

Taking sustainability to the corners of the earth

Challenges and opportunities of the way forward

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Abstract

Doing business in developing countries requires a thorough understanding not only of the challenges, but also of the differences of opinion that shapes people's attitudes and choices. Working in developing countries certainly brings with it a number of challenges such as an uncertain economic environment, poverty and low urban investment, high levels of inequity and lack of capacity. However, the greatest barriers presented to the agents of the industrialised nations who want to work in developing countries, is the mistrust of "Western" developmental agendas and the continuing exploitation of developing country resources to the economic benefit of the developed nations without a fair sharing of these benefits. In this context, the problem of encouraging sustainable development will not be solved by the assumption that sustainability is a way of thinking that needs to be spread from the developed world to the rest of the dark world out there. Central to achieving sustainable development in both developed and developing worlds should be the understanding that both worlds can provide models, technologies, processes and, most importantly, values that can further the cause, and that they therefore need to work together, as equal partners, to solve the problems of sustainability.

Key words: *sustainable development, sustainable construction, developing countries, indigenous knowledge, consumption patterns.*

Introduction

One of the resolutions of the previous (2000) Sustainable Building conference in Maastricht, was to find ways of including developing countries in both the debate on and the implementation of sustainable building and construction. I was therefore invited to talk to you about the business challenges of introducing sustainability into these countries.

Doing business in developing countries requires a thorough understanding not only of the challenges, but also of the differences of opinion that shapes people's attitudes and choices. This is as true for the business of introducing sustainable practices in the construction sector, as it is for introducing information technology or a new food product. What works in the business, social and built environments of the developed world, cannot always be transposed to the developing world context. Not only does one have to operate in a different physical and institutional context, but the very drivers of business are also different.

Challenges of working in developing countries

Working in developing countries certainly brings with it a number of challenges. First and foremost of these is an uncertain economic environment. The main sources of foreign income for most developing countries remain agricultural products and raw materials, and with the value of these commodities showing a steady decline over the past few decades,

these countries find it increasingly difficult to access financing or pay back existing debt. Developing country currencies are also very vulnerable to speculation and manipulation by foreign exchange markets. Compounding these problems is the ever-present threat of political and social instability that both feeds of and creates poverty. In an uncertain economic environment people focus on the here and now, ignoring the kind of long-term thinking that is required for sustainability. Limited foreign reserves also mean a limited ability to import expensive new technologies from the developed world.

The second challenge is that of poverty and the consequent low urban investment. Cities of the developing world show a low rate of investment against a high rate of demographic growth. What this means is that while the population of cities continue to grow, the ability of the population to contribute to the tax base and investment does not. The result is decaying infrastructure and urban environments, dangerously low levels of service and people taking matters in their own hands with sometimes disastrous and tragic results.

Within this generalized shortage of funding resources, construction alternatives with new and sustainable technologies struggle to find the necessary space to develop into mainstream technologies. Any technical solution that increases the total capital cost of housing or infrastructure will probably face opposition. In economies where people buy 100g packs of sugar and single cigarettes, there is no spare cash for technologies that may bring life-cycle savings in the long term, but at higher initial costs. Further, when you have to count your pennies, few people are prepared to invest in an unfamiliar technology – they simply cannot afford the gamble.

However, the most critical barrier is the lack of actual capacity to implement sustainable construction practices. This lack is a factor of the number of human resources, the skills of those resources and the tools and technologies available to decision-makers. There simply are not enough professionals, tradesmen and labourers who have been trained to support sustainable construction, nor are there people who can train them. In fact, the capacity of the construction sector in many developing countries can barely deal with the demands of routine construction. As the vast majority of construction firms in developing countries are small enterprises that rely on outsourcing personnel as required, the traditional apprenticeship system has all but disappeared. This has severely affected skills training and the retention of expertise and organizational learning. The impact can be seen in the rigid adherence to management techniques and construction practices handed down from colonial times or imported by the international construction companies who are responsible for the larger construction projects, whether these are appropriate to local conditions or not. Limited access to tools like computers, knowledge networks and databases, or even relevant text books, further compounds the problem

There are also high levels of inequity within developing countries, with many countries having developed a dual economy with a wealthy elite that has consumption patterns equal to those in developed countries, and the majority of the country living in abject poverty. The aspirations this creates in the poor then becomes a very effective barrier against the introduction of technologies that may be more sustainable, but are perceived as second-rate because the rich do not use them.

The notion of gender equity as understood by the West, is also a fairly recent introduction to many developing countries, and discrimination and abuse against women are still very much part of local culture. This also applies to the construction industry where women construction workers are given the most menial jobs and have to suffer high levels of sexual harassment.

Differences of opinion

The developing world also has a different value system from that driving the industrialised nations. The triple bottom line defined by the World Business Council on Sustainable Development (WBCSD) and others focuses on the three aspects or pillars of sustainable development, often described as “people, planet and profit”. However, those of you who are observant would have noticed that for the World Summit on Sustainable Development (Johannesburg, 2002) the South African government changed the “profit” to “prosperity”. This is a small but significant shift in emphasis. The South (or developing world) comes from a people-centred view of development where an individual or company’s worth is not just judged by the amount of profit that is being generated, but by the prosperity that is created and how well the person or company looks after the less fortunate members of the community.

However, there is a more fundamental barrier that we need to overcome. The very title of this presentation– “taking sustainability to the corners of the earth”, implies that we are taking something from somewhere where it exist to somewhere where it doesn’t. Moreover, I am afraid that sustainability is still seen as something that comes from the civilized, developed world and that should be taken to the barbaric wastelands of the undeveloped world. This is an attitude that is resented by many in the developing world and which contributes to the deep suspicion of the agendas behind the campaign for sustainable development from the West and international organisations like the United Nations.

The model of social and economic sustainability, which underpins Agenda 21 and our ideas of what constitutes sustainable development, is mainly based on the Western liberal democratic value system shaped by the previous millennium’s social revolutions in Europe. Despite the lip service paid to “harmony with local cultural and spiritual values”, the validity of other value systems is not always acknowledged within this framework.

Even more disquieting is the trend of turning the lofty ideals of sustainable development into camouflage for business as usual. Developing countries are especially sceptical about the role of big business in sustainable development, not only of those global businesses who are out and out cowboys, but also of those who come disguised in good intentions waving their World Business Council for Sustainable Development membership cards.

World Summit on Sustainable Development – who set the agenda?

The focus of the recent World Summit on Sustainable Development was on partnerships between big business and governments. However, as the civil society sector pointed out, sustainable development was quickly turned into whatever compromise governments happen to reach on trade, subsidies, investment and aid, and whatever projects corporations see fit to finance. What few of the delegates in the Sandton Convention Centre liked to admit was that partnerships require



trust and that trust is in short supply in the relationship between business and civil society, especially civil society in developing countries. This distrust was illustrated perfectly by famous South African cartoonist Zapiro during the Summit.

Much has been made of entering voluntary agreements instead of passing strong regulations, but developing countries (or at least their citizens if not their governments) fear that this is just a licence to continue the environmental destruction and human rights abuses that typifies multinational business practice in the developing countries. The lack of commitment on targets for energy from safe, renewable sources opened the field wide for the oil and nuclear lobbies to form new partnerships that supports their agendas.

This lack of commitment also provided a continued loophole for companies like Shell and BP to trade on their solar energy projects without having to make too much of an effort at changing current business practice. Both these companies are members of the WBCSD and their "commitment" to renewable energy qualifies them for the FTSE 4 Good and Dow Jones Sustainability investment Indices. However, while BP makes much of the fact that it has pledged 200 million US dollars to the development of solar energy over the next six years, what it doesn't advertise is that the company (which now calls itself Beyond Petroleum) has budgeted 5 billion US dollars for oil exploration in Alaska over the same period. This is called green wash.

For the uninitiated, green wash is when socially and environmentally destructive corporations attempt to preserve and expand their markets by posing as friends of the environment and leaders in the struggle to eradicate poverty. In fact, green wash has become such a plague that environmental groups are now handing out "Green Oscars"¹ to companies who are trying to fool the public with much publicized greening campaigns without changing the way they do business at all. Most civil society groups saw the outcome of the World Summit as a licence to green wash, and it is seriously damaging the credibility of organisations like the WBCSD and the many social responsibility investment funds, not to speak of the UN itself.

However, it is not just the big oil and chemical companies that are guilty of environmental destruction and bad human rights records. The construction industry itself is not doing too good either. Its environmental impact aside, the industry has a reputation for greed, corruption, and unfair labour practices. In a recent international Gallup poll, the sector was perceived as even more corrupt than the arms and energy sectors. A study by the International Labour Organisation² found that construction workers almost everywhere in the world do not view their employment in a favourable light and in many countries, both rich and poor, people work in construction out of necessity and rarely out of choice. Few would want their children to enter the industry. The same report also found high rates of gender discrimination and sexual harassment and that women construction workers are often saddled with the most menial and unpleasant of jobs and rarely offered further training to improve their skills.

One of the reasons why people do not rate the construction industry very high as an employer, is the employment conditions offered. In a study recently done for the South African Construction Industry Development Board³, it was found that over 60% of workers do not have a written contract, more than 70% do not receive paid leave, and over 80% do not belong to a union. This is in a country where business complains that strict labour legislation and strong unions are discouraging foreign investment.

However, the root of the developing countries' mistrust in the developed world's agendas lies much deeper. There is much talk about poverty alleviation, improving governance and generally getting the developing countries to pull themselves out of their misery. Forgetting for a moment that most of the US and Europe's wealth came from the exploitation of

developing country resources, lets look at how much of this wealth they are prepared to share.

Every year the US, the EU and Japan spend 350 billion US dollars on agricultural subsidies for their own farmers. Global military spending equals 800 billion US dollars. In contrast, the rich countries of the world only give 53 billion US dollars a year for overseas development aid. The business lobbies of these countries, of course, had no role to play in this allocation of funds (and Santa brings us presents from the North pole).

The industrialized countries of what is called the North, but includes Australia and New Zealand, continues to use far more than their fair share of global resources. A child born in these countries will consume 30 – 40 times as much as one born in the developing countries. He or she will consume 15 times more paper, 80 times more energy, and 10 times more steel. In total, the citizens of developed countries are responsible for 80% of the total global resource consumption, 75% of municipal and industrial waste and 80% of CO₂ emissions.

Is it surprising then that developing countries think it unlikely that sustainable development will be possible through the model of development espoused by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund? Especially since many of the problems experienced in the developing world are a result of the development models these institutions encouraged the developing countries to follow. The real root of the problem, that is the unequal distribution of resource consumption and waste production, is still not really being addressed.

As Ghandi said " the world has enough for everyone's need, but not for everyone's greed." Without addressing the overconsumption of the developed world, we will not be able to meet the needs of the developing world without seriously jeopardizing the survival of us all. However, the action plan coming out of the WSSD leaves Northern production and consumption patterns virtually untouched. Until these patterns are addressed, there is no way that we can meet the Brown Agenda of poverty alleviation and underdevelopment, as well as the Green Agenda of living within the planetary carrying capacity. And meet them both we must.

Is there a solution?

We cannot but hope and believe that another world must be possible, but to quote yet another famous thinker, Albert Einstein: "No problem can be solved from the same consciousness that created it."

We will definitely not solve the problem if we continue to think that sustainability is a way of thinking that needs to be spread from the developed world to the rest of the dark world out there. Moreover, can we really trust big business and its customers to come up with the kind of solutions that we will need for real sustainable development? But what is the alternative?

An old African legend tells of the first time when all life sprang from the marriage of Sema Kade, the Tree of Life, and Ma, the great earth goddess. Ma created the first race of humans and taught them the Great Truth that binds all living beings. Unfortunately, instead of looking after Ma and all her children, these humans ate all the fruit on the Tree of Life and all the plants around it until the land turned to dust. Then they started killing all the animals, and finally, when there were no animals left, they started killing each other. In their arrogance, they took metals from the sacred body of Ma herself and made awful beasts that destroyed everything in their path. Sema Kade, the Tree of Life became very angry and told Ma that she will have to destroy all the humans before they destroy not just all life, but the great Tree of Life himself. However, no matter how sad they made her, Ma could not destroy these children of hers. Instead, she chose the twelve wisest people, and together with their families

sent them off to the furthest corners of the earth. To each of these people she gave a part of the Great Truth, but only a part, and she told them that only when they have become wise enough to use it without destroying the earth and everything on it, will all the different parts of the Truth be put together once more and humans will again know the Great Truth. All this time Ma was crying and her tears became a great flood that cleansed the Earth of the first race of humans, leaving only a few wise souls to look after the part of the Great Truth that has been entrusted to them.

For us to once again fully know the Great Truth that binds all life, we must bring all the pieces from the corners of the earth together. No one nation knows the full Truth. In many ways, our quest for sustainability is the quest for that one Great Truth that will allow us to live in harmony with the planet and the greater community of life. We are also now living in a time that makes it possible for us to reunite all the pieces of knowledge and wisdom that can be found in the diverse cultures and traditions of the world.

The Agenda 21 for Sustainable Construction in Developing Countries

The *Agenda 21 for Sustainable Construction in Developing Countries* is an attempt to encourage just that – to create a path for knowledge and hopefully wisdom from all the corners of the earth to come together. The Agenda is therefore not just relevant for those working in developing countries, but for everyone interested in making sure that the development of our built environments support the ideals and vision of sustainable development. It provides not only a research and development agenda for introducing sustainable building and construction into developing countries, but also a strategy for action to make sure that sustainable building becomes business as usual in all the countries of the world.

While it acknowledges the challenges faced by developing countries, the Agenda emphasizes that they also bring with them specific strengths, another set of values, and most importantly, their bits of the great truth. Including these differences in emphasis serves to expand the current debate on sustainability.

The greatest contribution of developing countries to the sustainability debate lies in their cultures and traditions, while their greatest strengths came as a result of their many adversities. Because of the survival challenges experienced, people in developing countries are great innovators and used to adaptation and doing more with less – all important requirements of sustainability.

Developing countries further have a different perspective on life, and different ideas on what is important and the place of humankind within the greater community of life. They also encourage a more systemic and holistic way of thinking that shapes their relationship with both nature and community. One of the key strengths of developing countries is the strong culture of solidarity, mutual aid and people's willingness to work together.

Many developing countries have also developed guidelines for sustainable living in traditions that are thousands of years old. Although they are often cloaked in mysticism, superstition and religion, the underlying value of these guidelines should not be underestimated. As Western science expands, so many of these principles are starting to make sense even for sceptical and suspicious Western scientists.

This expansion of thinking can also be seen in the Agenda's answers to the question: "So what do we need to help us take sustainability further? "

Yes, we need technology to help us on the way forward, and the developed world which owes its wealth and high standard of living to its commitment to technological development would see this as the most important step forward. However, the developing world, coming as it does from a people-centred view, recognizes that ultimately it will be the behaviour and choices of people that will determine the success or failure of sustainable development, not the availability of sustainable technologies. We therefore also need an institutional environment that encourages and enables people to apply these technologies and change their behaviour. But most importantly, we need to give people a moral or ethical compass that will point them in the right direction, thus giving them reasons for changing this behaviour that are based on more than just material profit.

However, we also need to recognize that nothing will happen if we don't take action, both as individuals and as businesses. The following strategy for action is therefore suggested in the Agenda:

- Build your own capacity and knowledge, but also help others to build theirs so that no one has the excuses of ignorance or inability.
- We need to work together and form partnerships, but they must be partnerships of equals and care should be taken to manage the balance of power in partnerships between developed and developing country partners.
- Ultimately charity starts at home. Businesses especially need to realise that they have to internalise the principles of sustainability into their own activities if they want to be taken seriously as partners in sustainable development, and not become candidates for the Green Oscars. And yes, that does include managing the office paper consumption, but it also includes adopting corporate social responsibility as a moral framework for your business plan.
- Be a market driver, not a market slave and demand more sustainable options, while offering more sustainable products to the market – don't wait for regulation.
- Finally, share what you are doing, the successes as well as the mistakes. We are all in this together and we can only benefit from frank and open sharing of learning, as well as a good peer review every now and then.

In conclusion

I would like to conclude with a short elephant story. The great white hunter came upon a tribe of pygmies celebrating around a dead elephant. He was astonished at the amount of meat and asked the headman of the pygmies: "But how are you going to eat an entire elephant?" "Bite by bite, of course", the pygmy replied. The hunter was also really mystified by how these small people could kill something so big. "O easy," the pygmy replied, "we used a club". "It must have been a very big club", said the hunter. "Yes, it was about sixty people big," the pygmy replied.

Taking sustainability from the corners of the earth to a central understanding that underlies all our actions is an enormous undertaking that will require plenty of innovation and commitment from all of us. But if we form a big enough club and take it bite by bite, we can do it together.

Acknowledgements

Most of the supporting arguments for this document can be found in the *Agenda 21 for Sustainable Construction in Developing Countries*, available on the following websites:

www.cibworld.co.nl

www.unep.or.jp

www.sustainablesettlement.co.za

The latter site also provides the background papers to the Agenda and more information on the project.

I am indebted to the High Sanusi Credo Vusamazulu Mutwa, guardian of Africa's oral history, for the story of how the Great Truth came to be divided.

The elephant story is a combination of an African proverb and an old colonial joke that illustrates perfectly the different approaches to problem solving in the North (use technology) and the South (use the strengths of the community).

¹ See <http://www.earthsummit.biz/awards/>

² International Labour Organisation. (2001) *The construction industry in the twenty-first century: Its image, employment prospects and skills requirements*. International Labour Office: Geneva.

³ Van Huyssteen, S. (2002) *Status Quo Report on the South African Construction Industry*