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I was delighted to attend the Ellen MacArthur Foundation 10+1 event in Bradford at the end of November. Professor Michael Braungart gave a very interesting and stimulating lecture on his Waste = Food, Cradle-to-Cradle approach. He raised a number of interesting points and relevant challenges to the way we think about business and the economy.

To set the ball rolling he challenged the use of the 'S' word. Braungart has serious concerns around the limitations of the term 'sustainability' and the thinking it promotes. Should we be aiming for just sustainable, being less bad, or should we be looking further? As an amusing aside, he considered the state of a personal and intimate relationship if it were to be described as 'sustainable'; a relationship in this condition he offered, would probably gain his sympathy.

There was also a challenge to our breadth of vision when considering what we think is the sustainable option. He argued that taking a lift is more sustainable than taking the stairs, based on a holistic view of energy consumption and carbon emissions. In his assessment, the emissions resulting from the electrical energy used to power the lift would be less than the emissions associated with producing and transporting the food required to provide the calories to walk up the stairs.

And so to the central theme of the lecture, on how waste can provide 'food' in the circular economy. Braungart gave a compelling argument for businesses to adopt the Cradle-to-Cradle approach, drawing the distinction between eco-efficiency and eco-effectiveness. Those in the field will be aware of how one person's waste can be another person's resource. Indeed we have encountered great

A circular economy: Resolving the paradox of growth and sustainability



Is it a more sustainable option to avoid the stairs?

examples of this with the case studies on our Global Research Project. Silver Group, a small UK biofuel producer, provides some useful insight into 'waste as food' thinking, demonstrating how it is possible to re-use materials from even the most unusual of sources and move towards a 'closed loop' system. In their case taking fats, oils and grease arising from a utility company cleansing its sewers and using this as a feedstock in the production of biofuel, the by-products of which are themselves used in the manufacture of soap: simple, yet elegant.

The profound point was revealed when considering how this approach could work, supporting the creation of a 'circu-

lar economy', allowing economic growth in a resource-constrained world. If we can get to the point where resource sourcing and utilisation becomes almost totally renewable and efficient in application, it may be possible to promote economic growth without severely depleting resources and therefore significantly extend the life of our planet.

This was a light-bulb moment for me, not least because I had been wrestling for some time with the gaps between a number of standpoints: on one hand the businesses perspective, either unaware or unable to act, still using up non-renewable resources as if there was no tomorrow.

On the other side the proponents of the eco-efficiency agenda, myself included, urging us to start using less of everything and also get used to the idea of zero or low economic growth. Perhaps the square can be circled and we can retain growth, with the major assumption that rational behaviour returns to our markets, as well as looking after our planet? The key to this is that business as usual is not an option; we have to rethink and redo the way we conduct business.

When questioned why more organisations in the UK hadn't

yet adopted the Cradle-to-Cradle approach, Braungart suggested that our culture was a barrier. The implication being that we talk a good game, but do we follow through fully? A member of the audience then raised the example of Gazeley and the ten-year journey the developer has been on. But the point remains; there is still a long way to go for most UK businesses.

Taking a Cradle-to-Cradle approach, by Braungart's own admission, doesn't have all the answers. There are approaches that need to be brought together to deliver the best impact. But it represents a fundamental shift in thinking that enables businesses to align with the environment, to do the right thing as well as enable growth and profitability. It remains to be seen how far we can go towards the ultimate of 100% reuse in a circular economy, but even taking a step towards this enables us to reduce the utilisation of precious resources and extend the life our planet further. It has to be well worth a go.

Michael Townsend is the founder and CEO of Earthshine Solutions. For more info on the Global Research Project, visit > globalsustainablebusiness.org