1. Financing the future

The finance sector plays a critical role in the reallocation and management of capital within the economy and as such has huge potential as a lever for change. Yet how do we cause the finance sector to embed sustainability thinking into its general lending, insurance and investment activities? How can they finance and facilitate the transition to a low carbon sustainable future? What would it take to shift financial capital at scale into climate solutions and natural asset classes? How do we change finance and finance change?

2. Role of business in shaping a sustainable economy

What role can business play in shaping a more sustainable economy? The last thirty years have shown us that our current economic paradigm is not working as well as it could. Even though we have succeeded in lifting many people out of poverty and have seen technological progress unimaginable to previous generations, we are also facing an environmental, social and economic crisis of significant proportions. Since the Second World War, the objective of any society has been to further economic growth, but this has come at the expense of people, the planet and even economic stability. There is a growing consensus within government, business and civil society that a new approach is needed, but still uncertainty as to what that new approach should be. The Group will explore the failures of the current economic paradigm, explore the potential of a new, more sustainable paradigm and define how business can thrive by enabling the transition between the two.

3. “The Future is not what it used to be!”

What does sustainability actually mean? There is currently a spectrum from ‘weak’ to ‘strong’ sustainability. Strong sustainability argues that resources and management alternatives should be conserved for future generations in kind. Weak sustainability is more optimistic about the capacity for future generations to be able to meet their own needs by discovering substitutes for depleted resources. The current view of sustainability for most organisations is weak sustainability. How is this going to change in the future? How do we move to strong sustainability? How will this impact on how strategic decisions are currently made in organisations?

4. Aligning planning and decision-making with sustainability

Conceptual frameworks and definitions of sustainability have proliferated in recent years, and various sectors (for example mining) have undertaken industry-wide processes to articulate more clearly what sustainability means for their business. But how do these understandings of sustainability inform project planning and decision-making, and at what stage of the process? When we develop an investment strategy how can we ensure that more sustainable options are selected over less sustainable ones and that programmes, plans and projects are as sustainable as possible? How sustainable is ‘sustainable enough’? How can we work effectively with stakeholders and communities to deliver sustainable outcomes and a positive legacy from development? Where should the lines of responsibility between business and government be drawn in delivering these outcomes? The group will explore how sustainability is ‘operationalised’ in the context of real world project planning and delivery.

5. The role of business in society

Is the business of business, business, as Milton Freedman wrote? Or should and can business have a higher calling and contribute to society in more ways than simply commercial ones? Can a business be ethical? Can a business be motivated beyond commercial concerns? What is the role of an oil or coal company in dealing with climate change? What is the role of a pharmaceutical company in fighting malaria in poor countries? Can a water company help bring clean water to a developing country? How does a publicly owned company take its shareholders with it if it wants to contribute more to society, or does our model of company structure and shareholder value mean business is pushed to unsustainable actions? The Group can explore any aspects of the role of business in society, researching cases and models.