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Lock-in Old Habits and Unleash New Ways of Thinking and Action

Reflection from Centre for Responsible Businesses flagship annual conference, 'India and Sustainability Standards 2020' 28-30 October 2020

"The future can't be predicted, but it can be envisioned and brought lovingly into being. Systems can't be controlled, but they can be designed and redesigned. We can't surge forward with certainty into a world of no surprises, but we can expect surprises and learn from them and even profit from them", Donella Meadows



Over 800 practitioners – many of them from India came together for Centre for Responsible Business 7th Annual Sustainability Conference that concluded on the evening of 30th October. This year's event ended with the hope, with specific take-aways and most importantly desire among many to create and tread on 'pathways to sustainable, inclusive and green recovery for India' post COVID19. While there were some uninitiated, most of the participants were sustainability enthusiasts and are steadfast in their belief that promoting sustainable business, markets and societies is possible and is critical. Well, they are not alone – around the world an increasing number of scholars, practitioners, consultants, public figures, political leaders have embraced sustainability – and the need for us to value and preserve, nature – people – societies.

One may then wonder, why is there still sluggish progress towards – 'enabling out future generations to meet their own needs'? Clearly, we haven't done enough in mainstreaming sustainability into way we think and act on a daily basis in our own spheres. There is not much

time, and soon we will run out of options, if we don't start to act, and do so at a faster pace. COVID19 has demonstrated how human indifference towards the environment, habitats, fellow beings and communities can have deep impacts on economies and business globally. A bigger climate crisis lurks.

Inaugurating the conference the Guest of Honour and India's G7 & G20 sherpa - Suresh Prabhu reminded that the end of lock-down should be an opportunity for us to relinquish old ways of doing things. The world has been in a lockdown all this while he opined by pursuing an unsustainable development path, and not been able to come out of it for decades. The end of lockdown whenever that happens should help us to come out of this old way of thinking and actions, and start afresh. We should lock-in old habits and unleash for ourselves new ways of thinking and action.

Dr Rajiv Kumar, Vice Chairman of NITI Aayog highlighted the importance of optimising triple bottom-line for businesses in his keynote address. He reiterated the criticality for businesses to assess their performance, not only from the lens of financial performance, but also consider social and environmental parameters. He asserted that both the Government and businesses will need to come together to further strengthen the level of mutual trust, without which the goals of social, economic and environmental sustainability will not be achieved. The focus of the government will need to be on governance and that of business on self-regulation, he posited.

A number of leading national and international thought leaders shared their thoughts on the way forward at the high-level conference inaugural session. Founder of Development Alternatives and past Co-Chair of International Resource Panel, Dr Ashok Khosla asserted that the degree of the social and economic distress requires businesses to think and act in different ways – and postulated seven critical elements for that. Dr Yasmin Ali Haque, UNICEF Resident Representative India – underscored the value of business strategies and policies pertaining to sound working conditions. This has already demonstrated especially during and after the COVID19 induced lockdown, tangible benefits both for businesses and workers and their families. UNICEF will continue to work on promoting family friendly policies across workplaces, starting with the readymade garments sectors in the country. Ashwini Chhatre, Executive Director, Bharti Institute of Public Policy (Indian School of Business) highlighted the need for us to better understand the concept of 'resilience' itself, especially in the context of business and community resilience. While we need to be resilient as business and as society to withstand shocks and to be able to recover from them, we cannot afford to consolidate existing societal and cultural resilience that manifest into inequalities especially across caste and gender lines.

Frank Hoffman representing Friedrich Naumann Foundation regional office, South Asia - highlighted the need to advocate for a sensible balance between international legislations and those at national levels – to better estimate their implications on business behaviour. In addition to regional legislations, like the upcoming EU legislation on mandatory social and environmental due diligence, there is also proliferation of national legislations across Europe. This could be confusing for businesses and run a risk of distancing millions on SMEs in the conversation and actions on promoting responsible business. According to Beverley Postma, CEO of the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil - there's been never a stark reminder in recent history that we must adapt our business models and government policies around the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In her statement, Heidi Hautala MEP, Chair of EU Parliament Working Group on Responsible Business Conduct asserted that EU companies have significant leverage in promoting responsible business in their global value chains. She added this applies with key trade and investment partners of EU like India. The EU has over the years built considerable practical understanding and experiences on how to balance corporate accountability and sustainable development – that would now be put into use involving a multi- stakeholder engagement process.

Dr Bimal Arora, Honorary Chairperson of CRB and faculty at the Aston Business School brought to the fore the theory of 'narrative economics', which involves the study of the spread and dynamics of popular narratives and stories and called on delegates to spread the narrative captured in the conference theme (Sustainability a key to Business Resilience in an Uncertain World) – so that it goes viral. Rijit Sengupta, CEO of CRB while welcoming all participants, speakers and partners shared his observation based on interactions with a number of national and international businesses, international organisations, experts and practitioners that the consideration for sustainable and inclusive business, markets and society continues to remain front and centre for many.

The three-day conference brought together over 200 speakers from across the world, over 60 partner organisations committed to the theme of the conference – as they dissected and discussed a number of critical sustainability issues across the 28 thematic and sectoral sessions. Four high-level plenary sessions brought the most experienced practitioners from government, industry, civil society and academia to discuss complex issues around – (i) designing an enabling ecosystem for business behaviour; (ii) role of businesses post COVID19 in creating sustainable and inclusive recovery; (iii) strengthening business disclosure and leadership and (iv) building a responsible forest economy.

While it is difficult to collate the key take-aways from the rich discussions, here is an attempt to highlight some of the important messages that should guide us all in our endeavour to develop pathways to sustainable, inclusive and green recovery for India (and beyond):

- Applying a systems thinking lens and ensuring that we look at the entire system as a whole and not just in parts is critical
- Balancing the supply and the demand side issues, is critical. The endeavour to build sustainable enterprises cannot be achieved without proper demand side management (strengthening consumer awareness to drive more sustainable business).
- New and unconventional models of collaboration are needed
- Data and IT enabled tools is the way forward, however, caution has to be exercised that the digital divide is adequately addressed to ensure technology embodies fairness, equity and justice
- While some interventions can be scaled, some others will only be effective as pilots and at the micro level. Scalable and pilot level interventions are both needed and will co- exist
- As practitioners across business, government, civil society, academia – we need to expand our thinking of communities not just as beneficiaries but more as economic actors and mainstream them into value chains better. Local value creation is critical, will need to be led by community-based organisations who will need sufficient investments and technological support. This is key to building resilience in terms of withstanding shocks where most needed
- Most importantly it is clear that all stakeholders will need to come out of our comfort zones and innovate as it can no longer be 'Business As Usual' and develop tools/approaches/interventions to address the most pressing sustainability challenges we are confronted with, together

Friedrich Naumann Foundation, Bharti Institute of Public Policy (Indian School of Business) and Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil were Lead Partners of this event. A number of leading

national and international organisations joined hands with CRB to host this event. As it completes 10 years, CRB will incorporate outcomes from this event into its second decadal strategic plan and implement some of the actions in partnership with existing and new partners.

The 8th Annual Sustainability Conference of the Centre for Responsible Business would be held October/November 2021. Hope you will join us.

Colleagues who missed attending the event can visit the conference virtual platform (<https://virtual.sustainabilitystandards.in/community/#/login>) and listen to the deliberations and interact with the diverse and rich community of practitioners who came together for the cause – not just the event. For further information and support, please contact Siya Chopra (siya@c4rb.in) and Sonali Paikaray (sonali@c4rb.in)