
Editorial

John A. Parnell

School of Business Administration,
University of North Carolina,
Pembroke, NC 28372, USA
E-mail: john.parnell@uncp.edu

Biographical notes: John A. Parnell is the William Henry Belk Chair of Management at the University of North Carolina – Pembroke. He is the Founding Editor of the *International Journal of Sustainable Strategic Management*. He presently serves as a member of the *IJSSM* editorial review board.

I have had the privilege of serving as Founding Editor of the *International Journal of Sustainable Strategic Management (IJSSM)*. However, other professional obligations have necessitated my relinquishing this responsibility. Reflecting on my experience with the *IJSSM* and the future of the sub-discipline, I would like to offer a few observations. My purpose is not to resolve any issues in this editorial, so I apologise in advance for any oversimplifications.

Building on the work of Stead and Stead (2004), I envision sustainable strategic management (SSM) as the strategies and related processes associated with the continuity of superior performance – broadly defined – from both market and environmental perspectives (Parnell, 2008). SSM's distinctiveness is the link between the two types of sustainability. A strategy that lacks market sustainability – regardless of its environmental sustainability potential – is potentially beneficial only in the short-term. Alternatively, when a strategy possesses market sustainability but not environmental sustainability, it is compromising some degree of the environment in favour of traditional firm performance. An ideal strategy engenders both market sustainability and environmental sustainability. Developing and executing this type of strategy is difficult because doing so often assumes that organisations formed specifically to pursue market sustainability will voluntarily balance this pursuit with environmental sustainability (Lee and Ball, 2003; Parnell, 2008).

Many papers published in the *journal* have invoked this or a similar conceptualisation of SSM. Having read countless submissions to the *journal* over the past two years, however, I believe the search for a widely accepted and cohesive definition of SSM continues. Some researchers emphasise environmental sustainability at the expense of market sustainability, an approach seemingly fuelled by the assumption that market sustainability will take care of itself if resources are conserved and managed properly. As a devil's advocate, one could also argue that environmental sustainability goals are often achieved when organisations pursue financial returns in a competitive marketplace.

I suspect that most SSM scholars would reject both of these perspectives. In fact, if SSM follows a development pattern similar to that of other disciplines (e.g., strategic management); one can expect published work in the future to reflect a variety of conceptualisations between these two extremes. This lack of a widely accepted definition

of the field is not a shortcoming in all respects, but it does point to the need for further conceptual development.

I have also noticed that many SSM scholars associate sustainability with alternative economic systems. Capitalism – or at least a mixed system leaning in that direction – was an inherent assumption in my conceptualisation of SSM. In such a system, business organisations are expected to execute strategies that enhance performance in both the short and long terms. Some scholars, however, begin with the notion that centralised planning and coordination of resources is optimal and necessary in the interest of sustainability. Regardless of perspective, the validity of an entire paper can rest on (frequently unstated) assumptions like these.

I have also reviewed a number of papers that, directly or indirectly, presuppose anthropogenic global warming. This is a difficult issue for the *IJSSM* to address because arguments for and against the phenomenon are linked to concepts in the hard sciences that arguably lie outside the scope of the *journal*. The problem with accepting the argument for man-induced climate change is that it suggests a substantial and costly reallocation of productive resources that would be unnecessary if this position turns out to be unfounded. Devil's advocate could be invoked here as well, as those rejecting the argument could be overlooking the most critical sustainability issue of our time. Some concur, emphasising that man's role in climate change is 'settled science' and should be accepted as such. I remain sceptical of both a significant role played by man in global climate patterns and the notion that any proposition as complex and speculative as global warming should be viewed as 'settled'. Either way, we should be careful to clarify assumptions such as these at the outset of our work. The legitimacy of our contributions to the field is at stake.

Overall, these observations point to a need to solidify SSM's conceptual foundation. Progress is being made, but more work is needed. I am encouraged by a growing number of bright, energetic scholars from across the globe specifically trained in various facets of business sustainability. Those of us who completed our doctoral programs a couple of decades ago did not receive such exposure.

The incoming editor, Dr. Jack Spillan, has expressed a keen interest in publishing editorials and foundational work that engage the scholarly community in issues such as those I have discussed herein. I would encourage those who would like to participate in the conversation to contact him directly. I look forward to serving on the editorial board under Jack's leadership.

References

- Lee, K. and Ball, R. (2003) 'Achieving sustainable corporate competitiveness: strategic link between top management's (green) commitment and corporate environmental strategy', *Greener Management International*, Vol. 44, pp.89–104.
- Parnell, J.A. (2008) 'Sustainable strategic management: construct, parameters, research directions', *International Journal of Sustainable Strategic Management*, Vol. 1, No. 1, pp.35–45.
- Stead, W.E. and Stead, J.G. (2004) *Sustainable Strategic Management*, M.E. Sharpe, Armonk, NY.