



As a student examining how the private sector can contribute to mitigating the environmental impacts of agriculture and global food systems through corporate sustainability initiatives, it is easy to get into the weeds and become too narrowly focused. While this can be very useful from an analytical standpoint, it can make it difficult to step back and see this somewhat narrow subset of efforts as part of a larger picture of corporate social and environmental responsibility. The opportunity to attend the 2016 Net Impact Conference in Philadelphia afforded me the perfect chance to take this step back. With the theme of ‘Making History’, the 2016 Net Impact (NI) Conference provided a comprehensive and inspiring overview of the myriad ways in which businesses of all varieties are leading the charge towards a more environmentally sustainable and socially responsible future.



The diverse lineup of keynote speakers alone - not to mention the overwhelmingly numerous and varied assortment of panels - spoke to the incredible variety of initiatives that are currently being undertaken in the name of corporate responsibility. There was certainly a fair share of food and ag industry representatives amongst them, but they stood alongside speakers from Black Lives Matter, Etsy, Sustain Natural (a sexual wellness company), B-Lab, Toyota, and Walmart. Despite the many differences in perspectives that come naturally from points of view embedded within starkly different industries and types of organizations, these speakers had a great deal in common. On a more readily evident note, they all aspired to work towards a vision of a brighter future and intended to do so by leveraging their resources and influence as corporations. On a less obvious note, they all seemed to see themselves as players, partners, and leaders in a cultural shift, in a movement that was much bigger than any one business on its own.

Arguably, that second point should have been somewhat self-evident as well, but it actually came as something of a surprise to someone who is



more accustomed to hearing from or about one business at a time (usually via marketing materials, and more recently, teaching cases), a format of communication that highlights competition and does not paint a picture in which there is much room for collaborative partnerships. And while competition and the current typical structure of collaborative partnerships between businesses themselves (e.g. between suppliers and retailers) will likely not change a great deal, there is a great deal of potential for change through the development of effective external partnerships. And even more if businesses continue to view this space as open for innovation and for new, creative solutions to be undertaken with regards to the structure and function of such collaborations.



Regardless of the form that such future partnerships take, there is enormous potential for improved communications and cooperation through partnerships to share lessons learned and build on existing, already expended efforts. In this way, the overall movement towards more sustainable and responsible business practices can be judiciously strengthened and advanced. The Net Impact Conference drove home the message that the bigger picture of corporate responsibility, and the bright future that responsible businesses are working towards (some harder than others), are very much dependent on partnerships.