Guest Editorial

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Starting from our rather diverse backgrounds and a range of conversations around environmental policy and regulation, risks and sustainability we developed the idea that there were areas of commonality, but also areas where improved communication could shed light on some of the challenges. It then seemed natural to consider a forum to continue these discussions, and so arose the idea of a special issue (SI) of *Risk Management* on risk, environment and sustainability.

Pollard and Stephen (2008) set out a simple, positive and compelling approach to the risks and opportunities of sustainability that helps energise the debate on where environment and business issues interact. This can be taken back to Porter and even to Adam Smith. Protecting the environment and robustly tackling and mitigating risks, especially in the long term, inevitably adds costs to basic business as usual but it also saves costs and opens up market opportunities because of the consequences of thinking seriously about the future.

Felice Kincannon and Julia Zimmerman (11 October 2011) in their Environmental Leader post, Reframing the Sustainability Debate into Risk and Resilience, seem to hit the nail on the head! They say,

‘If you ask any group of sustainability professionals what sustainability is about, the answers might range from the challenges of climate change to consumption of depleting natural resources to fair labor and fair trade practices, and more (recognizing this confusion, The International Society of Sustainability Professionals aims to rectify it by defining a lexicon, starting with a session at its 2011 conference). A sampling of non-sustainability executives would return an even broader set of responses, perhaps including “a fad” or “a marketing gimmick” or, “I don’t know what it means”’.

Sustainability is still a nascent discipline, for the most part practiced as a silo of activity and reporting separate from other business activities, not yet considered integral to a company’s governance or strategic planning, and not yet codified into any standardized best practice. Even with recent SEC disclosure guidance, it is interesting to note how few corporations address sustainability matters in their annual reports. And of course there have been examples of egregious misrepresentation as well. For many skeptics, these factors constitute a self-reinforcing ‘proof’ that sustainability is irrelevant, or of marginal value at best.

They go on ‘For organizations of any size, strategic planning for risk and resilience reduces the occurrence and mitigates the impact of

“unforeseeable” accidents; costs from waste, fines and litigation; losses from man-made and natural disasters, whether from an oil spill, a blizzard or a drought exacerbated by crippling forest fires; and expenses associated with rising and volatile supply costs. Moreover, it equips the management team to recognize and seize new opportunities more efficiently and with less disruption, in a persistently uncertain market context’.

These are real performance gains. They are also real sustainability gains, achieved without ever having a conversation using the language of sustainability.

Neither risk nor resilience currently plays a prominent role in sustainability discussions, even though risk management and resilience planning are basic tenets of sustainability. But this is precisely why these two lenses are exactly the ones through which both large and small organizations alike may be more willing to look at sustainability.

Kincannon and Zimmerman conclude:

‘Sustainability language has been very effective with a segment of business leaders who have embraced its principles in a wide variety of interpretations, but has been far less successful with the wider majority of companies, particularly small- and medium-sized businesses. For all companies (and, to greater or lesser degrees, other organizations), cultivating resilience to risk is a fundamental strategic management goal, with clear fiduciary implications. Framing the conversation in this terminology can provide a more pragmatic, less freighted entrée to executives who have struggled to see the relevance of sustainability to their businesses. This inversion of the sustainability proposition offers to assist those companies to significantly strengthen their businesses (and thus the economy at large) while paradoxically advancing the cause of sustainability far more broadly, if only by another name’.

We think this nicely captures the interfaces we wanted to look at in our SI. It is, however, focusing only on the business and especially smaller business dimensions but it is something to do with breaking down the barriers and bringing together the expertise of people and work from different backgrounds that provides potential richness.

Often it seems, still, nearly 20 years on from Rio first time around, discussions of resilience, risk and sustainability issues, workers are operating too much in silos. The challenges of climate change, set out by the UK Government, for example, in their document, ‘Climate resilient infrastructure: preparing for a changing climate (May 2011)’ and the Scottish Government in ‘*Low Carbon Scotland: Meeting the Emissions Reduction Targets 2010–2022*’ as well as addressed by the EU’s proposed Seventh Environmental Action Programme and in COM 2011 363 make it highly desirable if not essential, that good science, good data and much thoughtful and integrative analysis be brought quickly to bear to inform business and Government decisions about the future.

This SI sought out contributions to address issues of risk quantification and management under the broad heading of the environment and sustainability. With increasing international focus on climate change and the development of strategies and policies around mitigation and adaptation, while still delivering economic growth against a backdrop of substantial scientific uncertainty,

the SI editors looked for contributions on topics addressing the SI theme in general and especially some of the specific topics listed below:

1. Risk management in sustainable development.
2. Risk, climate change mitigation and adaptation.
3. Risk, ecosystems services and function.
4. Risk, water resources.
5. Risk, environmental regulation and policy.
6. Risk, biodiversity.
7. Risk, food and agriculture.
8. Risk, energy-infrastructure and resilience.
9. Risk, carbon-capture and storage.
10. Risk, Governance systems.

The set of articles we have is diverse, they range from looking at a regulatory framework for managing new activity in the field of carbon capture and storage to flood risk and economic impact to social aspects of climate change mitigation to farming. This reflects rather nicely the very broad scientific and societal dimensions that sustainability spans, and underlines the multi-disciplinary aspects of this 'nascent' discipline. These papers will be included in two issues of the journal, to end 2011 and start 2012, reflecting the quality and quantity of submissions on this important topic. We hope that the breadth of topics that the articles cover will interest many readers, and encourage many to take up the challenges of risk, sustainability and the environment.

References

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