



# Sustainability – no one gets there alone

Dr Anne Stuart

SUSTAINABILITY IS AN EVERYWHERE WORD. It can feel abstract. That's because it lies at the intersection of large systems, environment, economy, and society, which is set against our daily decisions: often small, immediate, and constrained.

What creates this feeling is the gap between idea and practice. The idea of sustainability is clear in principle. But what does it mean for how a business operates on a Tuesday morning? Or how a household makes decisions under pressure?

Many organisations and businesses recognise the growing pressure to act, yet feel uncertain about where to begin. This creates hesitation.

Sustainability becomes more tangible when grounded in questions: *how* is energy used, *how* are materials sourced, *how* is waste assessed, *how* are people treated, and *how* are decisions made?

Sustainability is not an additional layer but a way of operating with intent, and over time. The intent is to question practices. It is as much a practical commitment as a mindset.

## Questioning business-as-usual

Not-for-profits and for-profits share many of the same operational needs. Both require strong governance, clear strategy, financial sustainability, capable leadership, and effective risk management. Whether the goal is for-profit or for-purpose, success depends on how well an organisation functions.

Increasingly, for-profits are expected to demonstrate environmental and social responsibility alongside financial performance. This should not be seen as a burden; it actually sets up a more resilient and future-focused business model.

Consider Fairphone, a Dutch company that redesigned its smartphones so every component could be replaced by the user. It extended product life to six years, reduced waste, used less virgin material, and lowered supply chain risk, delivering stronger margins over time. It is circular by design. Their approach was not charitable. It was commercially intelligent, aligning sustainability with long-term value creation. It was a smart business model. It aligned its business with B Corp Certification, and growth with purpose.

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Fairphone could have continued to run its business as usual. It didn't. It realised that the real risk was simply reporting compliance and not building resilience into its business model.

In Australia, Pablo & Rusty's Coffee Roasters provides another example. Recognised with a Banksia Award, the company has embedded sustainability into its operations, achieving carbon neutrality, B Corp Certification, and has become a committed one per cent for the Planet member. It demonstrates how small and medium enterprises can lead with purpose while remaining commercially successful.

In the Northern Rivers, Norco Co-operative Limited has embedded sustainability into its operations through three central pillars: People, Planet, and Product.

NORCO set a target to reduce carbon intensity (Scope 1 and 2) by 30 per cent by FY30 against a FY20 baseline, and has already exceeded this ambition, achieving a 39 per cent reduction in carbon intensity alongside a 32 per cent reduction in absolute emissions. Beyond energy, NORCO has focused on packaging innovation, transitioning to 100 per cent recycled PET (rPET) milk bottles to reduce reliance on virgin plastics. Through collaboration with Bega Circular Valley 2030, NORCO contributes to efforts to regenerate natural systems and transform waste into valuable resources.

## From reporting to resilience

Many small businesses are measuring, but often it's what's easy, visible, or required. Focus should be on where impact lies, for example, total energy use and cost, and waste generated. Often a cafe or service

business, even a building with multiple tenants will have a 'hotspot'. That hotspot may be to reduce energy (lighting, efficiency upgrades, solar panels, batteries, a Virtual Power Plant plan) or to review suppliers (local, lower-impact, less packaging). The quickest wins are actually cost savings, not costs.

The World Economic Forum's *Global Risks Report 2026* highlights a stark reality. In the short term, risks such as geopolitical instability and misinformation dominate. In the long term, it will be climate-related risks. Extreme weather, biodiversity loss and ecosystem collapse will become overwhelming. These are direct threats to business continuity.

## A regional opportunity

In the Northern Rivers, a recent feasibility study for a Circularity Hub found that the region is well positioned to become a national leader in circular economy transformation. The challenge is not capability, but coordination. The study found efforts remain fragmented across councils and industries.

A coordinated regional approach would amplify impact, attract investment and create local jobs.

Sustainability is often framed as an individual responsibility, but in practice, no one gets there alone. Businesses, communities, and governments are interconnected, and progress depends on how well they work together.

Real impact begins with shared action. The opportunity is clear. Start small. Measure what matters. Act where it counts. Work with others. Sustainability, at its core, is collaborative. No one gets there alone.

■ Dr Anne Stuart is the Chair of Zero Emissions Byron-Northern Rivers.

■ A local B Corp group meets monthly to learn about B Corp and grow sustainability in the Northern Rivers: [northernrivers@bcorp.community](mailto:northernrivers@bcorp.community).

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