

HOW TO MAKE SDGs EUROPE'S BUSINESS A Multi-Stakeholder Approach

Informal Conference Summary

30-31 May 2016, Brussels

On the 30th and 31st of May 2016, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands, the SDG Charter, the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) and the Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN) jointly convened a multi-stakeholder meeting in Brussels to explore the question of *how to make the SDG's Europe's Business*. Over 200 participants with a wide variety of professional and regional backgrounds – including European institutions, governments, large and small businesses, financial institutions, philanthropists, academia, and civil society, including trade unions, youth representatives and NGOs with environmental, developmental and social foci – were challenged to explore ways to make the SDGs a reality both within and outside the European Union. This informal conference summary outlines the conclusions from the discussion and suggestions for next steps.

The first day plenary, opened by First Vice President of the European Commission Frans Timmermans, provided stakeholders with a platform to present their views on Europe's role in implementing the SDG agenda. The main takeaway message from the meeting was clear: Europe should must take action on the SDGs and lead by example. The SDG agenda reflects European values and provides a political opportunity to promote the European social model, which Europe should be proud of and continue to defend. A lot is already happening on the ground where citizens, businesses, NGOs are combining forces to provide concrete solutions to realizing the SDGs. Now the political leaders of the EU and its Member States have to give a clear signal that SDG implementation is at the core of the political agenda and roadmaps with a 2030 time horizon have to be set up for effective and coherent implementation in Europe's internal and external policies.

At the same time, the SDGs are an opportunity for introspection and change. Europe should use the 2030 Agenda to develop a positive transformational narrative for a sustainable Europe, connecting long-term objectives with short-term actions. While Europe is well placed to attain the goals, a number of challenges remain and require urgent action. Tackling climate change requires a clear, long-term pathway for the energy transition to drives science-based policies. Migration, unemployment – particularly among young populations – and rising inequality all pose real challenges. Environmental action is needed to ensure planetary boundaries are respected. Europe may want to rethink its present growth model so as to effectively address these issues. It should also encourage regional integration and cross-country cooperation with partners across the globe to ensure no one is left behind. Good governance fostering coordination and coherence is an imperative to meet these challenges.

As one of the wealthiest and most equal regions in the world, benefiting from high-levels of education, skills and technological know-how, Europe is in a position to drive change within its borders and lead on the global scene if it uses the SDGs as a guide for innovation. The SDGs can also function as a scorecard and an agenda for social and economic change when integrated into the strategies of businesses, governments and other actors.

The integrated approach illustrated by the five P's (people, planet, prosperity, peace, and partnership) as well as a changing global environment, require new ways of cooperating. Multi-stakeholder partnerships are

needed to implement the SDGs at all levels, as no stakeholder alone can uphold or execute this ambitious agenda. This implies the involvement of local, national and regional governments; large companies and SMEs; financial institutions and philanthropists; civil society actors in the environment, development and social spaces; trade unions, universities and youth organisations. The general public also needs to get engaged more so that European citizens can play an educated, constructive role as consumers, investors and drivers of social transformation. Younger generations in particular have a key role to play in developing new solutions and challenging existing frameworks, and all efforts should be made to promote gender equality.

Governments can use the political opportunity provided by the SDGs to act as brokers and leverage their budgets to mobilize private financing. Suitable platforms and forums should be provided at local, national, and community levels, ensuring transparency and enhancing the dialogue between governments and non-governmental stakeholders as well as creating mutual understanding and cooperation between stakeholders across different sectors and constituencies. The role of regulation was a key topic of debate, as the right balance needs to be struck to ensure that regulation has the desired effect: to promote innovation across sectors, to ensure that all stakeholders work towards achieving the SDGs, and to allow bottom-up approaches to develop.

The SDGs provide a clear business case with real opportunities for investment. Business leaders emphasized the need for companies to actively contribute to and lead on the SDGs, including in vital sectors such as infrastructure, the energy transition or food production. More broadly, businesses need to promote a circular economy and sustainable value chains. Key steps in ensuring success include the alignment of business strategies with the SDG agenda, the promotion of integrated thinking, stakeholder engagement, and active support for action-oriented platforms and incubators. While many companies have recognized the huge investment opportunities that the SDGs represent, a focus should also be on promoting business models that are inherently sustainable and to actively engage small and medium enterprises which have limited capacity to act. Industrial transformation processes have to be accompanied with active employment policies in order to ensure a just transition and the creation of decent work.

On day two, eight workshops were organised around themes spanning the SDGs. The 150 participants discussed practical approaches to working together on the SDGs in Europe. Each workshop arrived at specific and actionable recommendations, which participants will now pursue. Highlights include:

- Calls for the exploration an SDG Charter initiative at the European level to catalyse multi-stakeholder partnerships at the national or European level. The main challenges identified were how to ensure fair roles for each stakeholder, a strong connection to local realities and the establishment of the policy preconditions for partnerships. The main opportunity identified was to remove barriers for solution-oriented collaboration across sectors and borders, enabling the scaling up of the many existing initiatives.
- Europe needs to develop a joint, long-term narrative using the SDGs as the principal guidelines for external and internal European policies, drive behavioural change and move away from the “dead end” of “business-as-usual”. The newly established The World in 2050 Consortium will explore this question in the coming years.
- Urban experts reviewed lessons from the EU’s sustainable urban development policies of the last few decades, and engaged European Commission officials on how this experience and expertise can support the implementation of the urban SDGs across all EU members in an integrated manner, and be extended to development partners across the world.

- An agreement on sustainable garment and textile production was presented in the Netherlands in March. Participants to a workshop on sustainable value chains explored how these agreements could become European-level multi-stakeholder initiatives and planned follow-up discussions.
- Europe needs to develop long-term pathways for the transformation of its agricultural systems. The Agricultural Transformation Pathways Initiative was discussed in a workshop where participants shared their experience of best practices and refined a work program for the coming years involving science, government, civil society and business.
- Similarly, on the energy transition clearer analyses are needed on technology options for the technology transformation and integration at national, EU-wide, and regional levels. In parallel we must improve our understanding of the macroeconomic and social implications to ensure a just and fair energy transition.
- Reducing inequality systems is the key to fighting poverty and implementing the principle of leaving no one behind. Therefore Europe should maintain social safeguards domestically and invest into social protection as well as promote social protection floors globally. Bottom-up multi-stakeholder cooperation based on clear and transparent framework agreements is essential for this purpose.
- Governments should remove major barriers and create clear incentives to mobilize additional, large-scale funding to support the SDGs. The Netherlands has formed a multi-stakeholder working group including representatives from government, the financial sector, and others to map opportunities, identify gaps, and pilot test new approaches and instruments. This project could serve as a model for other countries.