

Account-Ability for Sustainability

What is the influence of government and business, in global sustainability? This is a question that often unravels traditional notions of belief held by politicians and management. Does this form part of corporate or public governance issues? Certainly, in terms of dollar profit for business, and votes for public office-bearers, the buck stops with customers and voters, or it would seem. But, Nike 'just' did not 'do it' when it came to extensive reputational damage as a consequence of allegations of use of child labour in Nike factories in developing countries.

Imagine the scene of leading British citizens and adventurers on hunting expeditions for tiger skins in India and ivory in Africa. It was 'the' thing to do, back then. Now imagine a present-day British socialite/business man, say Virgin's Richard Branson in a safari in Africa sending home footage of animal hunts, endangered or not. You could imagine the reaction and the extent of negative criticism. Even more importantly you will also see a sharp drop in Virgin's share price similar to the effect that Ogoni in Nigeria and Brent Spar had on the Royal Dutch Shell Corporation. Branson's financial and corporate affairs advisers would not have allowed for such an incident to happen. Today, environmental and financial issues are inextricably linked through today's societal value systems.

Corporate and public sector behaviour, or accountability, when it comes to social and environmental sustainability is vital to organisational reputation and brand. Customer chains, supply chains and partnerships are all potential time-bombs, waiting to implode large organisations. Death by association, such as how one of the world's largest accounting firms, Andersons was affected by Enron, is a real risk.

Influence by private and public sector organisations can have a positive influence or environmental and social sustainability issues. For example, Ford has, for some time now, required all its larger suppliers gain accreditation to the ISO 14001 environmental management standard. Similarly, several public and private sector organisations have purchasing policies that are green. The Buy Recycled Business Alliance is an organisation that is set up to encourage such green purchase. When you're next using a pen, or buying something, or indeed investing your monies in superannuation, think about the association you're making, and whether indeed change of preferences by you or indeed the organisation your work for, would contribute to better environmental and social outcomes further up and down the chain.

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Written by Terence Jeyaretnam,
Director, Net Balance Management Group
Director, Net Balance Foundation