

We Launch 'Sustain'

Global business is preparing itself for ever tighter constraints on raw materials and pressure on the eco and social systems that support their production. Peak oil we may all be aware of, but what about peak water, peak uranium or even peak farmland? While governments are still talking the more conventional language of growth, this time promoting the potential of green technologies, it is business leaders who are asking the more fundamental questions.

Five months ago Paul Polman CEO of Unilever announced Unilever plans to decouple future growth from environmental impact. The company will halve the environmental footprint of its products, help 1 billion people improve their health and wellbeing, and source 100% of its agricultural raw materials sustainably. This came barely a year after one of the UK's more radical economists Professor Tim Jackson, Economics Commissioner of the UK's now defunct Sustainable Development Commission published his book 'Prosperity Without Growth'. He went a step further, proposing the move towards a no-growth economy.

But Polman is asking a more immediately relevant question. He suggests the way forward is not a simple 'either-or' choice between sustainable development on the one hand and building shareholder value on the other. He is asking can they be reconciled. This is the kind of question we believe all leaders need to be asking, and we have set up a new arm of Transcend called Sustain to support leaders to do exactly that. Polman opens the door for leaders to interrogate current business models at every level of their organisation's operations and to start a more mature conversation with their suppliers and their customers.

We understand what it takes to lead change, including a change in mindset.

We already see opportunities. One is the crisis of obesity particularly amongst young people. A research project looking into school food led by one of our associates through the University of Bath concluded it was the canteen business model that was the problem. Positioning the canteen as a conventional cafeteria or sandwich shop perpetuates in young peoples' minds the illusion that they are dealing with a conventional high street business, albeit a poor second since it doesn't sell the full range of snacks, soft drinks and confectionery. They narrow their expectations accordingly, choose conservatively and learn nothing about good nutrition, or about making better food choices. What could be the business innovation here that would re-engage young people with their school food, make the experience fun, and treat them both as customers and as *learners*: learning basic cooking skills and learning to choose healthily?