Sharing Responsibility for a Sustainable Future

An essay by Ruth Lorensson, 3 Jan 2023

> *"You cannot escape the responsibility of tomorrow by evading it today."* – Abraham Lincoln
>
> Critically evaluate this statement by considering the notion of responsibility and the relative roles of business, governments and society in general in assuming responsibility for a more sustainable future.

Introduction: The Concept of Responsibility

As a human concept, responsibility is rooted in our understanding of morals, philosophical ethics, as well as legislation, policies, and laws (Baumggrtner, Petersen and Schiller, 2018). Our immediate sense of responsibility recognizes that our actions have consequences, cause impact, and that we as humans must answer for them. Furthermore, the term is used casually to describe or endorse a person who is reliable or trustworthy (Baumgrtner, Petersen and Schiller, 2018).

While this is a decent basic explanation of the term, it does not explain the complexities involved in assuming responsibility or the dynamics associated with shared responsibility. There is much historical debate about how we define normative responsibility (Chell et al., 2014) and what our shared conventions and norms are.

The term responsibility was first recorded in the 13th century using the Latin verb 'respondere' to convey the meaning of 'to respond'. Until the mid-1600s, this noun had no meaning of being held responsible for one's actions (www.macmillandictionaryblog.com, n.d.).

It was during the Enlightenment in the 1800s that the modern philosophical concept of responsibility came into being, mainly dealing with philosophical debates pertaining to

politics and ethics (Baumgärtner, Petersen, Schiller, 2018). With Kant's contribution, a whole distinct area of normative ethics emerged called deontology (Bowie, 2017), in which decisions are made based more on social duty than on potential consequences. In Kant's view, there are universal moral principles (something Kant called a categorical imperative) that apply to every individual, regardless of the context in which they may find themselves. In Kantian ethics, the categorical imperative is the most critical factor for ethical decision-making, challenging the utilitarian normative ethical system that bases itself on consequences (Chell et al., 2014).

As the industrial revolution progressed, questions around responsibility, especially in business and politics, came to the forefront.

Responsibility for a Sustainable Future Emerges

During the twentieth century, the concept of responsibility gained a lot of traction and the challenges associated with it became increasingly relevant as the century progressed. Increasingly, people worldwide became aware of some of the long-lasting detrimental impacts our actions were having on populations, the economy, and the planet.

In 1985 the world was shocked by the discovery of a hole in the ozone layer (Walker, 2022), linked to *"the use of a human-made compound called chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) used in aerosols and cooling devices"* (Walker, 2022). With the ripples of concern spreading around the globe and projections of an *"uninhabitable planet by 2050"*, governments, industries, and individuals stepped up to change this outcome by adhering to the Montreal Protocol adopted by developed and developing countries in 1987 (Walker, 2022).

The last thirty years of the twentieth century were a time of growing interest in issues dealing with sustainability. In part, this was due to the fact that the world was witnessing a number of ecological disasters and the emergence of sociocultural shifts at the same time. Throughout the 1980s, as technology advanced, global news outlets spread, and the internet was born in 1981 (Board of Regents of the University System of Georgia, 2019), the irresponsible actions of industry, consumption, and globalization were increasingly on display for the world to see.

Raising the Bar for Normative Responsibility

The responsibilities of people in previous generations that were viewed as social norms, such as a parent's responsibility for his/her child's safety and welfare, have changed (Genetics et al., n.d.). They have been expanded now to include global and intergenerational considerations (Encyclopedia Britannica, n.d.). In the face of the facts, today's world cannot ignore the consequences of consuming products that violate human rights around the world. It has to reckon with the implications of manufacturing products that are disposed of in landfills, or using fuels that emit greenhouse gases. There is also the issue of weighing up the ethical ramifications of industries that contribute to the deforestation of the terrestrial environment as part of the process. These are just a few examples of the way that we need to expand our understanding of the responsibilities we have for global and intergenerational sustainability issues. International governments, industries, businesses, and individuals have all faced new challenges as a result of this.

Lincoln's quote captures remarkably well the dilemmas and tensions facing individuals, businesses, and nations today as we face unprecedented sustainability challenges in the years ahead. It addresses two hot topics of debate. The first is the assumption of our shared normative responsibility. Taking a postmodern or virtue ethic to heart (Chell et al., 2014) is not enough when it comes to dealing with the sustainability of the present and future — there is clearly some form of responsibility that all human beings, institutions and international communities must take on when it comes to this issue. How to take that responsibility seriously and what that responsibility is are the questions. Second, as human beings, we owe future generations something. According to intergenerational ethics, we have an ethical obligation to ensure that future generations of people also have a healthy lifestyle, a livable environment, and a standard of living. The question of whether humanity owes a duty of care to future generations is debated by some (Encyclopedia Britannica, n.d.), but most ethicists consider this to be a serious topic for discussion.

Increasingly, research is revealing the detrimental effects of current lifestyle choices on our planet, raising the stakes for normative responsibility. In light of a sustainable future that many believe is attainable, the responsibility we take for people, profits, and the planet has never been more critical. The challenges are particularly relevant to global governments in balancing their responsibilities for Global Goals. They are also relevant

to businesses in dealing with corporate social responsibility (CSR), and society as a whole as lifestyle, consumption, and technology change.

Responsibility for Sustainability in International Relations

Sustainability challenges have profound implications for national and international law, policy, and objectives. With nations increasingly embracing sustainable development, it is even more crucial to work together cooperatively through international relations to achieve global sustainability (TED, 2015).

There is no doubt that the United Nations (UN) is one of the most significant institutions with worldwide influence. With its overarching vision *"of peace, dignity, and equality for all on a healthy planet,"* the UN has laid the foundation for nations around the world to work together for a sustainable future (United Nations, 1945). In 2015, the UN adopted 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), also *"known as Global Goals"* (UNDP, 2022) with the hope to *"end poverty"* and *"protect the planet"* by the year 2030.

The UN's leadership and nations' efforts to achieve these goals are commendable. We appear to be on the right track if we keep moving at the pace we have set for ourselves. Nevertheless, assuming that this international endeavor would not come with challenges is naive (Erskine, 2003). For the SDG's to be achieved, there are a number of significant barriers that must be overcome. In addition to the complexities and dynamics of international relations, we live in an unpredictable world.

Recently, the COVID Pandemic and the war in Ukraine are two examples of unforeseen international disasters that have imperiled the progress of the SDG's. As stated in the sustainable development goals report (www.un.org, n.d.), *"over four years of progress toward the eradication of poverty were wiped out by the COVID-19 pandemic and 93 million people were pushed into extreme poverty as a result."* It was also stated that *"the war in Ukraine is creating one of the largest refugee crises in modern history."* As a result of the conflict, over *"100 million people have been displaced"*. There is now a quarter of the world's population living in countries that have been affected by armed conflict (www.un.org, n.d.).

To add to this, there are challenges that come along with different countries working together. Data deprivation, prioritization of goals and accountability are three such challenges (ye, 2018). Feng Ye in his blog, "*Three Challenges of the Sustainability Goals"*, points out the significant lack of or holes in reliable poverty data. He writes "*If it*

is not known how many people are impoverished or which groups are the most vulnerable to economic adversity, it is not possible to act effectively against poverty. Furthermore, it would not be possible to know how much progress is made over time and, more importantly, which policies worked." In addition to this, he also discussed the difficulties that nations are encountering with regard to the vague directions given to them concerning how to prioritize global goals and how to establish accountability for those goals (Ye, 2018).

Even though there are very real obstacles to achieving the Global Goals, progress reports continue to be optimistic. With the recent setbacks caused by the COVID Pandemic and the war in Ukraine there is increasing urgency to keep on track. The Secretary-General of the United Nations, António Guterres in the 2022 report said *"We must rise higher to rescue the Sustainable Development Goals – and stay true to our promise of a world of peace, dignity and prosperity on a healthy planet."* (www.un.org, n.d.).

Across the globe, governments and political institutions have taken on substantial responsibilities, but they cannot bear the burden alone. It is critical for the business community as well as society at large to play a role as we work together to adapt our thinking as a whole.

Corporate Social Responsibility in Business

In recent years, corporate social responsibility (CSR) has become a major topic of discussion in the business world (Ghoneim, n.d.). There is a growing expectation that corporations should adopt sustainability strategies in addition to generating revenue. This is in order to add value to society, and to ensure the company is profitable in the long run.

It is critical to know that there is a mixed opinion on this topic (Kielmas, 2019) - while many people view corporate social responsibility as a very important aspect of doing business in the 21st century, others view it as a distraction from what they believe is the main responsibility of a business - generating profits.

On one side of this debate, there are advocates of corporate social responsibility. As a result of adopting the accounting framework of *"the triple bottom line"* (Millar, 2020), which measures the success of a company by analyzing profit, people and the environment, they adhere to the belief that the purpose of a business is to be a source

of value for society. Profit generation will be part of this, but not exclusive. A growing body of evidence suggests that this approach can contribute to the success of long-term business and that companies can "*do well by doing good"* Millar, 2020).

As a result of their purpose-driven nature, these companies have wisely considered their stakeholders as well as their shareholders, and recent research demonstrates the willingness of consumers to prioritize sustainable products. For example, IBM's recent survey found that "49% of consumers paid a premium—an average of 59% more—for products labeled as sustainable or socially responsible" (IBM, n.d.).

In the past few years, there have been a number of big brands who have adopted corporate social responsibility. Moreover, there have been a number of social entrepreneurs who have made a significant impact on the triple bottom line of their organizations. As they lead the way, these companies are showing what is possible when businesses adopt CSR as an approach.

For example, Lulu Lemon, a clothing company in California, has taken bold steps towards investing in alternative materials. Among the measures that the company has taken include switching to plant-based dyes instead of synthetic dyes, and investing *"in the bioengineering company Genomatica to find effective ways to create plant-based fabrics such as plant-based nylon"* (Clendaniel, 2022).

Another example is Warby Parker, an eyewear brand, was founded in February 2010 by Dave Gilboa and Neil Blumenthal. Gilboa and Blumenthal started out as social entrepreneurs whose business model centered on corporate social responsibility (www.youtube.com, n.d.). Their purpose was to add value to society by addressing the problem of affordable and accessible eyewear. According to their website (Warby Parker, n.d.) there are over 703 million people worldwide who do not have access to eyewear and as a result, these people are 35% less productive at their jobs because of their lack of eyewear. With the help of worldwide partners, Warby Parker has been able to offer over ten million sets of eyeglasses to people in need, working with local economies, through *"their buy a pair, give a pair"* program.

With such companies as Lulu Lemon, Warby Parker, and a whole host of others leading the way, we are demonstrating a solution based on a sustainable model of business. This solution demonstrates care for profits, people, and the environment as they move forward.

Those who oppose corporate social responsibility are on the other end of the spectrum when it comes to this debate. In their view, businesses should focus primarily on making a profit, and CSR activities should be viewed as a distraction or even a cost.

As part of a debate held by Oxford SBS on social responsibility in business (Oxford MBA Debate: Social Responsibility in Business, 2016), MBA students and faculty members debated whether a business has only one responsibility: earning profit, which is based on Milton Friedman's famous quote.

In his original article titled *"'The Social Responsibility Of Business Is to Increase Its Profits"* published in the New York Times in 1970, Friedman argues that *"There is one and only one social responsibility of business–to use its resources and engage in activities designed to increase its profits so long as it stays within the rules of the game, which is to say, engages in open and free competition without deception or fraud."* (Friedman, 1970).

Friedman's article was supported by three main arguments in the Oxford SBS debate. These arguments are similar in nature to the positions taken by those opposed to corporate social responsibility (CSR) in the modern business world.

The first issue that was brought to the floor is that CSR is expensive to implement and the cost ultimately falls on consumers. Secondly, it was argued business leaders are not trained to solve social problems around the world. Often, businesses lack the skills necessary to provide the most effective solution, so it is argued that it's better to keep them focused on their strengths (making money) and leave social problems to specialist agencies. As a final point, the proposition contended that the existence of CSR programs could allow corporations to avoid regulations resulting in greenwashing as a result.

In the debate on CSR in business, greenwashing is a concern raised by both sides. A greenwashing act or practice is defined in the as "*the act or practice of making a product, policy, activity, etc., appear to be more environmentally friendly than they really are."* (www.merriam-webster.com, n.d.). Those companies that have "*product-level claims with environmental labeling"* (de Freitas Netto et al., 2020), or "*firm-level nature-evoked executional elements in sustainability reports" (de Freitas Netto et al., 2020)* but do not have any evidence of positive environmental impact are unethically profiting from a facade of corporate social responsibility.

A member of the audience of the Oxford SBS debate challenged the debaters to apply the example of Toms Shoes to demonstrate the potential nuances of greenwashing at worst and a lack of skills existing in business for social change at a minimum. Upon first glance, Toms Shoes can seem like a shining example of a social enterprise with a compelling mission aimed at supplying shoes to poorer communities, a mission that is driven by a sense of purpose and has purpose-driven aims. With the help of its website and marketing campaigns, the company has made headway in winning the trust of environmentally conscious consumers. As the company claims on their website, they have made a positive impact on "*over 100,000,000 lives to date"* (TOMS, 2022). However, Toms' sustainability rating is considered 'very poor' by some critics. For example, "*Good On You"* (directory.goodonyou.eco, n.d.), a directory which rates sustainable and ethical fashion brands rates Toms Shoes as 'not good enough' when it comes to their overall sustainability score. Among the complaints are issues that Toms Shoes does not take adequate steps to ensure the payment of a living wage for their workers. In addition, they do not have any worker empowerment initiatives. Moreover, other critics of Toms Shoes have pointed out that there are significant problems with the company's model of giving away shoes. They assert that the company's approach to free products and its lack of partnerships with local communities almost always negatively impacts the local economy in the long run (Anon, n.d.).

It goes without saying that the role of business in assuming responsibility for a sustainable future is a complex debate - we learn lessons along the way on how a business can be both socially and financially responsible whilst also being successful in the marketplace. Taking the assumption that all businesses exist solely to make money is a mistake in my opinion. This is a somewhat limited view of what businesses can offer. There is no doubt that most entrepreneurs, business owners, and people in the nonprofit sector are motivated by a desire to add value to society through their innovative inventions, products, and services (www.youtube.com, n.d.). Having said that, I also think it would be unwise to disregard the concerns raised by opponents of CSR. For businesses to play an active role and fulfill their responsibilities effectively to make the world a better place, they need to address these issues.

Society's Responsibility for a Sustainable Future

It is clear that governments and the corporate world are striving to take responsibility for ensuring a sustainable future. However, the responsibility for bringing about those changes still remains with society at large. Individuals contribute to sustainability by understanding that they have a role to play and by taking that role seriously. This involves consumers making informed choices about the products they buy. It involves changing their lifestyle by traveling less, consuming less meat, reviewing their own carbon footprint, as well as holding corporations and government policies accountable for their actions.

In a recent forum discussion in my MBA Sustainability Leadership course with UWTSD, the topic was being discussed on how we can make the world a better place by the year 2030. My fellow student Kayla Halmaghi (2023) wrote, *"It can be argued that government and business have the most power to make positive and meaningful strides toward increased social progress, yet, it is hard for society to hold those groups accountable if they are not aware of the global goals. The global goals allow society to have a benchmark of social performance standards to track progress and hold responsible parties accountable."*

I believe that she raises some valid points and tensions regarding the dynamics of influence, accountability, and challenges that the general population encounters when it comes to interacting with the role of government in sustaining the planet.

Societies all over the world are facing some very real challenges when it comes to embracing their role as sustainability stakeholders. It is pertinent to keep in mind that cultural norms which have formed an ideology differ greatly from one nation to the next. For example, taking the case of Sweden, the progressive nature of the country, as well as the meaning of the word "Lagom" embedded in its culture, positions Sweden differently from other nations when it comes to responding to sustainability (Henriksson and Weidman Grunewald, 2020). It is particularly true in western nations that we have experienced the issue of fake news and the politicization of environmental issues. Science-based messages have been difficult to communicate, which is key to empowering the public. And then there are the daily pressures of life. Financial

hardships, stressful relationships, work-life balance all compete for attention - the prioritization of sustainability responsibility can easily be thwarted.

Despite these challenges, we are seeing signs of change. Younger generations are at the forefront of the sustainability movement and are demanding action, not sentiments of hope, as they take the lead on sustainability (University of California, 2019). Furthermore, consumers are increasingly looking for sustainable products to purchase and adopting sustainable practices (IBM, n.d.).

Conclusion

To secure a sustainable future for the planet will involve the continued uptake of responsibility by international governments, the business communities around the world and the general population. This is a shared endeavor. In the face of a pressing need for change, there is always a temptation to delay and procrastinate. Additionally, there are a number of other areas of sustainability strategies that require further consideration and reworking so that our efforts will have the greatest impact possible. There is no doubt that this is an incredible challenge for us as we continue on our path to creating a better world for all people.

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