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Editorial



**John Sabapathy and
Steve Rochlin**

Welcome to the latest issue of *AccountAbility Forum* and with apologies to readers for the delay in publication.

This special issue takes as its theme the idea of accountable leadership. AccountAbility believes we are in the midst of a fundamental transition away from the vital issues that confronted 20th-century leaders. Challenges such as climate change, global poverty, water stress, peace and security, and globalising societies' health and education problems are diffuse, hard to define simply, and international in nature. Few obvious courses of action will present themselves, and solutions will demand extraordinary imagination and collaborative skills. This expanded issue therefore coincides with AccountAbility's major research project looking at these issues, 'The Challenge of 21st Century Leadership in Sustainable Development', supported by the Levi Strauss and Company Foundation.

In some ways we can say that the broad sustainable development agenda is in good shape. Civil society organisations are well organised, professional and savvy. Donors by and large combine their hold on purse strings with intelligent agendas and experience. What could be described as the New Celebrity Leadership is in rude health, helping to keep sustainable development towards the front rather than back of the newspapers. The corporate responsibility movement, too, is contributing insofar as it engages actively with core business processes and long-term 'triple-bottom-line' development. And the formal business of global politics, too, has had a boost in the recent, relatively positive, outcome from the Bali Summit.

Perhaps most importantly in the long term, the agendas of human development and sustainable development look, finally, like they might sensibly converge at a strategic level, as political responses to natural catastrophes make the interrelationship unavoidably obvious (be it in Darfur, New Orleans or Bangladesh). Again at an entirely subjective level looking back over the last decade or so it feels as if we have turned a corner over the last few years, whereby the sustainable development or sustainability agenda is now far more broadly accepted at all sorts of different levels that matter.

It might be tempting in such circumstances to presume that more of such 'business as usual' will therefore deliver the leadership needed to address

climate change and the Millennium Development Goals. One more push! Such complacency would be of course ill-founded, just as it would be ill-considered to depend on the sunshine leadership of celebrities and anniversary pop concerts to deliver the political change needed to address these long-term problems. All these tools will be necessary but it is highly doubtful whether they will allow us to rest on our laurels. Thankfully there are many resisting such complacency and seeking other ways to galvanise current and emerging leaders — the contributors here among them. This area of leadership is one in which we manifestly need greater, better guidance if we are (positively) to obtain development of a recognisably sustainable kind and (negatively) to avoid the worst scientific scenarios associated with climate change.

A crisis of leadership?

The question then becomes, ‘Are our leaders currently equipped to deliver that guidance?’ If we felt feverish we could make a decent case that we are actually in the middle of a global crisis of leadership, ‘North’ or ‘South’. Take the political arena. In Britain the first criminal investigation of a serving Prime Minister collapses, to general popular scepticism. In France the ex-President is being investigated for embezzlement. In the US a senior staffer of the Vice-President is convicted of perjury and then has that sentence commuted by the President. In South Africa the new leader of the ANC is voted in having escaped a prosecution for rape only to face further charges of corruption. In Pakistan, emergency and bloody constitutional suspensions unhappily align with scheduled general elections and the tragic assassination of Benazir Bhutto. Unfortunately, such problems are not restricted to politicians. The list of recently disgraced corporate leaders needs no re-rehearsal. But neither have intergovernmental organisations been spared: questions about personal probity ended Paul Wolfowitz’s tenure at the World Bank while Kofi Annan, although cleared of impropriety in the UN’s Oil for Food programme, was still criticised for the overall mismanagement of it. *Plus ça change?* Maybe. But no wonder Bono, Geldof and Jolie seem so attractive as voices of leadership.

Because at this point in world history we desperately need our leaders of all stripes to do very specific things. At the recent Bali Summit on climate change Nobel Laureate and former Vice-President Gore won angry applause

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for publicly ‘outing’ the elephant in the bedroom and decrying American leadership on, or rather opposition to, a deal on climate change negotiations. And while the ultimate outcome of this summit was a success for the leaders of the delegations pushing for a deal, we should remember that it is still only an agreement to talk about an agreement that would agree binding targets for reducing global carbon emissions. There remains, to say the least, an enormous distance to cover. And we have good grounds for being sceptical about the overall competence of our leaders to deliver this.

Talking about leadership therefore acquires a certain unhappy, urgent gravity when seen in this perspective. Leadership of all organisations now needs to be defined in relation to the sustainable outcomes we want. To put it bluntly, we might say that if it doesn’t do so it’s part of the problem not part of the solution. Our overarching question then in this issue of *AccountAbility Forum* is: ‘What are the sustainable economic, social and environmental outcomes we need and how should our leaders be accountable for them?’ If ‘we get the leaders we deserve’, our hope in this issue is that in a very modest way our contributors will provide examples or provide prescriptions of accountable leadership that will help us to deserve better *at scale*.

We hope what follows helps to do this. We have split it into two sections, ‘Visions of Accountable Leadership’ and ‘Practices of Accountable Leadership’. In a pretty self-explanatory way in the first section, contributors take a step back from the nitty-gritty to look at the vision thing we need from our leaders. Steve Rochlin sets out AccountAbility’s strategic perspective on the problem, stressing the need to renegotiate the ‘deal’ on leadership and really upping the ante on what it needs to mean to be an accountable leader. This stress on expectation, agreement and contract is the keynote of Ed Mayo’s contribution, a strongly practical application of the ‘vision thing’ in which he re-imagines the old idea of a social contract as an environmental contract fit for the 21st century. Mark Howard Chichester of the Aspen Institute also echoes the need to change expectations of leaders and offers his list of ‘essential skills’ an accountable leader might expect to find on the job application should he or she decide to apply for it. Chichester’s stress on the need to imagine ourselves out of the clichés we carry around about what a leader ‘looks like’ is welcome: particularly so in days when TV shows such as *The Apprentice* or round-the-clock news coverage impose pressures on

(especially political) leaders which risk reducing them to a lowest-common-denominator caricature mixing the worst blend of passive-aggressiveness. Chichester's reminder that Gandhi, Mandela or Lincoln did not always look like leaders is salutary. It is easy to iron out the sharpness, shock or even offensiveness of those leaders at the time *before* they were embraced by the constituencies they are now icons for. Mandela was, for instance, for many years a terrorist in the eyes of the British government.

Both Chichester and Kumi Naidoo emphasise the challenges that globalisation brings to leaders trying to grapple with problems on an international scale. Naidoo stresses that there is no universal template for leadership. Both stress also the need for culturally sensitive leaders as well as (for Chichester) historically savvy leaders who are not condemned to repeat the past.

The theme of culturally sensitive leaders is echoed in the second section, 'Practices of Accountable Leadership' by a number of contributors. Here contributors describe actual organisational practices supportive of accountable leadership. Thus Stan Litow elaborates on Sam Palmisano's vision of the globally integrated enterprise in which one of the major challenges is integration and engagement across widely differing organisational cultures. Jay Coen Gilbert describes the ground-breaking corporate structure that he has set up in Corporation B which challenges the premises of 'standard' corporate life. The theme of values dominates both sections. Leonid Drachevksy analyses the very different environment of Russia today in which newly liberalised markets are taking up the leadership challenge of sustainability which fared so badly under the Soviet Union. Likewise, Veli Sundbäck discusses the underpinning of Nokia's leadership in this area. Hal Hamilton provides a personal insight drawn from involvement with a colleague who demonstrated in her own way the kind of bravery that our section on 'visions' has talked about. Heiko Liedeker concretises the problems of leadership within multi-stakeholder partnership which Ken Caplan analyses in Section 1 at a higher level. Both Ken's, Chandran Nair's, Deborah Davis's and John Sabapathy's pieces provide complementary perspectives on the problem on leadership within and around civil society. Caplan and Nair address the challenges from the side of civil society organisations themselves. Davis and Sabapathy approach from the donor

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side, both highlighting the fascinating new work of the World Bank Institute promoting new approaches to development in less developed countries.

Among such a rich set of contributions it is inevitably difficult to single out a few dominant messages. But let these stand. We need more and better leaders who take sustainable development seriously. We need models of organisation and agreement that allow this to happen at scale. Perhaps most importantly we have to challenge our own expectations of what our leaders should look like and generate leaders who make our lives difficult. We need to encourage leaders who are constructively unpopular, and brave enough to be so and persist in being so. It is only by achieving this that we will obtain the leaders we need or deserve those we want. If our contributors help to show how to do this they will have served an important purpose.

This will be the last issue of *AccountAbility Forum* in its current incarnation. We have been reviewing and sounding out readers and members about how best to provide up-to-date thinking on all aspects of organisational accountability and sustainable development and feel that it is time to change our format and approach — as we have done a couple of times over the last decade. More soon, and if you would like to know more please get in touch with Fernanda Polacow (fernanda@accountability21.net).

John Sabapathy and Steve Rochlin