
Practical Experiences of Companies Working with the SDGs
WEC Europe Roundtable Series, #5- Examples of Collaborative Action for Greater Impact
Virtual Event – June 28, 2023

WEC is a leading business platform for global collaboration on achieving the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Through an exchange of thoughts and practices between global companies, WEC supports business to:

- Evaluate the value of the SDGs for companies.
 - Share practices on how companies work with the SDGs.
 - Optimize companies' contribution to the SDGs and find adequate means to measure impact.
 - Take responsibility for specific SDGs and work with business, governments and civil society to achieve them.
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Participants

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25 participants from business and academia/NGOs in ten industries and eight countries shared their advances on working with the SDGs, i.e. how they collaborate with peers to increase impact.

Speakers:

- Magali Anderson, CSO, Holcim
- Georg Kell, Chairman, Arabesque
- Glenn Prickett, President & CEO, WEC
- Emilio Tenuta, CSO, Ecolab
- Donna Venable, Exec. VP HR, Ricoh North-America

Key Learnings

- (1) **A poll at the beginning of the event** showed that 86% of participating companies have aligned their corporate goals with the SDGs. More than half of the companies stated that they collaborate with partners to support one or more SDGs. Similarly, the majority claimed that they are able to quantify their company's impact on the Global Goals. While 14% have only now started to work with the SDGs, the poll didn't identify a single company that would ignore them. In comparison with a poll conducted in 2021 all numbers confirm an increased engagement with the SDGs.
- (2) **A couple of business-led collaborations addressing systemic challenges were presented and discussed.** Each of them needs courage and persistence before a measurable impact can be claimed and each of them has the potential to be transformative. They do not necessarily highlight an engagement on the SDGs although they catch the spirit. Scientific studies may take them up and consider the time-lag between initiation and measurable impact of the action. That way they may conclude that transformative initiatives led by business do exist after all, and that some political impact of the SDGs may be seen in the future*. Although experts are skeptical these days that the Global Goals will be achieved.
- (3) **Concrete examples of collaborations led by business have been discussed:** ① the acceptance of remanufactured products by the Energy Star label through the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), which will lead to a greater penetration of the market with products used in circular designs (contributing to SDG 12). ② the collective action for net positive water in the Colorado river watershed through measures such as (a) assistance to modernize irrigation practices of native tribes, (b) leak detection at commercial buildings, (c) stopping deforestation practices in the watershed, and (d) orchestrating efforts to increase the supply (contributing to SDG 6). And ③ developing the infrastructure for capture carbon emissions for storage or usage at large scales in the years to come, even though the political framework has not yet been finalized and concerns persist**. Such large projects involve huge amounts of capital and numerous partners as well as companies/individuals who take the lead (contributing to SDG 13).
- (4) **All collaborative projects shown have in common that they impact the core business of the companies involved.** Early company leadership makes good business sense (to benefit from evolving opportunities) but at the same time success depends on strategic vision and key competencies to orchestrate collaborations. Every action is essential to help solve transformative challenges and at the same time stands for the good values in public consciousness.
- (5) **Investors favor companies which have real roadmaps to face upcoming challenges** such as decarbonization, according to roundtable participants. The SDGs are seen as a north star that a business strategy can build on, and they apparently help to connect with partners. These collaborations can lead to the creation of new companies which may develop into new industry champions. It was advised that companies keep good documentation on their learnings and pass them on. Often the story makes the impact, even though a measurable impact isn't always available.

* The first global [meta study](#), led by Prof. Frank Bierman at the University of Utrecht (2022), concluded that "the scientific evidence suggests only limited transformative political impact of the Global Goals thus far". Not a single transformative initiative led by business was identified. Similarly, the [Catalyst 2030 Awards for Systemic Change](#), on the hunt for companies contributing to the SDGs, have not identified transformative initiatives that address systemic challenges.

** For a discussion about the role of CCU/CCS to combat climate change please see [summary of WEC's Roundtable on Hard-to-Abate Industries](#) (2023).