

Scaling up sustainable development: slow, but steady progress

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More businesses are seeing sustainability as an investment, rather than a cost. These are signs of welcome change, says Bruno Berthon, global managing director at Accenture Sustainability Services.



Progress in scaling up sustainability across all sectors is slow but building pace.

Sustainability is becoming increasingly central to the growth strategies of some large multinational companies, but such businesses remain in the minority. However, there are signs of positive change with a proliferation of pilots and innovative sustainability programmes in the area of resource and energy efficiency especially. Underpinning this progress is growing goodwill and collaboration across all sectors to work together towards sustainability.

However, the global footprint of human activity continues to expand. Moreover, with many economies struggling to emerge from recession, the growth imperative often appears to counteract sustainability goals. Alongside this, the wave of emerging market industrialisation does not naturally support the pursuit of a more sustainable path - in many cases it does the exact opposite.

So are governments, business and civil society doing enough and are they realistic in their perception of progress? In terms of climate change, the scientific community would certainly say no. But if the question is whether we are approaching the tipping point for mass consumption of sustainable products and services, the jury is out.

Why is this so? Certainly the lack of political momentum since Copenhagen is not helping. There is an absence of a global framework, a lack of common regulatory rules and carbon pricing initiatives are relatively weak, although there is clear acceleration of these in Australia and Korea. Rio+20 may have attracted 1,600 companies compared to only 16 two decades ago, but feedback from this year's earth summit was mixed. As Pascal Lamy, director general at the World Trade Organisation, noted, the economic crisis has caused a retreat from international agreements and a return to domestic agendas.

The innovation cycle is also part of the challenge. As was the case with the internet, the first years of technological revolution often deliver little, with hype exceeding

reality. The economic slowdown has further hindered the volume-based economic paradigm, holding back the testing and implementation of new business and operating models at scale.

What will it take to reach a tipping point?

How do we turn good intentions and initial actions into scalable programmes that can transform business strategy, operational models, resource management, and energy consumption?

In Accenture's 2012 research, which asked 250 leading executives their views on sustainability, it was evident that business had turned a corner. More than three out of four leaders (78%) now believe sustainability plays a "vital" role in the future growth of their businesses, while 83% see expenditure on sustainability as an investment, rather than as an additional cost burden.

And we don't have to go too far to find sectors that have got close to a tipping point. In most markets, utilities are actively rebalancing their portfolio away from coal with a clear emphasis on both gas and renewables. Consider best practice examples such as Iberdrola and, at a geographic level, China's efforts to implement major initiatives to test and use all alternative energy sources at scale. So while coal plants still proliferate to meet demand, we also see an accelerated commitment to alternative technologies. For instance, it is widely accepted that carbon capture and storage will take off in China first rather than Europe. Meanwhile, the smart grid movement is taking off at high speed in many parts of the world, both developed and emerging economies, aiming to rebalance energy supply and demand.

In the automotive industry, which for the most part has long ignored sustainability, 2008 was a turning point. Whether it's the revived US sector or other efforts to accelerate advances in electric cars and alternative fuels, automotive shows nowadays seem to almost exclusively display electric and hybrid propulsion with a clear focus on carbon efficiency.

There are also shifts in the consumer goods sector with a revolution being led by prominent leaders, from Paul Polman's Sustainable Living programme at Unilever, the Performance with Purpose signature of Indra Nooyi at PepsiCo or the Shared Value ambition of Nestle. And then there are the redefined strategies and growth prospects of industrial companies instrumental to wider transformation such as Philips, Siemens, GE, Schneider Electric, JCI and their portfolio of lower carbon solutions for lighting, heating, cooling and motoring which support the vision of a more sustainable lifestyle.

From a geographic perspective, discrete but emerging pressure is coming from the coalition of the energy starved 'BICS' (Brazil, India, China, South Africa). In time, these countries will become a driving force, reshaping the sustainability agenda and international summits.

The point is this. In a complex world in which the power of western politics and international summitry are questioned, a more fragmented kaleidoscope of efforts is being fashioned. Consumer power and resource scarcity are setting clear guidelines and a more commercial approach to sustainability is being adopted.

In a globalised marketplace, sustainability is being seen as an opportunity for growth. So if we have not turned the corner yet and the picture is still troubled, at least we are inching our way closer from summit to summit, with business increasingly leading the required transformation.

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