



Sustainability Is What Matters Most

Boris Cizelj*

Abstract: Over centuries, but even more intensely since mid-20th century, in all domains of business, society and politics, we are witnessing reducing levels of sustainability. For decades, the environmentalists are warning us that our habitat is increasingly becoming polluted, biodiversity being reduced, and soon half of world population will have problems in accessing clean water – a vital condition for healthy life. Socio-economic differentiation has reached unprecedented dimensions, middle classes have virtually disappeared, and quality of political leadership leaves much to be desired. Supported by the dominant economic doctrine on permanent GDP growth, and financial oligarchs' responsibility recognised only to corporate shareholders, is leaving no space for socially responsible corporate management. Many people feel helpless, but in spite of actively reacting and demanding change, they do not even participate in elections. Ironically, this is happening in times when people are more educated than ever before in history, with powerful science, research and technology – including ITC, which would allow us to productively interact, inspire, exchange experiences, and build critical mass around demands for badly needed changes. This is exactly the objective of the new Sustainability Network of Networks, expected to connect numerous groups around the globe – trying to introduce new, sustainable approaches to current economic and socio-political problems. With this new programme the Knowledge Economy Network, KEN (est. in Brussels as a non-profit association in 2011) is going to contribute to changes needed to achieve more sustainability in various areas of public and private domain.

Keywords: sustainability; networks; network of networks.

* Prof. Dr., Chairman of the Board of Directors,
Knowledge Economy Network (KEN), Av. Lloyd
George 7, 1000 Brussels, Belgium, and DOBA
Business School, Prešernova ulica 1, 2000
Maribor, Slovenia; cizelj@knowledge-economy.net

How to cite this paper = Kako citirati ta članek:
Cizelj, B. (2020). Sustainability Is What Matters
Most. *Mednarodno inovativno poslovanje = Journal
of Innovative Business and Management*, 12(1), 83-
91. DOI: 10.32015/JIBM/2020-12-1-10

© Copyrights are protected by = Avtorske pravice
so zaščitene s:
Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial
4.0 International License (CC BY-NC 4.0) = Creative
Commons priznanje avtorstva-nekomercialno 4.0
mednarodna licenca (CC BY-NC 4.0)

*Mednarodno inovativno poslovanje =
Journal of Innovative Business and Management*
ISSN: 1855-6175

Trajnost je tisto, kar je najbolj pomembno

Povzetek: Skozi stoletja, posebej intenzivno pa od sredine prejšnjega, smo na vseh področjih poslovanja, v družbi in politiki priče zmanjševanja ravni trajnosti/vzdržnosti. Že desetletja nas okoljevarstveniki opozarjajo, da postaja naš življenjski prostor vse bolj onesnažen, biotska raznovrstnost vse manjša in kmalu bo polovica človeštva imela probleme z dostopom do čiste vode – temeljnim pogojem za zdravo življenje. Družbeno-ekonomska razslojenost je dosegla razsežnosti brez primere v zgodovini, srednji razred praktično izginja in kvaliteta vodilnih politikov postaja vse skromnejša. Podprta

s strani dominantne ekonomske doktrine o neprekinjeni rasti BDP, odgovornost finančnih oligarhov le do delničarjev ne prepušča nobenega prostora za družbeno odgovorno korporativno upravljanje. Mnogi ljudje se počutijo nemočni, vendar namesto aktivnega reagiranja in zahtev po spremembah, ne sodelujejo niti na volitvah. Ironično, to se dogaja v časih, ko je izobraženih več ljudi kot kdaj koli v zgodovini, ob močno razviti znanosti, raziskavah in tehnologiji – posebej IKT, ki nam omogoča, da produktivno sodelujemo, izmenjujemo izkušnje, se vzpodbujamo in gradimo kritično maso okoli zahtev za nujno potrebne spremembe. Natančno to pa je cilj nove Mreže mrež za trajnostni razvoj, ki naj bi povezala številne skupine po svetu, z namenom uvajati nove trajnostne pristope k aktualnim ekonomskim in družbeno-političnim problemom. S tem novim programom, podprtim s strani mednarodne ekspertne skupine pod vodstvom znanega indijskega profesorja R. A. Mashelkarja, bo KEN mreža (ustanovljena 2011 v Bruslju kot neprofitna asociacija) prispeval k spremembam, ki so nujno potrebne, da bi dosegli več trajnosti/vzdržnosti na različnih področjih javnega in zasebnega življenja.

Ključne besede: trajnost; omrežja; mreža mrež.

1. Introduction

Just over the last 50 years the world population has more than doubled: in 1970 it was 3.7 billion, and now it is 7.8 billion. During this half-century of intensive consumer society, the Earth has come under severe pollution pressure. Consequently, global warming is potentially threatening the future of our habitat, and therefore, greater sustainability has become an issue of survival for our civilization. The present pandemic is creating game-changing conditions, going well beyond accelerating the process of digitalisation and reducing the impact of physical distance among cooperating people. Let's not waste the opportunity for innovation and change in face of this crisis!

The intensity of socio-economic, technological and changes in management has not yet been fully recognised. Accompanied by rising socio-economic differentiation, the middle classes are rapidly disappearing, and political parties are losing their distinct ideological profile, turning increasingly into groupings around individual political leaders. While people are ever more educated, this is not reflected in more rational and healthy lifestyles. The post-industrial technologies – led by Information Communication Technology – are pushing productivity levels ever higher, while we are managing natural resources irresponsibly and systematically destroying the environment. Scientists claim that if a major shift in sustainability is not achieved in the next 10-15 years, the damage to the Earth will become irreparable. Now globally 7 million people die annually because of air pollution. And according to WHO by 2025 half of world population will be facing scarcity of water. These are all shocking prospects, of which we are at least partly aware, but very little is undertaken to save the planet from self-destruction. Even with the world in lockdown, global carbon emissions have only fallen by $\frac{2}{3}$ of what is needed each year. This is a good illustration of the unacceptable situation we have created.

The only proper response to numerous challenges being faced is to start behaving much more sustainably and responsibly, be it as consumers, producers and service providers, as part of civil society, and last but not least as authorities in charge of adopting and applying the solutions for the burning problems, further increasing by the day.

The mainstream economic doctrine is still not liberated from the illusion of permanent GDP growth, and only relatively weak voices are being heard, that human wellbeing and happiness are what really counts. More than half century ago a pioneering contribution was made by the Centre for Bhutan Studies – having introduced the holistic Gross National Happiness Index, based on 33 indicators (not surprisingly including

environmental diversity). The Western democratic paradigm seems to be failing a large majority of people, most of whom are only partly aware of it, and many feels unable to do anything – demonstrating it with very low electoral participation. Contradictions and tensions are rising, and there is still no credible and socially acceptable vision for the future. The common-sense bottom line is: unsustainable behaviour is socially irresponsible, ethically unacceptable, unhealthy, and not even economically justified (at least in the medium to long term).

Fortunately, awareness about the urgency of change is slowly starting to grow, and thousands of think tanks, civil society activist groups and associations, and networks are emerging in all parts of the world – particularly in the advanced countries. The actual impact of these entities is still very limited, while last September's unprecedented 6,000 worldwide coordinated protests of the young have sent a clear message: there is no time left to be wasted!

Over the last 10-15 years several groupings are bringing together CEOs of very powerful companies, such as former TNT head Peter Bakker – now president of World Business Council for Sustainable Development. He is declaring that »Capitalism as we know it today is starting to lose its licence to operate.« Instead of revolution, we need innovative and accelerated evolution towards better capitalism. An impressive voice of reason comes also from Larry Fink, chairman and CEO of BlackRock – a 7 trillion Wall Street powerhouse, who is asking CEOs to clarify their purpose and to contribute to society. He claims: «Climate risk is investment risk.« Acceptance of this approach is gaining support, recently also at 2020 World Economic Forum in Davos. Another effort in this direction is made from the US by Business for Social Responsibility, led by Aron Kramer.

2. The unacceptable environmental Footprint

Just between 2015 and 2017, worldwide material consumption jumped from 87 to 92 billion tons (jumping 254 % from 1970). This reflects an increased demand for natural resources, resulting in undue burden on environment. Without urgent and concerted political action, it is projected that global resource extraction could grow to 190 billion tons by 2060, which many scientists hold for totally unsustainable!

We are causing drastic reductions in biodiversity through unacceptable pollution levels – responsible for numerous health risks, even deaths – global warming being the inescapable consequence. Management of the most precious of all resources, human capital, is very poor: more than 50% of the world's school age children (over 600 million) do not achieve minimum proficiency levels in mathematics and reading. Globally, including the most advanced countries, the skills gap is seriously increasing since educational systems fail to adjust to the competence patterns of the present, let alone the future labour market.

Very few governments are capable of developing and implementing relevant strategies and select important priorities. In spite of unparalleled progress in technology, our quality of life is going down, and individuals' reactions are surprisingly timid and unsuccessful. There are three main explanations for such attitudes: lack of awareness of the problems, outdated knowledge levels, and indifference.

Why don't we act as necessary, to protect the legitimate interests of the present and future generations – while it is not too late and still possible? What are the reasons that we are not even recognising the urgency and the dimensions of the problems? Most governments are not giving to their people the real picture, and many media are not professional enough to report in a way enabling people to become fully aware of the critical situation. Strange enough, since they normally »breed« on shocking news. But maybe this is considered too serious, even frightening to the degree that might push the readership away?

Not surprisingly, one could notice a familiar phenomenon: the higher we look at society, there seems to be less readiness for change. Undoubtedly, we are failing also on democratic efficiency: one cannot disregard that democracy is being abused to serve the short-term interest of the powerful few. This is certainly not genuinely democratic, and somehow, all of this is being tolerated with an unbelievable level of complacency.

Two years ago, the United Nations adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, emphasizing the urgency of the situation, and defining the road to sustainability. However, Secretary General Antonio Guterres raised his voice in January and expressed his frustration at the dysfunction within the UN system, and its inability to act swiftly and energetically to bring about the necessary paradigm-shifting reforms. He declared that the UN was unacceptably off-track to continue its job of poverty reduction, gender equality, climate survival, peacekeeping, health protection, and to pursue other key measures of international prosperity. A new plan of radical reform is desperately needed, and it should begin with proper attention to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals.

Contrary to the mainstream permanent GDP growth paradigm (interpreted as condition for and indicator of progress), on the Kingdom of Bhutan's initiative, the UN General Assembly – with support of 68 member states - adopted in 2011 a resolution calling for a "holistic approach to development". The following April an UN High-Level Meeting on "Happiness and Wellbeing in a New Economic Paradigm" was held to develop a new economic paradigm based on sustainability and wellbeing.

Many people are increasingly aware that things must be changed but do little to efficiently connect with like-minded groups in order to reach the critical mass, which would have bigger impact. There are many activists and volunteers – doing whatever they can – but most people accept the position that »nothing can be changed, it isn't worth it«, as if really nothing could be done. This also serves as an excuse for actually doing nothing, and simply going along the false avenue – though many people are at least occasionally aware that we are driving in the wrong direction. At the same time, it should not be forgotten that changes of our behaviour must start with each individual, and with changes in our daily routine. Actually, due to fragmentation of lobbying efforts for sustainable growth and socially responsible management, as well as lack of connections between numerous positive initiatives, the general impression prevails that rather little, if anything essential is being achieved.

However, this is not necessarily and completely the right impression. Namely, there are literally thousands of various networks, associations, pressure groups, and think tanks, trying to mobilize people, exerting pressure, and lobbying relevant authorities, by publishing and disseminating relevant information about the urgency of sustainability problems.

Unfortunately, the overall impact of these activities is rather modest, and we need to look for the reasons for the insufficient impact of presently ongoing lobbying activities.

- Instead of using complex science approach, problems tend to be presented through isolated segments – largely ignoring their integral nature and systemic impact.
- Arguments are often articulated poorly – without demonstrating implications upon various social groups and each individual.
- The pressure on decision makers is missing sufficiently articulated and practically formulated demands.
- The profile and structure of »demandeurs« is not strong and representative enough, and therefore risking not to be taken seriously.
- The »demandeurs« are remaining too isolated, at local, or at best national level.

- Leaders of pressure groups are sometimes using inadequate methods of work, and consequently reducing the potential impact of respective activities.
- Modest networking and weak international coordination among potential partners and supporters with complimentary objectives.

There is undoubtedly a little bit of everything in most situations, but one fact could be the most important: if the existing networks could interact more intensely and systematically, their impact at all levels would certainly be much stronger.

3. Moving towards Possible Solutions

The situation should and can be changed, though certainly not quickly and easily. The question is: how can at least some of the passive observers become agile activists for change, or at least their determined supporters and followers – in line with their very own, and the legitimate interests shared by most members of society?

It is absolutely essential to fully inform people in very real terms about the present situation, major trends and the broader implications of the most unfavourable scenario, if we decide to remain passive. It is necessary to present the concrete impact of global warming and irresponsible environment degradation on quality of life for each of us in the next 5-10 years. This information must be presented in a highly professional, non-sensationalistic way, in order to be received as fair and credible. Otherwise, isolated, and exaggerated facts and figures are counterproductive, and people will treat them as »populist propaganda«). As a consequence, most people remain inactive, though complaining, which is not helping anyone.

While governments relatively easily coordinate their policies, share experiences, and even learn from each other, this looks much more difficult for the NGOs, networks and associations. However, this is starting to change, slowly-but-surely, and the recent Youth Movement has achieved an unprecedented level of coordination and operational success. Also, the very phenomenon of Greta Thunberg is symbolising the increasing determination of present-day young generation, which is very promising. In growing numbers, the young are ready to participate actively in opening the environmental sustainability debate at the domestic, international, and global level. A most impressive series of protest activities during the week of 20-27 September 2019, under the slogan »The Global Week for Future«, has been recognised as the largest protest in history of mankind (about 6,000 protests in over 150 countries, bringing together some 8 million young people – and the action received support from over 2,000 scientists from 40 countries).

Of course, our concern is not only the environment, but the whole range of issues of sustainable development and socially responsible business management leading to knowledge society and economy. These are strongly interrelated aspects of the same complex problem, which we should be addressing on a daily basis, as well as strategically. Let us not forget that an important part of the challenge is our old-fashioned mindset, and our traditional ways and habits, which have to be adjusted to the present situation of an overcrowded planet, population aging, lack of socio-economic cohesion, depletion of some resources, underutilisation of others (like hydro and solar energy), growing socio-economic and regional disparities – all covered by the Sustainable Development Goals.

Probably the largest network platform is at present the Sustainable Development Knowledge Platform - created by the UN Secretariat, linked to SDG 2030, and covering 17 SDG areas, covered globally by altogether 14,776 partners (not strictly defined as networks or even legal persons, but including also programs and initiatives), who have published 1,008 publications. KEN is also a partner in this platform.

Of particular interest is the 29-year old Programme on Think Tanks and Civil Societies at the Lauder Institute, University of Pennsylvania. They are systematically studying think tanks around the globe and have a 1,796 strong Panel of Peers. For their Global Go to Think Tank Index Survey for 2019 they invited 45,969 individuals and institutions to complete the Survey, with 21,608 of them participating. They produced the ranking of 8,248 think tanks, with interesting observations and conclusions.

Some networks are created for bringing people-powered politics into decision making worldwide. Such is the case for example with AVAAZ, an Ottawa-based global network, exerting pressure particularly on institutions when they are disregarding human rights, by collecting petitions and pushing respective institutions to correct their mistakes (e.g.: a court in Somalia decided that a rape victim was herself responsible for the act – corrected the verdict after receiving some 30,000 signatures of AVAAZ petitioners).

Another example is »Intercept« a New York-based service reporting cases of media abuse in the US to a wide global readership, exerting pressure on those responsible, and alerting the public to manipulative media, who are serving particular, often socially destructive interests.

In order to win the ambitious battle to re-establish global sustainability, we should all intensify our attention at what is being done by the authorities at the regional, national and international level. Sufficient lobbying pressure should be created and executed consistently, by letters to our MPs, debates, and even strikes and protests when necessary. This lobbying pressure should however be based on scientifically sound proposals offered to, or rather thrown at politicians, with demands for immediate and undivided attention, leading to transparent and consensual decisions – and protecting legitimate public interest by moving towards acceptable levels of sustainability.

In the document of the European Network for Rural Development (Connecting Rural Europe, November 2012) – based on published literature on networking, there are at least 10 types of networks:

- (1) Informal and formal networks
- (2) Vertical and horizontal networks
- (3) Networks of Practice/Communities of Practice
- (4) Hierarchical networks
- (5) Peer-to-peer networks
- (6) Knowledge/learning networks
- (7) Territorial networks
- (8) Communities of identity
- (9) Administrative networks
- (10) Policy networks.

Networks are categorised here by various criteria: origin, purpose, emphasis of activity, internal organisation, type of members, linkage to external environment, etc. Many networks could be classified under more than one of the above listed typology criteria. Anyway, the typology serves to remind us of elements determining the nature of each network. An important element is its institutional and financial independence. Transparency Report from Georgia is classifying think tanks according to their reporting on funding sources, and it is showing that the share of most transparent think tanks has increased from 12% in 2013 to 67% in 2018. Certainly, a welcome development!

Let us look at the general picture of the international networking landscape in the domains of sustainability, environment, and knowledge economy.

Based on our research, the following types of sustainability networks have been identified:

- Governmental Agencies Networks in various domains of sustainability - for example: Network for Greening the Financial System, NGFS which is bringing together representatives of 30 Central banks, serviced by the Banque de France;
- Corporate networks supporting sustainability and social responsibility – for example: The World Business Council for Sustainable Development, and the Business for Social Responsibility;
- Civil society associations/networks focussed on various domains of sustainability – for example Center for Knowledge Societies, and AVAZ;
- Academic Research & Consultancy Networks – including under- and post- graduate study programmes on sustainability for example: The league of European Research Universities, LERU; and Sustainability Research Network – being part of Common Ground Research Network, at University of Illinois;
- Sustainability Business Consulting Networks – providing consulting services on market terms, for example: Innovation for Sustainable Development Network;
- Foundations supporting sustainability, knowledge, green and circular economy – for example Korean Green Growth Trust Fund;
- Sustainability Certification Networks – for example SustainAbility linked to ISO, and the ISEAL Alliance having created the VSS system: Voluntary Sustainability Standards.

The structure of activities being performed by various networks is strongly diversified, but they all are involved in positive activism and lobbying, some also in publishing and public advocacy, many in research and even teaching/training, as well as in exchange of knowledge and experience. Only a smaller part of their efforts is devoted to influencing authorities through advocacy and lobbying. Much of their costs are covered by donations – some also have membership fees. Some also provide to their members and beyond some consultancy and other services on commercial or semi-commercial basis.

4. The future Sustainability Network of Networks, SNN

In 2011 KEN founding members assumed that knowledge economy offers all the necessary answers. Now they realised that this is not true, and this is why they are creating a new programme, the Sustainability Network of Networks (SNN), wanting to contribute to a stronger impact of numerous networks, think tanks and associations – sharing the concern for sustainability and corporate social responsibility.

A KEN Task Force has been created, led by National Research Professor Ramesh A. Mashelkar, President of Global Research Alliance, and Chair of KEN International Advisory Board, to evaluate this initiative. On 15 May the Task Force has endorsed the proposal and its members promised to help in its implementation.

As a modern, polycentric, and non-hierarchical structure, the SNN is to encourage future partners to exchange information, connecting and collaborating on a broader geographical basis for enhanced impact in their own environment and beyond. The main pillar of SNN will be an elaborate Internet-based Platform, through which groups will receive access to information on specific actions that SNN members are undertaking, learn from their argumentation, receive invitations to join, and pooling their resources to achieve critical mass in carrying out important activities in favour of higher levels of sustainability. The Platform will disseminate information to SNN members on a proactive basis – in response to their individual selection of topics and types of two-way information required (publications, conferences, events under preparation, etc.).

What is expected to be the added value of SNN Programme on top of the existing activities of numerous networks and associations around the globe:

- Firstly, in line with its complex and holistic orientation, it will connect all types of entities -- going beyond the traditional separation between politics and business, society and environment, and the macro from micro perspective;
- Secondly, its primary objective will be to increase awareness of various decision-makers and stakeholders about the urgency to achieve higher levels of sustainability, and on the request of its partners and members, will help them organise some joint activities and events;
- Thirdly, it will develop a system of sustainability self-evaluation for various types of organisations, accompanied by some certificates of distinction to be awarded to partners and members for exceptional contributions to sustainable performance;
- Fourthly, it will encourage members to pool resources in legitimate lobbying of and effective pressure upon relevant authorities for necessary regulatory and policy reforms – needed for greater sustainability.

The proposed SNN Programme is expected to function in a strictly horizontal and totally non-hierarchical fashion. Participation of the SNN partners and members in various joint activities is to be completely voluntary, and the SNN political platform/program should remain politically totally independent from any associated organisation, and at the same time general enough to attract as many organisations as possible.

The sustainability problematic is very wide and complex. Therefore, it will be covered by the SNN Programme through the following 9 Thematic Domains – listed alphabetically:

- a) Corporate management and entrepreneurship ecosystem;
- b) Environment protection;
- c) Gender issues and role of youth;
- d) Green agriculture, smart village and food safety;
- e) Health system, lifestyles and agreeable longevity;
- f) Human capital development – post-secondary education and LLL;
- g) Innovation ecosystem, science and R&D;
- h) Knowledge economy strategies, models and horizontal policy issues;
- i) Sustainable urban environment, transport, and infrastructure.

Each of the nine domains will be hosted by one SNN Partner – supported by additional 2-3 Partners (specialised in parts of the respective thematic domain) , and coordinated by a Team of Thematic Experts, (up to 5 people from specialised SN partners/members, plus some independent experts-advisers) from various parts of the globe, to be chaired by a Domain Chair, being an internationally recognised expert in the respective domain, and supported as Domain Secretary associated to the SNN partner hosting the particular Thematic Domain.

The activities and collaboration among KEN/SNN members will be supported by the Technical Secretariat primarily through the following services:

- Information on international developments in domains of sustainability and knowledge economy/society;
- Qualified insight into sustainability good practice and success stories around the globe;

- Training on specialised lobbying techniques and communication management;
- Expert opinion on initiatives of KEN/SNN members - upon request;
- Consultations by KEN Global Expert Pool to help partners and members to resolve specific problems on agreed cost basis;
- Supporting campaigns vs. decision-making bodies and institutions – upon request;
- Effective communication with the international media to promote the cause of global sustainability;
- Representing partners and members in relevant international bodies and institutions;
- Providing contact information on entities active in respective sustainability thematic domains around the globe – facilitating cooperation and joint activities;
- Providing links to the most important international and national reports and studies, through an interactive and constantly updated bibliography;
- Announcements of relevant international conferences;
- Dissemination of relevant international statistics on sustainability domains.

The primary service of the SNN Programme to its partners and members will be the provision of selected and highly relevant information on sustainability developments (achievements, challenges, and new solutions), and actors introducing good practice. It will also offer invitations to join some international actions (awareness raising, petitions, etc) which will gain specific weight through their reputation, sheer number of participants, and their geographical scope.

The SNN Programme is proposed to be a true »Network of Networks«, connecting entities engaged in various aspects of sustainable development, environment protection, and knowledge economy/society. Though it is difficult to anticipate any numbers, it is expected that within less than a year the Network should develop an impressive membership, covering all continents and various profiles of organisations.

What could be the value added in terms of additional impact the activities of SNN would bring? Functioning as network of networks, the Programme is expected to help partners and members to enhance their individual activities, and encourage their collaboration creating a bigger, combined impact, which could be expected through the following:

- A – Broader awareness among additional people of the urgency to lobby and put pressure on responsible to start appropriate action (legislation, administrative decisions, appointments for critically important public offices, etc.);
- B – Improved lobbying techniques and sharper argumentation (supportive facts and figures) in campaigns and communications, making pressure of SNN members in line with public interest more effective;
- C – Motivation to act – being encouraged by success stories of other members elsewhere;
- D – Mobilisation of larger numbers of individuals to reach the required critical mass expressing their opinion and demands – being encouraged by similar achievements elsewhere;
- E – Receiving unexpected third partner support resulting in larger impact of individual activities;
- F – Being themselves motivated to behave more sustainably.

Next month invitations will start being send around to potential partners and members of the new Network of Networks. KEN looks forward to successful implementation of the initiative and hopes to contribute to more sustainability in various domains. Further information will be available at: <https://www.knowledge-economy.net>; Warmly welcome!

This is a shorter version of the report prepared last month by KEN Secretariat for the Task Force created to evaluate the proposal for the Sustainability Network of Networks – a new programme of Knowledge Economy Network, KEN.