

Education for sustainability
The changing role of business
By Richard Welford

It is a great privilege for me to be able to visit Australia from Hong Kong in order to talk to you today about some of my perspectives on the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development and, in particular, the changing role of the private sector in contributing to that. I am particularly pleased to be able to engage with those scholars engaged with the Australian Research Institute for Education for Sustainability (ARIES) who have done such a great job in raising the profile of education and sustainable development in business schools, academia more widely and increasingly, in the business sector.

Any discussion about a strategy for education for sustainable development would be incomplete without considering the role of business and that is my focus here. The reality is that the biggest alleviator of poverty over the last two decades has not been governments, it has not been donor agencies, it has not been intergovernmental organizations, it has not been charities and NGOs working in developing countries. It has been business. In China, in twenty years, we have taken 400 million people out of poverty and a lot of that has been due to the massive private sector inward investment going into that country. The global shift of business to China and South and South East Asia, in particular, and increased private sector investment, matched by local multiplier effects that such economic activity creates, has created jobs, wealth and prosperity for many.

In order to move towards a more sustainable development in the modern world, we have to build the capacity to deliver the significant changes that are required. That requires much more education about sustainable development, but perhaps even more importantly, more education for sustainable development. Capacity building is central. And that means not only educating the managers of the future, but also challenging managers today and pushing education initiatives out into the workforce and along supply chains if we are to make progress.

Simple statistics show that the manufacturing powerhouse of the world is increasingly the Asia Pacific region. This powerhouse is being driven by some well-known brands, but increasingly, local Asian brands as well. My focus for a number of years has been to ask what we can do in this region to deliver sustainable development and one of my conclusions has been the need for good quality education, widely defined.

Increasingly the private sector is interested in education and training that can build capacity for sustainable development. Indeed, it is my view that some businesses are leading business schools in their efforts to deliver sustainable development. More of this later. But although there is some great work going on, the private sector is not usually central to a process of education and we need to consider ways in which business can use their resources and expertise to help to begin a wider engagement with principles of sustainable development.

The process of globalization has therefore brought many benefits along with it. But it has also created new problems and challenges. Our environment is deteriorating at a

faster rate than ever before. Air pollution and climate change pose serious threats to human health. We are using resources faster than ever, even though there are clear indications that many are past their peak production. In many cases economic growth is being cancelled out by the costs of pollution and environmental damage that is occurring.

The globalization of economics has not been translated into the globalized protection of human rights and many countries continue to abuse their own citizens. The benefits of globalization are not evenly distributed and I can still point to abusive sweatshop conditions in many parts of the world that fuel the wealth of already rich corporations and their shareholders. Indeed, many brands still live with accusations of running sweatshops dating back two decades .

But in many parts of Asia the protection of labour is failing because of the failure of the public sector to uphold laws for various reasons. It has often been multinational corporations that have protected workers along supply chains much more effectively than those that have a mandate so to do. The reality is that if you buy products from big brand name companies it is highly unlikely that they will have been made in sweatshops because of their own sophisticated codes of conduct and audit regimes.

Perhaps most disgracefully, however, we still live in a world where poverty exists when it need not. At least twenty percent of the world's population still lives in absolute poverty. But we do need to move beyond a culture of poverty alleviation through aid towards the use of resources to enable people to remove themselves from poverty and one of the keys drivers here has to be enterprise development, entrepreneurship and community-based business initiatives. That, in turn, requires education on economic aspects of sustainable development.

Businesses can and should therefore be involved in the process of education for sustainable development. They have a lot to offer and in many cases actively want to get involved. But businesses cannot work alone. They want to be involved but are often not quite clear who to partner with and who to work with. Businesses have a lot of resources to contribute: Not only money however, but skills, human resources, staff time and technical capacities. Too many civil society organizations look to the private sector only to bank role their activities without really engaging in what might best be achieved when working with the private sector.

On thing that businesses can bring to the process of education for sustainable development is linkage with people. Businesses have customers, their own employees within their own operations and additional labour down supply chains. Educational linkages with those people can significantly help the process of sustainable development. And one thing that business can encourage is what they are best at: business. Socially and environmentally sensitive small business development, grassroots business initiatives, providing basic resources for budding entrepreneurs and helping to upgrade professional skills and capacity can significantly contribute to sustainable development.

The private sector is already making progress on education for sustainable development and I want to illustrate that with a few examples.

Nike's efforts in promoting education amongst women in China has reduced school drop-outs amongst young girls and promoted local community based business development. It has been involved in the promotion of education for reproductive health amongst school children. In Bangladesh it has promoted an educational programme, mobilizing local communities and developing learning centres. It has targeted young vulnerable unmarried girls in promoting self-reliance and independence.

Reebok's commitment to human rights is both well known and highly respected. The company is heavily involved with training and education in order to tackle abuses of human rights including the use of compulsory labour, bonded labour, child labour and promoting a healthy and safe environment.

Adidas has pushed a number of educational initiatives along its supply chain to try to create the capacity to deal with both social and environmental aspects of sustainable development. It has been innovative and has experimented with a number of different models of workplace education and skills development. It has been active in health promotion in the factories from which it sources.

H&M is actively involved with education about the environment and providing environmental information to its own staff and workers along supply chains.

Leading electronics companies such as HP, IBM and Dell are also leaders in professional development that increasingly includes consideration of sustainable development. Their educational initiatives on waste recycling, take-back and return of products is an important ingredient towards delivering sustainable development.

Samsung has over 30 training courses for its staff. But it emphasizes projects on 'training the trainers' so that issues such as work skills, health and safety training and environmental and social responsibility are cascaded out to their staff and along their supply chains.

Sony has for some time been involved in education initiatives around environmental conservation. Factories have partnered with schools and developed eco-camps where children can conduct field studies and learn about the importance of conservation and biodiversity.

Toshiba has pushed out educational messages in its advertising designed to heighten the awareness of environmental issues amongst the public at large. Like many other large companies, it has a stated commitment to education for sustainable development.

Conglomerates such as Unilever have had a huge impact on poverty alleviation through their significant investment in countries such as Indonesia. But they have gone even further in trying to alleviate poverty and much of this involves working with local farmers and communities on skills development, education relating to new technology and the provision of loans for farmers to share the costs of new technology.

Siemens has project promoting gender equality in many parts of Asia. It has been involved in housing and educating street kids and provides scholarships to poor families allowing children to continue their studies.

Natural resource-based companies, such as Shell, Total and BP all have put considerable money into education programmes about conservation and biodiversity and this is an area where the private sector is increasingly active. There is increasingly a recognition that companies need to move from good environmental management practices to begin to embrace the significant challenges in protecting our natural heritage.

Chevron has been involved in innovative community development and education programmes in some of the poorest parts of Asia. In Papua New Guinea, the company works in partnership with WWF to educate people about the need to protect rainforests and develop local skills so that people can live in a way consistent with sustainable development whilst at the same time alleviating poverty.

HSBC has, for a number of years, partnered with NGOs such as Earthwatch here in Australia. And increasingly both businesses and NGOs are seeing the benefits of working together

It is somewhat of an irony, that whilst educators committed to sustainable development see the need to involve the private sector and whilst businesses increasingly want to involve themselves with education for sustainable development, business school educators have failed in most cases to take a lead on sustainable development. Indeed, most business schools seem to operate in a social and environmental vacuum and only a handful have really engaged with issues of sustainable development. Surveys have revealed that a few business schools are doing very innovative work in preparing managers of the future for the challenges of sustainable development. But those same surveys reveal to be that most business schools are shirking their responsibilities in this area.

To be blunt, university business schools, which should be taking a lead in new initiatives for business, are in most cases far behind what businesses are actually doing. Rather than leading best practice in industry most are failing even to follow what many businesses have achieved with environmental management and corporate social responsibility programmes. There needs to be a clear message to the heads of business schools to take sustainable development more seriously. It is nothing short of a disgrace to see the type private sector initiatives I have been talking about here and at the same time see MBA graduates leaving their business schools with little or no knowledge of corporate social responsibility and sustainable development.

And that is why I was prepared to come to Australia to meet with people involved in the ARIES initiatives, despite my partnership with Qantas Airways in contributing to climate change. In ARIES we are seeing some great initiatives. ARIES is trying hard to demonstrate the need for education about and for sustainable development. But not only have they demonstrated this need they have gone some way in showing us all what needs to be done.

In the first part of the ARIES project the Macquarie Graduate School of Management, the University of Technology Sydney, the University of Queensland and the Australian Graduate School of Management have shown us all the benefits of working cooperatively in partnerships for sustainable development. Their work on building capacity for education about and for sustainable development must be recognized as significant, not only in Australia, but within the whole of the Asia-Pacific region and beyond.

These organizations have made a contribution by working together, sharing ideas and identifying ways of producing and sharing resources. Strong partnerships with industry have demonstrated to students the need for skills development for sustainable development.

As an academic I value good, meaningful, relevant research. And the work of ARIES, developing research projects that are engaging people in critical thinking and reflection is exactly what we need. The emphasis on action research, engaging with the real challenges linking education with the achievement of sustainable development is precisely what we need.

Of course, there is still more to be done and one of the reasons I am here is to discuss some of the directions for the future. My own priorities are very much in line with the plans that ARIES has developed. There is a need to develop more teaching materials. I think we need to develop good cases studies containing both positive and negative lessons. My own work on case studies on companies such as Newmont, Freeport, Disney and Coca-Cola show me that however strong a commitment there might be to sustainability, operationalizing that on the ground is extremely difficult.

But good case studies and other teaching materials will involve further learning for us all about education for sustainability. This will require critical thinking, reflection and envisioning. We need to think hard about what sustainable development means and how businesses contribute to that. But good teaching materials will come out of good action-based research.

In my work at Hong Kong University and with CSR Asia have worked with a number of businesses and other organizations interested in education and building capacity down their supply chains. We must not forget that ongoing vocational education is an important part of achieving sustainable development. We are currently involved in programmes in factories in China, working with German based consultancy company TUV on a project called FIT5 that involves education in the workplace that creates simultaneous economic, environmental and social benefits to companies and their communities, thus contributing to sustainable development.

But cases and examples of what works well is not enough in itself. There is also a need to critically examine actual and potential barriers to change. For me, many business schools are too full of self-important academics with entrenched attitudes, narrow disciplines and out-dated modes of teaching, to make a difference. We need not only to challenge such situations but also show how to resolve them. If business schools still think sustainable development is not relevant to their teaching commitment then we should ask them why so many private sector organizations are now doing so much.

These are all issues being tackled by ARIES and I wish them every success. In the future the core business schools will be joined by the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, the Australian National University and Curtin Graduate School of Business in establishing even stronger partnerships in building education for sustainable development.

But I hope that lessons learned from ARIES can be spread even more widely. We need to pull more stakeholders into the process of education about and for sustainable development. We need to extend our geographical coverage and Australia could make a significant contribution by extending the ARIES work beyond Australia. We desperately need progress on sustainable development in the Asia Pacific region and projects such as this have a big role to play.

Sustainable development is first and foremost a development concept and it is essentially about making the quality of lives of human beings better in the context of protecting our environment and creating better societies. The role of business in that process is crucial. But if we are to get the message of sustainable development widely heard then we need to think hard about education over the next ten years. I would like to encourage you all to celebrate the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development and join with us in creating some new and exciting business-based educational initiatives.