

# Exploring the business case of sustainable consumption in Asia

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## Introduction

The challenge of setting up sustainable consumption patterns (SC), defined as (a) improving quality of life while (b) reducing environmental burden, is widely accepted by international organisations. In the context of developing or newly industrialised countries an improvement in the quality of life is closely related to the topic of poverty alleviation. Global agendas like the Millennium Development Goals give account by integrating both poverty alleviation and environmental issues. In the following paper we assume that establishing sustainable consumption patterns needs to be more closely linked to the academic and public debate of poverty alleviation and regional and local development.

The liberalisation of trade and financial markets and the rapidly evolving innovations in transport logistics and information and communication technologies during the last decades have led to movement of goods, capital and labour over state borders freer than ever before in modern history. Transnational companies (TNCs) can now acquire products from and supply products to a diverse range of countries. Along a single product chain from extraction of raw materials to the disposal phase, actors involved along the production chain range from local communities to financial institutions. Hence, interdependencies between societal actors and the TNCs are significantly increasing. While TNC activities, like any other economic activity, are influenced by societal structures in which their operations take place, they in turn affect the socio-economic developments (Kuhndt et al 2004a).

Activities of TNCs in developing countries have recently attracted the attention of a number of development researchers. Aim of their studies is usually to draw up policy recommendations for the governments of developing countries on how to better access to the large and differentiated markets of industrialized countries so as to induce economic growth, or on how to attract more foreign direct investment, mostly in export oriented industries. It is expected that "export-oriented industrialisation" leads to the creation of local employment opportunities that would then result in improved income opportunities for the marginalized, hence contribute to poverty alleviation. Export-driven economic growth in fact has helped millions out of poverty, especially in Asia, thus proving to be a viable option for poverty alleviation. Drawbacks of this traditional approach, however, include a lacking transfer of management knowledge, low investments in human capital and sometimes-questionable working conditions. Lately, businesses have embraced the last problem as a risk issue and are taking first management measures to prevent adverse effects. The authors of this paper believe that business contributions to alleviating poverty could go far further than merely opening up production sites in developing countries. Shifting towards a perspective actively considering value creation along the whole value chain can open up new opportunities and build the business case of sustainable consumption.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The Wuppertal Institute for Climate, Energy, Environment has set up a department for applied research on sustainable production and consumption in 2003. The research group focuses on sustainability enhancement opportunities along global product and supply chains considering all the actors involved at different stages and levels of the chain and analyses drivers and barriers for improving the overall quality of life.

The value approach towards company sustainability has been proposed by a variety of actors. Companies are called to become value creators that achieve “competitive advantage through the adoption and development of ecologically and socially supportive processes, products and services” (WWF-UK 2004). The competitive advantage achieved is increasingly relying on intangible value drivers. As the focus here is on developing countries, value chains linking industrialised and developing countries have core relevance. The major question is how additional value can be created in these chains: How can business value be created fostering regional and local value creation through ecologically and socially supportive processes? The authors will show that besides value creation in the production phase, consumption oriented activities bear great potential for value creation, on the business side as well as for local and regional value creation, hence contributing to poverty alleviation.

In the following we will elaborate on the questions how global value chains affect local and regional development. We will structure the discussion around the concept of “consumption oriented value creation” that draws attention to the value created during the later parts of the product life cycle. It will be shown that consumption oriented value creation targeted at the poor can indeed add value at the local and regional level in developing countries. Based on the research we will introduce a framework that allows business to identify business opportunities that in parallel add sustainable value at the local level. For developing the framework, a variety of case studies will be screened and analysed. The paper combines recent insights on business contribution in a developing country context (WBCSD 2004, Prahalad & Fruehauf 2004) with insights on sustainable business strategy development (WWF-UK 2004).

The framework does not only explain the success of a variety of business initiatives tackling the poor as customers, but also offers the chance to identify a variety of profitable, quality-of-life improving business concepts. At the heart lies the matching of local needs with business capacities through focusing on consumption related value creation. How this together can contribute to sustainable value creation will be laid out in the next chapter.

### **Matching local needs and business capacities through consumption oriented value creation**

The concept of “consumption oriented value creation” lies at the heart of this chapter. While the activities proposed under its name may not be entirely new, it nonetheless serves as a cognitive guidance towards seeing how these activities could be extended to developing countries. More specifically, it is reasoned that these activities can make a contribution towards better serving local needs and alleviating poverty on the one hand, and realising business benefits on the other.

To illustrate this, the concept of consumption oriented value creation will be defined first. Then, its relationship to poverty alleviation and serving local needs will be laid out, followed by an analysis of business benefits that could be derived from it. Thus, a rationale for the concept both from the perspective of development policy and from a business point of view will be given. The closing remarks of this chapter map some implications for developing business capacities needed to make the actions envisioned a reality. The framework for consumption oriented value creation in figure 1 gives a first overview how business capacities can be linked to local needs through a value creation perspective.

#### **Introducing consumption oriented value creation**

Within the industrialised countries, the importance of consumer related value creation has been growing over the last decades. Market research, design, distribution and so on have become critical success factors for businesses projects. Companies are increasingly focusing their strategy thereon,

outsourcing the mere act of production. Many business success stories are dependent on effective consumption oriented value creation. Reflecting visions of an emerging 'knowledge society' these businesses are more concerned with generating knowledge on their consumers and their organisational environment than with physical production activities.

Traditional thinking in development theory focuses on value creation connected to the production process and does not so much consider value creation along the consumption side. The same can be true for businesses perspective on their impact on the economies of developing countries. "Consumption oriented value creation" introduces a new perspective assuming that the most substantial opportunities for value creations are located around to the consumption phase of a product or service. In fact, the vast part of value added for many products does not happen during the physical production process, but on steps distinct from this, as apparent in the case of many textile products<sup>2</sup>. Examples for business functions involved in consumption related value creation activities include market research, design, marketing, distribution, and support and consumer education. All the activities linked thereto are disconnected from the production process and geographically hardly separable from the place where consumption happens. The attention dedicated to production and consumption oriented value creation varies strongly between industrialised and developing countries.

Developing countries are increasingly participating in production oriented value creation and the related benefits as already described in the introduction. In Asia, especially in China, a stunning growth in production potential has been achieved, and exports of physical goods have skyrocket. But so far, they are lacking behind in consumption oriented value creation. As most consumption happens in first world countries, existing strategies for consumption oriented value creation are developed for customers in industrialised countries. Businesses starting to undertake consumption oriented value creation in Asia are mainly targeting the emerging Global Consumer Class, leaving out the poor majority sometimes described as the Bottom of the Pyramid (BOP) market (Prahalad & Stuart 2002).

For businesses targeting poor customers in developing countries, consumption oriented value creation is not yet embraced as a strategic option. In next two sections, it will be shown how consumption oriented value creation can contribute to serving local needs as well as creating business value for companies.

	<b>Production oriented value creation</b>	<b>Consumption oriented value creation</b>
<b>Characterisation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▫ Activities distant from consumption</li> <li>▫ Geographically separable</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▫ Activities close to consumption</li> <li>▫ Geographically linked</li> </ul>
<b>Industrialised Countries</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▫ Importance declining on business and country level</li> <li>▫ Outsourcing to developing countries</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▫ Growing attention towards consumption oriented value creation</li> <li>▫ Wide variety of strategies and concepts</li> <li>▫ Critical success factor for business strategies</li> </ul>
<b>Developing countries</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▫ Development option in export-oriented industrialisation</li> <li>▫ Value added comparatively low</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▫ Consumption oriented value creation not targeted at BOP markets</li> <li>▫ Business concepts are not yet adapted to regional needs and circumstances</li> </ul>

<sup>2</sup> According to the international NGO *Clean Clothes Campaign*, only 13.5% of the costs of a 100\$ shoe are attributable to activities during the production phase (i.e. costs for material, production costs, labour wages and profit subcontractor), while the rest occurs during later stages of the life cycle. See [www.cleanclothes.org](http://www.cleanclothes.org).

### **Better serving local needs**

Among the poor customers, a variety of local needs currently do not get addressed, for example in the need areas nutrition, transportation, health, sanitation and communication. These local needs are well known to development professionals, and often recognised by international agendas, e.g. by the Millennium Development Goals.

From the case studies showing successful approaches towards poor customers, four key drivers were identified that allow for better addressing local needs and are open to be targeted with consumption oriented value creation activities:

- (1) Access to products and services** on a mass scale at the local level
- (2) Innovative products and services** developed with need focus and apt for third world conditions.
- (3) Knowledge and education** for enhancing quality of life and effective catering of needs
- (4) Governance Capacity** referring to an appropriate institutional setup at the local level.

Business can play a key role to help better serving local needs through addressing each of these factors. Consumption oriented value creation can show a path towards business concepts that can better address these local needs, linking business functions and capacities to the need areas. From the development perspective, business actions that serve local needs through consumption oriented value creation presents an overlooked opportunity. Properly implemented, it can help to reduce poverty as well as poverty implications:

- Some local needs can best be addressed by consumption related value creation. These needs are today often not served at all, or on comparatively adverse conditions and on a higher price level. Getting these needs served reduces the adverse effects of poverty, even if income poverty remains.
- Going further, local value creation includes the creation of local income opportunities. These are often higher qualified and thus better paid than jobs in export-oriented activities like extraction, agriculture or manufacturing. Their proximity to living spaces can enhance the quality and dignity of work and improve community integration, as opposed to jobs in production oriented value creation that are happening distant from local communities. These new employments are also less vulnerable to global economic developments that can effect jobs in production oriented value creation in a manner drastically illustrated by the shifting of manufacturing patterns happening in the textile sector under the phase-out of the Multifibre Agreement (MFA).
- Addressing local needs can initiate and facilitate local value creation activities, e.g. through empowering new entrepreneurs or reducing economic inefficiencies. This is obvious in the case of credits offered by micro-finance institutions that allow people to start new local business activities unthought-of of before. But it is also true for business contribution to education, a better health or environmental situations. In some cases, business with a more long-term focus than poor third world customers living from hand to mouth can help to overcome in-efficiencies induced by this short-term thinking.

### **Realising business opportunities**

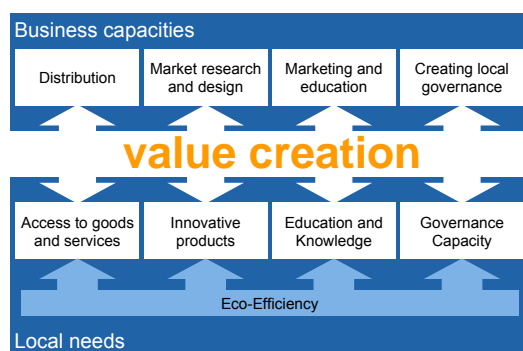
After laying out benefits from a development perspective, the rationale for business shall be developed here. Developing a business case is important to move actions beyond charity and secure consistent, long-term commitment to the activities undertaken. When evaluating the financial feasibility, i.e. the

business case, for serving the poor in a specific context, both impacts on tangible and intangible values should be considered.

Companies have started to see the business value in engaging with sustainability issues, with product and service innovations being the area with the most benefits expected (Arthur D. Little 2005). The authors argue that developing consumption oriented value creation solutions for the poor sector offers indeed new value creation and hence profit opportunities for the company:

- On the tangible side, entering these new markets can lead to revenue and earnings growth as well to a drastically improved efficiency (Prahalad & Fruehauf 2004). This is particularly notably as these factors have a high importance to business strategy, but are not affected by traditional 'corporate values' (Booz, Allen, Hamilton 2005, p. 7). Here the business case might even go beyond the one developed for 'classic' Corporate Social Responsibility (e.g. in WWF-UK 2001).
- Developing strategies for serving the poor can further impact on the companies' adaptability and innovation capacity. These learnings can provide a competitive advantage for the company. This can happen through a transfer of the concrete solutions developed or the adaptability and innovation capacity acquired – either to other developing country markets or to markets in developed countries. Once again, these capabilities are stronger affected by serving BOP markets than by traditional CSR activities.
- The last business drivers come from the fields of intangible values (Kuhndt et al 2004a). Brand equity and corporate reputation can be enhanced by carefully serving the poor. This holds especially true for the vast number of poor customers served than might become 'rich' customers in the future.

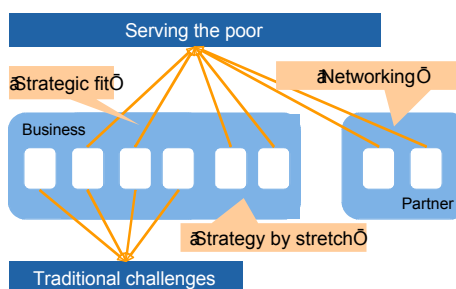
It was shown how a focus on consumption oriented value creation presents a business case and answers to basic needs in developing countries. In practice, it remains which actions are necessary by businesses to implement the concept on the ground. In the next section we will show how business functions and capacities can be matched to the key factors relating to local needs. For this purpose, innovation processes will be analysed with their implications for business capacities.



**Figure 1: Framework for consumption oriented value creation**

### Implications for business capacities when serving BOP markets

Internal and external factors determine innovation processes in businesses (Wallbaum et al. 2004)<sup>3</sup>. While the other chapters take a more external view on the innovations envisioned, it remains important to analyse the business' internal capacities to perform the necessary operations needed. Adapting consumption oriented value creation to the BOP market requires a



<sup>3</sup> For a detailed account on static and dynamic capabilities needed as well as the formal and informal institutions that allow for innovation processes to happen please refer to Kuhndt et al. (2004)

variety of capacities on part of the business. Three cases are imaginable:

**Figure 2: Business capacities and three options to deal with them**

- First, capacities already existing within the company developed to address traditional business challenges should be applied in the new context (see left hand box in figure 2). This can be referred to as a 'strategic fit': internal capabilities meet the requirements set by the outside environment (WWF-UK 2004, p. 23). These capacities can readily be applied, although often in an adapted manner, in this new context to create additional value that was out of focus so far.
- Lacking capacities can sometimes be created in-house building on existing capabilities, thereby developing 'strategy by stretch'. Stretching alters the business' capabilities and improves its position to develop innovative and products from a longer perspective. This is illustrated by the lighter-shaded part of the left box in figure 2, where new capacities have been added to the ones existing within the business to be able to better serve local needs.
- Considering the challenging conditions persisting in poor consumer markets, some capabilities might neither be available nor open to be developed by businesses. In this case, external partnerships and networks are essential to complement the capabilities of the business in focus. The partner organisation is illustrated by the right box in figure 2. Stakeholder engagement thus needs to be an integral part of product and service innovation. This option is of special relevance as many activities in developing countries require personal contact and insights into regional conditions that might not be available otherwise. The ability to complement capabilities by engaging in networks can be seen as a 'meta'-capability as it allows for replacing missing capacities in a wide variety of contexts.

### **Local needs and business capacities in practice**

In this chapter, the framework laid out above will be specified for the four key factors determining how local needs can be addressed. All factors are analysed with their implications for business strategy and capacity development, and are accompanied with examples illustrating how following this path could look like in practice.

A special focus is put on eco-efficiency improvements, which should be integrated into all efforts targeting poor costumers, can soften this relationship. These should always be seen from a lifecycle perspective accounting also for use-phase impacts. Businesses can realise prior unforeseen eco-efficiency opportunities through addressing the local needs laid out below as these can be all be related to eco-efficiency improvements. Eco-efficiency will be taken into account as a crosscutting theme, thereby linking the 'quality of life' aspect to the need to reduce the environmental burden when envisioning sustainable consumption.

#### **Access to products and services**

Access to products and services is concerned with making existing products available to poor developing countries customers. Ground research has shown that poor do often not have the same access to products and services at the same price level than rich do. Prahalad (2003) reports price differentials between poor and rich markets up to a factor of 75, with even basic commodities (e.g. rice) being sold to poor customers on a higher price than to rich ones. The cause can be found in inappropriate distribution and sales structures marked by various intermediaries and market failures, e.g. monopolies on the one or cost-intensive small-scale retailing on the other hand.

This situation provides and opportunity for TNCs who are willing and able to adapt their distribution and sales strategies, as these are developed for and normally targeted at comparatively rich

consumers in industrialised countries. First successful examples show how an innovative retail strategy taking into account the specifics of the poor market can turn rather conventional products into far-reaching success stories. The Mobiles Sales programme by GrupoNueva described in WBCSD (2004) has effectively opened poorer market segment, which turned out to be highly profitable (presenting 15% of sales but 40% of net income).

Access to products and services can be linked to eco-efficiency if the issue of technology transfer is taken into account (Kuhndt et al 2003b). Lacking access to products and services can induce environmentally harmful behaviour – e.g. in the case of making available more efficient heating and cooking equipment that can reduce use of firewood as well as fight diseases induced by uncontrolled in-house burning of wood.

### **Innovative products and services**

Leaving behind the question of access to products and services, for some local needs there might be no solution available at all, at least not on a larger scale. Needs are often not really known, and existing products and services often have to be significantly adapted to be practical in local conditions. Problem solving capabilities of large enterprises remain are not applied as these are not aware of local needs, and see no incentive to develop knowledge thereon. Sometimes assessing these needs can be a troublesome task, even for the people concerned, as priorities and interdependencies may be unknown or unclear.

Businesses active in innovative business fields normally have extensive knowledge and experience in the fields of market research, design and product development. However, various adaptations are needed to effectively apply these capabilities in a developing country setting. First, design and product development processes need to be changed, for example by increased attention to the durability of products under adverse conditions. Second, formal market research might not fit developing country markets. With a more collective orientation, and with the imperative to cater local needs instead of wants, access to local knowledge networks might better enable businesses to identify opportunities. Last, the ideas of functional thinking and product service systems (PSS)<sup>4</sup> gain importance in a developing country setting, where needs not served today might be open to non-conventional solutions only requiring a larger service-part than solutions offered in developed countries (for the need area food, see Tempelman 2004).

Innovative products for the poor can be a driver for eco-efficiency. Technologies applied today can be inappropriate from an environmental standpoint, either as they are outdated and therefore do not account for recent advances in technology, or as they were developed for use in industrialised countries where different environmental constraints and usage patterns prevail. Innovative technologies catering local needs and developed with an eco-efficiency mindset can induce efficiency gains in the poor sector, and significantly reduce resource use and therefore dependency as well as local environmental impacts.

One example of need-focused, customised product development is the iodinated salt developed by Hindulever (Prahalad & Fruehauf 2004). It caters a special nutritional need (supply of iod), where no open, articulated demand might exist. Partnerships were applied to identify this as a priority and to identify the circumstances leading to loss of iodine in existing solutions, e.g. inappropriate storage solutions. In the end, a high-end solution incorporating latest technological innovations was developed to effectively cater a need that was unserved so far, with the local value added being a better state of nutrition and health.

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<sup>4</sup> see Kuhndt et al. 2003a

## **Knowledge and education**

Local communities often have profound knowledge of local conditions that have been shaped over centuries. However, with social and technological change, this knowledge in part has become obsolete – the existing capabilities do not match the challenges at hand. This is especially true where innovative technology, e.g. information and communication technologies, have potentially far-reaching benefits, but depend on a variety of abilities. While basic abilities, e.g. literacy, are certainly the task of governments, knowledge and education regarding products and services offered by a company can be a highly value-adding activity, enabling individuals and communities to make effective use of the products at hand. At the same time, businesses can open up new markets and increase customer loyalty.

Marketing and support as a classic business function already enables businesses to go first steps into this direction. But educational efforts might go further than this. Especially in sensitive areas, e.g. health, local networking is needed to increase quality and credibility of educational efforts. The border between marketing and education should be clearly visible in all cases.

Lacking knowledge and awareness of eco-efficiency issues are a main driver for inefficiencies and losses in this field<sup>5</sup>. Spills and environmental accidents are often induced by the same causes. Eco-efficient products thus should be marketed with a special focus on enabling people to properly apply them in order to realise all benefits.

The more obvious practical examples can be drawn from the information and telecommunication sector. Educational activities, e.g. as organised in tele-centres or special adult education courses, can greatly improve the ability of local people to make use of the technology at their hands. But other examples show a wider understanding: Hindustan Lever Limited has marketed a soap at the poor sector together with an education campaign on sanitary and health issues that can be curbed by effectively applying the product (Prahalad & Fruehauf 2004). Modern technology was applied to demonstrate the effectiveness of the soap to remove invisible germs. The product together with information on the proper application involved has proven highly beneficial for the communities involved in terms of health improvements as well as for the company who could enter a wholly new market segment.

## **Transaction Governance Capacity (TGC)**

Transaction Governance Capacity can be described as the formal and information institutions needed so that people can effectively conduct economic transactions. The term covers the existence of laws, institutional rules, but also practices (e.g. experience with and respect for contracts) or attitudes (e.g. trust or solidarity) that make economic transactions possible. Many of these aspects are missing in developing countries, posing a barrier to economic development, especially among the poor and the information sector (De Soto 2000). This holds true for legal and enforcement systems, but also for informal institutions, e.g. respect for contracts. Often governmental institutions are in fact an obstacle towards effective governance as in the case of widespread corruption.

Most TNCs are not prepared for this challenge. The central criteria for good governance are normally fulfilled in developed countries, so they are not in the focus of traditional business value creation. By addressing the issue of Transaction Governance Capacity in developing countries, businesses can

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<sup>5</sup> This is well acknowledged for the production site and has given rise to a variety of instruments for knowledge transfer on eco-efficiency on the production phase, e.g. e-textile project, see: [www.e-textile.org](http://www.e-textile.org). These instruments will be extended to include social issues and the consumption phase, see: [www.smart-business.bz](http://www.smart-business.bz). For another example on knowledge transfer on eco-efficiency see also: [www.wisions.net](http://www.wisions.net)



realise business activities and address customers that were out of focus before. Fighting corruption, promoting and adhering to transparency, and fostering local solidarity and trust can be part of effective business strategies. Local spheres of good governance have to be created that allow people to conduct business with the TNC, but also within their community. If done right creating local good governance can be a significant part of the value chain within a company and for the community involved, with further spill-over effects into the local community surrounding. Building and using networks and partnerships is one of the most efficient ways to implement these strategies.

Examples for this kind of consumption oriented value creation can be found mainly in the micro-finance sector. Conducting business relies heavily on respect for contracts and a trustful relationship between the bank and the customer, even if no personal relationship does exist. Self-Help Groups as applied by Indian commercial bank ICICI (Pralhad & Fruehauf 2004) are an effective way to foster local good governance and allowed the enterprise to provide access to financial resources to customers where it was not possible before. Impressive side effects, e.g. on self-esteem of the women participating in the model, are well documented. Similar models are applied in many business models that have a financing component, e.g. within the Mexican company Cemex selling construction materials. Here, women are organised in saving groups that promote constant savings to enable the households to finance construction projects on their buildings.

## Conclusions

The paper has shown that consumption oriented value creation may show a way for profitable business activities that serve development purposes: To create regional and local value, provide employment opportunities and contribute to poverty alleviation. Business can profit from the activities proposed by the concept through exploring new and profitable markets, gain adaptability and innovation capacities and improve their brand value.

The authors of the paper have introduced the term consumption oriented value creation observing that the most substantial opportunities for value creations are located around the consumption phase of a product or service. In industrialized countries companies are increasingly paying attention to consumption oriented value creation. However, in developing countries only patches of applications are observable and consumption oriented value creation is not yet received as a strategic business opportunity. By matching key local needs with business capacities the authors have identified business strategies for implementing consumption oriented value creation activities.

In this paper, a range of potential opportunities in setting up consumption oriented value creation patterns have been identified. However, when moving to the implementation of the concept challenges remain. Who is willing to and has the capacities to take the leadership to explore the opportunities, coping with the obstacles and insecurities that exist in all innovation processes? Are knowledge partners like consultants, research institutions and business schools prepared to accompany companies during the process? Where can more empirical evidence be collected to illustrate concrete management approaches? Are local partners able and willing to support businesses in their efforts and to enter in partnerships that require a trustful relationship? Can consumption oriented value creation break dependency cycles that sometimes resulted from inappropriate provision of development aid? What can international organisations like Work Bank or from the UN system do to promote the concept? How can financial institutions address the challenges for evaluation and financing innovative business concepts based on consumption oriented value creation?

We believe that the challenges laid out above can well be addressed by joint capacity building efforts, involving public and business organisations as well as societal partners. Building on the basic evidence existing so far, and on a change in mindsets across the distinct actors affected by the

concept, these joint efforts could be one step-stone towards a world where business contribute to societal goals in an holistic way without sacrificing their long-term business objectives.

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