

Monica Saini



Name:
Monica Saini

Position/occupation:
Travel and Environment Advisor, Christian Aid and Climate Change Ambassador, LSx.

Residence:
Bexleyheath.

“Nobody wants their unsustainable behaviour to result in other people suffering.”

In early 2007 Monica became involved in a London Sustainability Exchange initiative, acting as a South Asian Climate Change Ambassador focusing on the borough of Ealing. “The programme was a unique opportunity to tackle attitudes to climate change and encourage behaviour change in a part of London’s population with limited awareness of the positive impact they can have.” As an Ambassador Monica has partnered with a number of groups, including the Southall Community Alliance and the Parliamentary Group ‘Punjabis in Britain’ (Ealing has the biggest Punjab community in the world outside India), and has been invited onto local radio shows. “There is huge appetite in London to learn and understand and becoming an Ambassador has opened up huge networks of groups and individuals who can and want to make a positive difference in combating climate change.”

Sustainability experience

For Monica, concern with the environment around her has been a lifelong passion. She became a vegetarian aged 14 based on the environmental and ecological impact of the meat industry, and persuaded her family to recycle. “My interests and concerns about sustainability developed and have shaped my career and the way I live my life.” Monica started her career in Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) after completing a degree in Accounting and Finance at the London School of Economics. “I wanted to look at where the biggest impacts on the environment are and where tangible changes can be made.”

An internship with Accountability grew Monica’s interest in the environmental impacts

of large organisations. In her next role with the Department for Food and Rural Affairs (Defra), she worked in their Corporate Services department to develop their sustainable travel strategy and communicate sustainable travel messages to civil service staff. Monica has developed a wide spectrum of experience, also working with the Asian Foundation for Philanthropy, a small charity raising awareness of development issues in India, and Olmec, a community investment foundation. Now with Christian Aid, Monica is a Travel and Environment Advisor, helping one of the UK’s largest charities to reduce their carbon footprint.

“Working at Defra was a real turning point for me professionally and really opened my eyes to the environmental impact of our travel choices.” Her experiences across various sectors have helped her develop a rounded and integrated view of sustainable development. “Different stakeholders have different needs and require different communication methods – there is never a one size fits all solution. I think that communication is at the crux of it all and that the challenge is making sustainability easier than business as usual to understand.”

The belief that communication is at the heart of sustainable change led Monica to participate in the London Sustainability Exchange Ambassador programme and also to become involved in their Motivate London project, by presenting a discussion about engaging people in sustainability through dance.

Sustainability challenges

“There has been very rapid progress in awareness and the profile of sustainability and climate change over the last five years. The language we use is changing and it’s not just about the environment but holistic sustainable development. Sustainability is gradually becoming part of people’s everyday lives and it’s an exciting time to be working in this field.”

Despite this optimism Monica feels that making real change happen is like ‘climbing a mountain’.

“Making people think about the impact of their actions is the first step – whatever choice you make, consider every alternative so you can make a conscious decision. Stepping out of the comfort zone is difficult so consider things carefully – did you know that boiling a full kettle twice is equivalent to leaving a laptop on for a whole year? It’s unbelievable when you realise the impact of your actions.”

“Sustaining what we have now isn’t enough to ensure our future. We need to curtail our resource use in order to have quality of life in the future.” Monica believes that on a daily basis in London we are so removed from the natural environment that we tend to live against the elements, forgetting the impacts of our behaviour. “I want to reintroduce and restore the connections at a local and global level. If people were aware of the impact of the food we eat, the electricity we use, or the waste we produce on the environment and our communities, we would see change. Nobody wants their behaviour to result in other people suffering”.

Gandhi said something that particular resonates with Monica, “He said you have to be the change you want to see in the world. I try and live my life inline with the messages I communicate.”

One of the issues Monica thinks needs to be addressed to facilitate a sustainable future is community partnership infrastructure. “Planning and housing don’t always help communities come together. There are great community initiatives across the city but poor cohesion between them. Partnerships need to be supported better at the London and borough level to help communities make changes. Sharing best practice is key.”

Monica’s top sustainability tips

- In your household, make changes that also save you money e.g. buying energy saving light bulbs
- Shopping is a huge opportunity to make positive change – shop locally and say no to

packaging

- Get out your car, especially for short distances – it’s better for your personal health, improves local air quality and helps tackle climate change.

London Leaders

“London Leaders is a fantastic opportunity to be part of a network of individuals who are making change happen, sharing experiences and offering support. It’s difficult to be a lone voice but working as a network we can make a bigger difference. There are thousands of leaders in London who are steering towards a more sustainable future for the city. By becoming a London Leader I can use and increase my own skills to continue to put sustainability in the mainstream and become a positive role model for those around me”