

Introduction

Behind every book, there is always a story — something that sparked the original idea. In the case of *Landmarks*, it was more a confluence of ideas and timing. As the Cambridge Programme for Sustainability Leadership prepared to celebrate its 20th anniversary in 2008, we found ourselves reflecting on what we were celebrating and how we might view the challenges that lay ahead. We found much to celebrate in how far the sustainability agenda has moved in just two decades.

However, in looking at the challenges that lie ahead, we were struck by the sobering prospect of how much more there is to do, and at the same time by a sense of optimism that all is not lost — that so much can be achieved by a relatively small number of dedicated and committed individuals.

In working with hundreds of leaders from business, the public sector and civil society from around the world, we have been inspired by the genuine desire of so many of them to do the right thing, and by their growing openness to the need for transformational change.

So this book is in part an answer to our question: How did we come so far in such a short time, and is it still a case of ‘too little, too late’?

Back in 1988, the Brundtland Commission had only just introduced its touchstone definition of sustainable development and all the talk was of the ozone hole, with climate change still something that most people didn’t know or care too much about, despite the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) being set up by the UN that same year.

Fast-forward to 2008 and we are awash with codes of conduct, certifiable standards, corporate programmes, industry initiatives, green politicians, triple-bottom-line reports and Oscar-winning documentaries about sustainability. At the same time, many of the global challenges — be they climate change, water depletion, biodiversity loss, bribery and corruption or income inequality — seem if anything to be getting worse rather than better.

Which leads to the second question that served as a catalyst for this book, namely: How can we deepen our understanding of the processes of change — at a societal, sector, organisational and individual level — and how have these acted either in support of, or in opposition to, sustainability? In fact, these are the same issues and questions CPSL has been wrestling with over the past 20 years in its executive education programmes, and it seemed to make sense to capture some of that learning in a publication.

The book illustrates a number of trends:

- It is clear that many of the issues highlighted in the next 20 chapters have moved from the marginal fringes into the mainstream. For example, although the UK Soil Association introduced its organic label in 1967, it took until 2004 before Wal-Mart converted to organic cotton supplies and changed the market irrevocably.

- We have seen a move from general problems to specific solutions. For example, we now talk less about environment, poverty and sustainable development and more about ISO 14001, the Millennium Development Goals and emissions trading. Twenty years ago, the call was for more data and debate; today, it is for more policy and action.
- Business and government has changed from being largely reactive to more proactive. For example, the reaction by the chemicals industry to Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* in the 1960s, Greenpeace's activism in the 1970s and the spate of industrial disasters in the 1980s stands in stark contrast to the approach taken by the Forest Stewardship Council in the 1990s and the Corporate Leaders Group on Climate Change in the 2000s.
- We have also shifted from high-level cross-sector principles to more detailed industry-sector responses. For example, the Sullivan Principles in 1977, the Valdez Principles (now the Ceres Principles) in 1989 and the International Chamber of Commerce (ICC) Business Charter for Sustainable Development in 1991 have given way to the likes of the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) certification scheme, the Equator Principles for project finance and the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative.
- Finally, we have seen a growing consensus on principles and standards. The initial flurry of codes and guidelines seem to have settled around a few core standards, such as the Global Reporting Initiative's Sustainability Reporting Guidelines, the UN Global Compact and Millennium Development Goals, the World Resources Institute's Greenhouse Gas Protocol and the UN Principles for Responsible Investment.

Looking at the events thematically, we notice that change is a long-term process, but sustained momentum is important to reach the necessary tipping points in public opinion, policy response and business action. For example, the global warming greenhouse effect was first discovered by Jean-Baptiste Fourier in 1824, but it is only really in the last three years that climate change has become a top agenda item for the news desks, parliaments and boardrooms of the world.

Likewise, the process of institutionalising globalisation may have begun with the formation of the League of Nations in 1919 and marched behemoth-like onward with Bretton Woods in 1944 and GATT and WTO into the 1990s, but it took the 'Battle of Seattle' in 1999 and subsequent 'anti-globalisation' protests to reopen the debate on what kinds of globalisation and capitalism will create a just and sustainable world.

This book helps tell the story of gathering momentum and shifting agendas. Its message in many ways is simple: the last 20 years have been critical — with significant and increasing responses by business, government and civil society. But all the signs are that our social and environmental problems continue to get worse. So, the next 20 years will be even more important — especially with the narrow 'window of opportunity' on

climate change, poverty alleviation and sustainable development paths for China, India and other developing countries.

The quality of the leadership that we experience and that we offer will determine whether we take the right path as a species — the path to breakdown or the path to breakthrough. Our work at the Cambridge Programme for Sustainability Leadership is based on the belief that breakthrough is possible and that there is everything to play for by devoting our efforts towards working with leaders who are in a position to effect that transformation.

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