

The Life Story of a Global Movement

By Wayne Visser

This new blog series for CSRwire is based on my book, *The Quest for Sustainable Business*. The book, in turn, follows a journey – around the world and through time; a journey of discovery and ideas. In the blog posts that follow, I will give you some glimpses into the search that has taken me to over 65 countries in the past 20 years. The path begins in Africa and winds its way through Asia, North America, Europe, Australasia and Latin America.

Along the way, I will share what I have learned in my encounters with mega-corporations and small farmers; and in conversations with CEOs and social entrepreneurs. I draw on facts and figures about world trends, and interviews with thought leaders and activists. This is a tale that consciously weaves the personal and the professional, mixing anecdotes and case studies. It looks outwards and reflects inwards, and is both autobiography and the life story of a global movement.

My inspiration for the book came when I decided, in 2010, to leave the security of the University of Cambridge – where I had been developing a Master's in Sustainability Leadership – and set out on a 'Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) quest world tour', which took me to 20 countries on five continents, travelling continuously for nine months. It was one of those great ironies of my life that I had to leave one of the world's premier educational institutions in order to advance my learning.

Suffice to say I had an itch and I needed to scratch it. I wanted to reconnect with what was happening on the ground in countries around the world; and I was excited by the prospect of making new friends, seeing new lands, soaking up diverse cultures and discovering fresh case studies. More than anything, I needed to rekindle the passion that had started me on this career in sustainable business 20 years before.

My intention was always to capture my insights along the journey and share them with a wider sustainable business audience. One of the ways I did this was to conduct nearly 100 video interviews, all of which are shared on the CSR International channel on YouTube, and referred to throughout the text of the book.

The other way was to keep a diary and to write a book about my travel experiences—the book which forms the basis for this blog series. However, when I started to write, I repeatedly found myself referring to earlier parts of my career. Gradually, I began to wonder if there was a bigger story to be told. After all, my journey began in the lead-up to the Rio Earth Summit in 1992, and here we were, 20 years later, preparing for Rio+20.

In the interim, I had been fortunate to work, study, teach and research in the field of sustainable business, tracking its path as it emerged from a fringe concern to a mainstream movement and a global profession. There were stories to tell that ranged from hippie-like adventures in eco-villages and community enterprises to hard-nosed consulting assignments for big global brands. I had worked as a strategy analyst for Cap Gemini and set up and ran KPMG's Sustainability Services in South Africa.

I had studied human ecology in Edinburgh and corporate social responsibility in Nottingham; established an economics NGO (non-governmental organisation) and a CSR social enterprise; lectured to students in countries around the world, from Germany and the United States to India and China; and had given keynote speeches to countless audiences, from Australia and Singapore to Hungary and Nigeria.

These had all given me invaluable exposure to people working in sustainable business. But besides these pragmatic experiences, I had also been on a remarkable intellectual journey. I wrote *Beyond*

Reasonable Greed just at the moment when the world was shaken by Enron's collapse, and had tried to advance a neglected area of scholarship with *Corporate Citizenship in Africa*, capturing my own PhD research on what motivates sustainability professionals in *Making a Difference*.

In *Landmarks for Sustainability* I had traced the events and initiatives that changed the world, and I interviewed some of the world's leading thinkers for *The Top 50 Sustainability Books* project. I had corralled over 100 experts for *The A to Z of Corporate Social Responsibility* and profiled 58 countries in *The World Guide to CSR*. Finally, frustrated by the apparent failure of sustainable business practices to reverse our most serious social and environmental trends, I had written *The Age of Responsibility*, calling for CSR 2.0 as a new DNA for business.

The book, therefore – and the blogs to follow – are an attempt to bring all of these experiences and insights together in one place – to tell a story of personal, professional and intellectual development, which occurred on an epic journey in search of corporate responsibility. I began writing the story chronologically, but quickly found that grouping it into regions and countries made more sense. The consequence is that there is a fair bit of time travelling, as I hop backwards and forwards over the years. I hope that this is not too dizzying for you as a reader.

I should also caution that I am not trying to present a comprehensive profile of sustainable business in the countries that I have visited – if you are looking for this, I recommend *The World Guide to CSR*. Rather, I want to share anecdotes and lessons from experiences I have had and people I have met, where the context happens to be a particular country or region.

Of course, my story represents only one perspective on the evolution of sustainable business. It is my odyssey and my path of learning, seen through my eyes. I am sure that many of you will have been on your own quest for sustainable business. I only hope that my stories will inspire you to share your own. And if you are still near the beginning of your journey, I hope it will encourage you to be bold in choosing the way ahead, so that you can echo the words of Robert Frost when you look back in 20 years:

*I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I –
I took the one less travelled by,
And that has made all the difference.*

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