

Leeds University Business School – Research and Innovation Podcast

Episode 35: System-level sustainability

Speakers: Professor Vera Trappmann and Dr Zlatko Bodrožić

Zlatko: Hello everyone and welcome to Leeds University Business School's Research and Innovation Podcast. I'm Zlatko Bodrožić, and I'm a lecturer in technology, organisation and sustainability at the University of Leeds. I'm doing this together with Vera. Hello Vera.

Vera: Yes, hello. I'm Vera Trappmann, I'm Professor of work and employment relations in the Business School, and Zlatko and I, we have co-founded LESS, the system level sustainability research group that we would like to introduce here today. The Business School is in a process of changing its own organisational practices dramatically.

A year ago, we have started a process where we felt, actually, the university is announcing a climate crisis, there is a climate action plan, and we, as a business school, have a particular responsibility, with having a lot of students who are going to be the business leaders in the future, to make them aware of the climate crisis and to raise their awareness and to make them think that maybe things can't go on like they are, and that we need radical change. So, as a business school, we introduced our own kind of process that we call blueprint, where we scrutinise and investigate all that we are doing: teaching, research and our own organisational practices, to see how we can contribute to a post-climate crisis future, and how we can contribute to reduce our own footprint.

Zlatko: Yes. That is a fantastic perspective on what is going on at the University of Leeds regarding sustainability, and maybe if I can add external experiences I made, and one of these external experiences is the EGOS Conference, that's a conference of the European Group of Organisation Studies, and we have there a standing working group which is a well organised, permanent group at these quite important conferences and we are trying there to push the theme of system level sustainability and one key rationale, one key idea we have is that we think that you could say science is usual, or science as it was done before, with a focus on the individual firm, and voluntary actions by these firms, that can often lead to interesting results, but it's not

sufficient to have effective strategy against climate change. But we discussed that at EGOS and we said we need to go beyond this individual firm level, and to try to reach the system level.

So, what is the system level? Could you define it as the structures, for example, states, other policies and other macro factors which are impacting individual firms, constraining them or enabling them. Okay? And we said that we need the system level. Why? Because we have often fantastic studies on individual firms, but we do not make this big step forward. That is our worry, and if we do not involve the system level that might continue, and we might not be able to stop catastrophe and climate change. So, that's why we need to add this system level perspective. You could, of course, have different perspectives on the system level, right? But that's absolutely fine. So, our speakers that we have invited, they all have, kind of, a little different perspective on it, and that is interesting for us. So, one perspective would be, for example, focus on the state, the role of the state, and a criticism could be that, so far, the dominant roles of the state are rather passive states, okay? So, you have this night watchman state, neoliberal states, where the market is dominating, and the state has very little... has a very small, limited role. And then you have other ideas of much more proactive states, for example, as discussed by Mariana Mazzucato.

So, from a certain point of view, to address the system level problematic, you would need these more proactive states, and some people say that the current COVID crisis is one of the examples showing that, indeed, we cannot do this radical change without a strong will of the state, we are grossly underpowered if we don't involve the state. Our first speaker that we had, he had a very historical perspective on this issue, and that was Professor Jason Moore, and he said, well, climate change, that's not something which is completely new, but we had climate crisis already, like, in the last thousand, thousand five hundred years, and what I took home from his presentation is: we need to act in a very effective way and completely rethink our strategies if you want not to end up with disaster. Historically there have been disastrous consequences of climate change, so we need to be aware of that, and we completely have to rethink our mindset.

Vera: Okay. So, maybe I could say a couple of words on how we started. So, we kind of realised, okay, actually we have a lot of colleagues who are doing research on, let's say, green topics, who are studied climate crisis and the environment. And we first felt that there is a need to communicate better with our external audiences what insight and knowledge they can already find with us in terms of how the economy of business might work better in a more environmental sense.

And then, at the second step we thought there is also a need to engage among ourselves, very critical, if the type of research that we are doing is already enough in order to tackle the climate crisis or to what extent we need to be even more... as the title of the group says, system level thinking. So, that we were saying we offer this platform with this LESS group to say we challenge ourselves, investigating, with our research and research from other colleagues, so we have speakers from LUBS and invited speakers, where we challenge ourselves in thinking: how would an economy have to look, and how would business have to look if we want to make it sustainable and want to tackle climate crisis?

Zlatko: Maybe our listeners are thinking: business school people, what can they say about sustainability? And they might have a point, but you might want to hear that we do quite a lot at the Business School regarding sustainability, Vera, right?

Vera: Oh yes, that's true. We have a lot of research, green supply chains, for example, and that includes the circular economy. We have colleagues that work on food waste and how to prevent food waste. We have a lot of research on green behaviour, so how can we support consumers in a more eco-friendly consumption behaviour? We have a lot of research about eco-innovations, about business ethics. We have research that we do about just transitions, so how could we actually achieve net zero economies and societies without creating totally unfair and unjust societies? So, there are a lot of things going on. And we are also cooperating with other institutes, so we have strong links with the Priestley Centre for Climate Research, we have research collaboration with the Sustainability Research Institute in the Faculty of Environment. But we need more of those because that's really, really important.

Zlatko: Great. I think that's a great answer.

Vera: I think what is a real big strength of the LESS group, or the, kind of, platform that we are establishing here is that we are from so many different disciplines. So, we have colleagues from the Business School that are doing organisation studies, we have economists, we have organisational psychologists, we have sociologists. And I think this thinking together is a necessary, kind of, precondition to solve some of the problems, and we understood this LESS group as a kind of first attempt to build up an understanding of what would system level change mean within our faculty.

But we have opened this up pretty much to colleagues from other faculties as well, so we are regularly having colleagues from the Faculty of Environment, or the Faculty of Engineering, and we really... some members of our groups are from those faculties and we are really benefitting from opening the debate and the exchange up beyond our own kind of disciplinary boundaries. And I think this is something where Leeds is probably strong at anyway, to say to tackle the big societal problems and challenges we need to work together from many different disciplines otherwise we won't be able to do it.

Zlatko: I couldn't agree more. If you have... for example, I'm from management and organisation studies, and more often you focus on organisations, and we have people from economics, right? Vera is from employee relations, and so we have these different perspectives from the faculty, but also, we have the other perspectives from the university and that is indeed one of the factors which is making our group very strong.

Vera: So, Zlatko, that's always so interesting to think about these things. What is your, kind of, future outlook for LESS?

Zlatko: That's a good question. I mean, there is no, like, definite one. Each of us have maybe a different outlook, and probably that is something we will discuss in the future, the different points of view and perspectives. I can only talk about my current perspective, and I have to say that the COVID crisis was for me a wake up. I mean... and it demonstrated for me that if we have the same kind of system fighting climate change that fought COVID, I'm getting really, really worried. I'm getting really, really worried.

So, I think we need to start thinking quite radically outside the box, and we need to question what the role of the state is, we need to question how movements can get stronger and have an

impact, different kinds of movements that we have, environmental movements, but also movements that are related to the rights of workers, the rights of women, of other groups, of the global south. And everyone... the children, students, who have a right to have a future. So, these groups are really important and how can we all bring this together in an effective way, understand movements better, support them to have a chance, to have an impact, rethink the role of the state, rethink organisations? And how to bring all these questions together? These are not answers, but basically questions which I ask myself.

Vera:

So, if you are interested in thinking with us about these questions, then please come to our seminars. They are always... the announcement is posted on our project website that you can find in the show notes to this podcast. We are always looking for new members, or if you have any ideas for speakers that you're really keen to get invited, please get in contact with Zlatko or myself. Yes. And hope to hear some from some of you in the future. Thanks a lot.