POLICY DIALOGUE ON SUSTAINABILITY

A New Model – The Case of the Corporate Leaders Group on Climate Change

By Wayne Visser and Margaret Adey

Abstract

Dialogue is often loosely touted as an approach to tackling sustainability challenges and resolving sustainability dilemmas or conflicts, especially through the process of stakeholder dialogue. However, the literature is more sparse on the role of companies in pro-active, pro-sustainability policy dialogue, as opposed to the practice of corporate lobbying against proposed sustainability regulation. This paper seeks to address this gap by analysing a particularly innovative case study, The Corporate Leaders Group on Climate Change. The paper follows the structure of introducing the concept of dialogue, reviewing the literature on sustainability dialogue and describing and evaluating the case study.

Dialogue

Ellinor and Gerard (1998) describe dialogue as a foundational communication process that assists in creating environments of high trust and openness, with reflective and generative capacities.

The word dialogue stems from the Greek roots 'dia' (i.e. through) and 'logos' (i.e. word or meaning). Although relatively new to modern-day organisational practices, dialogue can be traced to ancient Greece, as described in *The Dialogues of Plato* (1898) and to forms of communication used by Native Americans and other indigenous peoples. Aspects of dialogue can also be found within Quaker spiritual and business practice, in counselling models such as those of Carl Rogers, as part of certain Eastern meditation practices, and in the philosophical works of Martin Buber (Gerard & Teurfs, 1996).

There are numerous approaches to dialogue. For example, Slotte and Hämäläinen (2003) contrast the Bohmian dialogue, as developed by physicist David Bohm (1996) and championed by Senge (1990) and Isaacs (1999), with Socratic dialogue, inspired by Socrates but developed as specific approach by the philosopher and educationalist Leonard Nelson (1965). The Center for Creative Learning (1996) identify a broader range of perspectives on dialogue, based on the work of Chris Argyris (around organisational learning), David Bohm (around developing shared meaning), David Johnson and Roger Johnson (around cooperation and productivity), Jack Mezirow (around the conditions for rational discourse), and Paulo Freire (around educational transformation).

Among its more modern organisational applications, dialogue can form an integral part of continuous learning, diversity management, conflict exploration, problem solving, leadership development, team-building, organizational planning and culture change (Ellinor and Gerard 1998). Some of these applications adopt a very specific approach and set of techniques, such as the Decision Structuring dialogue method, which uses an agenda or topic as a starting point, focusing both on content (i.e. the issue under discussion) and process (i.e. the way the issue is discussed) and following a series of prescribed steps led by a facilitator (Slotte and Hämäläinen 2003).

Dialogue and sustainability

It would appear, however, that little or none of these perspectives and approaches on dialogue have been applied directly by sustainability scholars. Rather, dialogue most often appears in the sustainability literature in a looser sense as "stakeholder dialogue", incorporating business ethics (Garcia-Marza, 2005), corporate social responsibility (Jonker & Nijhof, 2006), corporate accountability (Rasche & Esser, 2006) and environmental management (Perret, 2003).

Perret (2003) defines stakeholder dialogue as "a process in which parties with different interests and values at stake in a particular issue work towards mutually acceptable solutions" (385). The process, typically involving a series of meetings and workshops, is seen as ongoing, iterative and interactive. The distinction from other forms of multi-stakeholder communication like citizens' panels, polls, focus groups or opinion surveys, is that dialogue is less about getting a reaction or opinion through attempting to achieve a representative mix and more about engaging people in informing a decision. Hence, stakeholder dialogue tries to include everyone with an interest.

Kaptein and Van Tulder (2003) draw a contrast between stakeholder debate and stakeholder dialogue. They see stakeholder dialogue as "a structured interactive and proactive process aimed at creating sustainable strategies" (210), whereas stakeholder debate does not seek an end point other than the debate itself. Similarly, Perret (2003) usefully compares and contrasts dialogue (bounded and open) with other types of engagement (information-giving, information gathering and consultation). Among the important distinctions is that, whereas other forms of engagement tend to elicit "positions" (inflexible, dogmatic demands or statements), dialogue attempts to understand "interests" (reasons behind the positions) and underlying "needs and concerns".

Acland (2000) has identified four influences in the history of stakeholder dialogue as a technique: 1) political – growing out of the US-based civil rights movement of the late 1950s and the Vietnam War protests of the 1970s; 2) academic – through the emergent academic field of conflict resolution which the political protest movements spawned; 3) legal – as a result of the environmental movement in the 1970s and complex environmental lawsuits in the 1980s; and 4) environmental – with the growth of 'alternate dispute resolution' and action research as alternatives to legal action on environmental issues.

McNamee and Gergen (1999) believe that multi-stakeholder dialogues can create a sense of 'relational responsibility', by which they mean a shared understanding of the respective rights and obligations of the moral agents embedded in any set of stakeholder relationships. Swanson (1999) refers to this as a "value attuned" process of decision-making arising from a "communicative ethic or a dialogue based on mutual respect among corporate managers and groups in the community" (518).

Daboub and Calton (2002) choose to emphasise the learning benefits of these interactions, naming them "stakeholder learning dialogues". They argue that "a corporate citizenship practice grounded in such multi-stakeholder dialogues is particularly appropriate for coping with ethical dilemmas that arise within messy, contested, pluralist problem domains" (96). Furthermore, that "an important feature of such dialogues is the potential for joint learning as different perspectives on the shared problem as well as preconceptions about relationships between 'selves' and 'others' are tested and recast" (96). Maclagan (1999) makes a similar point, suggesting that a "dialogic mode" is needed when stakeholders' varying demands and moral claims are in conflict.

There are numerous illustrations of sustainability-related stakeholder dialogues in the literature. For example, Kaptein and Van Tulder (2003) compare and contrast four stakeholder dialogues – a broad, proactive dialogue by a European telecommunications company, a stakeholder panel set up by an international chemical company, a reactive stakeholder dialogue by a transport company and a defensive dialogue by a financial services firm. Daboub and Calton (2002) cite a further two cases: The multi-stakeholder negotiations that resulted in an agreement on sustainable forestry practices on Vancouver Island, British Columbia (Winn, 2001), and the numerous multi-stakeholder dialogues "to develop and agree new solutions to issues of sustainable development" held by the World Business Council for Sustainable Development (Payne & Calton, 2002). Other examples include Perret's (2003) case study of British Nuclear Fuels, which engaged in a national stakeholder dialogue in order to better understand stakeholders' environmental concerns about the nuclear industry, and Adams, Brockington, Dyson and Bhaskar's (2002) analytical framework for dialogue on common-pool resource management.

All these and other examples tend to concur with Forstner and Bales's (1992) view of dialogue as a principle for improving the public consultation process; a way to "do as much listening as talking" and to achieve "a cooperative compromise" (32).

Policy dialogue and sustainability

Policy dialogue is most often discussed in the literature in terms of corporate political lobbying, which Keffer and Hill (1997) define as "an attempt to persuade members of city councils, county commissions, state legislatures, or [other national government structures] to support legislation favourable to one's goals or desires, or to defeat or repeal legislation unfavourable to one's cause" (162). Meznar and Nigh (1995) regard such lobbying as a form of "buffering" in which "a firm is either trying to insulate itself from external influence or to actively influence its environment" (977). Business and the Environment (2005) estimate that in 2004 the market size of Washington lobbyists exceeded \$3 billion, and in Europe approximately 15,000 lobbyists represent a 60-90 million Euro industry.

Lobbying is frequently discussed in the literature in terms of ethics (Grimaldi, 1998). For example, Weber (1996) argues that corporate political activity becomes a matter of ethics when companies pursue private interests over the public good, or where their influence is disproportionately large. Hence, he argues for a limitation of lobbying to a "careful use of influence" (258). Hamilton and Hoch (1997) argue that "rather than being inherently evil, business lobbying is a socially responsible activity which needs to be restrained by ethical standards" (117). The ethical standards they propose are simply a restatement of some of the principles of the major ethical theories, such as utilitarian optimisation, universal application, human rights, fair distribution and social contracts. Keffer and Hill (1997) propose a communitarian approach to political persuasion by companies and categorise lobbying activities into "good", "bad" and "problem" areas, where "good" represents legality and no infliction of undue harm on society, "bad" represents the opposite, and "problem" refers to activities which, if abused, have the potential for illegality or grievous harm.

One of the most comprehensive studies on the ethics of lobbying is a report by SustainAbility and WWF (2005) entitled *Influencing Power*, which ranks the world's top 100 companies on the transparency of their lobbying activities and contrasts this with their public statements on corporate responsibility. In terms of transparency, fifty per cent of the multinationals surveyed were providing some degree of transparency around lobbying activity, with UK businesses leading the way, followed by the US and the Netherlands. This represents a significant increase over the past five years since their last review (WWF & SustainAbility, 2000). Another report on the subject is *The Ethics of Influence*, which studied the lobbying and political donations behaviour of more than 30 leading companies in France, the UK and the United States and proposed a set of criteria for "responsible lobbying" (Lascellesis, 2005).

Most of the literature concludes that lobbying is an acceptable activity, so long as it is conducted within ethical parameters. Nevertheless, as SustainAbility and WWF (2005) conclude, even among those companies that ranked well in ethical terms on lobbying, "their focus is generally on defending often controversial positions rather than on how corporate responsibility and related policy activities can support core business strategies". Hence, policy dialogue on issues of sustainable development has mostly taken the form of social and environmental NGOs lobbying for more and tougher legislation (Park, 2005; Schmutzler, 2005; Sheate, 1992), and companies (often through business or sector associations) lobbying for less and more lenient legislation (Crouse, 1998; Damania, 2001).

Exceptions to this rule, i.e. companies that lobby for raising the bar on sustainability legislation, are few and far between. Likewise, the notion of policy dialogue on climate change, while recognised in a generic sense and in the context of corporate lobbying (Markussen & Svendsen, 2005), does not appeared to have been studied as a process of positive engagement, even in journals like *Climate Policy*. It is the latter approach which our case study – the Corporate Leaders Group on Climate Change – seeks to illustrate.

Introduction to the case study

Business is often criticised for its lobbying tactics of resisting stricter regulations on social and environmental performance. So how did a group of UK business leaders change "lobbying" from a dirty word into a form of corporate responsibility?

By developing a high-level lobbying strategy with well-positioned messages, the Corporate Leaders Group on Climate Change (CLG) has 'emboldened' senior politicians to make decisions on climate policy that go much further than they would have done otherwise.

The initiative made headlines in 2005 when the leaders of 15 major UK businesses and international companies – under the banner of the CLG – wrote an open letter to the UK Prime Minister offering to work in partnership with the Government to strengthen domestic and international policy on reducing greenhouse gas emissions. They stated that investing in a low-carbon future should be a "strategic business objective for UK plc as a whole".

This marked a major shift in the political debate. Up to then, governments had felt limited in their ability to introduce new climate change policies for fear of business resistance. Business, on its part, had been reluctant to scale up investment in low carbon solutions without the backing of long-term policy commitment by government. However, by openly supporting the government's development of new and bolder policies for tackling climate change, the CLG contributed to breaking this deadlock. Effectively, they created the political space for government leadership on climate change, enabling government to signal policy shifts that they would otherwise have been nervous about.

In June 2006, the CLG wrote to and met with the Prime Minister again, reiterating their support for the UK to provide international leadership by showing that developed countries, such as the UK, are serious about their commitment to tackling climate change and that such action is not damaging to their economies. The rest of this paper explores how this unusual call-to-action by business came about, with quotes provided by the stakeholders themselves.

Box 1 – Extract from the 2006 Open Letter by the Corporate Leaders Group on Climate Change to the UK Prime Minister

"The areas in which we see potential for collaboration between business and Government to increase action on climate change are:

- Strengthening markets for emissions reductions;
- Support for early-stage low-carbon technologies;
- Scaling-up low-carbon investment in rapidly developing economies;
- Improving energy efficiency in the large commercial sector;
- Stimulating consumer action on climate change;
- Strengthening product and building regulation;
- Reducing the impact of transport on climate change."

The Corporate Leaders Group on Climate Change: A model for bold action

The initiative began in 2004 when a handful of pioneering UK business leaders grew impatient about the prevailing uncertainty and general inertia on climate change and decided to organise themselves into the Prince of Wales's Corporate Leaders Group on Climate Change, or CLG. There are currently 19 members of the CLG (see Box 2).

Box 2 – Current Members of the Corporate Leaders Group on Climate Change

ABN AMRO, Anglian Water Group, AXA Insurance, B&Q, BAA, BSkyB, Centrica, E.On, F&C Asset Management, John Lewis Partnership, Johnson Matthey, Reckitt Benckiser, Shell, Standard Chartered Bank, Sun Microsystems, Tesco, Thames Water, Unilever and Vodafone.

The Group's members committed themselves to collectively agreeing on strong new messages on climate change that have the potential to significantly shift policy and politics, and to communicating these messages directly to politicians and to the media. Involvement of the corporate leaders at Chairman or Board level was seen as a key to the success of the Group, enabling access to the most senior politicians.

The CLG is facilitated by the Cambridge Programme for Industry - a specialist department of the University of Cambridge that focuses on sustainability leadership and runs, among others, the Prince of Wales's Business & the Environment Programme from which the Group emerged.

The Corporate Leaders Group operates through a two-tier process of dialogues, involving top leadership and expert support (i.e. the Working Group) respectively. These dialogues develop and refine the Group's strategy and key messages. They are facilitated and led by a Secretariat run by Cambridge Programme for Industry, which works closely with climate experts inside and outside the UK government to identify how the Group can have most impact.

Most of the background, preparatory and briefing work of the Group is done by technical specialists of one kind or another, ranging from government relations and corporate social responsibility experts, to climate change managers who are directly responsibility for developing new low-carbon products and services. This diversity means the Group has access to a range of knowledge and skills. For instance, B&Q offers particular energy efficiency expertise, while Shell has experience with the EU Greenhouse Gas Emission Trading System and Johnson Matthey brings a working knowledge of innovation policy. Where there are gaps in information or capacity, the Cambridge Programme for Industry brings in external experts to advise the Group.

The Policy Dialogue Process: How to Shift National Politics

By researching the experience of the CLG, the authors have identified a five-step process for companies to positively influence policy development on sustainability issues (see Figure 1). At the heart of this process lies the development of simple yet significant business messages on specific policy changes that address Government concerns and move the agenda forward.

Figure 1 – Cambridge Programme for Industry Policy Dialogue Process

Cambridge Policy Dialogue Process
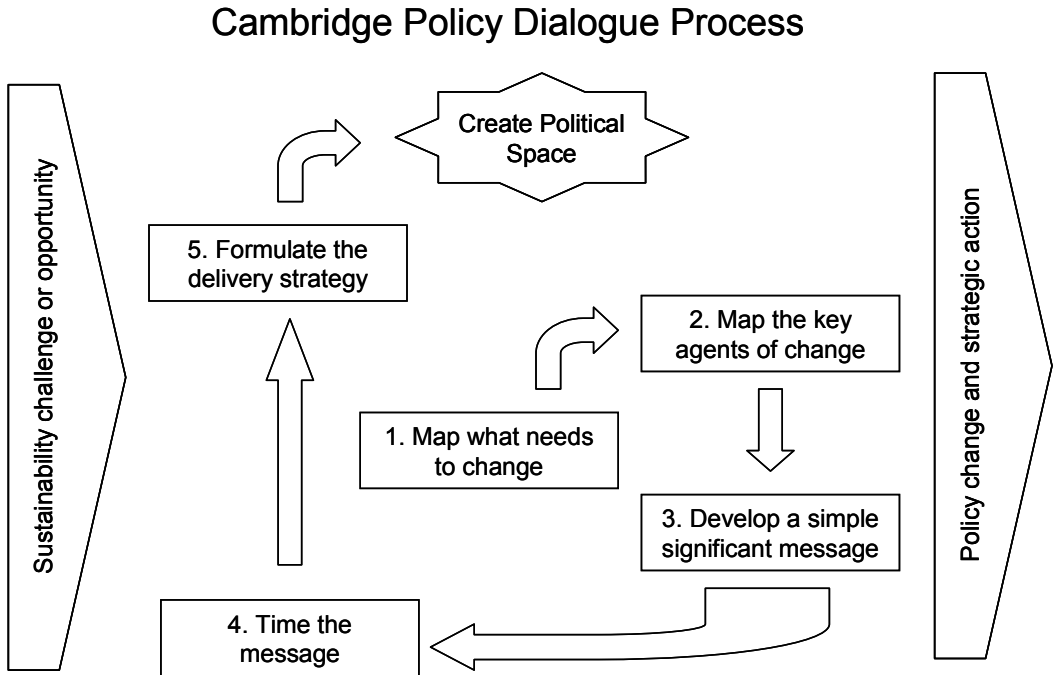
© University of Cambridge Programme for Industry

Step 1: Map what needs to change

The first step is to map what needs to change by understanding current policy options and identifying future options. Reviewing the latest policy documents reveals the current state of play on an issue. Talking with experts and officials across departments indicates the associated delivery challenges and what is needed to unblock these. The Group members then identify how their companies can contribute by supporting certain strategic directions and policy options. Often, the detail on how these could be implemented already exists from other sources.

Step 2: Map the key agents of change

Ideally, one or two pieces of policy, if changed, can move the agenda forward. Mapping key players inside and outside of government and identifying their motivations and concerns is the first step to anticipating any barriers to progress on an issue. The mapping process also identifies actors that can progress decisions if there is no consensus view. It is also helpful to know the concerns of government officials working on the policy recommendations.

Step 3: Develop a simple significant message

Once a number of policy options have been identified, their feasibility is debated with experts inside and outside of government. Tips from Special Advisors along the lines of "If the Group talks about [a certain issue or recommendation], it would be useful" are vital in shaping the final messages. Policy options then go forward to be considered by the relevant Ministers, Secretaries of State or the Prime Minister. In 2005 and 2006, given the national strategic nature of its proposals, the Group wrote directly to the Prime Minister.

Step 4: Time the message

To generate political interest, public statements from the Group must not only carry a strong, compelling message, but also be timed to coincide with political timetables, where possible piggy-backing on issues higher up the national or international agenda. This will also generate media interest which ensures the message is in the public domain. For example, CLG talked with the Prime Minister and other key Ministers – and published the 2006 letter – just before the Prime Minister had to make a decision about the EU Emissions Trading Target and the Energy Review.

Step 5: Formulate the delivery strategy

Messages can be delivered through a public statement, letter or report giving headline arguments and solutions - usually presented by the Group at a high-level private meeting with very senior politicians. In both cases when the Corporate Leaders met the UK Prime Minister, his Environment Ministers were also present (Margaret Beckett in 2005 and David Milliband in 2006).

Key success factors

Kaptein and Van Tulder (2003) identify various preconditions for an effective stakeholder dialogue, including, for example, trust and reliability, clear rules for the dialogue, a coherent vision on the dialogue, expertise in the subject matter, a clear dialogue structure.

Our research suggests that four sets of factors were particularly key in enabling the CLG dialogue process to successfully meet its aims:

1. Clearly articulate and enforce the different roles in the dialogue;

2. Craft a sufficiently strong and radical 'story' to get political and media attention;

3. Identify a high-level champions and/or a strong political hook; and

4. Create sufficient "political space".

These are discussed briefly below.

Clear roles

Perret (2003) identifies three crucial roles in all stakeholder dialogues: the decision maker (the organisation or individual who makes choices based on the results of the dialogue), the sponsor (the organisation that funds the process), and the convenor (the organisation or individual responsible for designing and running the process). The latter will usually include one key individual who is responsible for the design and management of the process (the facilitator), who may be supported by others as co-facilitators, or project coordinators.

In relation to the CLG, the top leadership in the Group consider options from the Working Group's dialogues and agree the proposals to be made to senior Government leaders – who are, in effect, the primary decision makers. The Group members are the sponsors, and commit to a contribution to develop and carry out activities within the CLG strategy. The Cambridge Programme for Industry act as convenor and provide a facilitator for the whole process.

Cambridge Programme for Industry's neutrality and convening power means that the CLG is seen as independent of Government while working closely with it. This independence is an important factor in creating and maintaining a neutral 'holding' space in which Working Group members can develop trust in each other and in the process as it unfolds.

At the same time, the maintenance of good relationships with stakeholders facilitates delivery of the CLG strategy. These relationships are key to the Group's understanding of the issues and to ensure that the CLG provides a balanced business view point. In widening its links into Government and other parties the CLG stays relevant and central to the policy making process, while maintaining its non-partisan stance.

Strong political story

The breadth and diversity of the sectors represented in the CLG is instrumental in building a strong and robust story. This story is based on very strategic insights into areas where government want to take action - insights made possible because of the strong working relationship between the Secretariat and Downing Street. Intelligent media attention is a result of the CLGs strong linkages with key media outlets.

On of the CLG participants commented that the CLG is effective because of "the tone and style – engaging and challenging but in a constructive way (not just critical) [and] including in the media. This is more motivating for political leaders than continual criticism. Encouragement and praise goes much further – with the threat of criticism."

Media engagement is influenced by how much the media can see a narrative and by what is already in the news. One role of the facilitator is to highlight the key messages and provide a framework of what the issues had been initially and how the Group has progressed them.

A 'knock on' effect of the CLG is that it has raised the profile of climate change among business in general and enabled other businesses to "feel that they are not speaking out of turn when they talk about the need for radical action on climate change." Hence, "the positive political engagement and media coverage has shown that environmental issues management can be positive for the company. From a corporate responsibility point of view it has been helpful to raise awareness and help drive the climate change agenda."

Identify strategic champions

The corporate leaders are the primary champions - "engaging with the right people, at the right level and at the right time", as one of the facilitators put it. The CLG "brings together a group of senior executives who believe, personally and institutionally, in important aspects of sustainability."

However, in addition to the corporate leaders themselves, the involvement of high level individuals with convening power (such as the UK Prime Minister and HRH the Prince of Wales) is an important factor in obtaining a successful outcome. Indeed, the ability to convene senior leaders from business

was catalysed by the UK Prime Minister delivering Cambridge Programme for Industry's annual lecture in 2004.

The senior business figures join the CLG because they want to be positioned as progressive leaders. A very strong trust-based relationship is then built with the champions and other key players – and consolidated over time.

In addition to identifying the champions, it is important to have a strong political hook. A political hook can be either created or identified. It can be, for instance, a high-level political opportunity where decisions may, or may not, get made (e.g. G8 meeting; EU Presidency; The EU CSR Finance Conference is one example of a high-level opportunity without decision-making remit).

Create political space

The creation of political space involves providing a positive business voice in which politicians can discuss policy and regulation. The CLG's willingness to listen and have open discussions with Government were seen as important and a differentiator of the Group from other industry organisations.

The creation of political space required the CLG to first identify one or a few important key strategic changes. This was achieved by asking the participants and Special Government Advisors at the outset "What needs to change?" and "What can a business group most usefully say that will add value?" Hence, "the group has been engaging and constructive and has come forward with specific proposals and ideas – being propositional – i.e. focusing on solutions not just problems."

Creating political space also required an analysis of the barriers to progress, internationally and domestically, and deciding which of these barriers business could do most about (e.g. the impact on competitiveness through taking action on climate change).

The result was that "there were clear movements in the instincts of policy makers between the Climate Change Review and the Energy Review – partly because of Blair's involvement, but the CLG definitely shifted people's perspectives of how businesses would respond to policy."

The Way Forward

The Corporate Leaders Group on Climate Change has created political space for UK politicians to take bold action on climate change, such as setting a target for the reduction in carbon dioxide emissions by 2050 as laid out in the draft Climate Change Bill. Feedback from Government has stated clearly that the CLG has had a direct influence on both the Energy Review and the National Allocation Plan of the EU Emissions Trading Scheme.

One benefit of the process is that it has also raised the profile of climate change among business in general and enabled other businesses to feel that they are not speaking out of turn when they talk about the need for radical action on climate change. The Group has been so successful that it has recently joined with several other European companies to form a wider EU Corporate Leaders Group on Climate Change that has begun working with President Barroso to ensure that European policy is similarly progressive.

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