Corporate Governance for Sustainability

Andrew Johnston
*University of Sheffield Law School*, andrew.johnston@sheffield.ac.uk

Jeroen Veldman
*Nyenrode Business University*, j.veldman@nyenrode.nl

Robert G. Eccles
*University of Oxford Said Business School*, robert.eccles@sbs.ox.ac.uk

Simon Deakin
*University of Cambridge*, s.deakin@cbr.cam.ac.uk

Jerry Davis
*University of Michigan*

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INTRODUCTION

The current model of corporate governance needs reform. There is mounting evidence that the practices of shareholder primacy drive company directors and executives to adopt the same short time horizon as financial markets. Pressure to meet the demands of the financial markets drives stock buybacks, excessive dividends and a failure to invest in productive capabilities. The result is a 'tragedy of the horizon', with corporations and their shareholders failing to consider environmental, social or even their own, long-term, economic sustainability.¹

The urgent need to address adverse impacts and risks produced by and associated with this model is reflected in the Statement on the Purpose of a Corporation issued by the Business Roundtable in the US, the 'Purpose' Letter issued by Larry Fink, CEO of Blackrock, comments by the Governor of the Bank of England and Chairman of the Financial Stability Board Mark Carney, as well as in the corporate governance codes in the Netherlands and South Africa and the Loi PACTE in France.

The Action Plan on Financing Sustainable Growth recently presented by the European Commission responds to this urgent need by setting out an ambitious agenda to develop integrated reforms in the areas of sustainable finance, directors’ duties, and corporate reporting with the aims of: addressing the root causes of short-termism in capital markets and corporate governance; correcting the failure of relevant actors to manage the financial risks associated with climate change; and moving business towards greater sustainability.²

Whilst recognizing that many corporate governance issues still remain to be addressed, the signatories to this statement express their support for the Action Plan’s goal of making corporate governance practice significantly more sustainable and focused on the long term. In order to contribute to the development of this agenda, the signatories of this statement put forward the following key proposals.
Directors’ duties are one way in which company directors can be held accountable for how they carry out their critical corporate governance functions of developing the company’s strategy, overseeing its operations, and accounting for its performance. Therefore directors’ duties are often considered as a possible method of steering company directors towards the long term interests of companies. In order to counteract the pressures imposed on directors by financial markets to maximise short-term shareholder value; increase director accountability; and ensure a proper consideration of corporate long-term interests and sustainability risks, we recommend that:

- directors should be subject to a legally-binding obligation to develop, disclose and implement, on behalf of the company, a forward-looking corporate sustainability strategy that identifies and addresses material environmental and social issues and significant impacts connected to the company’s business model, operations and supply chain.
- whilst directors should have discretion as regards identifying which issues are material for the corporate sustainability strategy, the law should clarify that the purpose of requiring companies to produce such a strategy is to ensure respect for the planetary boundaries and human rights, as well as integration of ESG considerations into all aspects of the company’s operations. In order to ensure that the strategy covers relevant matters, the law should specify a limited set of sector-specific issues and public objectives that should be addressed on a ‘comply or explain’ basis.
- a specified percentage of the KPIs and remuneration of executive management should be linked to the achievement of measurable targets set in the company’s sustainability strategy (and national remuneration disclosure laws should be amended to require publication of these matters).
In order to ensure directors’ accountability for this responsibility, we recommend that:

› the board should be required to include in the corporate sustainability strategy verifiable targets and a commitment to making sufficient resources available to management.

› the board should be mandated to discuss and sign off on an annual progress report, which should be included in the company’s non-financial report.

› a non-executive committee, composed of independent experts and chaired by a designated non-executive director, should be set up and tasked with monitoring and reviewing the content and implementation of the sustainability strategy.

› non-executive directors should have a duty of care to monitor the implementation of the strategy.

› failure to implement the corporate sustainability strategy should be considered a breach of executive directors’ duty of good faith (where deliberate) or duty of care (where accidental11), and could be enforced by the shareholders by derivative action where the failure causes long-term harm to the company.

› a national regulatory body should be empowered to bring proceedings against the executive directors where non-implementation has caused serious harm to third parties or unlawful harm to the environment.12

The function of corporate ‘non-financial’ reporting is to allow the company’s shareholders and other stakeholders to make informed investment and engagement decisions by providing information on the company’s social and environmental risks and impacts, and on the implications of such risks and impacts for the company’s development.

Since 2018, the EU Non-Financial Reporting Directive (NFRD) has required large companies, banks and insurers to disclose non-financial information. However, an abundance of standards and the flexibility accorded to reporting entities means that, whilst reports are often lengthy, they are neither comprehensive nor sufficiently comparable.13

The standardisation of non-financial reporting is indispensable for the development of sustainable finance, for effective monitoring of companies’ implementation of their corporate sustainability strategies, and for enforcement of directors’ duties. Therefore, we recommend that the rules relating to corporate disclosures should:

› clarify that information on sustainability matters should be disclosed if it is material either from a financial or from a social and environmental perspective.14

› stipulate minimum general and sector-specific requirements for form and content of disclosures. Minimum requirements should be imposed in relation to, inter alia, climate change-related targets, strategies and performance, and the results of environmental and human rights due diligence covering supply chains.15

CONCLUSION

Current corporate governance practice is contributing to a wide range of systemic risks, as well as devastating social, environmental and economic impacts.16 With less than a decade left17 in which to address the catastrophic threat of climate change, and with investors, companies, accountants, policymakers and academics expressing a shared sense of urgency, now is the time to act to reform corporate governance.

The signatories to this Statement call on all those concerned about climate change and sustainability to work together to support and implement the proposals in this statement and to contribute to the achievement of the EC Action Plan’s goals.
Ewan McGaughey  
Senior Lecturer, King's College

Chris Rees  
Professor, University of London

Nina Boeger  
Reader, University of Bristol

Adam Leaver  
Professor, Sheffield University

Marc Moore  
Chair in Corporate/Financial Law, University of Cambridge

Leen Paape  
Professor, Nyenrode Business University

Alan Meyer  
Emeritus Professor, University of Oregon

Marcello Palazzi  
President, Progressio Foundation

Nitasha Kaul  
Senior Lecturer, University of Westminster

Juan Felipe Espinosa-Cristia  
Researcher, Universidad Andres Bello

Timothy Kuhn  
Professor, University of Colorado Boulder

David J. Cooper  
Emeritus Professor, University of Alberta

Susanne Soederberg  
Professor, Queen's University

Andreas Jansson  
Associate Professor, Linnaeus University

Susan Watson  
Professor, University of Auckland

Ofer Sitbon  
Associate Professor, Zefat Academic College; Head of the Corporation & Society Legal Clinic, Ramat-Gan

Joan Loughrey  
Professor, University of Leeds

David Collison  
Emeritus Professor, University of Dundee

Maureen McCulloch  
Senior Lecturer, Oxford Brookes University

Navajyoti Samanta  
Lecturer, University of Sheffield

Daniel JH Greenwood  
Professor, Hofstra University

Grahaeme Frederick Thompson  
Emeritus Professor, The Open University (England)

Andrew Keay  
Professor, University of Leeds

Laura Horn  
Associate Professor, Roskilde University

Daniel King  
Professor, Nottingham Trent University

Marcus Meyer  
Assistant Professor, Maastricht University

Daniel Attenborough  
Associate Professor, Durham University

Holm-Detlev Köhler  
Professor, University of Oviedo

Sigurð Vitols  
Associate Researcher, European Trade Union Institute

Christophe Clerc  
Lawyer, Descartes Legal and Sciences Po Paris

Hans Schenk  
Emeritus Chaired Professor, Utrecht University

Janet Dine  
Professor, Queen Mary, University of London

Richard Hull  
MA Director, Goldsmiths, University of London

Andreas Rühmkorf  
Lecturer, University of Sheffield

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3 See the ‘Purpose’ Letter issued by Larry Fink, CEO of Blackrock; J Veldman et al. 2016 Corporate Governance for a Changing World, Cass and Frank Bold, Brussels


5 See European Commission, Action Plan on Financing Sustainable Growth, Action 10, which commits to carry out analytical and consultation work on requiring companies to develop and disclose corporate sustainability strategies and possible clarification of directors’ duties.

6 See Company Law Statement point 10; also for an overview of the legal position in a number of jurisdictions, see B Sjåfjell, A Johnston, L Anker-Sørensen and D Millon, Shareholder Primacy: the main Barrier to Sustainable Companies in B Sjåfjell and B Richardson (eds), Company Law and Sustainability: Legal Barriers and Opportunities (Cambridge University Press, 2015).

7 For further discussion of the centrality of the natural science concept of planetary boundaries to any understanding of sustainability, see: B Sjåfjell and CM Bruner, ‘Corporations and Sustainability’ in B Sjåfjell and CM Bruner (eds), The Cambridge Handbook of Corporate Law, Corporate Governance and Sustainability (Cambridge University Press, 2019), 3–12.

8 For example, the directors could be required to explain how the company’s strategy and targets are aligned with the national climate change mitigation strategy and the Paris Agreement.


10 See the report submitted to the Minister for the Economy and Finance of the French Republic by Patrick de Cambourg, President of the Autorité des Normes Comptables - Ensuring the relevance and reliability of non-financial corporate information: an ambition and a competitive advantage for a sustainable Europe (2019), p. 205.

11 Executive directors should have a defence to liability for breach of duty of care where they can show that they reasonably relied on reports of the sustainability committee.

12 The Australian Securities and Investments Commission has power to bring proceedings in the public interest against directors for breach of disclosure regulations and breach of duty, especially where necessary to restore market confidence and integrity; see M Welsh, ‘Raising the Public Potential of Corporate Law: Twenty Years of Civil Penalty Enforcement in Australia’ (2014) 42 Federal Law Review 1; in the Netherlands, the Enterprise Chamber has far-reaching powers of intervention in the internal affairs of companies, including nullification of corporate resolutions, suspension, dismissal or appointment of directors, and other remedies including dissolution; see J Van Bekkum, S Hjink, MC Schouten and JW Winter, Corporate Governance in the Netherlands (2010) 14 Electronic Journal of Comparative Law 1, 4.

13 The NFRD, which does not specify precise requirements, has so far failed to ensure meaningful disclosures by companies. See Alliance for Corporate Transparency, The State of Corporate Sustainability Disclosure under the EU Non-Financial Reporting Directive, 2019.

14 The NFRD adopts a ‘double materiality’ perspective, according to which companies should disclose information that is necessary for an understanding of their financial development, performance [and] position, as well as environmental and social impact. See Communication from the Commission — Guidelines on non-financial reporting: Supplement on reporting climate-related information, C/2019/4490, pt. 2.2.


16 For other projects addressing these issues, see the Statement of Corporate Purpose Campaign, the Future of the Corporation Project and the SMART project.

17 See the IPCC report.