

Branding for the environment: the extent of the problem

 By [Pierre Mare](#)

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The recent reports on climate change, although heavily negotiated, make for extremely bleak reading.

Even if emissions are stabilised, even reduced, the coming weather patterns do not bode well for anyone. There will be further warming. The climate will become more variable. Sea levels will continue to rise – and the process will continue for at least a millennium.

Bear in mind that this is the negotiated, best-case-scenario version, stripped of the most pessimistic scenarios. There is a less than 5% chance that global warming is a natural climatic phenomenon. It has been caused by smokestack economies, and the emissions have not declined. In fact, major polluters such as the USA, China and India have done all in their power to hedge against anything that threatens the industrial bases of their present and future economies.

Certain phenomena related to climate change are immediately visible. Glaciers are receding. Ice sheets are melting. The number and force of catastrophic weather storms are increasing. Food stocks are in danger. Fish stocks are collapsing, though also due to over-fishing. On that note, frozen fish fingers will become a valued commodity, as will canned tuna and tinned pilchards. Consider that thought carefully.

The executive summary of the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's report on impacts, adaptation and vulnerability has a number of pointers for Africa.

By 2020, between 75 and 250 million people will suffer from serious water shortages. Agriculture will be severely compromised, and yields from rain-fed agriculture could decline by as much as 50%.

The amount of land available and suitable for agriculture will decrease, as will the length of the growing seasons, especially along the margins of arid and semi-arid areas.

Inland fisheries will lose productivity due to increases in water temperatures.

And, towards the end of this century, sea level rises will require structural adaptations that will cost between 5 and 10 percent of GDP.

The report leaves little room for doubt that catastrophe is on the horizon. Inevitably, Africa is looking at drought and famine once more. Conflicts over water may well become regular items on the news. Massive numbers of economic refugees and the turmoil that they bring will also become a familiar occurrence.

Political systems are based on and seek to maintain economies that best suit the political will of the people. To all intents and purposes, the necessary structural changes will be slow in coming. Whether this is a good or a bad thing is a toss-up. On the one hand, the problems exist. On the other hand, the solution causes more problems. However, business is responding in varying extents, either in response to legislation, or of its own accord.

The ultimate goal of the organisation is to optimise returns to the shareholder. In a number of notable instances, environmental concerns are being factored into the equation. Some of the shift towards environmentally sound brands is a result of genuine concern on the part of shareholders. In the wake of environmental incidents in '80s and '90s, some of it is as a result of legislation.

However, by far the greatest shift is being driven by environmentally savvy consumers, who can read the writing on the wall.

Consumers, the most powerful lobby of all, are choosing or being driven to choose more environmentally sound products. In the automotive industry, small car brands are proliferating. The food industry is becoming dominated by the word 'organic'. And although it is vital for our economic and cultural survival, plastic is either disliked, or consumers are seeking ways to minimize its use.

This column will look at facets of branding for the environment, including products and services, consumers and the consumer lobby, elements along the route to market and emerging legislative and institutional environments. The next column will deal with products and services.

ABOUT PIERRE MARE

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