A unique exchange

In a collegial exchange on September 10, 2015 in Atlanta, GA, Dr. Wayne Lord, founding President of the World Affairs Council of Atlanta, and Mr. Neville Isdell, Chairman of World Wildlife Fund (WWF) and former CEO of The Coca-Cola Company, discussed the role of business in environmental sustainability. Mr. Isdell’s comments, and the event itself, indicate a shift in the business community in the last decade toward wide acceptance of the need for sustainability as a core business value and essential to strategy. The conversation before 150 members of the World Affairs Council of Atlanta and community members encouraged deeper consideration of how to accelerate sustainability efforts ahead of the rate of ecological degradation through NGO partnerships, business leadership, and further discussion.

In his introduction, Dr. Lord described how Mr. Isdell’s distinguished career placed him in a unique position to reflect on business and sustainability. Mr. Isdell reached the pinnacle of international business leading The Coca-Cola Company; and now in retirement leads WWF, one of the best-known environmental NGOs in the world. From these two vantage points, his experience with the partnership between the two organizations, and as a thought leader on “connected capitalism,” Mr. Isdell shared his view of a broad landscape.

Center environment in the sustainability triangle

Revealing a genuine personal connection and commitment to the natural world, Mr. Isdell cited his boyhood in Africa as formative to his ecological ethic. “You feel what the earth has for you, and you want to protect it,” he explained. He shared that his early training as a social worker contributed to his sense of service and the understanding of the connection between environmental and social concerns.

Layer on his business career, and he embodies the sustainability “pyramid”: society, environment, and economy. Notably, he argued that the environmental “point” of the pyramid must be placed at the top, centered between economy and society. Without a sustained environment, he said unequivocally, both economy and society will fail.

In the right direction

Mr. Isdell expressed optimism that the business community had made strides toward the “connected capitalism” that he began promoting at the end of the last decade. One had only to observe the room to see evidence of the shift. The sold-out luncheon with 150 attendees, preceded by an over-full business roundtable was evidence of the mainstream business interest in sustainability.

Ten years ago, Mr. Isdell imagined, a luncheon on sustainability would have attracted only a handful of participants and would have been “an argument” about the value of sustainability efforts for companies in the first place. During this 2015 dialogue, the crowd was serious, engaged, and wore nametags with titles announcing “Chief Sustainability Officers.”
As the next step, Mr. Isdell encouraged businesses to pursue mutually beneficial partnerships with NGOs and to take leadership roles in policy making for sustainability.

NGO partnerships

Mr. Isdell glowed about the partnership between Coca-Cola and WWF as mutually beneficial and successful from a conservation perspective. He advocates for NGO-business partnerships because businesses have “implementing power” – that is, the infrastructure and financial resources – necessary for NGO programs to have large-scale impact.

By partnering with business, particularly international companies with significant local presence, NGOs can ride the wave of existing business operations and development to deliver their programs with higher impact than they could alone. For example, Coca-Cola can build clean water infrastructure for communities with input from WWF while they supply their own resource needs; UPS can use its transportation infrastructure to deliver materials for CARE. Mr. Isdell continues to challenge companies to find creative partnerships like these.

NGO partnerships have a little-cited advantage to business, Mr. Isdell said. In addition to giving companies credibility as ethical brands, close partnerships with NGOs can gain business a seat at the table with other NGOs and governments. In the same way that customers often trust brands who partner with NGOs, he argued, so will governments – local, national, or international – value business’ contributions in discussions on solutions to pressing, global problems.

Business must take a leadership role

Building leadership roles for business is not just a welcome benefit of NGO partnerships, Mr. Isdell said; it is essential and even “becoming required.”

To negotiate the “jigsaw of moving parts” – environment, science, government, NGOs, academia, and business – Mr. Isdell insists that business must take a leadership role in decision-making around sustainability. He outlined the ways in which business can accelerate efforts toward environmental sustainability through his helpful model of “footprint, handprint, and blueprint.”

A company’s “footprint” is the range of resources the company uses for production. Companies should identify their most significant impacts and seek to reduce them. (In Coca-Cola’s case, water is the number one ingredient input, and Coca-Cola addressed water use as its major sustainability effort. In fact, Coca-Cola recently announced it had achieved net-zero water.) Mr. Isdell was clear to differentiate corporate sustainability from corporate philanthropy: corporate sustainability is core to a company’s business model. Corporate philanthropy has its place in promoting sustainability, yet scalable, rapid, and lasting efforts will only come if the sustainability objectives are aligned with the company’s primary purpose and mission.

If the footprint is the company’s direct impact, the “handprint” represents the scope and scale of the supply chain. Through committed and challenging sustainability requirements for suppliers, companies like Coca-Cola can have a major impact beyond their own production. Finally, the “blueprint” is the company’s ability to help craft policy to advance sustainability. While Mr. Isdell supports the regulatory role of government to achieve sustainability, he advocates that businesses need to be a part of crafting those regulations.
What must be done…next?

Mr. Isdell calls for increased business implementation of aggressive sustainability measures that reach across the supply chain; the leveraging of business-NGO partnerships; and reasonable, transparent government regulation. He finds optimism in the possibility of a technological “moonshot” and in the paradigm shift of many developing countries toward sustainability.

As positive about the progress of corporate sustainability as he was, Mr. Isdell was clear that “we are not there yet.” We have not manifested a sufficient reduction in harmful environmental practices or resource use, nor have we significantly enough changed the mix of our energy sources compared with the scale and velocity of detrimental environmental change.

Some have characterized the current state of capitalism and globalization as essentially unsustainable despite efforts like these (for example, Naomi Klein’s *This Changes Everything* and Pope Francis’ encyclical, *Laudato Si*). Contentious as they may be, deeper, more difficult, more overarching questions emerge that move beyond whether a company can pursue sustainability and its bottom line. How do we continue the progress in medicine, food security, and communications brought about by innovation, technology, and capitalism while adapting our practices, assumptions, and expectations in order to save the planet? How do we ensure equity and justice for developing countries as we admit the earth’s finite resources?

Building on a shared, visceral desire to protect the natural and human world, how will we address these questions next?