
The farmer, the scientist and the nuclear engineer



By [Zoe McKay](#)

A report from INSEAD's Alumni Sustainability Executive Roundtable in Fontainebleau.

Could industrial farming, genetically modified foods and nuclear power be part of the solution to creating a sustainable future?

Surprising as it may sound, these were some of the topics discussed at the recent 24th Sustainability Executive Roundtable here at INSEAD - where non-governmental organisation (NGO) activists, politicians and captains of industry came together around the topic of “Business and Politics: Partners or Opponents?”

During two days of lively debate, one point on which everyone agreed is that we have a problem. With an estimated 9 billion people to feed at horizon 2050, we seriously need to review our economic model and consumption - but left to its own devices, will business spontaneously come forward with solutions?

“Not only they can, but if they [don't] they are losing out in the future,” affirms **Peter Paul Van De Wijs**, Managing Director of Communications and

Business Role Focus Areas for the World Business Council for Sustainable Development. “If you consider the fact that the world will be populated by 9 billion people by 2050 and you realise that we are already at the end of the resources that we have available for the current population, the question is not if they can... the question is how fast they can adopt, and how willing they are to take the right decisions now.”

Van De Wijs believes that business leaders for tomorrow will need to take a longer-term view. “The quarterly cycle is a problem when you start looking and start thinking about the kind of changes we need in society.”

His view is that we need to start by focusing on the limited resources we have and deciding what kind of skills are needed to create a world that can sustain us all tomorrow. “So if you start thinking about that concept it becomes much more obvious – business leaders for tomorrow need to understand the challenges the world is facing and need to understand what kind of skills and competencies come with that to deal with these changes.” he adds.

Another of the day’s speakers, experienced NGO activist and politician, **Monika Griefahn**, shared the view that the objectives of business and politics are not irreconcilable but sees a bigger role for legislation.

“I don’t believe that everybody has a different agenda, I believe that they [all] want to live together and want to have a future for their children... when you realise that, then you come to an eye-to-eye discussion. If you start to talk about the future, then you talk about how we can work together, how we can produce, how we can make our lives sustainable in a way where we can all live together and have profits and feel well, and I think that is the basis to start to discuss how production can be changed and what legislation is necessary, to really come to sustainable production in the future.”

And it would seem that countries have a lot to gain both in terms of growth and employment. Griefahn tells us how focusing on sustainable policy has played a role in Germany’s recovery from the global economic crisis through investment in programmes like housing insulation, renewable energy for public housing schemes, encouraging more fuel efficient cars and most importantly investing in specific research programmes.

“Renewable energy is an export market in Germany... Germany has come through the crisis much better than other countries that didn’t have these

kinds of programmes because they kept people in work, they trained people for new jobs, and they had special programmes for small and medium-sized businesses which cannot be taken away to other countries like big production.”

It is true that Europe has long been an innovator in the domain of renewable energy sources but how long will this advantage last? According to several speakers it would seem that the emerging countries are well on their way to taking the lead in these industries.

According to Van De Wijs, “If you want to compare [emerging countries], they maybe started a little bit later but they are moving very fast in moving up and becoming the leaders, and one clear example is the fact that China is now the world’s leader when it comes to clean energy investment.” He tells us that based on a recent Ernst & Young study, China has actually surpassed the United States as the most interesting country to invest in when it comes to green technology. “So they are catching up fast.”

But still not fast enough according, to **Ravi Fernando**, CEO of the Sri Lanka Institute for Nanotechnology (SLINTEC), who gave us his viewpoint.

“The two big challenges that Asia faces, I would say, is one of environmental sustainability because of the lack of resources, especially water, and the second one is poverty and that is social sustainability.”

“I think one way for the European Union and countries in the West to engage with these issues is to quickly give up their knowledge, their technology to the southern hemisphere to address the issue of natural resource management. And secondly look towards bringing people out of poverty - not necessarily in a manner that makes them huge [consumers] - rather bringing them out of poverty but towards sustainable consumption.”

“It has to be a common responsibility and I don’t think that it is ever going to be a situation where the world is going to say, ‘Hey, we are the developed world, we are going to be all right, it’s only going to be the developing world that is going to go down under’. The Earth is going to go down under and that is the bottom line. If the developed and the developing world don’t see this as a common objective and a common goal to manage sustainability, I think we are all going to lose this battle. ”

“We have a great opportunity to move towards green business, green economies, and it makes sense for the world, but unless the policies are in

place, business isn't going to go there... and we need leaders with sustainable mindsets to lead business in the future, because if you don't have managers and leaders with vision for sustainable business then all the policies will remain in a document and business will not utilise it."

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