

Summary

Beyond the Pulpit – Sustainable Innovation by SMEs: An Introduction

When dealing with sustainable development and innovation the focus is mainly on large businesses and multi nationals. However, ‘Beyond the Pulpit – Sustainable Innovation by SMEs’ deals with the possibilities open to medium- and small-sized companies. The key question is what SMEs can contribute – collectively, not just the front-runners – to the process of change towards sustainability.

Between 2005 and 2008 Nyenrode Business Universiteit’s Center for Sustainability (CfS) has worked on the research program ‘Sustainability Innovations by SMEs’, which was commissioned by the Dutch Ministry for Housing, Regional Development and the Environment (VROM). The research analyzed how SMEs respond to the new sustainability requirements and how innovations are implemented in processes, products and services.

The CfS researched a number of important sectors in the economy: construction, transportation, the rubber and synthetics industries and the bodywork sector.

The publication of ‘Beyond the Pulpit – Sustainable Innovation by SMEs’, is largely an account of the results of this program, in addition to other research projects such as ‘Businesses and Biodiversity’ and the ‘Innovation Lab for Sustainable Redevelopment’. All the staff-members of the Center for Sustainability (CfS) contributed to this publication and in a few cases they drew on expertise acquired outside the CfS.

During the research, the CfS placed a great deal of attention on finding out what factors determined the success or failure of sustainable innovation within SMEs. We now know that SMEs cannot be qualified as a uniform group because of the quantity and diversity of the individual businesses. Because of this diversity new collaborations are needed to create innovation and to enhance the sustainable quality of businesses.

We have observed that, in their pursuit of sustainable innovation, SMEs run in to all kinds of restrictions, both internal and external. However, the book also reveals that there is room and ample opportunity for sustainable entrepreneurship. In addition, we have also ascertained the roles of other involved parties, such as knowledge institutes, consultants, professional organizations and government. How do these bodies supervise processes of change, what conditions do they put in place to stimulate sustainable innovation and what else is possible in this field?

We know that SMEs participate in complex process chains that transcend individual businesses and sectors. All of these chains and sectors have their own restrictions and pitfalls. Every SME will have to move forward individually, and not only inside the company, but especially externally, to become an influential partner in the innovation process. Together with other businesses and stakeholders, SMEs can make a valuable contribution to realizing



sustainability targets, by (1) a renewed focus on sustainability; (2) accentuating company competences that support innovation; and (3) improving cooperation between different parties.