



Ryder

Ethics and sustainable development

What it is and why the construction industry should know about it

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“Given the nature and scale of current challenges facing society and the planet ... a determined transformation of the [RIBA] and the profession ... is no longer simply desirable but is a necessity” cautioned the RIBA in a recent publication on Ethical and Sustainable Development (E&SD).¹ It is an increasingly important topic and as an industry we need to take it seriously, not just for the moral challenge but because strong ethics now more frequently equates to good business.

A wave is coming, bringing new challenges and opportunities and – rising sea levels or not – the tide of change is now lapping at our feet. If we start paddling now we can be among the first to catch it.

This article will outline some of the key themes in the growing topic of E&SD as they relate to the construction industry and a case will be made to other industry leaders to consider further research to develop a broader industry wide strategy and approach.



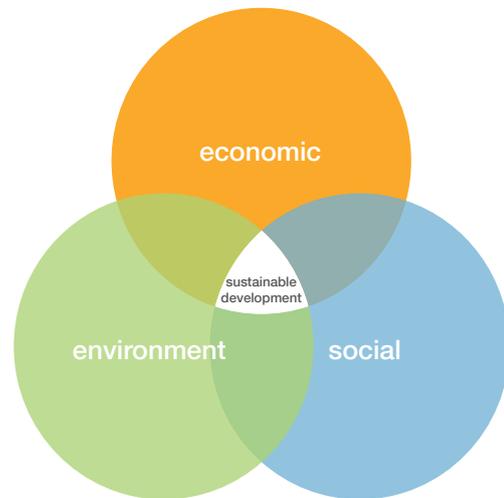
Be one of the first businesses to ride the coming wave of ethical change in the construction industry

Definitions

E&SD can be simply understood as a maturing of the environmental sustainability agenda to include social issues, enabled by a growing awareness that society and the environment are inexorably intertwined. This is well put by the RIBA in its UN Sustainable Development Goals in Practice² publication, the “global sustainability agenda has been evolving and best practice now consists of a more holistic approach that incorporates various social and economic considerations alongside more traditional environmental concerns”, “best practice now involves consideration of the impact of construction and buildings on people, through inclusive design and health, safety and wellbeing.”

This is starkly demonstrated in the evolution of the UN’s Millennium Development Goals³ to the 2015 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).⁴ The global community’s increased understanding of the interconnectedness and urgency of the challenges the world faces are clear when comparing the far greater scope, sophistication and ambition of the SDGs.

Much of the current conversation around E&SD centres on responsible sourcing of construction materials, products and cleaning up supply chains. Reports on disasters in Bangladeshi factories and ethically questionable supply chains of global brands like Apple and Nike have focussed the world’s attention. There has been attention on the construction industry and subsequently less movement, though there have been some small steps in the right direction which will be discussed later.



The global community is coming to appreciate that the economic, environmental and social realms are inextricably interconnected

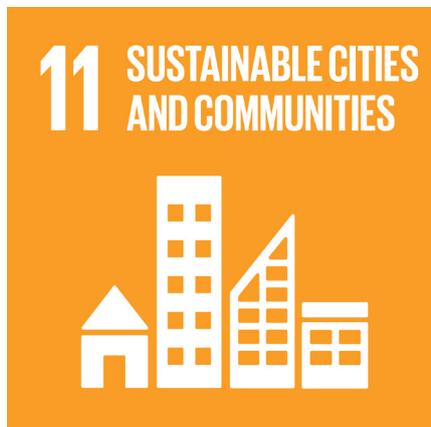
There is considerable overlap between the conversation around E&SD and responsible business (RB) which offers us another lens through which to view benefits of this way of thinking. The UK charity **Business in the Community** (BITC) has been a leading voice for RB for over three decades:

“[T]he prosperity of business and society is inextricably linked. If every individual business strives to be the best it can be in all areas as a responsible business, there will be a positive multiplier effect that will benefit society, the economy and the environment.”⁵

Why it is important

Trends are moving towards ethics and sustainable development in the construction industry – here we outline some key trend indicators to demonstrate why we should be paying attention as a sector.

For the construction industry SDG 11 is the most directly applicable: to make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable (this should not be to the exclusion of the other goals as all are relevant). The UN has declared its commitment to sustainable cities frequently in recent years, most notably through the 2000 UN Global Compact, 2016 Habitat III conference, 2016 Global Alliance for Urban Crises Charter and the Global Alliance for Buildings and Construction.⁶



UN SDG 11⁷

The RIBA has responded to the UN's commitments. In 2015 the RIBA became a signatory to the UN Global Compact and included a response to the SDGs in its 2016-2020 Strategic Plan.⁸ Although initially sluggish to make any actionable progress on meeting their strategic goals the January 2019 paper from the RIBA Ethics and Sustainable Development Commission reveals a clear intention now to take the lead.

The SDGs have provided the framework for UN member states to address global challenges and there has been meaningful engagement. In the UK alone there has been action on some of the ethical issues for over a decade.

Governments move to take action

The UK Gangmasters (Licencing) Act 2004 and more recently the Modern Slavery Act 2015 demonstrate a continued effort by the UK government to engage with social and human rights issues through legislation. Interestingly the government added construction to its list of industries for scrutiny in 2017. More recently the Welsh Government published its Code of Practice to Ethical Employment in Supply Chains in May 2017. Similar legislation is ratified or being drawn up by governments around the world.⁹

Beyond government there has been a steady increase in content relating to the responsible sourcing of construction materials and products in industry strategy documents, notably by BRE. BRE backs the Action Programme on Responsible and Ethical Sourcing (APRES) group, the leading voice of E&SD in the UK construction industry.¹⁰ In 2008 BRE created the BES 6001 Framework Standard for Responsible Sourcing (which certification programs including BREAAAM have interacted with since) and BES 6002 Ethical Labour Sourcing Standard in 2017.

- ILO Core Conventions 1930 onwards
- UN Declaration of Human Rights 1948
- Millennium Development Goals 2000
- UN Global Compact 2000
- US Trafficking Victims Protection Act 2000
- UK Gangmasters Licencing Act 2004
- California Transparency in Supply Chains Act 2010
- UN Guiding Principles ('Ruggie Framework') 2011
- EU Directive on Disclosure of Non-Financial Information 2014
- UK Modern Slavery Act 2015
- UN Sustainable Development Goals 2015
- US Trade Facilitation and Trade Enforcement Act 2016
- French Corporate Duty of Vigilance 2017
- Note: Hong Kong, Switzerland Australia all looking to develop legislation

Sample of global government legislation relating to ethical issues¹¹

Evidence of a move towards E&SD principles can be found across the board from government to industry to national planning frameworks and of course in public opinion – this section covered just a sample. For further reading a good place to start is the **RIBA E&SD** paper and **APRES website**, details of which can be found in the Recommendations section at the end of this paper.

Ethics and sustainable development as a market disruptor

E&SD has already been disruptive and transformative in other industries. While industry regulation in construction does not appear to be around the next corner the legislation discussed above suggests we are at least moving in that direction.

In big pharma two thirds of the world's top thirty companies became signatories to the Pharmaceutical Supply Chain Initiative impacting hundreds of thousands of subsidiary businesses. Similarly, UK supermarket giant ASDA has focused on E&SD principles since 2006 which has transformed retail in the UK, all while decreasing ASDA's costs, waste and energy consumption, rendering the business more resilient and competitive.¹²

These two brief examples offer a cautionary tale for other industries and give those of us wanting to address the environmental and social issues of our time cause for optimism that businesses and industries can effect meaningful change.





Slum streetscape

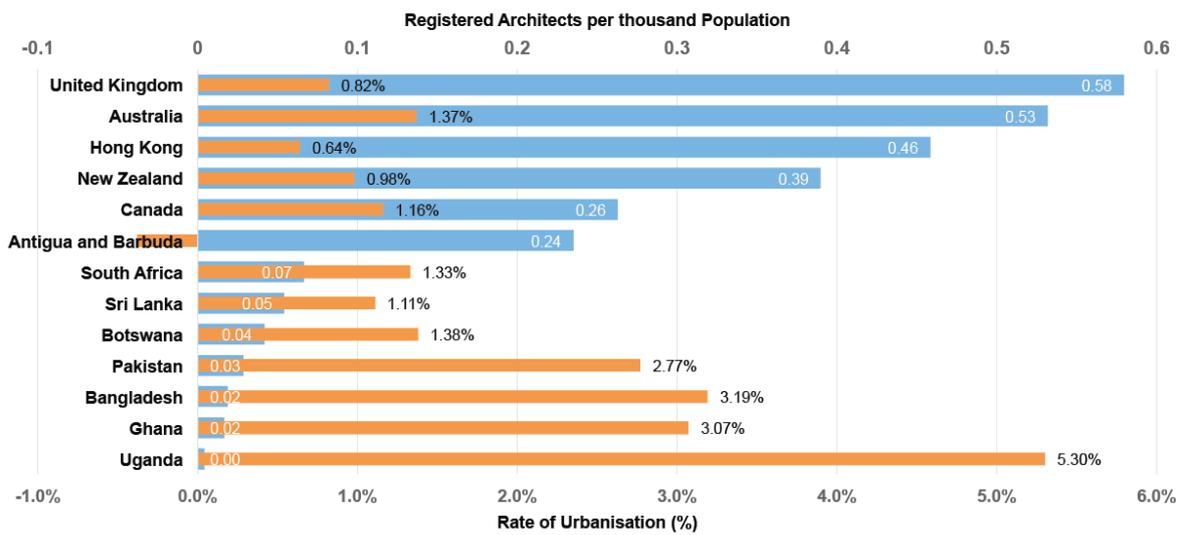


Figure 1: Architects per capita vs rates of urbanisation²²

Reinvention and leadership

The UN SDGs were published to guide global policy but we cannot wait for government alone to drive this forward. The RIBA E&SD Commission states,

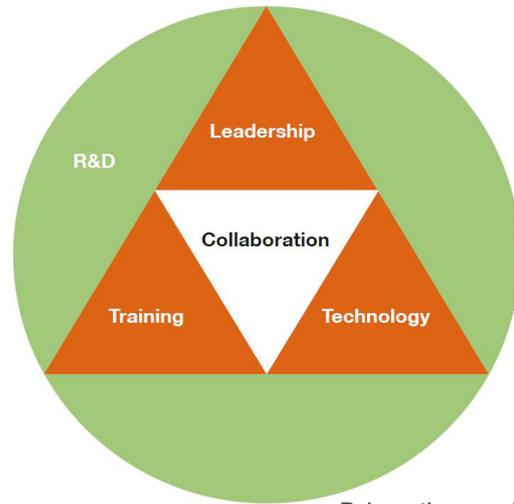
“[T]his is not a job for government alone ... The Commission believes that the RIBA and its members should be in the vanguard on these issues.”²³

Clearly, strong leadership must come from within the industry, and as Ryder’s **Reinvention** campaign states,

“[Change] will only happen if we all, in our own spheres of influence, make it happen.”²⁴

The E&SD model aligns to the aspirations of Reinvention and – the trends previously discussed being what they are – greater collaboration is integral to achieving our goal.

Encouragingly, Ryder is not a lone voice for change – while researching this article the names of several construction businesses frequently appeared. For example, the members of BITC include Sir Robert McAlpine, Kier, Knight Frank, CBRE, Legal & General, Turner & Townsend and Willmott Dixon. These like minded businesses have already joined us on this journey.



Reinvention conclusion



Reinvention launch with key note speaker Mark Farmer



Reinvention data workshop

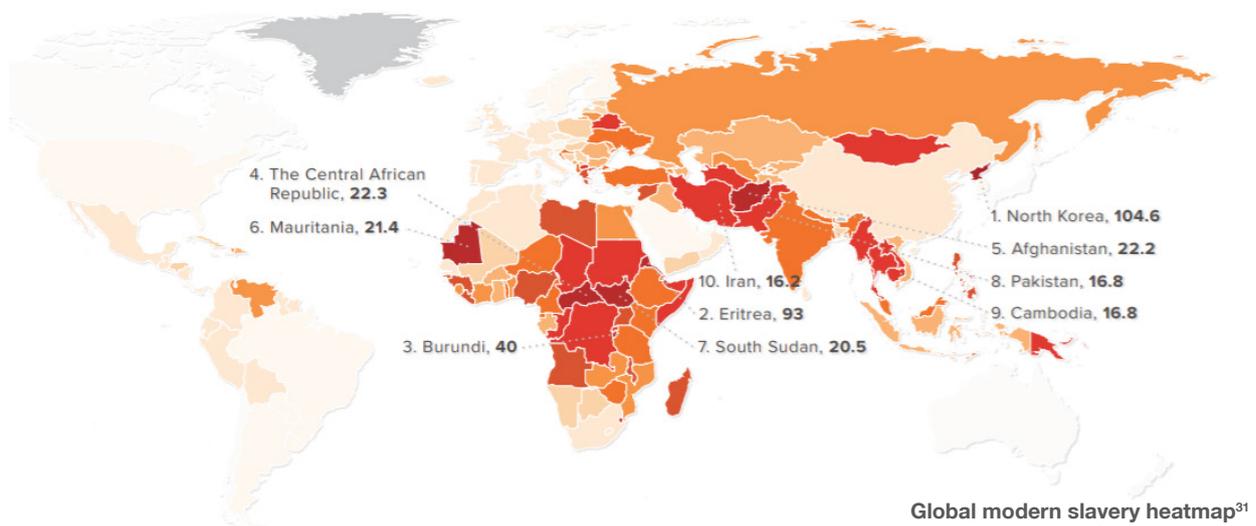
Ethics

While moral appeals tend to only go so far in the world of business, as architects we are obligated to address the ethical dimensions of our work. The RIBA Code of Professional Conduct includes ethically relevant statements such as the need to “balance differing and sometimes opposing demands”, to ensure a “regard for the effect [...] on users, the local community and society” and to be aware of “the environmental impact” of their work.²⁷

Ethics in the supply chain

There are 40.3 million modern day slaves²⁸ and 152 million child workers²⁹ in the world today (one in four in the poorest countries), many of whom are part of global supply chains that reach all the way to the UK industries, construction included. Other industries such as agriculture, retail and fashion have been working hard to address ethical issues in their supply chains for some time now, while construction is lagging behind.³⁰

If the construction industry is (as it is regularly described) a Walkman in the iPhone age, our conversation and progress around E&SD is no exception. Trends suggest the time has come to engage with the E&SD model to reap the business benefits being reported from other industries. Current geopolitics and climate change remind us with increasing frequency that unless we collectively do something the quality of our world may soon begin to deteriorate faster than we can improve it.



Recommendations

The aim of this article was to discuss some key topics relating to E&SD as they relate to the industry. It is a large and ongoing conversation. To join Ryder in leading the way on addressing ethics and sustainable development in our industry, conscientious and like minded businesses should first understand the scope of the challenge and current advice. The following documents outline current best practice and are the starting point for further research in order to detail specific actions:

- [RIBA Ethics and Sustainable Development Commission: Final Report](#)
- [RIBA UN Sustainable Development Goals in Practice booklet](#)
- [APRES website](#)
- [APRES white paper 2017](#)
- [RIBA Ethical practice overlay to the RIBA Plan of Work](#)
- [RIBA Sustainability book \(includes POW overlay\)](#)

Broadly speaking, suggested interventions can be grouped as the following.

Internal policy and governance

Updating internal policy and governance documents to reflect a commitment to social and ethical issues. As a minimum, businesses must be in line with legislation but this leaves a lot of room for improvement. Let's break a sector wide habit of aiming for compliance – there will be business value for pioneers seeking to move ahead of the curve on issues relating to the UN SDGs. Forming an approach to ethical sourcing is a good place to start.

Best practice

Standard specifications should give preference to certified sustainably sourced materials and products, all things being equal (or, even better, even when more expensive – because someone is paying the price) and move to educate clients on these considerations whenever possible. The list of available products is steadily growing, see [GreenBookLive](#).

Client communication

As alluded to, businesses in the construction industry should be leading the discussion with clients in RIBA Stage 0 and 1. We have an obligation to adopt the role of educator to discuss E&SD issues and implications in standard communications. We can all move to develop internal and external guidance documents to facilitate this.

Horizon scanning

Stay engaged with key bodies to maintain awareness of where the issues are heading:

- [Action Programme for Responsible & Ethical Sourcing \(APRES\)](#)
- [Royal Institute of British Architects \(RIBA\)](#)
- [RIBA Ethical and Sustainable Development Commission](#)
- [Business in the Community \(BITC\)](#)

Conclusion

Moving to a responsible and sustainable construction model might seem a stretch for an industry under the pressures recognised in Mark Farmer's Modernise or Die³² – but progress is achievable with resolution and strong leadership.

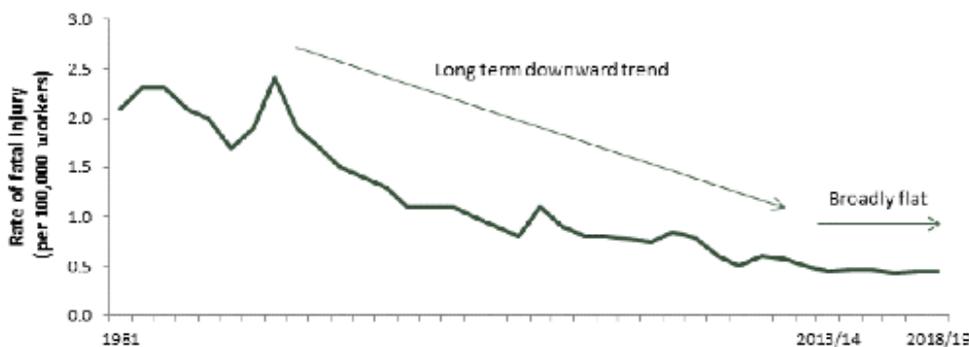
As a parting thought, consider this case for optimism. Just a generation ago the state of health and safety in our industry was poor to say the least, which led to the creation of the HSE. Despite the resistance the HSE legislation faced initially, today it is simply part of business and it has vastly improved the conditions for construction industry workers. Deaths and injuries are approximately a fifth of what they were in the 1980s.³³ Bottom lines have benefited as well. The stories of companies such as Alcoa³⁴ and Anglo American³⁵ show that profits vastly improved when worker safety was made a priority.

As Ryder knocks down silos and rallies the UK construction industry, the E&SD model is doing the same for industries on a global scale. We continue to look to collaborate and build relationships with like minded companies that will help us to change the industry and address the greater concerns of the UK and the globe as we expand our reach. Ryder's history is one of continuously rising aspirations, confidence and impact. Bringing E&SD into how we work is just another step on that journey. If you would like to find out more, don't hesitate to get in touch.

We would love to hear from you if you are interested in collaborating.



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Members of the public were killed due to work related activities in 2018/19

Rate of fatal injuries (per 100,000) of construction workers in the UK³⁶

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