

File name: Panel Session – Sustainability, Traceability and Waste Management.mp4

Moderator questions in Bold, Respondents in Regular text.

KEY: Unable to decipher = (inaudible + timecode), **Phonetic spelling** (ph) + timecode), **Missed word** = (mw + timecode), **Talking over each other** = (talking over each other + timecode).

Moderator: One of the key pillars of 10X is sustainability. Interestingly, Invest NI's regional officers are seeing emerging clusters of businesses in sustainability, traceability, and waste management. These businesses not only support the local economy with great jobs, enhanced skills, and creation of a great quality of life, but they are also supporting society's desire to source sustainably and its endeavours to reduce its carbon footprint. So, to look into this a little bit more, because it's really, really very interesting to me, I'm delighted to welcome Maria Diffley. She's joining us from London, and Maria is the co-founder of start-up SustainIQ. We've also got Colm Grimes, who's founder of Dungannon-based business Rep Tec. Paul Armstrong, who's a commercial director of Foods Connected, a Derry business currently scaling up. Ciaran Jordan who is co-founder of Responsible, a Ballymena man who's left Germany to return home, and Rachel Sankannawar, who is head of green growth within Invest NI. If you'd all like to make your way up to the stage here beside me, we had a brief chat a little bit earlier this morning, so you're in for an interesting twenty minutes or so here as everybody makes their way up. Grab a seat, guys. If I can see Maria, there we are, Maria's on screen, so we're doing the hybrid already, most of us in person, but Maria on the line from London. Maria, really good to see you, thank you for joining us today. Okay, we missed your hello, but the sound guys maybe can boost the volume there for Maria. In the mean time, Ciaran, we had a bit of a chat earlier on, because I've only got about five minutes with each of these guys, and they've such amazing stories to tell, so trying to condense everything down. You originally were global director of the Hype brand for Adidas, so you were schmoozing with the stars, you were meeting with Jay Z, Beyonce in LA, what brought you home to Northern Ireland?

M: It was a bit of head and heart, Karen, you know, the, the lure of home, being closer to family was a factor, but also, you know, it had been weighing on me for a time to, to try and do something for the world, try and do something about sustainability. And with, with my other founders we talked about, you know, trying to maybe make a difference in fashion, and coming back home into Belfast was an actual place to set a business up.

Moderator: So, your interest was in fashion.

M: Yes.

Moderator: You were selling gazillions of Adidas trainers.

M: Right.

Moderator: You've turned everything on your head to create a more sustainable model. So, tell me what Responsible is about, what's the philosophy there?

M: Well, we, we want to make circular fashion, that's the idea that you buy clothes, you can sell clothes and you can wear used clothes, that's a big emerging trend, and we want to make that accessible for fashion brands, and we want to make it more accessible for consumers. And so we've created an end-to-end solution, a technology platform that can help brands get on board with that, and also a, a processing capability to help repair clothes right here in Belfast and then put them back out into the world where we sell them online.

Moderator: Okay, so there are lots of elements here to tease through.

M: There are, yes.

Moderator: Okay. So, say I am a small fashion designer in Strabane and I want to embrace this circular fashion that you talk about, how do I approach your company and what can you do for me?

M: Well, we've, for instance, something that's very popular with the smaller designers, they usually work on Shopify, an e-commerce platform, we've built a free application that you can implement into your store that will allow you to take product back from your customers, give them credit towards a future purchase. And then we'll have that product winging its way to our facility here in Belfast where we'll repair it, sell it, and split the profits with the original designer.

Moderator: What's the cost to me? So, I've said, okay, I can see there's a trend, the consumer is wanting a more sustainable product, I'm going to buy my shirt, I'm going to then come back to you guys, perhaps sell it back to you, what does it cost me as the designer to embrace your technology, your software?

M: Well, a big factor for us is accessibility, we want to make sustainability the right thing to do, but also the easy thing to do, so we make it free for fashion brands to join, join the party. Now, fashion brands have to pay for the future purchase, the credit, but we take care of all the rest, we repair those garments at our own cost, we sell them at our own cost and we, we split the revenue. So, what we really try to do is realign the financial incentives in fashion to make sustainability work for brands and consumers alike.

Moderator: How has Invest NI helped you?

M: Well, they've been great, you know, as we, we thought about establishing the business and what we would need they've really helped us firstly get going with the technology side of things from software engineering that we're building here in Belfast through to research and development, you know, how do we-, how do we repair garments in an ever more efficient way? Also, a big part of this is business development, how do we go out and compete with American companies, European companies to win brands? So, we have-, we have people out there in the field in Europe and North America trying to-, trying to bring business back home.

Moderator: What does that do for the Northern Ireland economy? Are you employing many people? Is the skill set here particular to what you're trying achieve?

M: Yes, it's great, you know, there's, there's obviously, as we've seen from the videos before, there's a lot of software engineering capabilities here, which is really important for our circularity platform, but also, you know, the, as we discovered with the film industry, there's a lot of talent out there around costume, and seamstresses, and all sorts of textile workers that we've been able to tap into and really make sure that we keep clothes in circulation. And from my perspective in marketing, we have a really young digital native team, you know, that can help us reach consumers in Berlin, London, New York and know how to market to them, so we're really able to tick all the boxes across the business right from here.

Moderator: So, what's your ambition, as you scale up, as this takes traction, and you've obviously worked with a huge global brand.

M: Right.

Moderator: You understand the marketing world and you understand the consumer, what they're after, where are you aiming for?

M: Well, we're a mission-driven company, you know, we've, we've all come together to really try and make a difference within the fashion industry, so we, we're not going to settle until we start to see used clothing and, and circularity really being better within the fashion industry and become normalised, and that's what we want to help do.

Moderator: Yes. Is circular fashion a currency, a term that people are already familiar with or is it quite new?

M: You know, within the industry it's, it's something that we're, we're pleasantly surprised to see, it's on the lips of everyone, so when we go out and talk to brands it's for the most part something that they've already been thinking about, and they haven't yet discovered how to do it, so we're there to help.

Moderator: Sounds amazing, amazing cutting-edge technology team with recycling and fashion, which of course is a massive, massive industry. Let's move to Colm, who's sitting right beside you, next. Colm, you, we talked a little bit earlier, are into the world of robotics, so I'm thinking there's a conflict there. Invest NI is about creating jobs, and you're introducing robots, which in some cases can replace the jobs that would be in a local economy. Tell me about the concept of your company and how actually it's helping improve the lives and the quality of jobs available.

M: So, my name's Colm Graham, the owner of Rep Tec, we're a Dungannon-based company, we manufacture a range of recycling equipment including balers, compactors, and we also supply a range of robotics. So, the robotic side of things, in waste management companies there's a lot of manual separation techniques used, so basically in a lot of centres there are manual pickers, which will separate various waste streams from a conveyor belt. It's quite a manual, manual task, and like all industries around the world there's a huge labour shortage. And whenever I started Rep Tec back in July, 2020 I identified an opportunity for embracing AI and robotics and fell into that, that arena. We installed our first robot in the waste sector in Ireland in September. And basically what the robot does, it incorporate machine vision, where a camera will look at various items and materials, it'll then send the pictures to the cloud into a neural network of billions of images to help the system identify and classify what material it is, and then the robot will lift the material and put it where a manual picker would've done that.

Moderator: So, how difficult was it to develop that software? It's clearly very particular.

M: Yes, I was lucky enough, when I started the company my plan as to try and develop something like that myself. After a bit of head scratching I realised that it was going to be quite the task, so I fell in with a Colorado-based company, Arm Robotics, so since became their partner across the UK and Ireland, so they're, you know, in that market, they're a really strong player, and we're delighted to be working with them, so.

Moderator: How did you select your first customer, your first line, if you like, in which to install this, this machine?

M: It's very, again, like all things, these things fall into place. So, when I started the company, me and a sales guy moved into a little sales office in Omagh Enterprise Centre, and the local waste management company was a company called Recycle, so we had a different problem and we started talking to the owner of the company about, about the problem we had, but we moved onto the interest we had in robotics, and again, it just developed to that. So, he invited us around to his recycling centre, we had a

look at a line, and again, things just developed and fell into place, so no, we're delighted with how it's worked out.

Moderator: So, you're only operating since the middle of the pandemic, why would you start a business in the middle of a pandemic?

M: Yeah, that's a good question, alright. I've always really wanted to develop my own business, and I suppose like everybody else during that lockdown period I had an opportunity to just reflect and step back from what I was at, and, and just really wanted to, to start something. So, I wasn't sure where it was gonna be. So, I was sitting round the kitchen table at home and came up with a vision that I wanted to be a world player, a world manufacturer of recycling equipment, I wanted to embrace new technologies, and again, just things moved from that. So, we moved-

Moderator: Now, hang on, things just moved from that?

M: Yeah.

Moderator: We, we can all sit round the kitchen table and all have these really lofty ideas, but how do you go from the kitchen table to joining up all the dots, maybe past contacts you might've had, ambitions you might've had, ideas you might've had, how do you physically go from, you know, put the fish fingers to one side, 'I've got this drawn up, and here's how I'm going to make this business plan work'?

M: Yeah, I think connecting the dots is probably a good terminology. You know, over the last fifteen years I've made a lot of good connections within the recycling sector, within the, the local engineering sector in Tyrone, you know, I've made good connections in Invest NI, and a lot of those things do, do help to connect the dots. So, you know, we just, me and a sales guy, Garrett, we moved into a sales office, and things just started to happen, we got an opportunity to build a compactor for a company down in Waterford and we then subcontracted some of the manufacturing of that, and it just developed. So, now we're, we're into a 15,000-square-foot factory in Dungannon, we employ seventeen people, and if there were enough welders about that would probably be 25, but it's a bit of a problem.

Moderator: What's the ambition? You've said at the kitchen table, 'I wanna be a world player in this sector I've moved into,' and eighteen months, you're 15,000 square feet and seventeen people, where do you see yourself in a couple of years?

M: Pretty much like that, you know, there are a lot of great companies in the mid-Ulster area in, in manufacturing, you know, who are world players in, in their sectors. Again, you know, that's an ambition

I would have for Rep Tec is to grow, is grow a business like that. You know, the first year or two we'll probably focus on the UK and Ireland as, as markets to develop into, but, you know, we'll be trying to export or will be exporting, so that's the, that's the goal.

Moderator: Yeah, it's amazing, I love the ambition, but, you know, ambition's one thing, delivering it is a totally different one, so hats off to both of you. Let's bring Paul in. Paul, lovely to talk to you again too. Paul, your business is more established, you've been around a wee bit longer.

M: Yes.

Moderator: But you've already delivered a huge amount, but talk us through, you're in the food chain business, if you like, and you're working with a lot of big supermarkets, so talk us through.

M: We're in the food supply chain business, so we run a cloud-based software platform geared towards the food industry, and when I say the food industry, Karen, I mean, you know, the big retailers, the big manufacturers, the big food service companies. We started out in about 2013, so about nine years ago. At that time, my co-founder and myself were working in the food industry, specifically in the meat industry, and we noticed that, you know, like most businesses, they had great systems for, you know, managing finances and managing the operations, but there were loads of gaps. A lot of the important activity around procurement, around technical standards, quality systems, you name it, there was, there was so much that was managed by spreadsheets, word documents, PDFs, pen and paper.

Moderator: Lovely.

M: E-mails, I mean, it just created unnecessary admin and, you know, it didn't give us the immediacy of the reporting and the analytics that we needed to run the business, so within that we felt there was an opportunity, and, you know, we actually wrote a business plan, we threw it in the, the Go For It programme, and amazingly about a week later they came back and said they were interested, so I, we, we just thought what a crazy idea, and to have somebody actually encourage and, you know, recommend that we speak to Invest Northern Ireland was a great thing, you know, so I-,

Moderator: So, initially were you keen to approach to Invest NI or was it, kind of, a, 'Well, we might as well'?

M: It was-, it was just a natural thing to do, you know, we were-, we had an idea, we had a business. Right, what do you next? Well, and I think the Go For It programme was well advertised at that time.

Moderator: Yes.

M: So, I made my way to the Skeoge industrial estate in Derry and sat down and had a bit of an interview, and as I say, a couple of weeks later we were sitting talking to Invest Northern Ireland.

Moderator: What did that feel like? When, when you actually made the engagement, what difference did it make? Was there a change?

M: It's just the confidence that it gives you. At the end of the day, you know, having an idea is one thing, but, you know, having somebody, kind of, saying, 'Yeah, look, we think you're onto something here,' gave us the confidence to take it a step further. So, at that stage we didn't have a customer, we didn't have any revenue, we, we just had a, like, I think one of the videos there said ambition and energy.

Moderator: Yes.

M: You know, we had a-, we had an idea, so we took on, I suppose, our third co-founder, Gary, who'd just graduated from university with a software degree, and he very quickly built a prototype platform which Roger then took out some of the prospective clients and key contacts, and we presented our ideas to them, they liked them, but they said, 'Could you tweak this and tweak that?' And I suppose that cycle of innovation has just carried on for the last, sort of, eight or nine years. Today, we now have a, a software platform with about 25 software tools which cover the areas of, you know, supplier mapping, traceability, food safety. We've a big procurement part of the platform, a big supply chain part of the platform, so we cover many areas, and we don't compete with the big companies like SAP, and Microsoft, and, you know, the ERP systems, as we call them, but it's all of the important activity around the business in the food industry that we help them manage.

Moderator: So, you're based in Derry.

M: Yeah.

Moderator: And a lot of your customers would be in the UK, but you're beyond the UK too, aren't you?

M: Yeah, look, we have an office in Australia, in Sydney, we, we employ about ten people down there, we employ about, well, we employ 78 people in total now, so, and that's grown from the start of the pandemic we employed 39 people, so we've doubled our headcount, but we've also more than doubled our customer headcount in that space of time.

Moderator: Why would you double during a pandemic? What changed in that eighteen months, couple of years?

M: A Just, just the business. We, I suppose we went, you know, it's like a typical startup, you're, you're, you're growing organically, you're being recommended by clients to other clients. We got to the stage then we were a bit more proactive about our marketing and about, you know-, you know, about who we were, and we employed a couple of salespeople, and we went out and actively sold ourselves, and, you know, that's, that's bringing dividends, but I suppose, you know, there's a demand for what we're doing as well, which is a good thing.

Moderator: And where does the demand come from? Is it the demand from supermarkets wanting to validate, you know, that they are ethically sourcing meat, dairy, whatever it might be, or is the demand from the consumer saying, 'I need more,' and therefore that drives the supermarkets?

M: It's, it's a good question, and it's both, to answer you, Karen. So, the consumer, the young consumer of today is demanding more information on their products, they want to know the sustainability credentials of the products. Then, as a result of that the supermarkets are, you know, delving deeper into their supply chains. Like, we have supply chain mapped for a large UK retailer, their fruit and veg, and, you know, it's 12,000 growers and suppliers across many different countries. These are complex supply chains, so we have made sense of that, but I suppose where traceability is going, it was always about food safety and about knowing the provenance of your products, but it really ties into the whole sustainability thing. It is that thing where people want to know more about the sustainability credentials, and clients now want to be able to verify and validate that information, and, and that's the space that we're in today.

Moderator: Yeah. So, essentially for a layperson like me you're ironing out all the bumps that there might be from the producer right through to the supermarket and ultimately the consumer, making it a, a much easier supply chain process. So, you're growing, you've doubled in size in the last couple of years, you're based in Derry, you're going to move out of Derry or stay put?

M: No, well, I'm, I'm based there, I've family there, we're, we're very happy there, I think I said to you earlier our head of software's a Derry man through and through, so we'll never get him out of Derry, you know, we we, we've built the business round our team, but, you know, we've just registered an office in the US, for example, so, you know, we'll probably build a local team, we've the local team in Australia. But, you know, Northern Ireland's in our DNA, we're a Northern Irish based company, we're proud of the fact that we employ local people, and we're proud of the fact that we're operating on the world stage, like, we're, we're providing services to probably seven or eight of the largest retailers in Europe, so across Holland, Sweden, Denmark, Belgium as well as Australia and New Zealand, so no, we'll always be a Northern Irish based company.

Moderator: So heartening, isn't it, though, when you give back to the community from whence you came, so to speak.

M: Oh, yeah, it's great to see it, and, you know, Northern Ireland's got a, like, it's renowned for the quality of the food businesses here, we've got some of the best food businesses in the world, so we have luckily been able to tap into that expertise. Because a lot of what we do is not just the software, but it's about consulting with businesses how they do things currently, so we have probably 40 or 50 people who used to work in the food industry in different sectors and different disciplines, and they help our clients onboard the software and I suppose project manage the implementation of the software.

Moderator: Let's bring Maria in, who we saw online. She's joining us from London, from Futurebuild in London. Hi again there, Maria. Can you tell us a little bit about the startup journey of SustainIQ and how the community in Northern Ireland helped develop your business?

M: Yes, thanks very much for allowing me to be part of this today remotely, and I suppose it's very much a testament that we're over here in GB trying to infiltrate the market with the help of Invest NI at an expo like Futurebuild. So, SustainIQ was born from the fact that Liam McEvoy, the other co-founder, and myself had been working in the sustainability space for quite some time, and we were frustrated with the fact that the companies we were working with were doing an awful lot but couldn't tell us the impact that it had on their business, on the economy, on the environment, or their local communities. And often they were spending five times more on sustainability initiatives than they would on hiring new staff every year, and that just baffled me that they weren't able to, you know, tell us the impact that that was actually having. So, we set about making it easier for companies to capture the data right across their business no matter what department it was coming from, and really to not just focus on environmental but to also include, you know, that ESG element, the social impact, and the governance side of things as well. So, we started in 2017 with a self-funded prototype, we got three wonderful companies in Northern Ireland that helped us to test it, and I guess we went from SustainIQ 1.0 to 10.0 very quickly, and we listened to the market, and that's been our ethos ever since, stay really close to our, our customers. In 2018 we started trading, and quite quickly we realised that we definitely had product market fit, and in order to scale the business we were going to need quite a lot of help, and most likely a cash investment. So, at that stage we then enlisted the help, I guess, of Invest NI, and they were wonderful, you know, they've provided support to us in terms of mentoring and, and financial help through grants for marketing, sales, training, and tech development as well. And we also then at that point joined the Springboard programme at Catalyst, and that really basically took our business plan as we knew it, took it apart and put it all back together again, and.

And many a day I came out of the place thinking, 'Oh my god, this is-, this is a completely different business nearly,' but it got us really ready for investment, and as a result of that then we went through the H band network in 2020 in the midst of COVID, and we were lucky enough to get private seed investment, and we've spent the time since really building our team, bringing the tech in-house, and focusing our sales on the GB market. We're predominantly focused on the construction sector, surely

because it's heavily regulated, and, and also because we have a lot of expertise in that area, but we're also-

Moderator: Just tell us, on that, Maria, tell us about the tool, the SustainIQ tool. What's the secret to it? Why is it such a commercially viable proposition?

M: Yeah, so, essentially SustainIQ helps to demystify sustainability. This sustainability reporting agenda is moving at a rapid pace, and so many people come to us and say, 'We don't know how to start,' and I always, kind of, say to them, 'You start somewhere.' What we do is we have four key pillars that helps them to make sense of their sustainability journey. It allows them to enter data in a myriad of ways right across any department, multiple user, multiple site, and then we essentially do all the calculation for carbon and Scope 1, 2 and 3 emissions, all your social value calculations, and provide then the user with a dashboard where they can analyse future trends, they're able to comply with contractual and legal requirements, they're now able to tender more competitively for work, and they're saving on time and cost.

Moderator: Fantastic. Well, let's bring in Rachel, who's Invest NI's green champion, if you like. Listening to all this wonderful innovation around sustainability, what else is Invest NI working on? Give us some examples of the projects and what you're doing there.

M: Fantastic, thank you. Well, Invest NI sees its-, can everybody hear me?

Moderator: Yes.

M: Invest NI sees sustainability as a core pillar, and we're working with businesses to help them across a range of different areas, and one of the supports we have available is our technical consultancy support. And we're working with businesses, for example, like Responsible to help them lower their carbon footprint, and we work across a range of areas from decarbonising transport within businesses, looking at their energy efficiency, their resource efficiency, and we're able to go into businesses, complete audits, feasibility studies, do advice pieces, provide businesses with a report and recommendations to move that sustainability journey forward. And in fact, what we've just launched in the last year is our sustainability planning tool, so we're able to work directly with businesses to help them understand that environmental performance and look at ways to improve that. And so it's a fantastic piece of support, and it's open to, to a lot of different businesses, not just Invest NI customers, so keen to work with businesses on that. And there's one other area I would just like to mention, we have our resource matching services, which is really innovative, it's the idea that, you know, one man's waste is another person's gold, and we work with businesses to make sure that redundant resources are turned into something profitable. So, for example, we worked with Frylite down in Strabane to take the waste sludge out of their processes, divert it to an AD plant, which is-, which is then used to produce energy, and that saved the business over £250,000 which is fantastic.

Moderator: Wow, like dating in a whole different kind of terminology.

M: Exactly.

Moderator: Meet your match type of thing.

M: Yes, match mating, match making for materials.

Moderator: I'm aware of the time, and I'm aware that we have a lot to get through today, and also that today is a great opportunity for everybody to network after almost two years, it's lovely to be able to put faces to names and things. So, what I'll do for this point of the session is to say a huge thank you to everybody, Maria on the line there from London, but for Paul, for Ciaran, for Colm, and of course to Rachel, thank you very much for sharing your stories with us and inspiring us all as to what can be done round a kitchen table. Businesses can start and can begin. Thank you all very much indeed for your attention so far, it's been a busy start to the day and lots more to come, but have a break, go get a cup of coffee, say hi to everybody, and we'll talk to you again very soon, 11:30, if you can be back. Thank you.