

The Business of Landscapes

By Duncan Pollard

Are landscape approaches the next big thing or a passing fad? The World Business Council for Sustainable Development (WBCSD), The Sustainable Trade Initiative (IDH), International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), and EcoAgriculture Partners are all part of landscape initiatives sprouting up to promote, learn and encourage companies to get involved. But what's in it for business?

Actually, many companies are already involved in landscape approaches, they may just not know it, or call it that. Water stewardship, jurisdictional approaches, and many large-scale projects involving multiple stakeholders are all landscape approaches.

EcoAgriculture Partners have identified over 80 names for the concept, (which suggests that the terminology is becoming as misused as "sustainability" itself). Let's just say that for the businesses, if you need to think and work outside the fence-line, or beyond the supply chain boundaries, then this may be for you. This is especially the case for companies that have bumped into the limits of certification, have adopted broader corporate goals to create shared value, or deliver development outcomes that link to the Sustainable Development Goals.

A recent seminar convened by EcoAgriculture Partners, Sustainable Agriculture Initiative Platform, IUCN and the Sustainable Food Lab set out to understand where and how companies should or could be more involved in this movement. The consensus from the companies present¹ was that there is a strong case for corporate engagement at a landscape level when:

- there is a high level of dependency upon a landscape by the company (either through sourcing of raw materials, the presence of fixed assets such as a factory, and/or the need for a "license to operate")
- there are major sustainability risks that can't be solved alone i.e. local participation and multiple stakeholders are needed, especially governments
- supply chain approaches, with simpler tools such as certification have not worked or are unlikely to work

The latter point on simplicity is an important qualifier - landscape approaches are complex so need serious commitment and time. From our deliberations, two types of sustainability challenges stood out clearly as appropriate for landscape approaches:

- water stewardship
- helping farmers become resilient, principally to extreme weather events and climate change

There may be others.

The concept of landscapes grew out of the conservation community, and it is still seen as a way to deliver conservation outcomes at a broad geographic scale. It would arguably be more relevant for companies if the advocates promoted the potential to deliver on social outcomes too. Ultimately too, governments need to be at the center of any initiative for it to succeed.

There is still much else to be worked out. First is clarifying what landscape approaches are and what they are not – 80 definitions don't help. A better understanding is needed between NGOs who have a tendency to engage in long planning processes with logframes, and companies who have a bias for action. Alignment around a vision is a necessary first step – but a question remains as whether it's enough for companies to merely align their activities or whether they also need to be engaged in the governance of landscape initiatives as well? Finally there is much to learn about navigating complexity. Rather than focusing upon identifying a pre-determined set of activities, operating in complexity requires adaptability, flexibility and a need to focus efforts where there is already energy and momentum. Perforating silos is crucial.

¹ Danone, Mondy, Nestlé, Olam, Pick n Pay Stores, SABMiller, Unilever

There are plenty of examples where landscape approaches have been initiated by companies, and whilst landscape approaches may not be the next big thing, they clearly offer an important tool for companies.