

Professor Colin Coulson-Thomas

Turn environmental challenges into business opportunities

World Congress call for more innovative and entrepreneurial responses



In a recent encyclical on climate change, the environment and inequality Pope Francis suggests our planet is 'beginning to look more and more like an immense pile of filth.' His indictment embraces rubbish, the throwaway culture, the impacts of pollutants and greenhouse gas emissions. His critique suggests that in relation to environmental governance, innovation and entrepreneurship we have more to do.

Litter is not hard to find. Will growing mountains of waste be one of our most tangible legacies? Are they just a side effect of our business activities that we can either ignore or leave to others to clear up? Or do we accept responsibility and address the issue?

In his 1960 Harvard Business Review article on marketing myopia Theodore Levitt asked business leaders the question: "What business are you really in?" Given the comments of Pope Francis, are you in the business of producing rubbish?

Do your strategies embrace built in obsolescence? Do you upgrade or change products so that older

models are thrown away? Is your packaging excessive, unnecessary or non-biodegradable?

Fast food outlets can sometimes be located by following a trail of discarded cartons. Are there mechanisms that would improve market responses? Should businesses that produce or serve fast food be made responsible for clearing up the resulting rubbish?

If we fail to address environmental issues, others will. Governments and regulators will impose general solutions upon us. There is a risk that intervention might pander to vested interests? How do we ensure future regulations are effective, easy to implement and proportionate? Are there better alternatives such as incentives?

This year is the 30th anniversary of Innovation '85, an activity I conceived for Rank Xerox. It was attended by over 20,000 decision makers. The event attracted Royal and diplomatic visitors and a display by the Royal Air Force's aerobatic team the Red Arrows.

The exhibition covered the history of innovation. A common feature of many breakthroughs was that those causing them asked the right questions. Is effective environmental leadership, governance, innovation and

Professor Colin Coulson-Thomas addressed the 17th World Congress on Environment Management, organised by the Institute of Directors of India and held at the Hotel Le Meridien, New Delhi, India. The event coincided with the Institute's 25th anniversary and was attended by Ministers from the UK and India, senior civil servants and business leaders.

entrepreneurship about asking the right questions?

Are you thinking strategically about environmental issues and asking the right questions? Collectively are we focused on reducing carbon emissions, while overlooking the extent to which our activities are also reducing biodiversity? What could your company and its supply chain do to enhance biodiversity?

Are social impacts of our built environments being overlooked? How accessible for the disabled are they? Do they create positive feelings and improve performance? Do they enable interaction as opposed to causing isolation? Do they inspire the creativity and innovation we need to address environmental issues, challenges and opportunities?

Responsible leadership is about choices - making the right calls, selecting the best alternatives, establishing priorities and balancing contending forces. Can we turn environmental challenges into business opportunities?

Are growth and development contributing to congestion, pollution and ill health? Are we protecting our architectural, artistic and cultural heritage as old buildings are swept away? Should we renovate rather than replace?

The regeneration of UK waterways and derelict docks has boosted local employment, growth and property values. Cleaning up rivers can yield leisure, health and lifestyle benefits, as well as encouraging tourism and other commercial activities.

The world's most visited place is not a world heritage site but a shopping mall in Dubai. The most polluted shopping location in the UK is Oxford Street. If regulators, retailers and transport authorities worked together reduced traffic flows could benefit shoppers, retailers and landlords.

Responsible business can be profitable business. Could your purchasing power be used to better effect? Could you part fund a supplier's development of more environmentally friendly packaging in return for a share of resulting revenues?

Freedom encourages innovation. New models of network and virtual organisation - and new ways of working, learning and consuming - free people from activities at particular times and places. Such developments and greater use of intelligent homes, offices, robots and support tools can deliver environmental benefits.

Should you be collaborating with others? Compelling visions can engage, excite and bring together the know-how, technology and finance needed for their implementation. If you lack resources and capabilities you can collaborate with those who have missing pieces of the jig-saw puzzle.

How compelling is your environmental vision? How joined-up are the elements of your strategy? Could your company or business contribute to smart city, town and village initiatives and benefit from them?

Don't be afraid to cooperate with compatible partners. Some projects are so complex that even Governments find them difficult to handle. A network of collaborations may be required to build an airport or metro

network, replace sewers or construct nuclear power stations.

Where cooperation is possible size is not everything when it comes to effective responses. Established companies sometimes protect existing investments, where innovative and entrepreneurial ones create new options and better alternatives. Business owners and directors should challenge entrenched assumptions.

Are there different and more sustainable models of growth? Could different policies and practices differentiate us and simplify and enhance our lives, and those of our customers, while protecting and improving physical and aesthetic environments?

Activity sometimes replaces thinking. Should you rush to meetings, answer emails or reflect? When did you last watch the tide come in and out, or a flower open and close, and quietly reflect on how helping others to address challenges might create new opportunities?

Business owners, directors and boards should probe and question strategies, priorities and approaches. Will governance arrangements cope with the speed and scale of adjustment required? How do we engage with customers and other stakeholders and ensure informed debates?

Are we getting the right balance between immediate pressures and longer-term concerns? How do we fund progress along learning curves and prepare for the future while remaining competitive?

Questions stimulate the search for solutions. Today's questions determine our tomorrows. How do we achieve more with less? Rather than change corporate cultures, are there quicker, more sustainable and less disruptive ways of simultaneously achieving multiple objectives?

There are affordable steps that can be taken. Customers could be given support tools to help them make more responsible, sustainable and healthier purchase

and consumption decisions. Better support can also make it easier for people to excel at difficult jobs, speed up responses, reduce costs, ensure compliance and deliver other benefits for people, organisations and the environment.

Innovative, responsible and sustainable responses could restore trust and lead to less intervention and greater reliance upon market mechanisms. They could also produce closer and more productive public-private collaboration, as each better appreciates the contribution of the other.

Pope Francis called for a 'moral' approach. Business leaders have capabilities he lacks. They can employ practical, innovative and responsible business approaches. They can engage, utilize and deploy people, resources and capabilities to develop and implement more sustainable and beneficial business strategies.

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