

“Greenwash”



In partnership with Eco-Consulting

Green is a word that has been on the lips of many in Lebanon for the past year, to the point that it seems like everything is “green”. We can’t pick up a newspaper or read an advertisement of the latest building going up that isn’t mentioning sustainability in one form or another, often associated with “nature” and the green colour. But we all know by the simple fact of looking around and applying logic that all is not really rosy (or green)... Indeed, how could it be? Only a few years ago, eco-friendly was a term associated to a few marginals who wanted to save the planet. In such a short timeframe it is not possible to educate and implement sustainability throughout business, industry, and homes, let alone tackle the most difficult aspect of changing mentalities and challenging typical ways of doing things... such as for example, having the air conditioning set at 18°C in the height of summer with the windows open!

Few people may realise this, but sustainability is a highly complex field. Not only does it affect pretty much all aspects of life, but nothing is in isolation and where sometimes we believe that we are doing good, in reality the picture can be more muddled.

Single-use plastic bags, for example, are notoriously bad for the environment; they are made from petroleum based products, they clog our sewers, litter our landscape and sea, and kill our sea turtles. So it makes sense to ban or tax them to reduce consumption. The result? People may start using paper bags that use large amounts of energy to be produced, may deplete our forests, and are at the end of the day as wasteful. Instead, we have to change our habits and remember to bring our own shopping bags, as we used to do only a couple decades ago.

So where does that leave us?

Well, too much of what people claim as sustainable is nothing more than “greenwash”. A development that has scared yet another part of our mountain side ripping out trees, destroying native ecology, and replacing it with concrete and glass monstrosities sometimes is called an “eco-friendly village” as it is set among (what

remains of) the forest! Or a building in the middle of the city may claim to be green just because it has vegetated planters on all its balconies, where the choice of plants may not even be native which does not help promoting biodiversity...

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For buildings, a few solar photovoltaic (PV) panels on the roof producing electricity do not make a building green, and this type of “bolt-on” green-fix is known as “green bling”. Due to their inherent inefficiency and high cost, PV panels should be the last eco-friendly element to be added to a building. Double walls filled with insulation, low solar transmittance glazing, proper façades shading, energy efficient lighting and appliances all come well before installing PVs, even if they are not visible and “sexy”.

Combating “greenwash” is difficult due to the complexity of sustainability, and the amount of information and misinformation that is available. However, there are ways to fight back.

First and foremost, having a critical if not sceptical outlook on anything that is “green” is positive. Ask why something is “green” and how it fits the sustainability agenda. If it can’t be explained simply and thoroughly, then it probably isn’t what it claims to be. Manufacturer’s claims should be substantiated by independent studies and field trials, all of which should be readily available.

Next, think about using impartial third-party certification and eco-labelling wherever possible. We have heard about Fairtrade coffee or chocolate, but do you know that there are numerous timber certifications that guarantee sustainably sourced timber coming from responsibly managed forests? The 2 big ones are FSC (Forest Stewardship Council) and PEFC (Programme for the Endorsement of Forest Certification). What about low-toxicity paint, having the Green Seal or the NF Environnement eco-labels, attesting a low content of harmful chemicals?

For buildings, certifications are extensively used internationally and are growing in Lebanon too. The two big ones are BREEAM (Building Research Establishment Environmental Assessment Method) and LEED (Leadership in Energy Efficient Design), respectively British and American. Both certifications are relatively similar, as they cover the same broad categories of energy, water, ecology, transport, pollution, and management of construction sites. Within each group, a number of specific environmental issues should be addressed, for example providing water conserving fixtures or having energy-efficient equipment. The more elements achieved, the more points accumulated, and the higher the score or rating. For BREEAM, the ratings are Pass, Good, Very Good, Excellent and Outstanding; for LEED, you have Certified, Silver, Gold, and Platinum. Buildings that have made some true headway into sustainability will achieve levels of BREEAM Very Good/Excellent or LEED Gold/Platinum.

Certified green buildings give you peace of mind that there has been a rigorous process looking at most elements of sustainability—

although not all issues may have been addressed. Clients and buyers should see the numerous benefits that eco-friendly buildings procure: lower running costs as they use less heating, cooling, and water; protection of our ecology; healthier indoor environment with fewer toxic finishes and appropriate ventilation; retention of property value; and ability to attract institutional and foreign investors... amongst other things.

Remember though, that even these certifications are not the be-all and end-all of sustainability. It is possible to achieve a relatively high rating, but still have some truly unsustainable features. Furthermore, some developers or companies claim to be achieving a certain certification level but in fact have not obtained their target or even certification at all, so do ask to see the actual certificate.

“Greenwash” can only be effective if the target market is ignorant or uncaring. By keeping anyone who makes green claims on their toes, by questioning them about how, what, and why something is environmentally-friendly, we can ensure that truly sustainable endeavours are rewarded while “greenwashing” is named and shamed ■

