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Glocal Business Sustainability – Performance Beyond Zero!

Abstract

The paper describes and debates business sustainability beyond zero emissions and neutralized impacts through compensatory performance. Our findings highlight the interconnections and interdependences of sustainability issues across contexts and through time. The vision of performance beyond zero is necessary and required to achieve glocal business sustainability. The implications also include a broadened and positioned view in the present and for the future on the emissions and impacts generated by the world of business locally and globally in relation to Earth's local and global life- and eco-systems. We argue for the future that it is necessary and required to move beyond zero to heal and restore the negative emissions and impact so far caused. The rational and contribution is an offensive and proactive view of contemporary visions and mission of glocal business sustainability performance beyond zero.

Keywords: sustainability, performance, triple bottom line, zero-sum, non-zero-sum, carbon footprint.

Paper type: Conceptual Paper

INTRODUCTION

The definition by World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED, 1987) is to our knowledge the only one that breathes offensive and proactive elements of sustainable development in relation to the long-term well-being of Earth. WCED [(1987), p. 43] proposes that sustainable development should: “...*meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs...*”. Subsequently, it appears to be an all-embracing approach to deal with issues of sustainability across contexts and through time. Furthermore, it has an inter-generational perspective on sustainability. We find it questionable that existing literature reviews only come up with myopic conceptualizations and insights of sustainability issues. In fact, they are vaguely visionary, hardly farsighted and only smoothly challenging.

We raise the question whether mankind will ever be able to manage the impact of the past, present and future on the planet Earth and achieve genuine sustainability across contexts and through time in relation to its local and global life- and eco-systems (IPCC WGI – Fourth assessment report, 2007). The current paper is however limited to the world of business and its performance of business sustainability within and beyond organizational boundaries, as well as within and beyond their supply chains or business networks in the marketplace and society.

The objective is to describe and debate business sustainability beyond zero emissions and neutralized impacts through compensatory performance (e.g. tree planting to compensate for carbon footprints). The rational and contribution of this paper is its holistic and futuristic concern regarding contemporary visions and mission of business sustainability performance. We strive to provide a broadened and positioned view on the emissions and impacts generated by the world of business locally and globally in relation to Earth's local and global life- and

eco-systems. It highlights the interconnections and interdependences of sustainability issues across contexts and through time.

LITERATURE REVIEWS ON SUSTAINABILITY

Scholarly acknowledgement to sustainability issues dates back at least to the 1960s (Carson, 1962). The interest has grown on issues of sustainability in the past two decades as demonstrated in several recent literature reviews (e.g. Chabowski et al., 2011; Gimenez and Tachizawa, 2012; Leonidou and Leonidou, 2011; Seuring and Müller, 2008). Different theories have been integrated (e.g. stakeholder theory, political economy paradigm, resource-based view, institutional theory) and numerous concepts: social performance (e.g. Wood 1991), cause-related marketing (e.g. Varadarajan and Menon, 1988), enviropreneurial marketing (e.g. Menon and Menon 1997), cognitive psychology (Eriksson et al., 2013), and corporate environmentalism (e.g. Banerjee et al., 2003).

Recent literature reviews on sustainability focus on different aspects. For example, Faber et al. (2005) review the conceptual foundations of the sustainability of ‘sustainability’. Glavic and Lukman (2007) review the terminology and definitions of sustainability. Shrivastava and Berger (2010) review principles of sustainability. Guest (2010) reviews sustainability in the context of economics and climate change. Gold et al. (2010) explore the catalytic role of sustainable supply chain management in creation of intra-organizational competitive benefits.

Other recent literature reviews have emphasized sustainability within subject areas. For example, Seuring and Müller (2008) conceptualize a framework of sustainable supply chain management. Ashby et al. (2012) connect supply chain management and sustainability literature. Gimenez and Tachizawa (2012) present a literature review of expanding issues of sustainability to upstream tiers in supply chains.

There are also literature reviews in other subject areas: marketing and management (Chabowski et al., 2011; Leonidou and Leonidou; 2011); corporate social responsibility (Elg and Hultman, 2011; Peloza and Shang, 2011; Vaaland et al., 2008); international business (Kolk and van Tulder, 2010); corporate performance (Goyal et al., 2013); and tourism (Haiyan et al., 2013; Saarinen, 2006; Schianetz et al., 2007).

Sustainability related publications have risen in numbers during the last two decades (Aguinis and Glavas, 2012; Fassin and Van Rossem, 2009). Many of which focus on the effects of globalization and impact on local communities.

SUSTAINABILITY, GLOBALIZATION AND LOCAL COMMUNITIES

Global supply chains are the result of a trend of worldwide economic growth and globalization of industries. Consequently, emphasis has been placed on logistics and transportation activities over long distances (Abbasi and Nilsson, 2012). Businesses operating in the global marketplace face new challenges of sustainability to meet consumer demand, increased competition, and a need for higher efficiency (Cruz, 2013). Low cost levels in developing countries have allowed companies to meet several of these challenges, partly through strengthened procurement activities (Akamp and Müller, 2013). However, companies that source from low cost countries cannot simply reap economic benefits while exploiting developing countries. They also face increased demand for responsibility of their activities in the whole supply chain (Andersen and Skjoett-Larsen, 2009; Seuring and Müller, 2008). Consequently, SCM plays an important strategic role for improving such performance (Lintukangas et al, 2014).

Focusing on the issues with global distances and local differences there are several aspects that come into play. First and foremost, not only geographical distances are long, so are also cultural distances (Lowson, 2001, 2003; Pedersen and Andersen, 2006). These distances need to be taken into account when implementing sustainable practices (Mamic, 2005), which to some extent may require local experience (Cho and Kang, 2001). Companies that do not consider local conditions may face difficulties implementing their standards (Ciliberti et al., 2009). One company determined to deal with local and global issues of business sustainability (i.e. glocal business sustainability) beyond zero is Fairphone that is presented and described in the next section.

METHODOLOGY

In pursuit of the purpose of describing and debate business sustainability beyond zero emissions and neutralized through compensatory performance we apply a two-step process. First we present a case company, Fairphone, which has been selected based on its illustrative purposes (Yin, 2009). The company is therefore used for illustrative purposes here to encapsulate the theme of the paper. The information gathered and citations presented here are all derived and retrieved from their homepage (www.fairphone.com). The methodology is thus not applied to create statistical generalizability, but to provide empirical illustration to the key points advocated in this viewpoint.

The shortcoming of current literature to advocate more aggressive sustainability strategies we draw insights from the case company. It illustrates how it is possible to adopt a more aggressive sustainability agenda, and to constantly push for better sustainability performance. The findings are then used to propose and motivate a new framework for sustainability performance.

The objective is to describe and debate business sustainability beyond zero emissions and neutralized impacts through compensatory performance

EMPIRICAL ILLUSTRATION – THE CASE OF FAIRPHONE

Fairphone is a company producing smart phones. The company strives to maintain a strong profile of being dedicated to business sustainability. The company applies an innovative and unusual business model to monitor and manage its efforts of business sustainability in the marketplace and society. The company communicates on their website that they: *"...change the way products are made... ...putting social values first and opening up the supply chain... ...one step at a time..."*.

Fairphone is currently collecting orders for their second production series of their phone and approximately 18,500 out of 35,000 phones are booked (July 31, 2014). The company's business philosophy is based upon the idea of offering transparency to their business operations. For example, Fairphone writes that they: *"...starting new relationships between people and their products by showing where stuff comes from and how it's made... ...sharing the Fairphone story, so one can make informed decisions about what one buys..."*. The company publishes cost breakdown per phone and supplier lists, and provides personal blog posts about its business sustainability efforts.

Several areas relevant to efforts of business sustainability stand out in Fairphone. For example, the company states about mining that they: *"...believe in conflict-free, fair resources that put people first... ...starting with conflict-free minerals from the Kongo that*

support families, not armed militias...". Conflict minerals are tin, tungsten, tantalum, and gold. Conflict refers to how armed forces are being funded by the trade of these minerals. Workers in conflict mines face both violence and armed guards. Mining can significantly impact the environment around the mines. Chemicals that are either used in, or a by-product of, mining can cause detrimental environmental and social implications, such as erosion, and contamination of soil and water. Fairphone intends to use materials extracted in environmentally and socially acceptable conditions.

Conflict minerals used in smartphones are mined in the Democratic Republic of Congo. However, the country itself exports virtually none of the minerals. Instead thousands of tons are smuggled into Rwanda and Uganda, from where they are exported to the Far East. Minerals from all across the world are smelted, which makes it almost impossible to trace their origin. Moreover, the supply chain of smartphone minerals passes through numerous middlemen reducing traceability and transparency even more. Fairphone has succeeded in the latest smartphone to achieve conflict free tin in their soldering paste, and conflict free tantalum in their capacitors. The company is also engaged in projects aimed at promoting the use of conflict free minerals.

The electronic industry is notorious for its waste, e-waste. Developing countries have difficulties treating e-waste and it is processed in a destructive manner. Plastics, for example, are burned off to salvage the metals. Fairphone claims that: *"...fair products should have an end-of-life phase that is fair to society... ...addressing the full lifespan of mobile phones, including use, reuse and safe recycling... ...believe that our responsibility doesn't end with sales..."*. The company has purchased discarded phones that are disassembled and metals are smelted in modern facilities in Europe. The company wants their net-sustainability impact to be positive. They have not reached all the way yet, but currently they take approximately three phones out of the system for every one they add to it. For example, the company strives to use recycled metals in their products in the future, which puts the environment under less stress.

Fairphone also relates the design issues and say: *"...making phones that are built to last using open, responsible design... ...want consumers to have true ownership of their phones, including how they use and configure them..."*. It is an opposite approach to other companies in the telecom industry that strive to have patents on every detail possible to gain competitive benefits and increased profits in the marketplace.

The company also is concerned about manufacturing and expresses on their website that: *"...factory workers deserve safe conditions, fair wages and worker representation... ...work closely with manufacturers that want to invest in employee wellbeing..."*. It appears to be a sound way of doing business that takes into consideration the local as well as global aspect of business.

Finally, Fairphone highlights that they offer a smartphone with social values and writes that they: *"...open up processes and start a conversation about what is truly fair... ...from conflict-free minerals to fair factory wages... ...making improvements one step at a time... ...purchase supports better ways of doing business that aim to inspire the entire industry..."*. We believe that the company is attempting to do business in an innovative and challenging way that is not often done by other companies in the marketplace.

RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS

Recent literature reviews, as previously presented, compile a large amount of references based upon previous studies and existing theory. However, we argue that they communicate mostly defensive and reactive conclusions and propositions on sustainability issues in the marketplace and society. We contend that what has been found and conceptualized in these reviews is nearsighted and do not push or drive propositions of sustainable development forward through time and across contexts.

While several authors stress the importance and benefit of a stakeholder perspective (e.g. Brower and Mahajan, 2013; Tencati and Zsolnai, 2008; Wolf, 2011), we argue that the most important stakeholder, Planet Earth, is overlooked. Despite that the Earth is the ultimate stakeholder and source of everything on the planet it is ignored (Svensson and Wagner, 2012). Contemporary literature reviews provide far from offensive and proactive concepts and propositions based upon the past to deal with the sustainability of Earth and its life- and eco-systems in the present and for the future. Subsequently, we propose two concepts here: (i) glocal business sustainability; and (ii) performance beyond zero.

(i) Glocal Business Sustainability

Svensson (2008) argues that local practices and global sustainability are interconnected, where the local efforts and practices sum-up the global sustainability. Subsequently, global and local issues of business sustainability, and vice versa, are intertwined and interdependent. Local business sustainability relates to global business sustainability as well as global business sustainability relates to local business sustainability. Likewise, Earth's local and global life- and eco-systems are intertwined and interdependent.

The empirical illustration presented previously based upon the case of Fairphone and their smartphones shows how conflict minerals have negative effects on workers and the environment, and how conflict minerals also support local armed forces. These effects are, through smuggling, low transparency and traceability hidden away from the consumers. The global supply chain structure aids in covering these effects. Moreover, global consumption of electronics produces e-waste, which initially impacts developing countries negatively, but in a longer time frame, also has an adverse impact on global sustainability. A concept of glocal business sustainability therefore is proposed as follows:

Glocal business sustainability refers to the interconnection and interdependence between local and global performance of sustainability issues in relation to Earth's local and global life- and eco-systems across contexts and through time.

There appears to be blinkers affecting and interfering with contemporary conceptualizations and propositions that ignore the glocal complexity of business sustainability across contexts (e.g. markets and societies) and through time (e.g. one generation to the next). Glocal business sustainability is not only needed, but also required to heal and restore the planet and its local and global life- and eco-systems.

Visualize the reality and limitations of the triple bottom line approach (Elkington, 1997 cited in Elkington, 2004) and other concepts that embrace business sustainability performance. Where is the local and global interconnection and interdependence addressed? Why are there no estimates beyond zero emissions (e.g. carbon footprint) or neutralized impacts (e.g. climate neutral or compensatory approaches)? We argue that the real challenge lies in moving from defensive and reactive concepts and performance towards offensive and proactive ones to heal and restore our Planet in general and Earth's life- and eco-systems in particular.

Why limit business sustainability concepts and performance across contexts and through time to zero emissions or neutralized impacts? Most likely, the future demands not only business sustainability concepts and performance beyond compliance, but *beyond zero*!

(ii) Performance Beyond Zero

Why should it be sufficient to only strive towards zero emissions or no impacts on Earth's global life- and eco-systems? Surely this is not easy. Regardless, the Fairphone-case illustrates how it is possible to, at least in some areas, implement offensive and proactive strategies of global business sustainability. The company also shows how it is possible to set goals that are not yet achievable, but work towards them in an honest and transparent fashion.

The defensive and reactive approaches are most likely based upon the assumption that the Earth will heal or restore itself. This is to be defensive and reactive to the challenges involved in the performance of business sustainability. Evidently, the mission of business sustainability performance at the moment should be towards zero emissions or neutralized impacts on Earth, but the vision for the future should go beyond zero emissions and neutralized impacts on Earth's global life- and eco-systems. This would be offensive and proactive approach to deal with the challenges involved in the performance of business sustainability.

We contend that business sustainability performance should go beyond minimizing emissions or neutralizing approaches, but currently resemble a 'negative zero-sum' performance as shown in Figure 1. Business sustainability should strive beyond a 'zero-sum' performance towards 'positive non-zero-sum' performance of global business sustainability – that is, beyond zero across contexts and through time.

Insert figure one about here!

We propose that the introduced and defined concept of global business sustainability here takes performance to a new level. In fact, it is necessary to heal and restore the global sustainability of Earth for the future. The world of business has for a long time used, abused and misused the natural resources available on the planet. Global life- and eco-systems have suffered significant damages worldwide.

Contemporary 'best practice' of business sustainability performance is at a stage of 'negative non-zero-sum' performance – that is, there is still a significant gap towards global business sustainability. There are also challenges ahead to achieve zero emissions and neutralized impacts on Earth's global life- and eco-systems. Subsequently, contemporary efforts and applications of business sustainability are still in early stages of development towards 'zero-sum' performance. Furthermore, they are far from comprehensive regarding global issues of sustainability. Only marginal efforts and applications may be seen as 'positive non-zero-sum' performance, that is, beyond zero!

MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

Contemporary life in the developing and developed worlds of civilizations and its markets and societies depend upon the use of non-renewable natural resources, which reflects non-global business sustainability performance across contexts and through time. For example, recycling of resources contributes to diminish the gap of 'negative non-zero-sum' performance in relation to the point of 'zero-sum' performance. Beyond zero performance requires that renewable resources are used rather than non-renewable ones to achieve a genuine 'positive

non-zero-sum' performance of glocal business sustainability. For both researchers and practitioners it implies that strategies can actually be more aggressive and not content with zero-sum performance. Researchers from several related areas need to contribute to both document and improve the performance of organizations. Organizations, on the other hand, need to be honest and open with the limitations they face so to enable joint efforts to improve performance. While some researchers link economic performance with environmental practices (e.g. Dubey et al., 2013) other researchers present companies that have faced difficulties aligning their business with the TBL (e.g. Eadie and Raffery, 2014). Consequently, different business approaches, such as that of Fairphone, are important to discover alternative modes of conducting business with a sustainability focus.

The dilemma and question arises to what extent it is possible to achieve performance beyond zero of glocal business sustainability in broad and large-scale settings. Evidently, life in developing and developed nations in the world is partly based upon elements that complicate it. Another dilemma and question arises to what extent it is possible to achieve glocal business sustainability performance beyond zero across contexts and through time. We raise the concern whether it is utopic in relation to Earth's glocal life and eco-systems to truly perform beyond zero to establish genuine glocal business sustainability in markets and societies worldwide. Nevertheless, we contend that offensive and proactive performance of business sustainability should be the vision for the future, rather than just defensive and reactive one. It stresses the shortcomings in contemporary negative-zero-sum performance of business sustainability.

CONCLUSIONS

Beyond zero-sum performance appears highly challenging and at first sight potentially utopic, but is there an option or should mankind rely on that Earth's glocal life- and eco-systems heal and restore on their own Mother nature shows remarkable ability to heal and restore itself, if it has not been driven to far beyond non-recovery.

A principal contribution based upon the theme of the current article is that the vision of performance beyond zero is necessary and required to achieve glocal business sustainability in the marketplace and society. Current business sustainability is still a stage of zero-sum oriented performance, though Earth's glocal life- and eco-systems have been used, misused and abused to cause severe damage to them. We argue for the future that it is necessary and required to move beyond zero to heal and restore the negative emissions and impact so far caused. Fortunately, Earth's life- and eco-systems can to a certain extent enable an auto-healing process, but the proper conditions are needed and required to make it happen. Of course, non-renewable resources used cannot be replaced at once, but at least it is possible to strive towards a total use and reuse of renewable resources. It would be offensive and proactive, rather than defensive and reactive. This would make it possible to move glocal business sustainability performance beyond zero!

LIMITATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR THE FUTURE

A major limitation of the current article is the lack of extensive empirical illustrations to glocal business sustainability performance beyond zero. Currently, there are not many possibilities to actually empirically illustrate it, so it offers an opportunity for further research. We believe that there is a huge potential for the future to further assess corporate role models across markets and societies striving for glocal business sustainability performance beyond zero!

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Figure 1: Zero-Sum and Non-Zero-Sum of Glocal Business Sustainability – ‘Performance Beyond Zero’ Positioned.