

## Sustainable Development Goals: how is business, private finance and the world progressing?

- **Unexpected turnout at the United Nations in New York: 1,500 business leaders, from Aviva to Veolia, attend SDG Business Forum**
- **“The SDGs honeymoon is over, it is time for action”, said Lise Kingo, CEO & Executive Director, Global Compact**
- **The private financial sector has yet to be engaged, despite the need for bold investment and the fast-growing interest from investors**
- **“The average global GDP per capita is USD 17,000, easily enough to achieve the SDGs”, said Prof Jeffrey Sachs.**

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More than 1,500 business leaders and government representatives registered to attend the [SDG Business Forum](#) on 18 July, at the United Nations headquarters in New York. The big jamboree was organized by the International Chamber of Commerce (ICC), the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA), and the UN Global Compact to discuss how business is progressing towards the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The demand for the event was so high – last year 200 people attended – that the organizers had to relocate the meeting to the famous and humbling UN General Assembly Hall.

The SDG Business Forum was part of the so-called [High Level Political Forum](#) (HLPF) which took place at the UN from 10 to 19 July. The HLPF is an annual meeting held since 2013 to discuss sustainable development globally and more recently to check how national governments and other stakeholders are implementing the 2030 Agenda, including the SDGs.

### Who was there and why the HLPF is important for business and finance?

In addition to 77 ministers, the UN Secretary-General, Antonio Guterres and other UN leaders, NGOs and academics, people from organizations such as Aviva, Baker & McKenzie, BASF, Bloomberg, Danone, Fibria, Finnair, GRI, Johnson & Johnson, Mars, Mastercard,

Monsanto, MSCI, Nasdaq, Neste, Nestle, Novartis, Novozymes, NRG Energy, Pepsico, Pfizer, Syngenta, Takeda, Tata, Telenor, WBCSD, Veolia and others – including SUST4IN – made an effort to be there.

The numbers and list of companies present at the HLPF speak for themselves, but here are three reasons why the HLPF is important:

- 1) It is a great chance to debate with governments, NGOs and others in a neutral environment.**

In addition to assessing the evolution of the SDGs, namely at the 43 countries which have presented their [Voluntary National Reviews](#) (VNRs – yes, another acronym!) the HLPF is important because it is a place to hear and to be heard, at global level and to meet people you normally do not meet at business conferences.

The HLPF mixes UN agencies, governments, NGOs, business and other stakeholders in (mostly) honest conversations. It is a combination of boring, but important, official meetings – attended by governments and UN agencies basically and full of pre-written statements –, more than one hundred side events, learning workshops and courses, and three “special” meetings, such as the SDG Business Forum.

At the official part of the HLPF, “Business and Industry” is represented as a “major group” through the International

Chamber of Commerce (ICC), which was already designated as the official business representative in the processes that lead to the creation of the 2030 Agenda, and in an unprecedented move was upgraded to [“observer” status last December](#). Other “major groups” include NGOs, Workers, Women and Scientists.

## 2) Attendees better understand risks and opportunities.

The theme of the HLPF this year was “*Eradicating poverty and promoting prosperity in a changing world*”. Even a cynical CFO can be convinced that “eradicating poverty” equals to more consumers (or users) and hopefully more stable markets. Others better understand the risks and get excited with “prosperity”, a term relatively new in UN speak.

For the first time a set of specific SDGs were reviewed in more detail: SDG1 (no poverty); SDG2 (zero hunger); SDG3 (good health and well-being); SDG5 (gender equality); SDG9 (industry, innovation and infrastructure); SDG14 (life below water); and, to be repeated every year, SDG17 (partnerships for the Goals).

## 3) New partnerships are born or strengthened

In addition to better mutual understanding, global meetings, such as the HLPF, spur real partnerships. There are more than 4,000 “SDGs partnerships” globally and currently [more partnerships around SDG14](#) (Oceans) than for any other SDG. This is in great part thanks to the Ocean Conference recently held, also at the UN.

## How is business, private finance – and the world – progressing? Eight takeaways.

### 1) Good news: **Business support to the SDGs is stronger than thought.**

- Registration at the SDG Business Forum jumped from 200 to 1,500. So much that the organizers had to move the meeting to the colossal and famous UN General Assembly hall.
- Seasoned diplomats – such as one of the “fathers” of the SDGs, Ambassador Macharia Kamau – were clearly impressed: “When we started the SDGs

negotiations, business was not even invited. I praise your support and for being here”, said Mr Kamau.

- John Danilovich, ICC Secretary-General, calls the SDGs, the “BDGs: Business Development Goals” because of the enormous opportunities (and responsibilities) for business.
- The ICC, together with the World Business Council for Sustainable Development, the UN Global Compact and others issued a strong statement – to be read and reread – called [“Business is stepping up for transformational partnerships”](#) with various commitments for business, including: raise **awareness** of the SDGs; promote and set SDG-related **targets**; incorporate sustainability at the core of business decision-making and business models; and, reach out within and **across sectors and supply chains** to build roadmaps for sector and systems **transformation**.
- Public-private partnerships are more and more welcome. “We emphasize that the scale and level of ambition of the 2030 Agenda require strengthening and promoting effective and transparent multi-stakeholder partnerships, including public-private partnerships”, says the final [Ministerial Declaration](#) – the highest level official outcome of the meeting.
- In addition to commitments and partnerships, business had also a list of requests. During the official session to review SDG9 (industry, innovation and infrastructure) John Danilovich, ICC, asked for: policy coherence; trade facilitation reform; finance to enable businesses to access international markets; and harnessing the trade potential of the internet.

### 2) But let’s be honest, the **business influence is still limited.**

- The UN – and its “member states” – are progressing towards listening to business views, but a lot more needs to be done to find a “real home” for the private sector at the UN, beyond the work of the UN Global Compact:
- 43 countries presented their National Voluntary Review (NVR) reports. A few have consulted and included companies, virtually none has included investors. Brazil, Japan, Kenya, Malaysia, Italy, Thailand, Sweden, Nigeria, Panama were explicit –

- some excited – with their work with the private sector.
- Peter Thomson, President of the 71st Session of the General Assembly, is an example of that progress. He clearly understands that business is the “[engine-room](#)” to achieve the SDGs.
- 3) Bad news: we are moving too slowly.
- **The pace of SDG implementation must be accelerated.** As Lise Kingo, UN Global Compact, said “**The SDGs honeymoon is over, it is time for action**” or, as a representative the Alliance of Small Island States stated during the closing plenary “The year 2030 will arrive whether we are ready for it or not.”
- 4) The private **financial** sector, namely banks, has **yet to be properly engaged and engage.**
- It is clear that private capital needs to be shifted towards sustainable development. “We stress the necessity of adequate and predictable financial resources from a variety of sources, including public and private ones” says the final [Ministerial Declaration](#). It goes on by agreeing “We note that an important use of international public finance is to catalyse additional resource mobilization from other sources, public and private, and we also note the increase in **blended finance** strategies through partnerships with the private sector, so as to scale up the amount of capital that can be mobilized to support public investment projects” and finally “We acknowledge the potential of **innovative financing** in this regard.” Next year they may be talking about green and sustainable bonds, loans and other instruments.
  - Even Prof Jeffrey Sachs, in his [virulent speech](#) (jump to 34:40) at the opening of the ministerial HLPF meeting – lambasting the coal and oil & gas industries, tax havens etc – said that “ESG/PRI Investing by Asset Managers” is essential.
  - However not many capitalists were at the building designed by the late communist Oscar Niemeyer. Not for ideological or aesthetical reasons, but most probably because they had not been invited! The honourable exceptions were Aviva, Bloomberg, MSCI and Nasdaq.
- More dialogue and actions are needed. There is plenty of capital sitting somewhere, interest rates are very low and demand for responsible investment is growing. “The take up of the SDGs among mainstream investors is the fastest ESG/PRI trend in the last 20 years, it is less niche and more serious”, said Meggin Thwing, Vice President, ESG Research at MSCI.
  - (Later in the week I met two of the largest global banks, headquartered in the same island as the UN, both very engaged with sustainable finance: they barely knew about the HLPF and had not been invited.)
- 5) **Standardized impact reporting is key.** The [UN](#) and [business](#) were both asking for that.
- Transparency may be a solution for the growing “SDGs Washing” trend (according to an EU official), but also a response by more responsible business, even in vilified sectors such as oil & gas (represented by IPIECA, but not by big companies).
  - The Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) was there, but SASB and CDP went missing.
- 6) **Global SDGs awareness is low.**
- Citizens, voters and consumers are not aware of the SDGs.
  - Same with middle-managers and even some of the speakers!
  - Mainstream media was virtually absent, only a surreal fire-alarm evacuation of the whole UN HQ, which interrupted the SDG Business Forum, made the news, from [China](#) to the [UK](#)
  - “The SDGs need to go viral.” said Peter Thomson, President of the UN General Assembly
  - In fact, the need for **awareness, better data, investments shifting and accelerated action**, were the main conclusions of various reports, launched to coincide with the HLPF, and debates, including:
    - [SDG Index and Dashboards Report](#) provides an excellent overview of historic country performance (but not current effort) vis-à-vis the Agenda 2030 and the SDGs. It is lead by Prof. Jeffrey Sachs and produced by the Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN) and the Bertelsmann Stiftung.

- The official Annual Report by the UN Secretary: [Progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals](#).
  - [The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2017](#)
  - EU's Sustainable Finance High-Level Expert Group (HLEG) [Interim report on sustainable finance](#)
  - The [New EU Consensus on Development](#)
- 7) From **presentations** and corridor conversations, we confirm that **successful companies** in implementing the SDGs:
- go beyond goals and targets and are now using the SDGs **indicators**
  - confirm that implementing the SDGs is hard work at the beginning, but less so after they become embedded into the business
  - use the **SDG Compass** – in various industries, countries and sizes
  - focus on a few material SDGs: **Climate Action** (SDG13), **Empowering women and girls** (SDG5) and **Circular Economy** (SDG12 & others) are very popular across business and government and maybe a good start for public-private partnerships, if really material.
- 8) **The SDGs can be** fashionable. The Finnish business delegation literally wore the SDGs colours. See our tweets for more.

## Speaking at the UN – videos

On a personal note, I had the privilege to be back at the UN, for the first time since the SDGs adoption in 2015, to attend the SDG Business Forum, the Partnership Exchange, various side events, including the excellent and packed "[Chief Sustainability Officers and Sustainability Champions](#)", organized by the WBCSD and attended by more than 100 representatives. Plus, the novelty and honour to represent "Business and Industry" at two official panels: where business is now even allowed to speak as if we were a country.

The not very popular UN Web TV streamed live from various HLPF meetings. We can still watch some modest interventions by this SDG servant and get a taste of the debate. Here are six videos:

### 1. At the official meeting on "Leveraging interlinkages for effective implementation of SDGs":

[On systemic thinking, the business commitment to the SDGs, the links between various SDGs for business, the need for coordination at government level](#). Jump to 2:02:24

[Answering to the moderator, who was asking for specific examples](#) on what governments should do: Awareness, education, web portal, smart taxes etc.). Jump to 2:36:37

### 2. At the SDG Business Forum:

[On the strong business support to the SDGs, but lack of awareness, the need to celebrate the SDGs to motivate more companies to get involved and elearning as a solution to train middle-managers](#). Jump to 1:49:42

### 3) At the "Business leading the way: the SDGs as a tool for sustainability and growth" side event:

[On defining priorities and the middle-management challenge](#). Jump to 1:34:40, see also the very interesting answers from Kip Cleverley, VP, Global Sustainability - International Flavors & Fragrances (IFF) and Tamer Mosalam, SVP PepsiCo Egypt, from 1:37.20

[Asking the UN Global Compact, the WBCSD and GRI to keep working together](#), namely to keep the SDG Compass updated and improved, plus our work on the Sustainable Development Goals for Business elearning. Jump to 46:43

[On the importance of investors, clarification on the new MSCI Index and "SDG Bonds"](#). Jump to 48:11

## Final outcomes

In his closing statement, the Under-Secretary-General for Economic and Social Affairs Wu Hongbo noted that the HLPF is confirmed as the central global platform for review and follow-up of SDGs, while offering a space for exchanging experiences and peer learning.

Key documents:

- Official [Ministerial Declaration](#), adopted by all countries on the last day, with recommendations on how to progress with the SDGs, namely the ones assessed, but also with strong commitments to Climate Action, stressing the “interlinkages” of the 17 SDGs and a dozen references to the private sector, finance and business!
- ICC Statement: “[Business is stepping up for transformational partnerships](#)”

## What next

### 1) Learn, implement and finance the SDGs:

- [Sustainable Development Goals](#): Go deeper than the goals and targets, indicators can also be inspiring!
- Read some of our previous articles:
  - [Why the Sustainable Development Goals are good business?](#)
  - [SDGs: Doing nothing is a costly option](#)
  - [The Sustainable Development Goals \(SDGs\) and Business: We Need To KISS!](#)
  - Our first article, back in July 2014: [Sustainable Development Goals \(Proposal\) just published: What does it mean for business?](#)
- Convince your CEO. Use the [Business and Sustainable Development Commission report](#) or more directly the [CEO Guide to the SDGs](#).

- Check our elearning initiative: [Sustainable Development Goals for Business](#), which has been supported by Paul Polman, Unilever/WBCSD, Sir Mark Moody-Stuart, UN Global Compact Foundation and others and is currently being finalized.
- Engage with your value chain, industry peers, investors, communities and government, for instance by joining your Local, Regional or National Commission for the SDGs
- Attend some events, such as the “**SDGs: Two Years On**” **International Conference** in Madrid on 26 September. Save the date and pre-register by sending us an email: [info@sust4in.com](mailto:info@sust4in.com)
- Get advice, from SUST4IN for instance: [info@sust4in.com](mailto:info@sust4in.com) or call us +34 91 5309903

### 2) If you (still!) want to learn more about the HLPF:

- [ICC summary of the SDG Forum](#)
- [UN Global Compact summary](#)
- [James Gomme, WBCSD, Insider Perspectives](#)
- [IISD Final Summary](#)

### 3) See if you can attend at least one of the following week-long events in New York

- September 2017: UN General Assembly Week. There will more than a dozen business-related events between 17-21 September. See the UN Global Compact’s [Business Guide to UN General Assembly Week](#).
- July 2018, again at the UN in New York: The sixth [HLPF](#) will address the theme of “Transformation towards sustainable and resilient societies.” The Forum will also review very important for business and finance: SDG6 (Water & Sanitation), SDG7 (Energy), SDG11 (Cities), SDG12 (Sustainable Consumption and Production), and SDG15 (Forests, Life on Land), as well as Goal 17 (Partnerships), which is reviewed every year.

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