



Reporting 2025 interview

Interview 11: Sara Parkin

GRI's *Reporting 2025* project looks ahead at what thought leaders expect to be the main issues on companies' agendas – and in their reports – ten years from now. Through a series of in-depth interviews with thought leaders in various fields, GRI is building an open dialogue that will form the basis for meaningful future corporate disclosures.

Edited highlights of these interviews will be posted every month on the [Reporting 2025 webpage](#), along with related references that enrich the discussion. GRI will update and publish an analysis of the main trends identified in these interviews every quarter. In January 2016 the final publication will present a roadmap for the future of reporting.

Creating a shared picture of a sustainable future

Sara Parkin is Founder Director and Trustee at [Forum for the Future](#) – an organization that helps companies find ways to create a sustainable future, including by changing the food and energy systems, which are vital in delivering a sustainable future. Formerly an activist and politician with the Green Party of England and Wales, Parkin was awarded an OBE for her contribution to education and sustainability in 2001. She currently holds board positions with the Richard Sandbrook Trust, the European Training Foundation and the Higher Education Academy.

Collaboration is key for a sustainable future; Sara Parkin believes that we need to think together – society and companies – about what we consider 'good' when it comes to sustainability performance, before we can begin to create the future we want. Without a shared understanding of what we want the outcome to be, Parkin believes we're in danger of documenting our own extinction.

Society: using technology and finance to create human, social and natural capital

We have ignored the big issues for far too long, and Parkin believes society will start to see the effects in the next decade. "We haven't actually slowed, never mind halted some of the big trends of environmental degradation over the last 40-odd years, which should give us cause for reflection. In the next decade we're going to see some big problems coming through, and the manifestation of that will be primarily social: whether it's people moving or people dying in large numbers, the impact will be on people."

Realizing how the environment, economy and society are intertwined could give us a new perspective. "We treat the economy a bit like gravity, as if it is a scientific given and you can't do anything about it. It's not; the economy is a social construct. If anything, the financial crash has taught us that money is not the objective of doing things together. It's also not something that's going to get in the way of sustainability: if you can manufacture trillions to put into the vaults of a bank, we can manufacture a few billion to build renewable energy systems and socially good, well-insulated housing and so on!"

As a society we also need a new approach to understanding how technology and finance will support the changes needed, instead of using them to increase consumption. "How can we shift our priorities towards growing natural, human, and social capital, and pulling in support from finance and technology, rather than using them the way we are at the moment, as a driver for increased consumption and all the damage it causes?"

Companies: business will have to envision a picture of a sustainable future

Despite seeing these challenges, companies are failing to act. “I think companies know about these trends – they’ve got much better research units than most NGOs – and it’s on their risk registers. The problem is that they don’t know what to do; as two Secretary Generals of the United Nations have mentioned, the crisis is in the implementation.

“We’ve lost the will and the courage to actually do something. I think that’s so important, it’s almost as if we’re living in a dream world where we’re going to be the only species to have actually monitored our own extinction minutely to the nth degree, rather than actually doing something to prevent it.”

So what’s stopping companies from acting on the information they have? “There is not a shared understanding of what ‘good’ would look like. What are the bare essentials that we would expect to find in a sustainable future? With a shared understanding, you can actually say, ‘Okay, my company, my government, me personally – this is how I can contribute to it.’ There are huge lists of things that people can do around, but they don’t inspire or even enable action.”

Parkin believes we need a simple, broad picture of what a good future would be, so companies can act together. “We will have an economy that has a logic based on fewer people consuming less stuff because we can’t carry on the way we are, so why don’t we work out how to make as positive an experience as possible rather than fight against it? If we were to do, we would be investing in building in natural, human, and social capital, including refurbishing our built environment, which would benefit enormously from ecological enhancement. We would use finance and technology in support of that.”

Get ready: collaborative efforts to tackle real problems and measure the ‘good’

Reporting helps companies monitor their sustainability performance, but is that enough? “I think reporting and disclosing has a very important role, but it has to have a very different motivation. At the moment companies are still very defensive of what they do and how they might manage to continue to do it more or less the same into the future. There is nothing that convinces me that companies have actually understood sufficiently that they have a major contribution to make to sustainability and that they are doing it.”

“In the future, reporting and disclosure will be about saying, ‘Well, I tried this and it didn’t work, but when I joined with these other companies in the sector we managed to do a lot more,’ or, ‘I’m stuck on this, who can help?’ You’re actually reporting and disclosing in order to get help and to collaborate and build alliances in order to achieve a lot more, even faster. Reporting will be for a different reason and, therefore, will be done in a different way.”

Because collaboration will be urgent, reporting will also reflect how it is happening. “We are going into a sort of way of living where we have to collaborate and urge all to collaborate more in order to get bigger outcomes sooner.”

A sustainable future isn’t just about protecting ecosystems and mitigating climate change, it’s also about people. “The starting point is that the purpose of everything we do, whether you’re a company or another organization, is that it’s good for people. It’s not mediated by people being able to buy stuff, it’s mediated by how they feel about themselves, their relationships and where they live – what we say makes us happy. Since a sustainable future will be about doing things that are good for both people and nature, I think that is what we will be measuring.”