



January '19 Editorial comment: The end of sustainable development

December 19, 2018

In a recent keynote at the long-established Sintercafé event in Costa Rica, Daniele Giovannucci, President and Co-Founder of the Committee on Sustainability Assessment (COSA) had some interesting – not to say shocking – things to say about sustainable development. In Daniele's view, we are witnessing the demise of sustainable development. There is, he said, a broad and deepening failure to address the multiple dimensions of sustainability.

Instead we are heading in the direction of an array of well-intentioned specialisations with a single-issue focus – be it deforestation, greenhouse gas emissions or gender inclusion. “Such specialisations can certainly be useful and we need them,” he said, “but a single-issue focus is unlikely to generate the comprehensive sustainability that is needed to address the two big systemic realities at origin: the lack of profitability in farming coffee, cocoa and other agricultural commodities; and the need for resilient farming systems that can help farmers respond to changes in the climate.

“We need to be smarter about distinguishing the symptoms from the causes,” he said. “Low productivity, for example, may not be simply due to lack of training or fertilizer. The illusion that a compliance checklist – just ticking boxes – equates to sustainability can also dilute progress. Similarly, a ‘code of conduct’ alone rarely achieves any real results.” You can read more about what he has to say about training programmes for farmers and their effectiveness – or lack of it – elsewhere in this issue.

But Daniele doesn't believe it's all bad news. The good news is that industry platforms are developing common metrics to really learn about sustainability. Some roasters and traders are using new technology to understand their supply chain and listen to farmers, creating stronger relationships and better-targeted services.

More than ever, farm-level issues are visible and better articulated, even if some consultancies and NGOs continue to dish out the same insipid programmes that have not worked very well the last 20 times they were applied.

COSA isn't just sitting on the side-lines carping, though. It's rolling out SMART solutions that have been successfully piloted with government, sector platforms, and businesses. It has developed a straightforward and easy to use Sustainability Intelligence System that integrates intuitive technology to see real risks and opportunities and to facilitate impactful reporting.

I have to agree with much of what Danielle had to say at Sintercafé. He and I spoke at length after the event, and what he had to say reinforced a nagging doubt I've long had about the growing fragmentation of sustainability certifications.

In C&CI we've also looked at the growing trend for corporations to adopt their own in-house sustainability programmes. One such example we highlighted was Cadbury's transition to an in-house sustainability standard which, it was argued, could threaten the sustainability of the cocoa sector, provide fewer benefits for farmers than an international standard and is a rejection of the participatory governance model that Fairtrade and other schemes employ.

As I write this, the C price for coffee on the international market is around 100 cents/ pound, well below the cost of production. I first started writing about coffee around two decades ago, when the industry was heading into a crisis worse even than the current one. Yet rarely a week goes by without somebody sending me a press release about one or other sustainability effort a corporation is involved with, or a training programme that has trained thousands of farmers. The fact is that most cocoa farmers continue to live in abject poverty and millions of coffee farmers and their dependents are at the mercy of the C price.

Rainforest Alliance, which recently merged with UTZ, has launched a first round of public consultation for a new Rainforest Alliance certification standard. Consolidation among sustainability certifications could be beneficial for farmers. Let's hope so. Farmer organizations will be guaranteed a higher price for cocoa sold on Fairtrade terms, now that Fairtrade is raising the Fairtrade Minimum Price for cocoa from US\$2,000 to US\$2,400 per tonne – a 20 per cent increase. But farmers will remain in poverty all the same.

As Fernando Morales-de la Cruz, founder of Café for Change pointed out to me recently, cocoa prices are so low that even with the higher Fairtrade price farmers cannot live with dignity. He describes the Fairtrade price as a “false claim of fairness” which will never eradicate poverty or help eliminate child labour. As Daniele told me, too many companies get away with using sustainability as a marketing tool. What's really needed is the widespread use of the kind of metrics COSA is working on, that can measure the effectiveness of sustainability initiatives.

We need credible data on what works, not more ‘halo projects’ that help companies use a narrative to sell coffee, so is good to see COSA, Rainforest Alliance and the Global Coffee Platform facilitating measurement and alignment of science-based indicators and metrics through their Coffee Data Project, which aims to improve our ability to identify and measure best practice, enabling more effective sustainability investment and the communication of impacts and results.

This extract is from an article that first appeared in the January '19 issue of C&CI, click on [subscribe now](#) if you wish to read the article in full and other informative articles in the January and future issues of C&CI.

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