



Sustainability and Reporting 2025 interview

Interview 20: Kumi Naidoo

GRI's *Sustainability and Reporting 2025* project looks ahead at what thought leaders expect to be the main issues on companies' agendas – and in their reports – ten years from now. Through a series of in-depth interviews with thought leaders in various fields, GRI is building an open dialogue that will form the basis for meaningful future corporate disclosures.

Edited highlights of these interviews will be posted every month on the [Sustainability and Reporting 2025 webpage](#), along with related references that enrich the discussion. GRI will update and publish an analysis of the main trends identified in these interviews every quarter. In January 2016 the final publication will present a roadmap for the future of reporting.

Facing climate change and questioning bad leadership

Kumi Naidoo is International Executive Director of Greenpeace. A social and environmental activist, Naidoo has worked with the Helping Hands Youth Organisation, he was secretary-general of the Global Call to Action Against Poverty and of Civicus: World Alliance for Citizen Participation, an international alliance for citizen participation. More recently, he led the Global Call for Climate Action, which organized mass demonstrations around climate negotiations. Naidoo joined Greenpeace in 2009 and has since become notorious for his activism.

Naidoo believes that we will face social, environmental and political challenges in the coming decade, and that the increase in extreme weather events will force us to face the realities of climate change, which may lead to conflicts. While companies may not realize the only race they should be participating in is the race towards green technology, Naidoo says they will need to be very ambitious and courageous to tackle the impacts of their activities and show their customers they are doing good.

Society: time to face up inequality and climate change

Some of the biggest challenges we face in society have been brushed under the carpet for too long, and in the next decade we will need to tackle them, says Naidoo.

“I think in the next decade there are three key issues that society is going to have to address with much greater urgency than we've done before. The first is deepening inequality: the fact that in virtually every single country around the world the gap between the rich and the poor is growing at a completely unsustainable rate and also the inequality that is growing between developed and developing world.

“The second issue that is increasingly climate change is now in our face. I think that in the next decade the writing is going to be on the wall. In the last decade we've had an increase of more than 100 percent in extreme weather events. I believe in the next decade the science now is very clear. There is no contesting the science and I would anticipate, sadly, that we will see an increase in extreme weather events. That increase is going to make addressing climate change an irresistible issue both for governments and for companies. I see that as one major game changer.

“The third issue is that of safety and security. I would include education and health in that because far too often when we have talked about security in the past we have just seen it in national security terms. Today human insecurity has reached very, very high levels.”

And the realities of climate change are likely to bring social issues to the surface, encouraging resistance. “As we get closer to resource constraints – to water, land and food scarcity – you can bet your last money that those who are privileged, those who are benefiting from the current system and those who are making obscene levels of profit from current system will fight exceptionally hard to protect that which serves them well in the present, even though they know that it will neither serve society nor themselves in the future,” explained Naidoo.

Companies: businesses need to rewrite their DNA and rethink their lobbying

According to Naidoo, the fabric of business today is not conducive to positive change. “Addressing the issue of consumption and what this planet actually has in terms of sustainable consumption is a thing that we are in absolute denial about,” he said. “The difficulty is currently in the DNA of business: more and more and more. It is more profit, more products, more markets. In context, the challenge is not simply us doing more with less, we actually have to do less, only that which we need for genuine human progress, prosperity and fulfillment.”

One aspect of this is in the power of business to affect democracy. “Businesses continue to corrupt and pivot good governance by exercising their influence so that one of the core intentions beyond democracy – to equalize the power of rich people with the voices of ordinary people – is not the case today,” he said.

“We have a form of democracy without the substance of democracy in many countries around the world. If businesses want to behave in accountable ways, one of the things they have to do in the coming decade is to reconsider what is an appropriate level of lobbying and advocacy. Right now I believe that they have perverted many governments around the world, which is why we are not making the kind of progress that we need to make on climate change, even though we are dangerously running out of time.”

Get ready: tomorrow’s leaders and consumers won’t stand for bad business

The leadership of these businesses and governments is not fit for the future, according to Naidoo, and the next generation shouldn’t accept today’s norms.

“What I’d say to young people is do not invest faith in the current adult leaders,” he said. “Seriously, we are the biggest bunch of losers young people are going to find, because, unlike earlier generations of adult leaders, we don’t have the excuse. Look at the world around you and don’t accept it! Just because it is presented to you as the norm, and you are told to be well adjusted to inequality, injustice, continuing racism and so on, I would say resist it and don’t be well adjusted to it. Present a different vision!”

With this new generation of leaders and consumers, companies will have to raise their game. “Companies that rely on ordinary people as customers are going to have to do something more,” explained Naidoo. “They are going to have to show that the net result of their business activity is not simply doing no harm, but actually doing some good. Increasingly, people are looking for good things to invest in – companies that actually do good business. I believe their products, the way they do business and how they respect human rights, gender equality and so on are going to have increasing value.”