What should companies be doing to address the main challenges of sustainable development?

Building on 15 years of tracking sustainable development expert opinions, research firm GlobeScan has teamed up with think tank and consultancy, SustainAbility, to provide The Sustainability Survey, the definitive annual poll of sustainability experts.

This eBrief outlines the inaugural survey’s summary findings of the views of these thought leaders on topical issues such as the economic crisis, climate change, international development and the role of companies.

Key findings include:

- Fresh water and climate change are the most pressing SD challenges
- Companies are better at addressing corporate accountability than environmental or social challenges
- Partnerships are the most effective way to address SD challenges
- Investing in healthcare and education is the best way to address poverty reduction challenges
Prioritizing SD Challenges

When rating the urgency of sustainable development challenges, the 2,238 expert survey respondents highlighted fresh water shortages and climate change at top the list. Poverty, loss of biodiversity, and food security are also rated as quite urgent challenges by the experts.

While water shortages and climate change are the most pressing issues, experts think corporate strategies to tackle sustainable development are most effective when they act on operational elements related to business processes, such as electronic waste management or air pollution. Interestingly, effectiveness at addressing corporate accountability for sustainable development was given the number one rating. While companies are felt to be moderately effective in addressing climate change and toxin management, experts are less certain about business’ ability to address many other SD challenges.

The white space in this chart represents “DK/NA.”

Q. 2
Comparing the perceived urgency of fourteen SD challenges with companies' perceived effectiveness in addressing those issues, four distinct issue clusters emerge.

Experts are somewhat divided on the private sector’s ability to address the issues that relate primarily to the social dimensions of sustainable development—clean water, food security, diseases, poverty, and nutrition. When effectiveness and urgency are considered together, it is mainly these issues that emerge as high-risk issues—those considered to be urgent, yet areas where experts doubt large companies can be effective.

The white space in this chart represents “DK/NA.”

Q. 11
**High Urgency / Low Effectiveness:**
Experts appear to be skeptical of business' ability to address critical issues such as clean water shortages, poverty, loss of biodiversity, food security, and undernutrition. If companies are going to play a role in these areas, they may want to consider addressing these challenges through partnerships with NGOs and/or governments.

**Low Urgency / Low Effectiveness**
Overnutrition is a sustainable development challenge that is viewed as less critical than others and one that companies have not yet been able to prove effective at addressing.

**High Urgency / High Effectiveness:**
Climate change, corporate accountability and economic instability emerge as areas where experts believe companies can play a primary role and make the most progress on sustainable development. There are high expectations for companies to focus on these critical challenges.

**Low Urgency / High Effectiveness:**
Issues in this grouping represent less urgent sustainable development challenges yet are considered areas where companies can be effective. These areas represent opportunities where companies can make progress in the transition to sustainable development.
Approaches to Corporate Involvement in SD Challenges

To understand thought leader perspectives on how companies can best have a positive impact on societal challenges, experts were asked to rate three possible approaches:

1. Deploying the companies’ core capabilities for social and environmental purposes

2. Supporting other actors such as NGOs, charities, and governments to make positive contributions

3. Engaging in new types of partnerships that bring together governments, companies, and civil society to tackle social and environmental challenges

Large companies are perceived make the most positive societal impact through partnerships with government and civil society organizations designed to tackle social and environmental problems. The partnership approach is slightly favored over simply supporting NGOs and governments, or deploying the companies’ own capabilities.
**Focus on Poverty**

In relation to poverty reduction in developing countries, experts were asked how much effort should be spent on ten distinct issues. These include greening urban areas, government accountability and public policy, investing in infrastructure such as roads and electricity, education and healthcare, support for climate change adaptation, and food security through land management policies and farm productivity. The experts concluded that effort should prioritize education and healthcare, strengthening governments and eliminating corruption, empowering civil society to hold governments accountable in public policy decision-making, and implementing land management policies that address food security issues for the poor.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Effort Required to Reduce Poverty</th>
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<tr>
<td>&quot;Great Deal (4+5),&quot; 2009</td>
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<tr>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>Effort Required</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Investing in education/healthcare</td>
<td>91</td>
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<tr>
<td>Strengthening governments / eliminating corruption</td>
<td>84</td>
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<tr>
<td>Empowering civil society to hold governments accountable in public policy decision-making</td>
<td>78</td>
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<tr>
<td>Implementing land management policies that address food security for the poor</td>
<td>77</td>
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<tr>
<td>Investing in helping smallholder farmers increase productivity</td>
<td>72</td>
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<tr>
<td>Making changes to global trading rules</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Providing support for social enterprises</td>
<td>70</td>
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<tr>
<td>Investment in infrastructure such as roads and access to electricity</td>
<td>66</td>
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<tr>
<td>Providing support to populations for adapting to changes in the climate</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Investing in efforts to “green” urban areas</td>
<td>54</td>
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