

WBCSD Insider Perspective:

Key Takeaways from the 2019 High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development

July 2019



Introduction

The 2019 High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development

The High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) on Sustainable Development is the UN's central platform for follow-up and annual review of the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Between 9 to 18 July 2019, the UN Headquarters in New York welcomed over 2,000 participants to 33 meetings and over 150 side events as part of the HLPF 2019.

During the eight-day Forum, ministers from 47 countries presented Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) on their SDG progress so far, bringing the total number of countries that have submitted in-depth reviews to 142 over the past four years, since the SDGs were launched in 2015.

This year's HLPF marked the end of a cycle in that all 17 SDGs have now been explored in depth as part of discussions over the course of the past four years. There was also a general review of the VNR process with UN officials and stakeholders sharing views on how the VNRs have added value, lessons learned, and how the process should evolve moving forward.

The key theme of this year's HLPF was *"Empowering People and ensuring inclusiveness and equality,"* with a specific focus on progress and challenges in relation to SDG 4 (Quality Education), SDG 8 (Decent Work & Economic Growth), SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), SDG 13 (Climate Action), SDG 16 (Peace, Justice &

Strong Institutions) and SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals).

As in previous years, the HLPF also provided a critical opportunity for wider groups of stakeholders, including business, to engage and share solutions to SDG implementation. The World Business Council for Sustainable Development (WBCSD) and its member companies again played an active role in convening and contributing to a variety of important dialogues.

Over the following pages we highlight some of the key takeaways from this year's discussions that are most relevant from a private sector perspective.



HIGH-LEVEL POLITICAL FORUM ON SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

2,000
attendees

125
ministers

47
national reviews

150
side events

Key Takeaways

1 SDG Progress: the need for accelerated action

Assessing progress

Ahead of the HLPF, the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA) released its annual [Sustainable Development Goals Report](#) which uses the latest available data to track global progress on the SDGs. The report shows that, while advances have been made in some areas, monumental challenges remain.

It highlights the fact that the natural environment is deteriorating at an alarming rate, with sea levels rising, ocean acidification accelerating, land degradation continuing unchecked, and one million plant and animal species facing the risk of extinction. It also points to a lack of progress across important social indicators, noting that

progress towards ending extreme poverty has slowed, global hunger is on the rise, and at least half of the world's population still lack essential health services. Overall, it revealed that climate change and increasing inequality are not only undermining progress toward achieving the 2030 Agenda but also threatening to reverse many gains made over the last decades.

As a result, the HLPF saw a repeated call for a much deeper, faster and more ambitious response to unleash the economic and social transformations necessary to achieve the SDGs. During her [opening address](#) Inga Rhonda King, President of the United Nations Economic and Social Council, in particular called for member states to “*launch an*

ambitious decade of action that puts the world on a new trajectory for SDG achievement” and to “*kick-start a new phase of SDG implementation*”.



Looking to September 2019

While the HLPF usually occurs once a year in July, every four years the UN undertakes an additional [SDG Summit](#) held under the auspices of the UN General Assembly (UNGA) which seeks to review the progress of the 2030 Agenda at the level of heads of state and government. In September 2019, world leaders will assemble at the first SDG Summit since the Goals were launched in 2015.

This summit will form part of a series of critical meetings around the UNGA in September including: the Secretary General's Climate Action Summit; a high-level dialogue on universal health coverage; and a high-level dialogue on financing for development.

During the course of the July HLPF, UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres [called on](#) “*leaders to come to the September summits not with beautiful speeches, but with concrete actions, plans and commitments to accelerate the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the Paris Agreement on climate change*”. Meanwhile UN President of the General Assembly Maria Fernanda Espinosa Garcés described the September summit as “*the greatest milestone since the adoption of the 2030 Agenda, and the best opportunity to reaffirm and fulfil our commitments*”.

Key Takeaways

2 The inclusion imperative

Against the backdrop of the UN's key theme of *"Empowering People and ensuring inclusiveness and equality,"* the issue of tackling global inequality received widespread coverage and discussion.

In his opening remarks to ministers, the UN Secretary General [spoke about](#) the *"inclusion imperative"* noting that *"development is not sustainable if it is not fair and inclusive"* and that *"rising inequality hinders long-term growth"*.

He went on to detail four key conclusions to advance the inclusion imperative, highlighting the crucial need for:

- Dramatically scaled up public and private investments in the

SDGs as the best tool of prevention against inequality.

- Global climate action that is advanced in a manner that reduces inequality, fostering new jobs in the green economy and helping people acquire 21st century skills as the world transitions from fossil fuels.
- The successful implementation of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration.
- Strengthening global commitments to end conflicts and displacement while standing together for justice, tolerance, gender equality, and human rights.

Meanwhile, many other sessions underlined the scale of the

challenge facing the world when it comes to addressing inequality. The UN Statistics Division reported that even as most countries' income is growing, inequality continues to rise, and that it is in fact higher today than it was 30 years ago.

The UN Development Programme (UNDP) also released its released its [2019 Multidimensional Poverty Index](#), which this year was subtitled *"Illuminating Inequalities"* and sheds light on the number of people experiencing poverty at regional, national and subnational levels, revealing inequalities across countries and among the poor themselves.



"The evidence is clear: Development is not sustainable if it is not fair and inclusive — and rising inequality hinders long-term growth."

Antonio Guterres, UN Secretary General

Key Takeaways

3 Engagement by business: Event for Chief Sustainability Officers

2019 marked a continuation of strong engagement around the HLPF by business, with many companies in attendance and engaging in a series of events both within and alongside the UN's core program. From its side, WBCSD and its member companies again played an active role in convening and advancing a series of important dialogues.

The central platform for business engagement alongside the HLPF was the Chief Sustainability Officers for SDGs event which was co-hosted for the third consecutive year by WBCSD and UN DESA. This half day session brought together around 400 attendees from business, civil society and UN delegations and incorporated a series of panel discussions

exploring topics such as: progress made by business on the SDGs so far; the role of business in empowering people; integrating the SDGs into corporate culture; how to leverage corporate partnerships for SDG impact; and the latest trends in managing and reporting SDG performance.

The session was opened by Maria-Francesca Spatolisano, Assistant Secretary-General for Policy Coordination and Inter-Agency Affairs at UNDESA, who welcomed the event as a timely opportunity to share and explore how business can use the SDGs as a new lens to translate global needs and ambitions into business solutions.

This was followed by opening statements by: Lise Kingo, CEO &

Executive Director of the UN Global Compact; John Denton, Secretary General of the International Chamber of Commerce; and Masaya Futamiya, Chairman of Sampo Japan Nipponkoa.

Ms Kingo provided perspectives on the progress that business has made against the SDGs over the course of the past four years and issued a call for further action particularly around the issues of climate, addressing inequalities, and enhancing respect for human rights. Mr Denton complemented this by underlining the importance of scaling business impact, particularly through the engagement of SMEs, and of addressing pervading misalignments in terms of policy frameworks and SDG datasets which are acting as barriers to



progress. Mr Futamiya then spoke on behalf of the Japan Business Federation (Keidanren), illustrating how it is mobilizing Japanese innovation and technology to further contribute to the realization of the SDGs.

The event then proceeded with a number of high-level panel discussions featuring representatives from a range of WBCSD members

and partners including: Baker Mckenzie, Bloomberg, Cemex, CMPC, Cornerstone Capital, Edelman, ERM, Fazer, LVMH, Morgan Stanley, Nestlé, the University of Oxford, Palmhouse Dairies, PwC, Randstad, Shift, Total, and the World Benchmarking Alliance. A video recording of the full session is available to explore [here](#). Slides from the session are also [available](#).

Key Takeaways

3 Engagement by business: Other WBCSD events around the HLPF



Business & the SDGs: Local impacts on a global agenda

This WBCSD event hosted by Baker McKenzie on 15 July highlighted the importance for global business of understanding SDG priorities and levels of progress at the local level in the markets in which they operate. This discussion incorporated views from the Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN), representatives from the Chilean government, and WBCSD Global Network partners from Costa Rica, New Zealand and Spain.



Integrating the SDGs into business strategy: tools & guidance

On 16 July, WBCSD convened an interactive dialogue at the offices of S&P Global to discuss challenges, opportunities and emerging best practice when it comes to integrating the SDGs into corporate strategy. The session featured a presentation by Trucost on findings from the roll-out of its SDG Evaluation Tool as well as insights from representatives from Nestlé, Novozymes, Philip Morris International and Veolia.



Discussions around Business Reporting on the SDGs

This event jointly organized by WBCSD and Bloomberg provided an opportunity to explore SDG-related corporate disclosure and the evolving expectations of stakeholders. As well as showcasing insights from WBCSD and Bloomberg, the session also welcomed interventions from: Francisco Ruiz-Tagle, CEO of CMPC; Erika Karp, CEO of Cornerstone Capital; Gerbrand Haverkamp, Executive Director of the World Benchmarking Alliance; and Robert Eccles, Professor of Management Practice at the University of Oxford.



SIMS Municipal Recycling Facility Visit & Networking Event

During the HLPF SIMS Metal Management also kindly provided WBCSD members with the opportunity to visit its Municipal Recycling Facility in Sunset Park Brooklyn. This facility is the largest sorting system of its kind in the United States and sorts hundreds of tons of metal, glass, and plastic each day. Visitors had the chance to hear from the company's CEO, Alistair Field, and to learn about the sustainability aspects of the facility's design.



The power of data – Can we share data already disclosed?

Against the backdrop of the HLPF's key theme of 'Empowering people and ensuring inclusiveness and equality', this corporate roundtable co-hosted by Novo Nordisk, WBCSD and the International Chamber of Commerce (ICC) looked at opportunities for sharing already disclosed data with a view to enhancing understanding of corporate impact on the SDGs.

Key Takeaways

4 New collaborations to realize the SDGs

Another common theme throughout the course of the HLPF was the essential role of pioneering partnerships to realize the transformative ambitions of the Global Goals. A number of innovative collaborations involving and led by business were highlighted throughout the course of the week.

During WBCSD's Chief Sustainability Officers for the SDGs event Francisco Ruiz-Tagle gave a keynote presentation to mark the launch of the [Forest Sector SDG Roadmap](#). An initiative led by WBCSD's Forest Solutions Group (FSG), this roadmap articulates a joint vision of the most impactful contributions the forest sector can make to help realize the ambitions set out within the SDGs, and sets



out tangible pathways to fulfilling this potential.

At the same event Mitchell Toomey, Director of Sustainability at BASF, was also on hand to provide an update on the progress being made by the [Alliance to End Plastic Waste](#), a group of almost 40 companies from throughout the entire plastics value chain who have come together to tackle the issue of plastics waste.

In addition, on the sidelines of the HLPF, Nikkei America and Nikkei Business Publications hosted The Nikkei SDGs Forum to showcase and discuss the various action plans that are in place to unite SDG efforts by government, business, science and academia in



Francisco Ruiz-Tagle, CEO of CMPC launches and explains the key elements of the Forest Sector SDG Roadmap

Japan to help realize the SDGs. This “whole-of-Japan” approach underlined the importance of multi-stakeholder collaboration and demonstrated what can be achieved through close coordination which transcends private and public spheres of activity.



Mitchell Toomey, Sustainability Director at BASF, highlights progress being made by the Alliance to End Plastic Waste

Key Takeaways

5 The need to make the SDGs Actionable

Amid calls to scale up global efforts around the 2030 Agenda and to usher in a “decade of action” in 2020, one of the key topics of discussion around the fringes of the HLPF was how to make the SDGs more directly actionable and measurable in terms of impact.

A number of organizations used the event of the HLPF to highlight their thoughts on how to translate the SDGs into concrete action agendas for different sets of stakeholders. SDSN and the OECD presented a new [working paper](#) which proposes how the SDGs might be organized into six key transformations around which policymakers could align and plan long-term interventions.

Similarly, the World Benchmarking Alliance (WBA) also published a [new resource](#) detailing the systems-based approach that it will be taking to benchmarking. The Alliance has identified seven systems transformations which it believes have the greatest potential to drive economic, environmental and social progress and achieve the SDGs. Moving forward, considering how to realize these transformations will inform the WBA’s approach to selecting the sectors and 2,000 or so keystone companies that will be included in its rankings in years to come.

In addition to the focus on making the SDGs more clearly actionable for business and governments,

another common theme was the need to enhance measurement of SDG impact by the private sector.

A number of sessions decried the lack of robust metrics and datasets to assess business impact on the SDGs as well as the increasingly diverse, and occasionally incomparable, series of ESG ratings.

There was a general call for consolidation and standardization across metrics and frameworks, a cause which was helped by the United Nations Conference on Trade & Development (UNCTAD) publishing a series of [Common Guidance on Core Indicators](#) on reporting contribution towards the SDGs by business.



John Denton, Secretary General of the ICC calling for systemic change and greater alignment around datasets to support key business shifts



Dr Jeffrey Sachs launches new working by SDSN and OECD focusing on six key transformations around which policymakers could align and plan long-term SDG interventions.



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