

The Collective Role and Responsibility of Society in Environmental Sustainability

Abraham Lincoln stated that “you cannot escape the responsibility of tomorrow by evading it today”. This statement highlights the need for business, government, and individual members of society to take responsibility for their actions now in order to protect the environment and future generations. To understand Lincoln’s statement as it relates to environmental sustainability, it is important to understand the role that mankind plays in climate change and what can be done to create progress.

The following statement was shared at the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment that took place in Sweden in 1972. This statement is an urgent call to action for humans to understand and take accountability for their impact on the environment.

A point has been reached in history when we must shape our actions throughout the world with a more prudent care for their environmental consequences. Through ignorance or indifference we can do massive and irreversible harm to the earthly environment on which our life and well being depend. Conversely, through fuller knowledge and wiser action, we can achieve for ourselves and our posterity a better life in an environment more in keeping with human needs and hopes... To defend and improve the human environment for present and future generations has become an imperative goal for mankind (Du Pisani, 2006, p. 91-92).

With documented environmental awareness dating back many centuries, the need for action is not a new concept. In the fifth century, Plato was already discussing environmental harm caused by humans (Du Pisani, 2006, p. 85). In 1962, Rachel Carson published the book *Silent Spring* to expose the dangers of pesticides on the environment. The evidence of imminent danger and risk brought forth in this book caused fear and anger amongst the public. It even led to government action, with some countries putting legislation in place to cut back on pesticide use (Pimentel, 2012, p. 1). However, even with the evidence of danger to humans and the environment, it has been over 60 years since Carson’s book and pesticides are still widely used today. This relates to the broader topic of environmental sustainability. Despite growing evidence and support, many pockets of society choose not to believe in or care about the role that humans play in climate change.

Following centuries of awareness about environmental sustainability, why is climate change still not more widely accepted and understood by business, governments, and society? Understanding ethics can help explain this. We all must make ethical decisions about how we live our life and what we value, therefore,

“the question is, at root, about how we think we should live and different people have a myriad of different ideas about this. The distinctive task of ethics is to bring some clarity and order to these ideas” (Hayward, 2012). Society as a whole is not rowing in the same direction in relation to environmental sustainability. Some members of society are more accepting of the role humans play in harming the environment, and therefore, they are more accepting of their responsibility to take action in protecting the environment. This applies to business, governments, and individual members of society.

How do we get society to take accountability for their present actions and start rowing in the same direction towards a more environmentally sustainable future? The United Nations aims to address this through their 17 Sustainable Development Goals. These goals serve as an urgent call to action for the world to come together for the wellbeing of humans and the environment. According to the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs website, there are 169 target goals within the 17 overall goals. The goals were agreed upon by all members of the United Nations in 2015, which includes developed and less developed countries. The resources needed to achieve the goals are substantial. Every country cannot afford to implement the actions needed to achieve the targets. As explained by the United Nations, they have prioritized giving more aid to developing or less developed countries:

The SDGs target developing or less developed countries by urging richer nations to support programmes in the less deprived or developed regions. More specifically, the SDGs were designed to, among other things, provide a basis to end poverty, eradicate hunger, protect the planet, and improve the quality of life in the world, ensuring a balance is achieved between social, economic, and environmental sustainability. These challenges are more pressing in the least developed countries, which are precisely those countries lacking the (financial) resources to implement the necessary changes’ (Swart, Filho, Dinis, Ruiz-de-Maya, Doni, Eustachio, Paço, 2022).

The sustainability challenges facing society require abundant resources and effort from a research, development and execution perspective. Less developed countries who struggle with everyday quality of life challenges cannot devote the needed money, technology and political resources to address sustainability challenges. Businesses and governments from developed countries have a responsibility to support less developed countries. The United Nations SDGs provide a framework for doing so in a way that fosters global alignment and partnership efforts spread across government, business, social entrepreneurship, and individual members of society. Given that society as a whole has avoided the warning signs of climate change and not taken responsibility for their role in

environmental harm, the amount of effort and resources will only grow as more time passes. Inaction now will create a more challenging and burdensome future.

Government plays a role in propelling business and individual members of society towards being more environmentally sustainable. Governing bodies have many tools at their disposal to support, compel and force individuals and businesses to adopt environmentally sustainable practices. Even if individual members of society and businesses know that they are harming the environment and want to take responsibility, they may not know how to take action or have the means to adapt. Governments can provide society with more awareness and resources to take accountability for environmental sustainability:

The Government can help to create an environment that is conducive to effective, efficient and equitable adaptation by:

- providing and promoting information on the future climate;
- supporting coordination at local and regional levels;
- devising a framework that embeds consistent policy targets and incentives across different levels of government, while promoting coordination; and
- directly providing or funding adaptation

The aim is to provide decision makers with the appropriate incentives to incorporate adaptation into their strategies and processes (Cimato & Mullan, 2010, p. 22).

With this type of environment enabled by the government, society is better equipped and more likely to practice and believe in environmental sustainability. Governments can help lead the way for society by building adaptive capacity. Adaptive capacity allows current societal systems to adjust to climate change and adopt practices and principles that lead to innovation and mitigate harm to the environment and mankind. Society's ability to do this "depends on a number of factors, including socio-economic and cultural settings, institutional and policy contexts" (Cimato & Mullan, 2010, p. 23).

The UK government launched the Climate Impacts Programme to help society become more adaptable to climate change. By providing guidance and resources to incorporate environmentalism into the current frameworks of society in the UK, this programme aims to generate partnerships and awareness at a regional and local level. In order to combat climate change, a wide range of efforts is required across society. According to Bertolotti & Catellani (2014, p. 1) 'the efforts required to effectively combat global warming have serious and unprecedented scope, ranging from small changes in individual lifestyle, such as reducing energy

consumption at home, to large-scale changes to the present economic system". It can be daunting for people to know where to start in understanding how and why they need to adapt to climate change. With effective strategy and execution, governments can help incentivize individual members of society and business to take action and responsibility for their part in achieving widespread progress towards a more sustainable future.

In addition to leading the way by providing support and resources, governments can take responsibility for the actions of society and business by implementing legislation to protect the environment. The European Union recently agreed to implement a carbon tax on its borders. The Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism is the first legislation of this kind in the world. By requiring foreign carbon importers to cover the cost for their emissions, this legislation helps the Europe Union towards their goal of cutting their carbon emissions to net zero by 2025. The European Union is also setting up a Social Climate Fund of up to 65 billion euros to assist businesses and vulnerable members of society during the transition to this new policy (Hancock & Espinoza, 2022). The Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism is an example of the government stepping in to legislate the acts of businesses and enforcing the pursuit of a more environmentally sustainable future.

The state of California recently announced that they will ban the sale of gas-powered cars by 2035. As this will have a drastic impact on automotive manufacturers and consumers, the state believes they have found a realistic compromise of timing and restrictions based on where the industry, supply chain and production facilities are at (Shepardson, 2022). Similarly, the city of Paris announced a ban to help curb carbon emissions in the metropolitan area. According to RFI (2022), "heavily polluting diesel vehicles have been banned from low-emissions zones in the greater Paris region as part of new rules that took effect". While some could argue the restrictions in California and Paris allow too long of a timeline and are not strict enough, these governing bodies are setting a new precedent for cities, states and countries to follow. It is also a wake up call for businesses to take a proactive approach to adopting environmental practices before they are legislatively forced to do so. Governments have the power to help push business and society forward to adapt and embrace a more environmentally sustainable future.

Just as the government holds power to make a big impact on environmental sustainability, businesses are in a prime position to take responsibility for creating a more sustainable future. According to McKinsey's 2020 Global Survey, 83% of executive leaders believe that environmental, social, and governance (ESG) practices will drive more shareholder value in five years than they do now, which shows a trend that businesses are buying into the belief of environmental sustainability in business (Delevingne, Gründler, Kane, Koller, 2020). It is hard to

ignore the supporting evidence that businesses who adopt strong ESG practices now are setting themselves up for a better future.

The Danish company, Ørsted, was named the world's most sustainable company in 2020 by Corporate Knights (Scott, 2020). The company was originally founded as Danish Oil and Natural Gas and as their name suggests, they operated in the coal and gas space. According to the Ørsted company website, they were previously one of the largest and most coal-dependent companies in Europe, which makes their incredible transformation even more drastic and impactful. With increased scrutiny on oil and gas companies from consumers and government due to climate change, Ørsted took this challenge as an opportunity to completely transform their business away from coal and oil. Ørsted's business is now completely focused on green energy through the development, construction and operations of offshore and onshore wind farms, solar farms, and energy storage facilities. With legislation and consumer demand moving away from carbon emissions, companies that embrace green energy are putting themselves in a lucrative position ahead of competitors. "Sustainability does not mean sacrificing profits or putting success on the back burner. On the contrary, the reward is resilience" (Makridou, 2022).

There is an evident need for energy companies to overhaul their traditional business models. Recent research has shown a "staggering 9% global jump in methane emissions since the last decade (from 2010-2020), as emissions from fossil fuels and agricultural sources continue to increase. Overall socio-economic development trajectories also suggest higher global emissions inventories over the next decade" (Abraham-Dukuma, 2021). By realizing this early and making drastic changes to their entire business model, Ørsted has put themselves in a lucrative position compared to their competitors. They are now poised as an industry leader in clean energy, while others are playing catch up to gain a piece of the sizable market share and profits that Ørsted is enjoying. However, rather than being content with their own transformation, Ørsted is driven to help other companies make the transition to become more environmentally sustainable. Regarding their mission and sense of duty, Ørsted CEO, Mads Nipper, made the following statement:

Every company must transition to a sustainable business model to contribute to the fight against climate change – and to stay in business. The Ørsted transformation is not a 'one size fits all', and our learnings may not be applicable in all companies, but I hope that by sharing our learnings and insights on how we've been able to transform and perform at the same time, we can help inspire other companies to engage in a faster green transformation (Das, 2021).

Ørsted's transformation is an example that companies can take responsibility for their actions all while increasing their longevity and profits. Their transformation has led to "industry-leading returns to its investors and has more than quadrupled its market capitalization since its IPO in 2016" (Das, 2021). Adopting strong ESG business practices does not have to come at the cost of profit.

While Ørsted was able to successfully transform their business, there are business leaders who are reluctant to prioritize and place environmental sustainability as a central part of their business. It can seem daunting and costly to make drastic business changes, however, "academic research and business experience point to quite the opposite. Embedded sustainability efforts clearly result in a positive impact on business performance" (Whelan & Fink, 2016). When companies go through a learning curve and change management process to improve their sustainability standards, it can foster innovation and lead to improved risk mitigation. The company 3M has prioritized sustainability as a central part of their business through their "Pollution Prevention Pays" project (Whelan & Fink, 2016). They reformulated their products and processes to eliminate waste and pollution. While this project required additional time, effort and money, their innovation journey has given them better technology and a more adaptable and sustainable business model.

Many of the current ways of doing business are not working. Current business practices are not sustainable and they are causing harm to humans and the environment. As explained by the Forum for the Future organization, "we need to change these systems to make them more resilient, more equitable and able to continue into the future" (Draper, 2015). This change starts with creating new and innovative ideas. Draper outlines six steps to create a big shift in our current societal systems, which is needed in order to improve the environment for present and future generations of mankind. Progress cannot happen without change.

Social entrepreneurs are working to achieve change by creating businesses that have a positive impact on society. While the definition and understanding of social entrepreneurship varies, it is understood that social entrepreneurship can serve as a way to overcome complex social challenges through innovation (Peredo & McLean, 2006). Typically driven by a mission, social entrepreneurs can help tackle societal challenges by employing principles and practices from for-profit businesses through innovation.

Khethworks is a social enterprise based in India, working to create affordable and reliable solar-powered irrigation for approximately 30 million farmers in India. Within the current system, 60 percent of the groundwater that could be re-used goes to waste and farmers are lacking reliable access to electricity to tend to their

agricultural land (Nemeth, 2021). By installing their solar pump in these communities, Khethworks is able to provide farmers with a reliable electrical and water source. Rather than relying on monsoon rains for water and an expensive fuel pump for power, this company is providing their end users with sustainable practices that improve their livelihood and the environment. The Khethworks solar-powered irrigation system empowers land owners to grow crops throughout the year by using sustainable practices, which increases their livelihood and food production. “When a farmer switches from renting diesel and kerosene to using Khethworks’ system, they can increase annual profits by 170 percent” (Nemeth, 2021). As evidenced from the work of Khethworks, social entrepreneurship is a powerful resource to tackle complex challenges within society. The innovation and progress that comes from their missions can help society understand and accept responsibility for doing our part to create a better world.

While government and business have a large presence in society and the potential to make a big impact by taking responsibility for the part they play in environmental harm, individual members of society can also have a large collective impact. H.E. Luccock once said “No one can whistle a symphony. It takes a whole orchestra to play it”. Small individual efforts may seem insignificant, however, when those efforts are done as a collective they can add up to have a profound impact. In relation to environmental sustainability, individual members of society need to take responsibility for their actions that can harm the planet and mankind. By achieving widespread acceptance and accountability, individual members of society can hold the government and businesses more accountable for their actions.

As stated by Lincoln, “you cannot escape the responsibility of tomorrow by evading it today”. It is vital for all members of society to take responsibility for their actions now in order to protect the environment for future generations. The environmental sustainability challenges facing society cannot be solved alone. The responsibility and impact of government, business and individual members of society is interconnected and interdependent. The potential impact of widespread environmental efforts can have a meaningful and positive impact, but it takes widespread and collective accountability to achieve progress and change. Everyone must do their part to accept responsibility for their individual and collective role in creating a more sustainable society for future generations.

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