lead to decreased effectiveness in persuasion. This becomes even more important when considering that sustainability issues are usually long-term in nature and may require frequent encounters with the same politicians.

Of course when someone tries to persuade, he/she has their own agenda they want to pursue, but this should never lead to providing false information. Mr. Efstathiades commented that when you honestly present the negative side of your argument, then the interlocutor esteems you more, thinking that "that person does not hide anything"; this also creates the strategic effect of appearing as if the communicator is not actually trying to persuade on a given issue but provides a truthful account of the best course of action, leading to increased persuasion, as discussed by Brehm et al. (1999). Of course, in this situation, Mr. Efstathiades pointed out that "you have to multiply the positive sides of your argument".

In any case, the information provided to politicians must always be truthful. Ms. Bernardi commented that "you must be absolutely honest, because if you don't you might have problems", while Mr. McGrath suggested that "lobbyists should always be absolutely strictly honest in making their case in the best possible

light”. In contrast to widely-held notions that lobbyists are hired to present black as white and to distort reality, it seems that the effective communicators do not play these games – more so since the recipients of their argument (politicians) are not known for gullibility. Therefore, sustainability proposals should always be presented in a truthful manner; after all sustainability proposals have the merit of wisdom in them, therefore one does not need to distort them to make their case.

Moreover, in order to attain a high degree of reliability, communicators should be honest in acknowledging that there are differing points of view and should present to the politician the other side of the argument. As mentioned, Cialdini et al. (1992) commented that the reliability of a source increases in two-sided rather than in one-sided communication where the source displays a non-dogmatic demeanour, while Schultheiss and Brunstein (2002) indicated that two-sided persuasion is more effective. The risk pointed out by Ms. Bernardi of making a politician “curious to discover” the other side can be reduced by utilizing the research results of Igou and Bless (2007) and present the benefits of the proposed sustainable course of action on the end of the communication, given that a recency effect takes place, as has already been discussed. Mr. McGrath commented that two-sided communication

...is the only way to develop long-term relationships with policy-makers and to gain a reputation for integrity and trustworthiness. It's also far and way more effective than allowing other lobbyists to come in later to the same policy-maker and undercut your argument.

This means that the effective sustainability communicator must possess a thorough knowledge on the issue at hand, not only from a sustainability perspective, but from opposing paradigms as well, in order to present their merits and flaws successfully and point out why sustainability is superior. This seems to be one of the principal reasons why Mack (2005) and de Lange and Linders (2006) pointed out that knowledge of the issue is of extreme importance. Mr. Efstathiades also stressed the vast importance of preparation before meetings, while Ms. Bernardi commented that “sometimes you meet people who have no clue what you’re talking about, and sometimes you meet somebody who knows much more than you know”. The effective communicator must be ready to address his/her points under all circumstances.

Knowledge seems to be important also because it increases the ability of someone to communicate his/her issue with the confidence that seems to be of great importance in persuasion. Confidence leads someone to have a strong voice and avoid using powerless language, defined by Blankenship and Holtgraves (2005) as characterized by “linguistic features such as tag questions, hesitations, disclaimers, hedges, polite forms” (4), with hedges (e.g. “sort of...”, “kind of...”) having the worst effect. Schultheiss and Brunstein (2002) suggested that verbal fluency and voice modulation are an important determinant of effective persuasion,

showing that someone who wants to persuade must possess a fluent command of language and use it in a way that influences the interlocutor both under high and low elaboration.

Regarding likeability, in accordance to the finding that it is strongly influenced by the communicator's appearance, Mr. Efstathiades strongly underlined the importance it has, by commenting:

...appearance must be perfect (...) depending on the occasion. The other person must know that the one standing in front of him is someone smart, active within society's structures and who shows respect to others.

Appearance also matters because it tends to classify you within different clusters of the political spectrum. Ms. Bernardi gave an example of this, by saying that "for instance, if you dress as an intellectual, then you can be very easily classified as a socialist" in Brussels. "When you meet a politician, dress-code is very important [since it] can show that you're on the same level, that you talk with them as a peer", as she pointed out. Moreover, a non-neutral appearance might create an undesirable 'noise' that may distract from the procedure. This aspect of communication is especially important under conditions of low elaboration. However both content strength and heuristics are important determinants of successful communication, since both are ways through which persuasion takes place. The effective source of a message should acknowledge that recipients are perhaps inadvertently influenced by processes such as appearance and heuristics and should take them into consideration.

Some of the source characteristics can surely be learnt through practice and experience and therefore proponents of sustainability should strive to attain a basic level of their understanding in order to be able to communicate their ideas effectively. Other traits might be inherent talents that charismatic individuals only possess; therefore the strategic effect of choosing which communicators approach which politicians pointed out by Mack (2005) indicates that the source of a persuasive message must be carefully and consciously chosen by an interested party that wishes to effectively promote sustainability and must not be left to chance.

#### ***4.1.2. Message characteristics***

All of the aforementioned source characteristics are closely linked with the content and style of the presented message. Honesty, likeability and reliability open the pathway of communication, while fluency of language determines whether the communicator has the ability to get his/her point across. Beyond the need to avoid powerless language, there are specific things one should do or not do when trying to get across a sustainability message. These have to do with the content and style of the message and more particularly with the language used and whether one should use emotions and fear appeals.

#### ***4.1.3. Language used in effective sustainability communication***

The need to develop a coherent language that would position sustainability issues in a persuasive way was underlined by Mr. O’Riordan, who commented that “we must improve the understanding that people must feel that sustainability is for them”. Mr. Whitelegg imparted the idea that currently those involved in trying to affect environmental policy “do not use language that has an immediate impact on the people listening”, while Ms. Bernardi suggested that “speaking the same language [with politicians] is of big importance”. These comments strengthen the need for this study and indicate that much more needs to be done in order to create a viable framework of sustainability communication.

It was not feasible through this study to come up with particular words that should or should not be used; this would require extensive quantitative research with a statistical sample and the testing of particular words. Moreover, since this paper aims to be a first approach to the issue, it does not deal with specific sustainability problems and the language that should be utilised therein, but attempts to come up with a large framework of understanding that can facilitate more focused research. As Mr. McGrath commented when asked about specific word usage, “it’s hard to be very specific about particular words to use or not since it all depends on the issue and on what side of it the lobbyist is working”.

What came out clear from the interviews though was that the language currently common in sustainability science “does not resonate”, according to Mr. Whitelegg, and thus fails to be persuasive. One of the main reasons for this is that currently too much of it is jargon and this, in accordance with Tierney’s (2002) aforementioned suggestion (in McGrath 2007), must be avoided at all costs. Many questions of the interviews dealt with the best possible method of communicating some of the core characteristics of the environment as a policy problem, as presented by Carter (2001): that they often deal with public goods, are often transboundary in nature, possess temporal and spatial variability, are enhanced by administrative fragmentation, are plagued with complexity and uncertainty and come into conflict with other regulatory activities, especially those providing mainly for economic growth. The respondents were very strong in emphasizing that all such terminology must be avoided and this is the reason this study is not structured under such sections. Mr. Whitelegg explained that:

...we have to part our ideas and our suggestions in language that we know will actually have impact. If I go to speak to politicians about public goods and tragedy of the commons, I know they’ll go to sleep.

Thus, the use of complicated language poses the imminent danger of diminishing the attentiveness of the recipient, drastically reducing the persuasive appeal. There is even the danger of being misunderstood. As Ms. Bernardi put it:



...never forget that you need to be as clear as possible. Something that you think as evident is never evident. You might end up being misunderstood and then they can make an amendment completely different of what you wanted to say.

Therefore, the individual communicator must be trained and prepared to convey information to the layman, and do exactly that when addressing politicians. In the field of decision-making, where even a comma on a sentence might alter a given decision, it is very important to be as clear as possible about what you stand for. In this sense, technical and specialised information should be reserved for communicating with knowledgeable bureaucrats and technicians, but never with politicians.

Mr. O’Riordan commented moreover that currently sustainability communicators have failed to create an attractive language and this must immediately change:

...we need to widen the basis of the [sustainability] language and get it across to the notion of well-being, to the notion of improving peoples’ lives and we’re not doing that at all well right now.

It must be shown, he continued, that sustainability “is good, something that improves [people’s] lives, a thing they can do something about it rather than doing nothing and shifting responsibility to someone else”. Essentially, sustainability must be re-framed, as will be discussed later, not the least in order to break away from its emphatic link with environment. As Mr. O’Riordan continued:

...we need to use a language that people can understand, related to social cohesion, betterment of peoples’ lives, changing the way with which they feel connected and worthwhile, that they have a role to play in changing the world they live in, in terms of their own neighbourhoods and their own families.

Therefore, sustainability must be communicated in a way that shows its immediate relevance to the here and now, instead of discussing the possible effects of non-action and its dire consequences on a difficult-to-imagine future. Under that prism, the tried technique of threatening communication must be revisited.

#### ***4.1.4. Emotions and fear appeals***

One of the main characteristics of the sustainability problems modern society faces is that they are irreversible in a human time scale, while failure to mitigate them may lead to severe disturbances in the social, economic and ecological web of the current reality. Sustainability advocates have been very aggressive in pronouncing that we should strive as much as possible to deal with issues such as climate change, lest disaster strikes in the future. However the literature on fear appeals indicates that this is a very

sensitive subject that must be approached with caution. While it is quite possible to persuade someone that climate change, for instance, is a serious problem, it is more difficult to show that the interlocutor is personally at risk from the problem or that the recommended practices to mitigate it are feasible – therefore threatening messages might not be effective, following the rationale of Roger’s (1983) protection motivation theory, as summarised by Olson and Zanna (1993). That is perhaps the reason why Mr. O’Riordan noted that one should:

...use the language of opportunity, not the language of problems:  
you never get anywhere with the language of problems, all you do  
is get people feeling that they can’t do anything about them.

Eliciting helplessness – and thus inaction – must be avoided at all costs. While the temptation of trying to show the problems awaiting modern society if action is not taken seems to be irresistible at times, sustainability communicators must refrain from using fear as a means to persuasion. As mentioned, such recourse might also lead to the marginalisation of the sustainability communicator, through processes of denying accepting a message of impending doom. Especially when attempting to persuade politicians, one must be even more cautious. According to Mr. Whitelegg:

...talking about irreversibility loses your audience. Immediately  
people will say ‘this is just another example of someone going  
around saying “we’re doomed!”’, I don’t think we are doomed,  
good bye’.

It is important to create an environment of safety where the recipients of the message will feel comfortable to discuss the issue at hand, without defence mechanisms being activated and blocking their desire to act by making them deny the issue even exists. When that environment has been created, then perhaps a deeper discussion that will tackle the exact dangers caused by inaction can ensue. In that respect, one should present problems as opportunities. As Mr. Whitelegg pointed, one possible course of action would run in the lines of suggesting that:

...if we manage to solve the climate change issue, we will have  
massive gains in air quality, in road safety, in the national  
economy; approach ‘the range of co-benefits’. That’s a word  
politicians like: ‘co-benefits’.

Therefore, when approaching politicians, it is of extreme importance not to be negative about the issues at hand. Communicators of sustainability should make a strong case of the benefits appearing from a given course of action. Communicating to a politician the various co-benefits can also create a sense of cohesion between different policy departments and offer to a politician a concrete way through which he/she can aid their colleagues and thus have significant personal side-benefits.

In any case, it is vital to refrain from pointing out the negative outcomes of non-action. While this runs contrary to common-sense, the current course action indicates that after two decades of amassing evidence regarding climate change, little has changed in actual practices at the institutional and behavioural level, especially in relation to how big the transformation of our society needs to be to overcome this challenge. As pointed out by Mr. Whitelegg, sustainability communicators should portray:

...a very strong sense of optimism: 'we can solve these problems and there are lots additional benefits, additional gains, big improvements in quality of life etc.'

while Ms. Bernardi also commented that her experience has taught her to avoid fear appeals and use optimism instead.

That is not to say that emotions generally should be avoided. Emotional language seems to work well with politicians. As mentioned, research shows that both emotions and logic should be utilised in effective communication. Mr. O'Riordan's comments were in agreement with research findings: "You need to have the power of feeling and the logic of analysis; you have to have both working hand in hand". Mr. McGrath commented that "emotion is useful when talking to politicians, but much less so when dealing with civil servants", explaining how technical papers appeal more to civil servants, while "putting a human face" to the issue by discussing, for instance, social angles proves to be more successful in discussions with politicians. On the other hand, one must keep in mind Mr. Efstathiades' remark that emotions are a double-edged sword: "Today they are on your side, tomorrow they are not", while appeals to logic remain (usually) stable through time.

Finally, Ms. Bernardi noted that emotions – particularly positive ones – serve another useful role: they get you more in touch with politicians and their usage makes them feel comfortable, helping the communicator to "be more direct on the issue". As has already been discussed, Petty et al (1993) found that eliciting positive moods into recipients helps into making a message more persuasive under both high and low elaboration. However, this effect should be used with caution, since research has also indicated that people in good mood usually do not exert the cognitive strain necessary for the activation of the peripheral route. And research has indicated that attitude change which stems from the central route of persuasion is relatively more stable and survives longer in time than the one that is the product of the peripheral route of persuasion (Olson & Zanna 1993), while it is also more resistant to counterarguments and more likely to lead to behaviour change (Crano & Prislin 2006). But another angle of making a politician feel comfortable is to make him/her believe that you are on their side. As Ms. Bernardi pronounced, if a politician "feels you're an enemy, you will never get anything out from the dialogue".

## **4.2. Organizing a strategy for effective communication**

Language and the message conveyed are just one part of the communication process. Pushing effectively for changes requires much more, an entire array of actions that are aimed into constituting the exact moment of communication (the message) as strong as possible. Trying to affect the agenda of a meeting or its outcomes thereof can be a long-term process that requires, as Mr. Efstathiades put it, “an organised plan of action: the more detailed and the more to the point it is, the better”.

### ***4.2.1. Understanding politicians – Recipient characteristics***

Beyond making politicians feel more comfortable, understanding their rationale is an integral part of the communication process, both in relation to the specific politician one wishes to persuade on an issue and on some traits that may be characteristic of politicians at large. It is important, for instance, to know whether a politician is in favour, undecided or against the sustainability agenda – and how strongly he/she feels in each case. Research conducted by Olson and Zanna (1993) and Petty (1997) on bias indicated that some people simply do not want to have their attitudes changed. If resources such as time, money and personnel are limited, then it is important to know which key politician to target, and therefore their ideas must be known. It is important also during the process of communication to discern if the point is conveyed successfully or if a change of approach is necessary, as pointed out by McGrath (2006). In order to do that effectively, it is important to know how a certain politician functions. As Mr. Efstathiades put it, “before you approach a politician, you must study him. You must study his weak points and his strong points”. Ms. Bernardi agreed:

...you need to understand which kind of interlocutor you have in front of you. Who is the person you're talking to. It's important to have a CV, to know where he's been working etc. For instance, Barrot [ed. the EU Commissioner for Transport] loves trains. So if you put the word 'train' in your speech, he looks at you and smiles. And then you get him to your side. It's little tricks like that.

Moreover, showing that you are aware of a politician's likes or dislikes – even personal ones – indicates respect and interest towards him. Mr. Efstathiades pointed out that when talking to a politician “you can underline that you know he is the one who insisted in Parliament and imposed this and that change”, while Ms. Bernardi noted that:

...it is important to recall things like studies, personality, even hobbies. If someone's a football fan, make jokes about football. If he's a rugby fan and you're in the middle of the rugby season, make a reference to it. It's stupid, but it means you show him 'I know what you like, and I'm here for you, not against you'.

Such rapport creates an environment of safety where exchange of ideas can occur at a deeper level. Knowledge of a politician's ideas, values, interests etc. enables the communicator to assume different

demeanours that fit each case and therefore increase the effectiveness of the message conveyed. For instance, knowing someone's hobbies can lead to the successful use of metaphors in persuasive speech, since research has indicated that they are a style that leads to increased persuasion, but only if the metaphor is related to the recipient's interests (Ottati et al. 1999).

Understanding the mindset and agenda of a politician is also important to create a starting point through which one can push for changes in accordance with sustainability principles. As has been pointed out by research on persuasion, communication is more effective when the content of the message matches some interests, characteristics or values of the recipient. To that respect, as Mr. O'Riordan pointed out:

...you have to show to a politician what can be done about sustainability that's actually part of their portfolio and that they can make that work. So, you always have to work through something that politicians feel they can do something about, that they will feel good at, otherwise there's no success (...) There's no point to giving politicians a deep, long lecture, but rather understand what they are trying to achieve and then go from there.

More than the simple truth that one should not approach a politician that deals with energy and talk to them about fisheries, this idea holds a bigger notion: that currently sustainability must work within the political game and take advantage of it in order to become implemented, even not to the fullest at first. Politicians have agendas and the effective communicator tries to fit in sustainability into that agenda, instead of trying to change it. Thus, sustainability must be presented as relevant, attractive and desirable, within the specific context within which a politician functions – at least until a sufficient degree of institutional change has occurred which will allow for the sustainability agenda to permeate all fragmented policy sectors. Care must also be taken to promote issues that lie within the grasp of a politician and therefore their level of influence (local, regional, national etc.) must be taken into consideration.

Within that tactical way of influencing a politician, it again appears to be important to frame any argument in as much a clear way as possible, leaving out ambiguity and complications. It is through knowledge of how politicians work that Mr. Whitelegg pointed out that they do not think in terms of temporal and spatial variability and rarely wish to tackle with the 'tragedy of the commons'. Rather:

...a politician thinks in terms of 'what are the really serious problems that I have to deal with everyday', 'what are the very practical solutions that are relevant to dealing with those problems' and anything which gets more abstract and gets larger in geographical scale and larger in time scale gets put in a box called: 'Too difficult to think about'.

Therefore, it is important to simplify sustainability arguments and tie them in to the exact interests of a politician, thereby showing to the recipient that the message conveyed is of importance to him/her and gain their attention. As has been already been shown, fear appeals do not work, particularly also because “politicians are not usually very receptive to ideas that something is irreversible; it is their nature”, according to Mr. Whitelegg.

Once more, what surfaces is the same suggested course of action: combine a sustainability argument with the interests of a politician, take fully into consideration what it is the politician can and wants to achieve, and show clearly that sustainability is to their best interest. As Mr. O’Riordan commented:

...you need to work out with a politician what their line of action is, what they are thinking about and then work in term of their interests as well. That’s the best thing.

In this sense, the conflict between long-term solutions needed for sustainability and the short-term interests of politicians (revolving in many cases around tomorrow’s newspapers and next year’s elections) is resolved. According to Mr. Whitelegg, the politician’s short-term interests “is the way the system of governance works” and sustainability communicators need to keep this in mind and work with the ‘rules of the game’. The way to persuade a politician to take the right action now (what Mr. Whitelegg terms “the direction of travel”) is to make sure that the results of this action will appear soon, although their full nature will take years to come. Also, that tardiness will make the results appears even later in the future. As Mr. Whitelegg put it:

...if you talk to politicians about the direction of travel and increase the confidence that we can have a really good solution to problems, even if takes a little bit longer, then they do see that point so they can be persuaded to take a slightly longer term-view than the newspapers tomorrow.

Currently, however, this process is fraught with problems. Mr. O’Riordan strongly underlined that “there’s no easy way to get the politicians to go forward”, because “it’s very hard to get a politician to take the sustainability message sincerely and clearly”. Mr. O’Riordan contested that this is one of the biggest problems the sustainability debate faces: very few politicians have the proper attitude to understand sustainability and “even with them it’s difficult to put things into practice”. The root of the problem seems to be that “even getting the politicians interested is nowhere near where we need to be”, as Mr. O’Riordan commented. Politicians as a whole are not substantially interested in sustainability, other than using it as a catch phrase that is particularly attractive these days but can be devoid of substantial meaning when it comes down to practicing it. This is the root of the problem that must change, as will be explored later, requiring a massive reframing of sustainability in order to clearly and strongly present its relevance to politicians.

The need to move swiftly in this direction is paramount. While under the current status quo the only thing that can be done is to work under those circumstances, the speed at which change occurs is slower than what actually needs to be done. Mr. O’Riordan pointed out that:

...unless we really double our efforts to try get politicians feel they can do something about [sustainability], we are not going to go anywhere.

Therefore, once more it becomes of extreme importance to communicate sustainability effectively and that is why more research should aim to this area, taking into consideration the wide array of sustainability issues and understanding the approach that communicators should pursue in each different case.

Despite the sufficient difficulties, politicians are the decision-makers and the effective sustainability communicator can win them by his/her side by deploying the aforementioned suggestions. As Mr. O’Riordan pointed out:

...you can’t work with something politicians will unlikely want to see happen in the next six to nine months of their political lives, but see where you can make something work to their benefit.

A possible way to make a politician interested in innovative solutions is to frame issues to show that a particular course of action will benefit their agenda and will lead to increased well-being of citizens. This is where emotional or moral appeals might work well, especially when they are coupled with a simultaneous attempt to create a public stir about a certain issue. Politicians usually respond to issues of discrimination or justice, as pointed out by Mack (1997; in McGrath 2007).

Another possible way forward is to take advantage of the inherent competitive mode that Mr. Whitelegg asserts characterises most politicians. In that sense, Mr. Whitelegg proposed that the sustainability communicator can:

...use the competitive argument to encourage people to make decisions that actually will deal with problems that are properly described as public goods and tragedy of the commons (...) This will still have the same result and it’s the result that matters.

For instance, a successful communicator can underline the long-term effects of sustainable practices and indicate that they create a strategic advantage in relation to competing cities or countries. Or, by pointing out the wide array of co-benefits that emerge from a sustainable course of action, he/she can show to the

politician that the voters will regard highly a political figure that aids their well-being – given that the public understands that a certain course of action will indeed enhance it.

Understanding how politicians work is also one of the most important ways of getting in touch with the current political climate and learning how to influence it. The aforementioned attributes are not inclusive of course, and much depends on the particular individual. However, they do provide with a basic understanding of the importance such an endeavour has, especially when taking the direct action needed to effectively persuade a politician through processes such as agenda-setting.

#### ***4.2.2. Agenda-setting***

As has already been stated, the process of agenda-setting is long-term in nature and requires significant strategic thinking that involves sound organisation, preparation, commitment and patience. In this process, “presence is fundamental” as Ms. Bernardi noted, requiring “as much human resources as you can [have] to be present in all aspects of decision-making and in different types of policy”. Mr. Efstathiades underlined the importance of contingency thinking and the exertion of influence on all the stakeholders involved, through sound strategies of different communicators approaching different key figures of the policy at hand and making sure that what has been agreed is implemented appropriately. The importance of having adequate financial resources emerges, although Mr. McGrath pointed out that “all things being equal (...) good communication can make an enormous difference to an organisation or cause”.

As has been already ascertained in the literature regarding both persuasion and lobbying, effective communication has to be relevant to the recipient, and one of the things politicians care most for are their electorate – for various reason. While this thesis focused on how to effectively persuade politicians, it was soon realised that influencing public opinion is an important facet of this process that cannot be ignored. Of course, influencing the public is a huge endeavour, whose study surpasses the scope of this thesis. However, some basic notions will be presented.

#### ***4.2.3. Outreach to the public***

Within the new political environment of improved telecommunications, globalisation and rapid media involvement, the process of agenda-setting has significantly shifted from what it was before. This change favours NGOs and civil society organisations, since “they are more in tune with the current political and social climate” (Tittle 2003: 85). The formulation of public opinion has become a vitally important part of influencing politicians, with grassroots lobbying and especially good contact with the Press acquiring significant role within persuasive strategy, as was pointed out by Mr. McGrath. This analysis ties in with Baumgartner’s and Jones’ (1993) model of ‘punctuated equilibrium’ discussed in Carter (2001), which states that when the stability of the established order is disrupted – as is the definitely the case with the global



society being in the state described – new paradigms step in to fill a vacuum and persuade that their course of action will lead out of the problem. In this process “[a] key role during these moments of instability is played by the media, which can direct public attention to new issues or developments, or offer a new perspective on familiar issues (Carter 2001: 180) – that is, reframe them. Ms. Bernardi agreed, discussing how “the Press is a fundamental stakeholder”, offering visibility and influencing politicians greatly. As she noted, “it is better to have the Press on your side than not having it at all; and much better than having it on the wrong side”.

This renewed importance of the media must be taken very seriously into consideration: it can affect politicians into leaning more towards the sustainability side and it can constitute sustainability issues more relevant to politicians by stimulating a public discussion into which they must position themselves, given Koepl’s (2001) finding that effective communication to politicians must be relevant and of personal interest. Moreover, the media can also act as a vital tool for disseminating information that might lead into instilling sustainability ideas to the public at large, thus creating a discursive framework which will influence politicians. In current democratic societies, although societal participation might not be at the most desirable level, politicians listen to public opinion and take its wants and needs very seriously into consideration. Therefore, it seems that the required institutional changes that are the overall goal of persuading a politician to adopt a given policy must be mirrored in public opinion. Sustainability must consequently be diffused as a viable, concrete concept to which people can relate to and which they clearly understand that is to their best of benefit.

It is debatable whether it is more the public or the politicians that actually drive change forward. The process of a policy paradigm shift is complicated and both parties are of significant importance. However, in this study the focus is on politicians. The public acts as one of the possible means to enact pressure towards politicians for them to implement structural changes that can in turn lead to changes in public behaviour through facilitating sustainable practices.

In order to gain acceptance to the public, coalition building with institutions that are part of the current institutional arrangement becomes of paramount importance, as has been mentioned by Titley (2003). For instance, Mr. Whitelegg commented that sustainability proponents have found an important ally in the face of the global insurance industry, which influences not only politicians but the public at large through its recommendations. Ms. Bernardi discussed furthermore the importance of creating a “critical mass” of supporting actors in order to influence effectively politicians. Coalition building also provides reliability to the argument at hand: in such a case, both public and politicians cannot label a given policy as emerging from ‘environmentalists’ and the connotations such a term carries.

This is one of the main reasons why sustainability arguments must embrace more aspects and actors of modern society. Sustainability communicators must reach out to the public and make it understand that sustainability is to its own benefit, creating a critical mass within the societal sphere and direct the influence it holds over the political and economic spheres appropriately. Meanwhile, the same pressure can be enacted to politicians directly through the lobbying techniques discussed, by showing the significant advantages that stem from adhering to sustainability. However, in order to attain such a goal, sustainability must be reframed into a more holistic concept.

### **4.3. A paradigm shift for sustainability**

#### ***4.3.1 Reframing sustainability***

Framing has already been discussed as one of the main lobbying techniques utilised to bring forth the desired outcome of not only shaping the context of a given problem but also providing direction towards its solution (McGrath 2007). Moreover, it is a very good way to present old problems (especially ‘wicked problems’) so as to lead into the formulation of new questions and the application of new methods of scrutiny, while it also reveals unfavourable results of a given course of action and how traditional solutions might be incomplete in order to deal with a given problem (Ohlsson 2007). Essentially, reframing an issue provides a new breath into topics that may have reached a stalemate; thus taking into advantage the precepts of the informativeness principle discussed earlier (Olson & Zanna 1993) that novelty of information is an important indicator of persuasive communication. Framing sustainability in a new way, revealing its relevance, bringing it closer to the people; all of these can create an atmosphere where it can emerge as a new championing paradigm that can challenge the current way of doing things and which can influence politicians into adopting it. While framing can be utilised as a very effective form of communication for tactical gains, for instance to make a direct link between the need for more public transport with issues of health, well-being, safety etc., it is of extreme importance when discussing the need for a long-term paradigm shift for sustainability.

Regarding the process of this shift, Hall (1993) commented that it is sociological rather than scientific in nature and depends “not only on the arguments of competing factions, but on their positional advantages within a broader institutional framework, on the ancillary resources they can command in the relevant conflicts, and on exogenous factors” (280). Therefore, it is of extreme importance to influence as much as possible towards sustainability the key-figures of the current political scene, using effective communication as an “ancillary resource” to frame and strengthen the sustainability argument. It is important to convince politicians per se, since the shift ends when people who support the new paradigm acquire authority positions in the political scene and are able to institutionalize its principles in policy making (*ibid.*)

Language and the proper framing of issues are vital tools that can facilitate the process of this shift. Hall (1993) suggested that the terminology used by policy-makers is extremely important for the development of

a paradigm. What Rhoads wrote in 1985 might still hold true today: “economic language is often the currency of the contemporary political debate” (in Nelson 1995: 135). The current communicative framework that dictates policy-making must be contested and a relevant sustainability language must replace the dominant one. This is important because language is a discursive structure that “contain[s] cognitive and normative elements that mediate which policy programs policy makers can best perceive, understand, articulate, and as a result, which policy ideas they are likely to adopt” (Campbell 2002: 32). In this prism, language has power and the effect of reframing sustainability issues effectively and persuasively will aid in the process of facilitating a respective policy reaction. For instance, language may have the effect of changing a body’s own identity; through an effective dissemination of a relevant identity as champion of sustainability, the EU might shift from the current practice of conceiving its own identity on the foundation of trade liberalisation (Ruddy & Hilty 2007).

That is the way through which it will be able to replace the paradigm of efficiency and of adherence strictly to economic growth, following the process described in the ‘punctuated equilibrium’ model developed by Baumgartner and Jones (1993; in Carter 2001): persuade key politicians for its value and make sure that they institutionalise the core principles discussed by Carter (2001) of global and local equity, democracy through increased participation, the precautionary principle, policy integration and concrete planning instead of a reliance to the invisible hand of the market.

In order to do that, sustainability communicators must stress the problems modern society faces. This must be done in a non-threatening spirit, but with the mindset of proclaiming sustainability as the foremost process which can help deal with what Campbell (2002) called the “shocks, crises, and other disturbances” (23) pivotal in the process of a paradigm shift. Independent reports such as the one quoted from the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment Board, sponsored by the United Nations, should be used in this process.

This will surely be a long-term process, given Chong’s and Druckman’s (2007) aforementioned finding that effective frames are intricately linked with long-term exposure and especially in connection to Arkes’ et al. (1991) conclusion that repetition of arguments or information influences the recipient’s perception into believing them to be more valid, on the basis that “familiarity is a means by which validity is judged” (597). This change will take place one step at a time, revolving around the notion that people actually believe that sustainability is desirable and feasible. According to Mr. O’Riordan, when addressing both the public and politicians, sustainability communicators must make them:

...realise what they are capable of doing is possible and then, building on that, that they can do other things that are related to other aspects of their lives and the sustainability agenda.

This is a path of course that is filled with pitfalls. As has been already mentioned, the inertia of the current system is too strong and the measures that are needed in order to avoid far-reaching ecological problems are implemented too slowly. Moreover, it seems that politicians in many cases do not wish to tackle the problem at its root. As Mr. O’Riordan put it, politicians “don’t like to deal with sustainability” since it is an issue “too difficult for them”. Mr. O’Riordan believes that for them:

...it’s problematic, it’s long-term, it involves many other departments and political interests. Generally speaking, politicians shy away from sustainability and talk about other things, like well-being.

Thus, the need to reframe things again appears as the only plausible option of action. Mr. Whitelegg already noted that “it is the result that matters”, while Mr. O’Riordan suggested that:

...the only way around is to play the political game, understand what the game is, and then draw the issues to what’s important. Take them further but step by step and show them what the vision is.

Perhaps this vision of sustainability is one of the most important things that need to be clarified if ever modern society begins to take a sure path towards its realisation. Wironen (2007) provided an inclusive appraisal of the pitfalls that have emerged after the term ‘sustainable development’ was coined, concluding that its discourse currently is “as fragmented and contradictory as ever” (6), while Mr. O’Riordan commented that one of the main problems regarding the transition to sustainability is that it’s a concept “that can be interpreted in a variety of different ways”. Perhaps, as has already been mentioned, the need for an over-arching global definition may not be paramount. However this must not lead to a deviation where everything can be termed ‘sustainable’. The process of the shift towards a transitional society aiming for sustainability requires this not only to be clearly and coherently reframed (even as a loosely defined and circumstantial concept that can take different forms in under different conditions), but also to be effectively and persuasively communicated to politicians as the best course of action for modern society.

Unfortunately, this process is not easy. As Mr. O’Riordan commented, while it is undeniable that as a whole society wants to take the road towards more fairness, social justice and a better life:

...people don’t think this is also part of the sustainability message and this is another reason why this whole process becomes very difficult to get across. People see sustainability still too much as an environmental message, about saving the planet, and not about saving people, particularly disadvantaged.

Through this perspective, communicating sustainability in an effective manner essentially becomes the process of showing that it embraces vital parts of the human endeavour, such as well-being, freedom, spirituality and self-esteem, while also catering wisely for social, economic and environmental needs. It must evolve to automatically be linked to the minds of politicians and the public with ethical matters, since research has indicated that this is a very effective way to get a message across. And, as Mr. O’Riordan continued, “up to now we haven’t built this sort of thing into our system”. While he stated that:

...it is very difficult to see how we can move forward for the notion of sustainability to embrace other mainstream areas of civil liberty, poverty alleviation and improved well-being,

this surfaces exactly as the main plausible course of action in order to realise a transitional society. It is the main way through which sustainability can gain the social prominence and validity it requires to become truly resonant in the political, economic and social agendas not as an abstract concept but as a program that can and will be implemented. Therefore, sustainability communicators must be extremely aware of linking its precepts with the wider societal endeavours through the need for reframing discussed. This is undoubtedly a huge task: as O’Riordan<sup>4</sup> noted, “we are only just beginning to grapple with the enormity and complexity of sustainability as a realisable vision” (3).

Thus, a reframed sustainability must be pronounced as the answer not only to environmental, but also to social, political and economic problems, the way to deal with ethical issues. In order to do that focus should be given to reveal “the common agendas of the environmental policy think tanks with the security pundits, the economic lobbies and the global strategic analysts” (O’Riordan 2004: 239). To achieve that, sustainability must emerge not as yet another policy department, but as an inclusive paradigm that can provide viable solutions in the “wider political theatres of military security, conventional economic investment, poverty alleviation, hunger removal and the eradication of public health dangers” (O’Riordan 2004: 239); policy integration must be ensured and the pitfall of administrative fragmentation must be avoided. Certainly, it must be decoupled from its current entrapment within the small confines of environment which “continues to plague its political acceptability and public empathy” (O’ Riordan 2008: 2) while restricts environmental lobbies into “not being actually involved in sustainability”, as Mr. O’Riordan commented. As a new paradigm, sustainability must be the leading frame of thought in all aspects of the human endeavour, even acting as a mechanism for fostering peace (Wolf 2000; in Khagram & Ali 2006).

In this process, political functions are of primary importance and this is again one of the reasons why focus should be given to a great extent in persuading politicians and directing resources to changes in the institutional pillar of sustainability. Politics is the main instrument through which the institutional framework

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<sup>4</sup> Unpublished manuscript.

of modern society is created, upheld and transformed. Even if attitudes and values of the people become concordant with the idea of sustainability, in order to transform these into stable behaviour an entire set of institutional practices, laws, regulations, infrastructure etc. must be in place (Leiserowitz et al. 2006). Moreover, there is a noticeable effect in cleaner corporate practices after regulatory intervention was formed (Press 2007), indicating that institutional changes have an important influence on the business sector as well. And current governance systems are hardly sustainable. The gap between the citizen and the decision-makers must be bridged and “new forms of regulation and assessment, participation and scenario-building” (O’Riordan<sup>5</sup>: 8) must be envisaged.

To quote Mr. O’Riordan, “sustainability can only succeed if it actually has a different language, a different message and different targets”. Apart from the way to deal with specific problems, e.g. reformulating the issue of fish stock depletion as a failure of the price mechanism (Ohlsson 2006), sustainability must essentially emerge as a new positive alternative, carrying along it a force that will clearly demonstrate it can deal with the roots of modern society’s global and local problems. As such, communicators must make sure that framing it in a way that will aid the process of the massive paradigm shift needed must be done according to the provisions discussed through this study: it must use the language of opportunity, be positive for the future, appeal to both emotions and reason and underline ethical issues, clearly demonstrate that it is important and relevant, be novel, attractive and simple in form, clearly show that it will lead to short-term improvements in quality of life, aim into building large coalitions of truly dedicated groups (as opposed to groups interested only in greenwashing) and seek a widespread diffusion of its ideals to the public as a way to indirectly influence politicians. All of those must be done by highly reliable professionals who are thoroughly knowledgeable about today’s reality from a wide variety of perspectives, who understand how politicians function and how they should approach them, and who can eloquently present the benefits stemming from adhering to sustainability principles.

The relation between the tactical communication described and the strategic effect of a long-term paradigm shift becomes apparent. The tactical steps of communication presented in this paper can and should form the backbone of the language and approach required in order to influence step-by-step the decision-making and affect the political climate in such a way so as to gradually push it towards sustainability. The steady diffusion of tactical sustainability ideals into the system through effective persuasive communication of key political figures can lead to the gradual creation of a discursive framework that will be pivotal in the long-run into making more politicians aware of the true value of sustainability and of its worth, thus bringing the institutional changes required.

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<sup>5</sup> Unpublished manuscript.

#### **4.4. Obstacles in effective communication**

This does not mean that the process will be easy to accomplish. Severe obstacles exist in the process of effectively communicating sustainability to an extent where massive shifts in thinking can occur. During the course of research and especially through the interviews, two main points on which communication is particularly difficult have been recognised: a) the prevailing economic thought that is founded on the pursuit of limitless economic growth (Comelieu 2000), and b) the current governance systems, which are characterised by top-down hierarchical structures that promote little active participation from responsible citizens. Since these two fields are paramount for a sustainable society to exist, it is immediately apparent that effective communication is not the panacea that can change the world alone. While it does remain an important aspect of the transitional phase we currently experience, more things are needed – perhaps the “exogenous factors” discussed by Hall (1993: 280). Therefore, it becomes apparent that while effective communication might be very helpful, much more needs to be done. Perhaps through the infusion of ideals through the successful implementation of sustainable practices aided by tactical communication, a set of values and institutional practices can be arranged that may enhance in the future the prospect of being able to effectively communicate to politicians the need to check unlimited economic growth and transfer power to lower, local levels of governance that appear to be the two main and important ‘snags’ in promoting a shift for sustainability. The two following sections briefly underline how such an endeavour can be facilitated through the notion of reframing; however, it is a very difficult task under the current status quo, extremely complicated and requires much more than effective communication.

##### **4.4.1. A shift in economic thought**

It can be argued that in order to bring forth a shift towards a society marked by sustainability (as opposed to the concept of sustainable development that implies the continuation of economic growth), the dominating economic way of thought – which is ingrained currently in decision-making – must be challenged, since its main element, the relentless pursuit of growth, is “often in conflict with the views of those most concerned today about sustainability” (Nelson 1995: 142-143) The disillusionment coming from the 20<sup>th</sup> century – the most destructive in the history of our species – and from its promises for widespread well-being through progress has already been recognised as a key feature of the advent of sustainability (*ibid.*).

The worship of progress has failed to deliver its promise and this must be clearly communicated. Leiserowitz et al. (2006) showed that there is indeed an increase in perceived happiness as Gross National Product per capita increases; however this levels off at US\$14,000, indicating that while a degree of material wealth is prerequisite for a good quality of life, money after a point does not make people happier. After this level, non-economic factors are more important. On the contrary, if the pursuit of material wealth that resembles today’s Northern standards was the norm for every human on the planet, we would be heading for a swift environmental catastrophe. Earth cannot simply take that burden. Instead, in order to bridge the vast

inequalities in income between rich and poor, it seems that the rich must rein on their economic activity. As a UNESCO report put it, “ecological constraints are real and more growth for the poor must be balanced by negative throughput growth for the rich” (in Nelson 1995: 146). Even though this might be true, Mr. Whitelegg warned that:

...it would be a big mistake to say to politicians ‘we must halt economic growth’. At that point, most politicians will close down in terms of listening to you.

The main reason behind such an attitude might be a fear that a politician’s opponents will use this stance on the next elections to say that he/she does not want the electorate to have a job.

An economic science for sustainability must return to the roots of the thinkers who shaped today’s economic paradigms and who did not pursue economic growth as an end on its own, but as a means for increased well-being. Mr. Whitelegg commented that:

...we have forgotten that the original authors, Adam Smith, Keynes etc., always said that the purpose of economics is to improve the feeling of well-being and human happiness.

Therefore the direction a shift in economic thought characterised by sustainability ideals should be towards re-establishing a focus on well-being and promoting the necessary economic level of affluence that will support that, but without taking from the planet more than such needs dictate. Mr. Whitelegg also pointed out the effective communicator should stress that:

...rising levels in economic welfare, year-to-year increases in per capita GDP and so on are not associated with increases in happiness, in the way that people feel safe and secure, not associated with big increases in health and physical activity.

Therefore a reframing of economic thought is needed, one that would stress its original aim and use a language that is equally appealing: that of well-being. While politicians will never want to be seen as appearing against economic growth, “they are very good in saying ‘I want to improve the feeling of happiness and contentment, the feeling of well-being’”, as Mr. Whitelegg noted. In this process it might help to appeal to new indicators of well-being other than the GDP, such as the Index of Sustainable Economic Welfare or the Genuine Process Indicator (Lawn 2003). Currently the need to rethink economics seems to be one of the major obstacles in communicating the need for a shift in politicians, and thus it must be circumvented through appealing to the philosophical basis of modern society’s obsession with relentless economic growth in a finite environment.



#### **4.4.2. A shift in decision-making**

The importance of who gets to make the decisions cannot be overstated. Democracy is one of the pillars of a sustainable society, as discussed by Carter (2001), and therefore institutional changes towards a system characterised by greater public participation are an important step in the transition to sustainability. If people feel that their voice does not carry power, then they do not get involved in the public affairs, on the same time while a sustainable society must be comprised by responsible citizens. Mr. Whitelegg noted that:

...this is, in some ways, far more important than the scientific discussion about greenhouse gases, climate change, pollution, health etc. (...) The bigger and more important question is who has the power to make the decisions and at what level and it has to be lower than now.

Mr. O’Riordan also commented that “the only way forward is small action in local places”. Decision-making at a local level promotes responsibility and awareness of the impact that everyday actions have. Moreover, while it is indeed necessary to have a degree of coordination between various regions, overarching goals may not be easily met by places where different circumstances reign. The widely-used motto “Think globally, act locally” indicates that local action, as both Mr. O’Riordan and Mr. Whitelegg pointed out, is indeed the only way of action for the biggest percentage of the populace. However, in order to have proper action, one should take part in the decision-making process and be able to influence it in a satisfactory degree.

Yet, how can one effectively persuade politicians to handle over decision-making to lower levels and to the people? The interviewees think that this is not possible and indeed it appears to be extremely hard in the competitive political world of today for politicians to delegate authority. Mr. O’Riordan commented that on this level “it is hard to make the European and national superstructures change”, while Mr. Whitelegg was certain that “you will never persuade a national politician to transfer power to lower levels of governance”.

Perhaps such a step could occur, at least in the European Union, through an insistent attempt to push for the expansion of the principle of subsidiarity, with Mr. Whitelegg agreeing that the subsidiarity argument is a possible way forward to transfer power into lower levels. However, this is too big a subject to cover in this thesis. What must be said is that even if the principle of subsidiarity, as it is now, applies to the fullest, much more needs to be done to create the “well-being citizen” that O’Riordan<sup>6</sup> (31) talked about, the citizen aware of the consequences of his/her actions who feels responsible for the whole and acts to prove it.

Coming up with a definition of what exactly sustainable governance is or what it should be is more difficult than it sounds. The aspect of democracy discussed by Carter (2001) is certainly a step in the right direction.

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<sup>6</sup> Unpublished manuscript.

However, it is quite debatable what a democratic society truly is. On that respect, it seems difficult even to imagine a society governed not by superstructures but by local regions which are coordinated through an institutional set of practices that does not impose from the top-down its decisions. We seem to have little point of reference. As O’Riordan<sup>7</sup> commented, “we do not have the thinking or the visionary capability to imagine unimaginable future states where so many variables hinge on each other, and on unanticipatable [*sic*] interpretation of what each possible future state might mean, in terms of improbable ecologies, economies and societies” (20). Perhaps the closest thing that surfaces as an ideal proposal for a governance system is the political (and not social) structure of the ancient Athenian *polis*, made of citizens who had the education to perceive themselves as responsible for the whole. But it is very difficult to imagine a global society like that. On that particular aspect of governance, proponents of sustainability currently seem to be visionaries with no vision – and perhaps this provides them with a freedom of movement unwitnessed in the past, which may be the vital clue that differentiates the proposed policy paradigm shift and constitutes it truly flexible and, thus, sustainable.

#### **4.5 Summary of findings**

Following is a summary of the points that have surfaced through this study as vitally important elements of effective communication of sustainability issues to politicians.

##### **4.5.1. Source characteristics**

The individuals who wish to promote sustainability with maximum effectiveness must be considered to be honest and reliable by politicians. Therefore they must present the negative sides of their argument, while multiplying the benefits it carries along, and acknowledge that there are differing points of view, which during the process they must counter. Hence, they must possess substantial knowledge of the issue from a wide variety of angles, in order to be fully aware of the stakes at hand and not miss a single point that a competitor might later present as important. They must also be likeable, and thereby appear to be compliant and refrain from adopting extreme viewpoints.

Moreover, such individuals must take considerable care to acknowledge that there are two routes of persuasion and try as much as possible to cover both. They must be eloquent and confident in their argument, thereby avoiding powerless language that hinders effective communication. An overall appearance and demeanour that facilitates rather than hinders this process is of vital importance.

##### **4.5.2. Message characteristics**

The message must be presented in as clear a way as possible, avoiding ambiguity that can stem from the use of jargon and complicated language. Rather, the language used must be understandable and attractive. It

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<sup>7</sup> Unpublished manuscript.

must also be broadened to include more aspects of the human endeavour rather than simply environmental considerations, with increased well-being being one of the most important notions one should present. Inferences about a distant future must be avoided; the message conveyed must be relevant and focused on the here and now, even on issues that possess significant spatial and temporal variability. Moreover, threatening communication concerning the dangers awaiting modern society if sustainable action is not taken should be avoided. The language used must be positive, presenting the various co-benefits that emerge when adopting a sustainable course of action and showing the various levels where improvements will ensue. It must be the language of opportunity, not of problems. On that respect, it should deploy both recourse to reason and emotions, especially through the utilisation of ethical issues in order to constitute the argument more powerful. It must also fit within the agenda of the politician/recipient and try to work within its framework to bring forth the desired outcome.

#### ***4.5.3. Understanding the recipients of the message***

Effective sustainability communicators must study very carefully the politician they wish to approach as far as attitudes, ideas, values, previous record, interests, hobbies etc. are concerned. During discussions, they must demonstrate awareness of the politician's likes and dislikes, that they understand his/her agenda and that they are there to help the politician further it.

From this understanding of a particular politician stems a given course of action that revolves around linking the sustainability message at hand with the portfolio of the politician, meanwhile proclaiming that sustainability is relevant, attractive and desirable. In order to counter the lack of long-term thinking that many politicians exhibit, suggestions should have a clear short-term benefit, while the strategic competitive advantage for a given region created by following sustainability practices must be clearly underlined.

#### ***4.5.4. Process of communication***

The sustainability communicator must be present in the entire decision-making process, from its inception up to its implementation, and be persistent in pushing for his/her agenda. All politicians, committees etc. which are involved in a given decision must be approached, by many different communicators when the process is undertaken by an interested party of many people. When time, personnel and financial constraints exist, key figures must be targeted, through a thorough knowledge of the relative influence and attitude that each politician involved in the process possesses. Contingency plans are important, with the entire procedure laid out in as much a detailed way as possible.

The effective communicator should strive to have good relationship with the Press, utilising it to push for the inclusion of sustainability arguments in the everyday newspapers and media outlets. Apart from influencing politicians directly, he/she should aim for a widespread public discussion of the relevant agenda, thus

constituting it relevant to politicians. In order to facilitate this process, it is important to build coalitions with various players to provide reliability to the message and be able to influence the decision-making process from more angles.

#### ***4.5.5. Reframing sustainability***

Sustainability as a whole must be significantly reframed in order to appear novel, attractive, relevant and novel. Given the wide discrepancies between different regions and settings, it should be framed as a concept that is flexible under local circumstances but does not drop below a given set of ideals that are of vital importance. It must be presented as a new positive alternative which can provide adequate solutions to the many problems that plague modern local and global society and emerge as a new paradigm that will counter the prevailing one.

All of the provisions displayed in the tactical communication must be deployed to the fullest in order to push as much as possible for small changes in the institutional framework that when amassed can lead to a bigger shift in thought. The new language characteristics described above can create the discursive structure through which problems and solutions are filtered. If sustainability becomes the main language of political discourse, then the proposed solutions can only be sustainable in nature. Thus, the effort of effectively communicating sustainability issues to politicians must be doubled, in order to increase the speed through which this shift will take place. All other stakeholders must also be targeted in the process, since politicians form only one piece of the puzzle – albeit a vital one. When key politicians are persuaded, they can instil institutional changes which lead to a gradual paradigm shift

This process will take time to complete; sustainability proponents must be persistent and repetitive. Successful frames need time to take root.

#### ***4.5.6. Obstacles on the communication process***

Communication is not the universal remedy, but simply a very important aspect amongst other initiatives that must be pursued effectively. There are significant problems in communicating to politicians the need to check relentless economic growth and the need to transfer power into lower levels of governance. However difficult the process might be, these issues must be addressed, even with little effect at first. In order to communicate the need for a change in economic thought, the discussion must be shifted to increases in well-being, while the true relation this holds with financial safety must be underlined. Use of different indicators to measure well-being other than GDP should be promoted.

To deal with the required change in decision-making towards lower-level participation, the sustainability proponent can push for the furthering of the principle of subsidiarity in the EU. Generally, he/she should aim

for more policy measures that revolve around the diffusion of value systems that promote responsibility in citizens, which may lead into an increased desire on their behalf to participate in decision-making and thus a gradual shift of this process into lower levels of governance.

#### **4.6. Recommendations for future research**

The lack of relevant studies in the literature guided the aim of this paper to be broad and encompassing the sustainability field as a whole. However, sustainability studies are comprised of numerous fields, each unique and presenting its own challenges. It is important to identify the markers that constitute communication effective on all the specific fields and policy departments in which sustainability decisions can be taken and future research should aim towards that direction.

As discussed, this study could not come up with specific words that should or should not be used when communicating sustainability issues, partly because these must be different for each field of study. Therefore, such research should also look at effective words that should be utilised, using statistical samples and inferential statistics. Such research has already been initiated by commercial groups such as Futerra Sustainability Communications (2007). There is a lot of room for it in scientific journals.

Such an endeavour could be part of a larger research on how to effectively communicate sustainability issues to the public. It is important to conduct research on how can sustainability be presented as a tangible concept that will acquire meaning in everyday discussions as an inclusive notion that can provide realistic solutions to the everyday problems of people. This study showed how important it is to spread the idea of sustainability to the public in order to effectively persuade politicians. Carefully constructed research that would take into consideration the precepts of social facilitation theory must ensue in order to understand how sustainability should be diffused to the populace.

Finally, politicians are not the same across different parts of the world, while the institutional framework in which decision-making occurs is equally diverse. One limitation of this study is that it was based on literature and interviews of a Western context. Thus, future research should delve deeply into different cultures and countries but also study the differences between various levels of governance, aiming into coming up with specific suggestions on how to persuade politicians therein. A cross-cultural study or meta-analysis could then ensue in order to come up with universal characteristics that can be generalised.

### **5. CONCLUSION**

The process of effectively communicating sustainability issues is complex, multi-levelled and long-term in nature. Unfortunately, it has been hardly studied and this must change. This paper provided a basic

understanding that can function as a framework through which deeper research into particular issues can follow. It has also come up with specific guidelines that should be followed by people who wish to properly and effectively promote the idea of sustainability at a political setting. The process of communication for tactical and strategic gains was discussed, along with an argument on why it is important to create a distinct and highly specialised relevant communication framework if the transition to a sustainable society can be achieved.

From taking into consideration what qualities and characteristics the person who wishes to communicate sustainability must possess, to the importance of understanding how politicians function and how should messages be framed, this paper has indicated that effective communication must be highly organised, carefully planned and innovative. It is not something that must be left to chance, and while intuition and former experience are important, they must be supplemented by scientific scrutiny to yield the best of results.

As has already been mentioned, sustainability possesses an inherent wisdom that aids significantly the process of arguing for it. What must be clearly understood is that this process of communication is highly important. All of the people who are deeply interested and involved in sustainability must learn how to become effective and persuasive communicators thereof; this is imperative in our time, since the forces of inertia in the current system are incredibly strong and time is ruthlessly passing. Knowledge of sustainability issues is not enough without the ability to communicate it effectively and persuasively. This paper has demonstrated the importance of such an endeavour and how best to approach it.

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## **Appendix A**

### ***Informed Consent Form***

I state that I voluntarily agree to participate in a research project conducted by Theoharis Tziovaras, Student of Lund University's Master Programme in Environmental Studies and Sustainability Science. The study is about effective communication of sustainability issues to policy-makers. The specific task I will perform is to grant an interview to Theoharis Tziovaras pertaining to the issue. This will take approximately 30 minutes.

I acknowledge that Theoharis Tziovaras has explained the task to me fully; has informed me that I may withdraw from participation at any time, without prejudice or penalty; has offered to answer any questions that I might have concerning the research procedure; and has assured me that any information I provide will be used for research purposes only and will be kept confidential by providing the option of answering his questions anonymously.

I acknowledge that Theoharis Tziovaras has explained to me that I may contact him at any time after the end of May 2008 via his e-mail address ([Theohariss@gmail.com](mailto:Theohariss@gmail.com)), so as to request the results of the study be sent to me.

I acknowledge that replying to the email through which this Informed Consent Form was sent amounts to signing the Form.

February 2008