



Aligning Business Strategy with the SDGs
Gold Medal Symposium Summary
Planet Word, Washington, D.C. – May 17, 2023

Background

On the occasion of awarding the Gold Medal 2023 to Jacobs, the World Environment Center convened a Symposium for Business Executives to discuss with thought leaders and practitioners how to align business strategy with the [UN Sustainable Development Goals \(SDGs\)](#). Even though not primarily designed for company use the SDGs have provided a framework for business to align central pieces of global challenges in a way that management would be able to design a company purpose and communicate company goals in a language that both the business community and civil society would understand. Held under the Chatham House Rule, this Symposium was a dialog designed to learn from companies that made the SDGs the center of their business strategy. All panelists were current or former WEC Gold Medalists, which underlines that they are successful and leaders in sustainability.

Participants

Speakers represented the United Nations as well as three Gold Medal awardees:

- (Keynote) **Jan Walstrom** – Senior Vice President, Office of Climate Response & ESG, **Jacobs**
- (Keynote) **Adam Roy Gordon** – Interim Executive Director, **UN Global Compact Network USA**
- **Dow: Carrie Houtman** – Global Sustainability Director – Climate
- **Ecolab: Emilio Tenuta** – SVP of Corporate Sustainability and Chief Sustainability Officer
- **Ricoh: Kousuke Ito** – Director, Sustainability Management Center

*moderated by Tawny Keene, Vice President, Global Corporate Sustainability, Jacobs,
and Glenn Prickett, President & CEO, World Environment Center*

The Roundtable was held in the beautiful premises of the Planet Word Museum, with approx. 50 senior executives from WEC member companies, other international corporations, as well as from government, science, and think tanks.

Key Points

- (1) Inspired by the SDGs some companies have transformed their business model towards a social purpose that provides solutions for society.** Such a transformation requires a strong belief in the business value of the SDGs and the strategic foresight to divest business lines that do not fit the purpose and do not promise financial returns in the future. However, a successful transformation requires additional elements that lead to a cultural change within a few years: it needs leadership from the top, internal advisors who can explain the benefits and implement action on the ground, and ideally boot camps or the like to help all executives engage in the SDGs and get their buy-in to fully integrate sustainability with the company strategy.

On a strategic level successful companies recommend several important steps that helped them integrate the SDGs with their business: (1) global megatrends are aligned with the SDGs while long-term business risks and opportunities are identified. (2) Focus areas aligned with the SDGs are confirmed, associated KPI's



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developed, and integrated with existing company commitments (such as e.g. the Science-Based Targets but also new commitments). (3) KPI achievements are constantly being reviewed in every executive committee. (4) Stakeholder feedback, especially from the employees, helps to further select a few key SDGs for the company and thus get very broad support for a new company strategy that can be communicated boldly, e.g. as a growth strategy: “-a response to climate change”, “-nature positive solutions”, etc.

- (2) Sustainability and Resilience are two sides of the same coin. Companies who take ownership for the SDGs and make Sustainability the new global strategy can expect value in several ways:** (1) **STRATEGIC FOCUS:** it enables the company to develop a clear vision (e.g. to solve global challenges), focus on business lines with greatest long-term potential; (2) **TRUST:** investors value a clear business strategy, and the fact that the company does not get constantly distracted by interpretation of what sustainability is or what a sustainable business means, (3) **TALENT ATTRACTION:** the young generation, to a greater extent than previous generations, wants to be part of a purpose-driven business that provides solutions for society, (4) **BUSINESS OPPORTUNITIES:** collaborations among business partners, customers and other stakeholders for concrete action on the SDGs enables the company to connect, position itself as a leader, and discover new opportunities as action takes place.
- (3) The SDGs are not the roadmap for companies – they are the lighthouse. Business leaders are advised by successful companies to AIM BIG even if uncomfortable at the risk of falling short.** As one participant put it: “We can’t afford to get discouraged. It’s far better to have a 75% perfect strategy that is 100% implemented than to wait for a 100% perfect strategy that can only be implemented to 75%”. Time matters and every immediate contribution to solve global challenges is worthwhile and can be claimed a success. Companies find it difficult to articulate what impact their actions have had on the SDGs although many noteworthy collaborative initiatives are continuously taking place: a few mentioned are collective action on watershed management, voluntary internal carbon Emission Trading Schemes, supplier support-programs for sustainability, and also internal programs such as tying employee compensation from top to bottom to an achievement of indicators associated with some selected SDGs.
- (4) Thinking beyond 2030, the United Nations is encouraged to make the SDGs more expansive to include more suitable targets and indicators for business and use a clearer language on impact.** At the same time, raters, rankers, and regulators are recognized for having made the language of corporate disclosure more accessible, something they should continue to do. While it is common sense that transparency is essential, the bureaucracy of corporate ESG disclosure in the many frameworks available often distracts companies from implementing solutions on the ground. Contributing to the SDGs must be a greater concern than reporting.

Note: WEC Executive Roundtables are conducted under the Chatham House Rule.