

## Making the connections:

### Women, corporate sustainability and sustainable development

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#### Placing women's empowerment at the heart of corporate sustainability:

The 2012 UN Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20) seeks to build global political consensus on a pathway towards greater environmental, social and economic sustainability. The conference, taking place in Rio in June 2012, will focus on two themes: building a green economy and creating an effective institutional framework for sustainable development. The private sector has a critical role in this endeavour. Corporate sustainability – defined as the delivery of long-term value in economic, social and environmental terms – is the single most important contribution that business can make to sustainable development. With the right incentives, enabling environments and means of implementation, this contribution can be brought to true scale and achieve lasting impact.

Efforts towards gender equality and women's empowerment need to be at the heart of corporate sustainability efforts. It is widely accepted that women's empowerment yields strong economic returns and may be the most critical enabler to achieving a wide range of development and other objectives. Countries with greater gender equality generally have economies that are more competitive and grow faster. Moreover, the empowerment of women is an investment in communities and society as a whole. By contrast, where women do not have full participation in economic and political life, development is not truly sustainable. This applies to all efforts aimed at promoting sustainable development, including corporate efforts. Women's participation is crucial if such efforts are to hit their intended mark and have the full desired sustainability impact.

Business, along with other actors, has a key role to play in advancing gender equality across the workplace, marketplace and community. The Women's Empowerment Principles (WEPs), a joint initiative of UN Women and the UN Global Compact, are a set of seven principles offering concrete steps for business based on good business practices from around the world. They offer a clear, coherent and attainable vision of the contribution that business can and must make towards gender equality in order to sustainable business and contribute to sustainable development.

#### The **Women's Empowerment Principles** in brief:

1. Establish high-level corporate leadership for gender equality.
2. Treat all women and men fairly at work – respect and support human rights and nondiscrimination.
3. Ensure the health, safety and well-being of all women and men workers.
4. Promote education, training and professional development for women.
5. Implement enterprise development, supply chain and marketing practices that empower women.
6. Promote equality through community initiatives and advocacy.
7. Measure and publicly report on progress to achieve gender equality.

## Maximizing integration for greater impact:

Many businesses are already taking some action to promote gender equality, however, these efforts need to be scaled up and be more systematic and strategic. Often, such efforts are siloed within an organization e.g. they may be confined to Human Resources or Procurement or be part of an initiative run by a corporate Foundation without being connected to the organization's core activities or broader corporate sustainability goals. This is true even in smaller enterprises, where different people may be working in isolation from each other. The business itself may not have a good overview of the entire

The Dell Social Innovation Challenge, launched in 2007, is a platform for emerging social entrepreneurs to bring life to their ideas. In 2009, Gardens for Health International (GHI) was the recipient of the competition's grand prize of \$50,000. GHI currently works in Rwanda promoting food sustainability by providing agricultural training and technical assistance to families affected by HIV/AIDS. According to 2009 UNAIDS estimates, there are between 76,000 – 98,000 women aged 15 and up living with HIV. By providing support to emerging social entrepreneurs, Dell is able to support innovative solutions that promote women's empowerment and sustainability.

contribution it is making to gender equality and women's empowerment and may be missing key opportunities to leverage their own business' core strengths or philanthropic contributions to benefit the business, women and sustainable development.

A concrete example of the opportunity for businesses to take a more systematic approach to women's empowerment is procurement policies that allocate a minimum proportion of spend to women-owned enterprises. Increasingly, businesses and their stakeholders are emphasizing sustainable value chain management and major resources are being invested in capacity building and monitoring, among other approaches. And yet, most guidance for business on sustainable supply chain management does not discuss the value of diversity in the procurement context or how to achieve it. Making linkages such as these offers the opportunity to make corporate sustainability efforts more impactful as well as to achieve mutually reinforcing objectives with the same actions.

Recognizing the link between women and sustainable development, PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) released a 2008 report titled, "What is Success in a Connected World? Empowering Women to Empower the Earth". The document highlights the close linkages between women's empowerment and sustainable development, and puts forth the belief that "women must be empowered as ambassadors of natural resources and the environment and as contributors to socio-economic progress if the earth is to be sustainably developed". The report concludes by acknowledging that sustainability efforts must be achieved through a multi-stakeholder context of which the private sector is a component of the solution

A related example is efforts by organizations to help women owned businesses achieve relevant certifications and/or provide other

services to them to help them gain access to global supply chains. If these efforts also build the knowledge and capacity of women business owners on corporate sustainability, they may help open a broader and growing array of opportunities for these businesses to secure contracts with the increasing number of companies across the world that are committed to improving the sustainability of their value chain management.

International Trade Centre (ITC) recognizes that certification standards can pose a barrier for small farmers – often women – to access markets for their products. In an effort to overcome this barrier, ITC has been helping approximately 3,000 mostly female Ugandan coffee farmers to secure organic certification that will allow them to sell their products into UK supermarkets.

## Applying a gender lens to corporate environmental sustainability efforts:

In the lead up to Rio+20, when increased focus and attention is being given to the corporate contribution to sustainable development, and calls are being made to business to make new commitments in this realm, there is a great opportunity for businesses to apply a gender lens to their

Each year, millions of people in the developing world – primarily women and children – die or become sick as a result of cookstove smoke. Dow Corning is collaborating with the UN Foundation-led Global Alliance for Clean Cookstoves to address the problem. The company has provided financial support to the Alliance, and also the time and skills of a number of employees, who have worked in the field with NGO partners of the Alliance to help improve the quality of cookstoves. In addition to reducing pollutants and providing a cleaner cooking environment, the initiative also helps to reduce the time devoted – usually by women and girls – to collecting fuel for the cookstoves, freeing up time for other activities including education and income generation, empowering women for the future.

efforts to enhance environmental sustainability. For example, while studies show that women are generally more environmentally aware than men, in many countries around the world they are underrepresented in green jobs.

The Walmart Foundation and Business and Professional Women's (BPW) Foundation recently announced a partnership to launch the "Moving from Red to Green: Working Women in the Green Economy" initiative, connecting women to the emerging green economy by providing green job training. With generous support from the Walmart Foundation, BPW Foundation will establish a pilot program and award \$60,000 grants to four organizations to expand their capacity to train women for green jobs.

The creation of green jobs in fields such as construction, bio fuels, energy, and transportation are typically male-dominated. Businesses can take steps to

ensure that women and girls have equal opportunities for company-supported education and training, and access and encouragement to take up green jobs especially in non-traditional job fields.

In 2009, Rio Tinto, a multinational mining company, published the "Rio Tinto Gender Guide" offering guidance on integrating gender into the company's community engagement efforts. It highlights the close link between gender and the environment acknowledging mining's actual and potential impacts on land use and quality, forest density, and water quality. In its publication, Rio Tinto states that "consideration should be given to how men might be affected differently from women should there be an environmental incident". The company's focus on greater integration and engagement in operations has resulted in a more acute awareness of its environmental impacts in a Mongolian project. Following the initial community consultation process, the company's Community Relations Officer organized a women's meeting where concerns over the environment were communicated. Specifically, women of the village raised concerns about impacts on land rehabilitation and quality, and the potential risk of exotic plants being introduced. These issues related directly to the women's central role in dairy and milk production, and their livelihood. By including women in the consultation process, Rio Tinto was able to better understand the environmental importance of the land and decrease environmental impacts. Rio Tinto was also able to better map the land as women had a deeper knowledge of the pasture lands and seasonal fluctuations.

Similarly, environmental sustainability efforts should be gender sensitive so that they help enhance gender equality and equal opportunities rather than reinforce discrimination and disadvantage. In spite of progress in gender equality in some areas, women still face too many barriers to participating fully in the economy, including in terms of access to jobs, markets, credit and property. Helping to address these barriers can unleash women's potential and contribute to social stability, economic growth and sustainable development.

In October 2011, Enel Green Power (EGP) became the Barefoot College's first ever private sector donor. This partnership aims to develop the capacities of illiterate grandmothers from rural communities in Latin America by providing them with technical training to install and maintain solar panels. Select participants will undergo a six month training at the Barefoot College in India where they will be trained to become solar engineers. After completing the course, the women will return to their rural communities where they will act as trainers at Community Empowerment Centres (CECs) in their respective countries. The CECs, established by EGP and Barefoot College, will host Rural Electronic Workshops for women to expand the reach of the initiative. The partnership exemplifies the effectiveness of a public-private approach to sustainable development and women's empowerment. Introducing this project into the very countries EGP plans to expand in Latin America is an excellent business development strategy and provides a win-win opportunity for both the company and the NGO.

### **What you can do:**

Not taking gender into account in corporate environmental initiatives and commitments does not just risk reinforcing disadvantage, it may actually lead to missing key opportunities to make such initiatives and commitments more impactful. Women are not merely a vulnerable group; they are also powerful change agents, whose full support and participation is essential to realizing the sustainable future that we all want.

#### **The call to businesses:**

1. Demonstrate your commitment to gender equality and women's empowerment by signing the CEO Statement of Support for the WEPs.
2. Apply a gender lens to sustainability initiatives and commitments. Consider whether they may impact women and men differently, and how they could be made more impactful when explicit consideration is given to women's participation and/or role in the sustainability solutions that are being put forward.

#### **The call to Governments:**

1. Use the WEPs to understand the ways in which the private sector can promote gender equality and women's empowerment, and when engaging in dialogue with business about their role in sustainable development.
2. Take the WEPs into account when developing and revising public policies relating to corporate sustainability.
3. Consider corporate commitment to gender equality and women's empowerment when making decisions on business partnerships and procurement.
4. Include in the Rio+20 outcome document strong language linking the gender dimension and private sector dimensions of sustainable development. Take the opportunity to reinforce the importance of business also making such crucial connections to ensure that innovative efforts to bring about sustainable green economies are also reinforcing of efforts to close the gender divide.