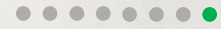




CASE 6: INTEGRATED SUSTAINABILITY:
UNILEVER'S SUSTAINABLE PLAN
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CASE 6: UNILEVER'S SUSTAINABLE PLAN



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ABSTRACT

<https://doi.org/10.29180/ISSUEII.21.6>

Sustainability, as it relates to both social and environmental issues, is treated very differently among companies that incorporate the subject into their business strategies. In this case study, we explore sustainability at Unilever, where management address sustainability as an opportunity for competitive advantage and growth rather than as a risk to be managed or cost to be avoided. With developed and emerging markets as the backdrop, we learn about Unilever's Sustainable Living Plan, and what the company has done to integrate sustainability principles into its business model and build on its core competencies, such as reducing plastic and recycling through innovative product development and marketing expertise, to realise the potential of the fast-growing emerging markets. Issues considered in this case study include the role of corporate culture and competencies, the importance of committed and courageous leadership, the willingness to set ambitious goals and the challenge of creating internal and external alignment around strategic goals. The case study is particularly well-suited for discussion at board and management level, as well as with graduate business students in strategy, organisational change, business and society, corporate responsibility and leadership courses.

Challenges

Unilever

The Unilever sustainability plan

Embedding the Unilever sustainability plan

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CHALLENGES

Financial, social and environmental challenges are growing. In particular, crowded urban centres and global warming have increased the threat of widespread drought and flooding. Estimates predict that two-third of the world will be living in water stressed conditions and more than 2 billion hectares of the world's agricultural land will have been degraded. These factors will have supply chain implications for most global companies including Unilever. In developing countries children continue to die from malnutrition while developed countries will have to deal with higher levels of child obesity and its health consequences.

Social and environment issues are market drivers that offer opportunities for revenue growth and shared values creation in emerging and developed countries (PWC, 2018). Emerging market populations may be more susceptible than developed countries when it comes to environmental and social pressures. This poses several questions. Does the sustainability plan, reduction and recycling of plastic as a transformative approach provide Unilever with a strategic competitive advantage and offer them a key long-term sustainable success in these markets? Can integrating sustainability into their businesses help businesses to harness the potential of developed and emerging markets? Unilever's holistic, integrated long-term approach suggests that it can.

Unilever

A decentralised global company headquartered in the UK, Unilever has operated in developed and developing countries for more than 100 years. Unilever Group, comprised of Unilever N.V. and Unilever PLC is a massive global consumer goods company with 2.5 billion customers in 190 countries. The company's shares trade on Euronext Amsterdam exchange as (U.N.) and on the London Stock Exchange and as ADR on the New York Stock Exchange

as (U.L.). Its purpose is "to make sustainable living commonplace" (Unilever) and to "create a better future every day, with brands and services that help people feel good, look good and get more out of life". This purpose is deeply rooted in its founding core value of balancing profit with responsible business behaviour, and underlies the company's strategy, business processes and corporate culture.

Unilever governance and strategy

When Unilever got their first ever profit warning in 2004, they thought about implementing new business strategies and also thought to bring changes in the company leading position. Unilever brought in Paul Polman CEO who introduced Unilever Sustainable Living Plan (USLP), a commitment that placed three "sustainability" goals at the core of the company's strategy: to help one billion people in improving their health; to halve the environmental footprint of making and using Unilever products, and; to enhance the livelihood of those in its value chain. Paul Polman is a Dutch business leader who started his career at Procter & Gamble (P&G), where from 1979 he worked for 27 years and Paul had reached P&G's most senior level within a few years. Paul then joined Nestlé in 2006 as chief financial officer and Head of the Americas. On 1 January 2009, he succeeded Patrick Cescau as chief executive officer of Unilever.

Paul admitted breaking conventional rules was key to address problems in the way Unilever was doing business. Therefore, he connected the business strategy to sustainability and shared value, to address societal issues including poverty. The environment was another priority for Polman and that's why he wanted to make the business environment friendly and also create products reduce water use. Polman offered a different vision, as according to him, most businesses think how they can use society and the environment to be successful, while he thinks about how he can contribute to society and have an integrated sustainable shared value.

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To create sustainable shared value strategy, Paul challenged much of the conventional wisdom in the business arena. Huge changes in the management were made. Within a year, a third of the top executives of the company changed and a Unilever Leadership Executive team was created. Sustainability programs were used to make impact on the environment and also as a marketing strategy to connect with consumers because Paul believes that Unilever should consider all its key stakeholders, , not just the shareholders. He succeeded with this marketing strategy and Unilever has got back to its form and made good sustainable profits. However, the question is, has Unilever's board done enough to reach the sustainability goals or it was just a strategy to reestablish the financial and market performance of Unilever?

Unilever Action to Achieve the Goals

Unilever's CEO Paul Polman has take action according the situation to address the quality of leadership to achieve the goal of a sustainable strategy. The actions taken by CEO and governance team were to create high motivation for employees and sustainable shared value for key stakeholders. The CEO Paul Polman's high motivation is clearly evident in his success story. As a successful leader, Paul Polman has always been confident enough to face the challenges with the implementation of new strategies.

Polman invested his physical, cognitive and emotional energies into his performance. He knew that USLP required a radical new way of thinking, not only from Unilever's 165,000 employees, but also by the 5 million people in its supply chain, and eventually by the 2 billion people worldwide who used its products. It was a huge task, and internally the new strategy was greeted with nervous anticipation. While the idea of doubling revenues seemed exciting, some found USLP's less familiar environmental and social goals harder to grasp. In order to engage employees and stakeholders in the company's sustainability journey, he took few significant initiatives such as, defining company's long term purposes, spelling out the economic case for sustainability, and creating sustainability knowledge and competence for shared value.

THE UNILEVER SUSTAINABILITY PLAN Embedding the Unilever sustainability plan

Unilever view sustainable and equitable growth as the only way to create long-term value for all their stakeholders. That's why Unilever have placed the Sustainable Living Plan at the heart of the company strategy and value creation business model.

Unilever vision of growth is driven by the purpose to have a clear purpose – to make sustainable living commonplace.

What does Unilever mean by sustainable living?

The company aims to help create a world where everyone can live well within the natural limits of the planet by putting sustainable living at the heart of everything they do. This includes their brands and products, standards of behaviour within and beyond Unilever, and their partnerships and advocacy – which are driving transformational change across company value chain, and beyond. Unilever management believe that managing for the long term is the best, and the only way for a business to grow and thrive in the future will be those businesses that serve society today.

Sustainable growth

The Unilever Sustainable Living Plan (USLP) aims to achieve sustainable growth, while delivering their purpose. It covers all aspects of our business and [value chain \(PDF | 251KB\)](#), incorporates all their brands and divisions, and covers every country they work in.

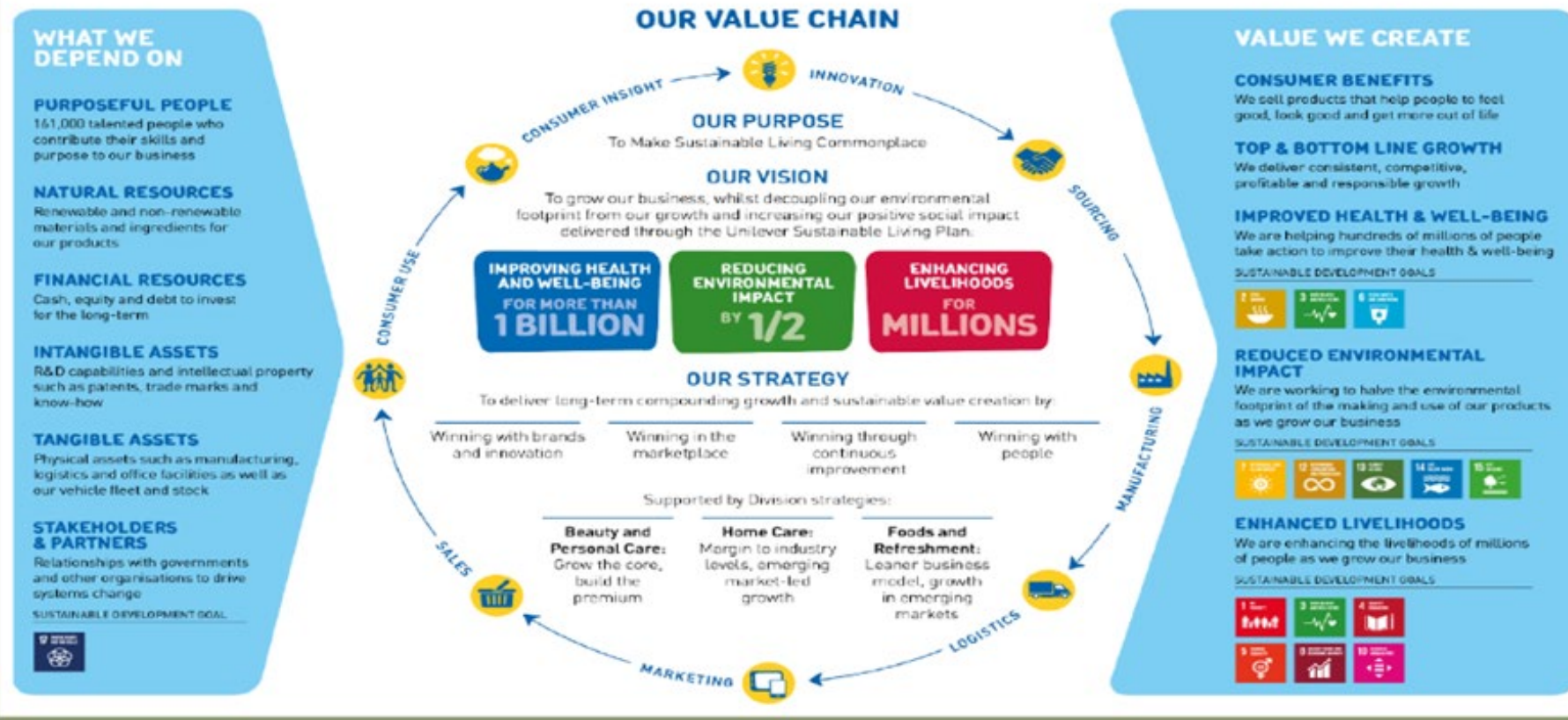
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Blueprint for Sustainability

Shows a comprehensive value creation model driven by sustainability mission, covering required resources, value chain, targets and link with SDGs.

HOW WE CREATE VALUE

We believe that sustainable and equitable growth is the only way to create long-term value for our stakeholders. That is why we have placed the Unilever Sustainable Living Plan at the heart of our business model.



Source: Unilever Website, Sustainable Living, About Our Strategy

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It aims to create change across our value chain – from their operations, to their sourcing, to the way consumers use and dispose of their products. The Plan, launched in 2010, is built around three big goals and nine pillars. It embraces the strategic priorities Unilever identified through their materiality analysis. While checking these are still the right priorities by carrying out a [materiality analysis](#) every two years. For each goal, Unilever have a number of targets.

Improving health and well-being	Reducing environmental impact	Enhancing livelihoods
<p>Goal: By 2020 Unilever will help more than a billion people take action to improve their health and well-being.</p> <p>Pillars: Health & hygiene Improving nutrition</p>	<p>Goal: By 2030 our goal is to halve the environmental footprint of the making and use of our products as Unilever grow as a business.</p> <p>Pillars: Greenhouse gases Water use Waste & packaging Sustainable sourcing</p>	<p>Goal: By 2020 we will enhance the livelihoods of millions of people as Unilever grow as a business.</p> <p>Pillars: Fairness in the workplace Opportunities for women Inclusive business</p>

Unilever have long known that growth and sustainability are not in conflict. Each year, management gathers more evidence of the benefits our USLP is bringing to the business, as well as to society and the environment. Unilever grow as a business four-point framework shows how the USLP drives value.



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Transformational change beyond business

The biggest challenges facing the world cannot be addressed by one company alone. Therefore, Unilever as a business want to help transform the system in which business is done by acting as agents for change more broadly, by bringing others together for progressive discussions, and by working in partnerships that deliver positive business, social and environmental impact at scale.

They believe that being part of the solution to challenges is the right thing for businesses to do, as well as it is also being a commercial imperative. This is an opportunity to win the trust of consumers while helping create societies and economies in which businesses can grow and succeed.

Unilever aim to use their scale and influence to help bring about [transformational change](#) in four areas. Where the business can make the biggest difference, and they represent the biggest market opportunities for Unilever.

By adopting a multi-stakeholder approach, Unilever is better able to understand the challenges preventing society and ecosystems from thriving, and to find ways to begin addressing them. Unilever engage with shareholders, governments, NGOs and civil society organisations, with the aim to shape the business landscape through advocacy. A range of opportunities to achieve transformational change, including through partnerships, blended (public/private) finance, financial inclusion at scale, and digital and new business models.

Sustainable Development Goals

One way in which Unilever are using partnerships to deliver change at scale is through the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). They are fundamental to future economic growth and are an enormous business opportunity. The Business & Sustainable Development Commission, co-founded by Unilever, concluded that successful delivery of the SDGs will create market opportunities of at least \$12 trillion a year.



Unilever are working across many of the SDGs through the USLP. In doing so, they are unlocking new markets, and investing in brands with purpose and innovation. Find out about Unilever [approach to SDGs](#) and how they are taking action on them, throughout their [Sustainable Living Report](#).

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THE UNILEVER SUSTAINABILITY PLAN

Unilever's CEO Paul Polman has shown great potentials in making perfect decisions to achieve the goal and to lead the company towards its ultimate sustainability destination. ULE team has mainly focused on influencing people through innovations in business strategies as they started recognising human capital as individuals. Unilever's CEO has also shown great initiatives in an intensive communication campaign to make stakeholders aware about their new innovative sustainable strategies. ULE team have successfully led the company towards achieving a sustainable strategy, zero-waste policies, reducing energy and water consumption, improving the health of workers – all these things promote the wellbeing of the environment and society, and they also improve efficiency, reduce costs, ensure viability in business and sustainable shared value.

Sustainable Living Plan has impacted in achieving great results for Unilever. It has contributed to business growth as consumers choose Unilever brands with purpose – such as Dove, Hellmann's, Ben & Jerry's and Omo.

Unilever have learnt a lot about what does and doesn't work, and keep making changes to get things right to create shared values and sustainability. Unilever's continual improvement is mainly due to looking for new ideas and ways to influence our wider value chain. Collaboration with stakeholders is viewed as the key to tackling many sustainability challenges and Unilever will be focusing even more on this in the years ahead. Unilever's transformational change initiatives will help to bring about the systems changes needed to address some of the most complex social and environmental problems.



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UNILEVER SUSTAINABLE LIVING PLAN: 3-YEAR SUMMARY OF PROGRESS 2016-2018



IMPROVING HEALTH AND WELL-BEING FOR MORE THAN 1 BILLION PEOPLE

Pillar	Commitment	Target date	Unit of measure	2016	2017	2018
Health and hygiene	By 2020, we will help more than a billion people to improve their health and hygiene. This will help reduce the incidence of life-threatening diseases like diarrhoea.	2020	The number of people reached on a cumulative basis by an intervention through our programmes on handwashing, self-esteem, oral health, sanitation and safe drinking water.	538m†	601m	1.24bn
	By 2020 our Lifebuoy brand aims to change the hygiene behaviour of 1 billion consumers across Asia, Africa and Latin America by promoting the benefits of handwashing with soap at key times.	2020	People reached through our initiatives which aim to improve handwashing behaviour (cumulative millions).	379m	426m	1bn
	Through our range of water purifiers, we aim to provide 150 billion litres of safe drinking water by 2020.	2020	Litres of safe drinking water provided through the sales of Pureit devices [measured in millions of people since 2005 until end of 2013]	85bn	96bn	106bn
	By 2020 we will help 25 million people gain improved access to a toilet by promoting the benefits of using clean toilets and by making toilets accessible. [New target 2014]	2020	Cumulative number of people reached by Domestos funded programmes which help people gain improved access to a toilet since 2012 (millions). [Note: there is a one year lag in the reporting of performance e.g. 2015 = 2012-2014, 2016 = 2012-2015; 2017 = 2012-2016; 2018 = 2012-2017]	6.2m	>10m	16.5m
	We aim to reach 50 million people by 2020 with our toothpaste and toothbrush brands and oral health improvement programmes to encourage children and their parents to brush day and night.	2020	People reached through our initiatives which aim to improve oral health (millions).	75m	78m	83.5m
	We aim to help 15 million young people to build up positive body confidence and self-esteem through educational programmes (target extended to 40 million young people by 2020).	2020	Cumulative number of young people reached through the Dove Self-Esteem Project initiatives since 2005.	23m	29m	35m
	Through our Vaseline Healing Project, we aim to help heal the skin of 5 million people by 2020.	2020	People reached through product donations and healing missions (millions)	Target did not exist	2.6m	4m

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Nutrition	By 2020, we will double the proportion of our portfolio that meets the highest nutritional standards, based on globally recognised dietary guidelines. This will help hundreds of millions of people to achieve a healthier diet.	2020	Percentage of sales volume of Unilever's food and refreshment products meeting the criteria for highest nutritional standards, based on globally recognised dietary guidelines.	35%	39% ^o	48%
	By 2020, 75% of our Foods portfolio will meet salt levels to enable intakes of 6g per day. [#]	2020	Percentage of our Foods portfolio compliant with the 5g target until 2015, and 6g from 2016	61%	63%	66%
	By 2012, our leading spreads will contain less than 33% saturated fat as a proportion of total fat.	2012	Percentage of leading spreads (by volume) containing less than 33% saturated fat as a proportion of total fat	Target expired	Target expired	Target expired
	A daily portion will provide at least 15% of the essential fatty acids recommended by international dietary guidelines.	2012	Percentage of leading spreads providing at least 15% of essential fatty acids recommended by international dietary guidelines.	Target expired	Target expired	Target expired
	By 2017, 90% of our complete global portfolio of soft vegetable oil spreads will contain no more than 33% fat as saturated fat and at least 67% as good unsaturated fat. In tropical areas, without chilled distribution, the maximum saturated fat content will be set at 38%, as a slightly higher saturated fat level is required to maintain stability of the spreads.	2017	Percentage of sales volume of Unilever's soft vegetable spreads global portfolio sold in tubs containing less than 33% saturated fats as a proportion of total fat.	79%	80%	Target expired
	By 2012, we will have removed from all our products any trans fats originating from partially hydrogenated vegetable oil.	2012	Percentage of portfolio free from trans fats originating from partially hydrogenated vegetable oil.	Target expired	Target expired	Target expired
	By 2020 we will remove an additional 25% sugar in ready-to-drink teas. In 2014 we extended this target to include our powdered ice tea and milk tea products.	2020	Percentage reduction of sugar content in sweetened tea beverages based on current sales volumes compared to sugar content in sweetened tea beverages based on 2010 sales volumes.	12%	15%	20%
	By 2014, 100% of our children's ice creams will contain 110 kilocalories or fewer per portion. 60% will meet this level by 2012.	2014	Percentage of children's ice cream products which have 110 kilocalories or fewer per portion.	Target expired	Target expired	Target expired
	By 2015, 80% of our packaged ice cream products will not exceed 250 kilocalories per portion [New target 2014]	2015	Percentage of packaged ice cream sales volumes which have 250 kilocalories or less per portion.	91%	90%	92%

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TEACHING NOTE 6: Integrated Sustainability: Unilever's Sustainable Plan

ABSTRACT

Sustainability is often depicted as either good for the community and society or as a risk to be managed, potentially very costly and to be avoided. This case study views sustainability as an opportunity for shared value and growth for competitive advantage in developed and emerging market. This perspective is explored using the Unilever sustainability living plan and integrated reporting as a case study.

This case study presents the opportunities and challenges of the developed and expanding emerging markets as a backdrop, along with Unilever's shared value driven culture. The case explores what Unilever has done to integrate sustainability within its business model and build a strategy on its core competencies. Management issues considered in the case are the role of corporate culture and corporate competencies, the leadership commitment and willingness to set sustainable ambitions goals, and the question of how to create internal and external alignment around strategic goals.

TEACHING OBJECTIVES

The Unilever case is appropriate for use with board and senior managers, and with graduate business students in strategy, business and organisational change, business and society, governance, corporate social responsibility and leadership courses. Therefore, different learning subject/modules in these area can integrate Unilever case study as an integrated sustainability practical example for the students.

Learning objectives

- To instil an appreciation for understanding at a fundamental level the importance of what are a company's existing shared values and core competencies.
- To encourage the need for holistic and integrated systematic thinking.
- To reinforce the critical integrated role of communication and transparency in building a sustainable strategy and sustaining trust, and creating alignment among various stakeholders around clearly-defined, shared goals and values.
- To advance the need for bold, courageous leadership and commitment to an integrated long term vision and how shared values are fundamental for sustainability.

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ASSIGNMENT QUESTIONS AND ANALYSIS

- What major sustainability challenges, trends, and societal issues is Unilever facing?
- How did Unilever embed the sustainability within the organisation? What do you think were critical success factors in the integrated reporting plan?
- To increase the size of the business, Unilever identified social and environmental aspects to build its core competencies, but it also required managers to rethink how to develop, distribute, and source its products, particularly in emerging and developing markets. What are examples of Unilever's core competencies? How did Unilever build on them to develop a strategy for emerging markets?
- As illustrated in the case study, Unilever has linked its success as a company to both financial and non-financial indicators, and it publishes the results against both in its annual report to the investors. Are the goals realistic? What is the benefit of setting and sharing such ambitious targets? What are the risks?
- Unilever management evidence the commitment to build a strong company for the long term, and has taken a bold step of discontinuing quarterly earnings guidance to security analysts. Is this decision consistent with Unilever's sustainable plan? How risky is it? What might be some ways to align investors with long-term goals?

TEACHING APPROACH AND PLAN

Teaching instructions that can be used in a 90 minutes class, including questions for interactive opening and advancing discussions.

- Instructors can use a number of short videos (see recommended readings and references above) into the course discussion. For example, the video listed, Unilever the Power of Purpose.
- Analysing the case study situation (15 minutes): Instructors can start the discussion by analysing the Unilever's case study situation. Ask students, "What major sustainability challenges, trends, and societal issues is Unilever facing?" Students can point out the indented sustainability challenges identified by Unilever's strategic review. Including discussions how these challenges affect the company and its market sustainability. It is essential for the students to understand the content in which the Unilever sustainability was developed.
- Analysing the Unilever sustainability plan (20 minutes): Instructors can use Unilever history to share a perspective on the company's response to sustainability and social challenges in the past and the integration of the social driven shared values within the business. Ask students "What do you think of Unilever's vision to grow even as it reduces its environmental impact and increases its sustainable social impact?" Students discussions should lead to Unilever's strategy been challenged by unique and ambitious sustainability-driven solution in long-term.
- Implementing the sustainability plan Unilever (20 minutes): Ask students "How did Unilever embed sustainability within the business? What are the pros and cons of using specific sustainability KPIs? What is the importance of Unilever's governance structure for sustainability?"
- Evaluating Unilever's sustainable plan (25 minutes): Ask students "are the goals that the sustainable plan is realistic?" Debate whether sustainability goals are moderate or ambitious. Highlighting advantages and disadvantages, such as ambitious goals motivate employees to make the change in the company as they require creative thinking and lead to innovative solutions that help create sustainable competitive advantage in long term.

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ANALYSIS AND INSIGHTS

This offers comprehensive analysis of the questions posed in the teaching plan. Instructors can discuss the generalising case points and extracting key lessons, relating to theory that exists and evolves to include in present day actions.

- What major sustainability challenges, trends, and societal issues is Unilever facing?
- How did Unilever embed the sustainability within the organisation? What do you think were critical success factors in the integrated reporting plan?
- To increase the size of the business, Unilever identified social and environmental aspects to build its core competencies, but it also required managers to rethink how to develop, distribute, and source its products, particularly in emerging and developing markets. What are examples of Unilever's core competencies? How did Unilever build on them to develop a strategy for emerging markets?
- As illustrated in the cases study, Unilever has linked its success as a company to both financial and non-financial indicators, and it publishes the results against both in its annual report to the investors. Are the goals realistic? What is the benefit of setting and sharing such ambitious targets? What are the risks?
- Unilever management evidence the commitment to build a strong company for the long term, and has taken a bold step of discontinuing quarterly earnings guidance to security analysts. Is this decision consistent with Unilever's sustainable plan? How risky is it? What might be some ways to align investors with long-term goals?

FEEDBACK

Feedback should be educative in nature. Towards the end of the session the teacher may encourage students to reflect on their learning.

- Ask the students to describe key concepts and provide further examples of them.
- Be sensitive to students and strive for a balance between correction and encouragement
- Ask them how the session compares with others
- Try to provide constructive feedback
- Sometimes seeing a comment written is more effective than hearing it aloud – use post-it notes to collect and communicate feedback
- Give genuine praise for excellent work and guard against meaningless praise to win approval
- Make an effort to notice students' efforts and comment on it
- Invite the students to provide feedback on your teaching strategy

Additionally, this will stipulate discussion at Board and senior management levels on viewing integrated sustainability as an opportunity to be realized strategically, especially as companies pursue a shared value strategy. The case lends itself well to role-playing. Students can assume the roles of managers at Unilever who support and oppose the integrated shared value model, and can stand for management and investors as the company takes its bold stand against integrated reporting and sustainability. **Additionally, different learning subject/modules can integrate Unilever case study as an integrated sustainability practical example.**

The case study can translate easily to assignment topics, such as the integration of sustainability and shared value strategy, how to create a supportive culture for sustainability, or the intersect company role with that of government when it comes to sustainability and societal issues.