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Industry Perspectives on the UN's Sustainable Development Goals

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The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were launched by the United Nations (UN) in 2015 to facilitate a transition to a more sustainable future. The UN called on all governments to develop national strategies to pursue the SDGs but also acknowledged the role of the private sector in contributing to the achievement of these ambitious goals. Now, eight years on, and half way towards the 2030 target date, what has been the contribution of key industry sectors to the realisation of the SDGs?

The Sustainable Development Goals

Following the publication in 1987 of [Our Common Future](#), the concept of sustainable development began to attract increasing attention around the globe. There were growing concerns about a range of major challenges and problems facing societies, environments and economies, and the adoption of sustainability policies and practices was seen as a potential solution. It is against this background that the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were agreed by the United Nations' member states in 2015, to establish the priorities for sustainable development through to 2030.

The seventeen SDGs were seen by the [United Nations](#) as a plan of action to “shift the world on to a sustainable and resilient path.” Apart from the SDGs themselves, there are 169 associated targets, and, for every target, there are one or more “indicators”, [there being 241 in all](#). From the outset, it was recognized that the private sector would need to play a key role. The [Institute for Human Rights and Business](#), for example, noted that, for the achievement of the SDGs, “the private sector has been highlighted as a partner with the potential to contribute in multiple ways to development objectives: by stimulating economic growth and job creation, providing investment and finance and sharing the resources and knowledge needed to shape innovative solutions to global challenges.”

Industry Perspectives

[Recent research](#) has examined how eighty organisations spread across eight industry sectors have responded to the challenges set by the SDGs. SDGs 8, 12 and 13 were the most supported overall, with SDGs 1, 2, 14 and 16 being the least favoured. 85% of all companies supported SDG13, 71% supported SDG8 and 70% supported SDG12. At the other end of the spectrum, only 30% or less of all companies supported SDGs 1, 2 and 16 (**Table 1**). Only in the retail industry were more than a third of the 17 SDGs supported by the ten organisations reviewed in that sector. Retailing aside, the most supportive industry sectors were pharmaceuticals and energy. The widespread support for SDG13 reflects the global concern for the impact of climate change, and support for SDGs 8 and 12 arguably reflects what is deemed most appropriate by the private sector. The lack of support for the SDGs concerning poverty, peace and justice, and hunger may reflect stakeholder priorities and what is considered realistically achievable.

SDG No.	Goal	Industry Support
13	Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts	85
8	Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth , full and productive employment and decent work for all	71
12	Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns	70
3	Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages	64
5	Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls	57
7	Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all	50
6	Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all	47
9	Build resilient infrastructure , promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation	46
11	Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable	46
17	Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development	45
4	Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all	45
10	Reduce inequality within and among countries	37
15	Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems , sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss	36
14	Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development	31
2	End hunger , achieve food security and improved nutrition, and promote sustainable agriculture	30
16	Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels	30
1	End poverty in all its forms everywhere	26

Table 1. Percentage of 80 companies and organisations supporting each SDG

Many companies targeted a number of specific SDGs, which align with their corporate goals and business strategies. In the pharmaceutical sector, for example, where all 10 companies supported SDG3, [Johnson and Johnson](#) note “we are committed to dedicating our expertise, ideas, and ingenuity to catalyze efforts toward achieving those SDGs where the Company’s unique constellation of strengths can help create scalable societal impact”. In the energy sector, SDGs 7 and 13 were supported in some measure by all ten companies in the study. In the automobile industry, all ten companies also supported SDG13, with [Volkswagen](#), for example, concluding “SDG13 Climate Action was identified as the primary goal, followed by five further goals that were classified as priorities: SDG12, SDG11, SDG8, SDG9 and SDG7.” In the retail sector, SDG12 received support from all ten companies, as did SDG8. SDG12 is linked by some companies to [circular economy](#) practices. [John Lewis and Partners](#), for example, note “it is critical we reduce the amount of physical waste our business produces through operations, sales of goods and services, food waste and single-use plastic packaging, in order to prevent further environmental damage, food scarcity, and climate breakdown. We’re facing these challenges head-on, innovating towards a more circular economy.”

The concept of shared value is closely linked to arguments about industry’s contribution to the SDGs. [Porter and Kramer](#) defined the concept as “corporate policies and practices that enhance the competitiveness of the company while simultaneously advancing social and economic conditions in the communities in which it sells and operates”, and in many ways this represents the approach to the SDGs of the companies in the study. The varied support for specific SDGs is undoubtedly related to the business community’s conception of sustainability. Some companies may view support for the SDGs as a means of gaining competitive advantage. In pursuing actions to combat climate change and its impacts, by reducing carbon emissions, energy and water consumption and waste generation, for example, companies are also reducing costs. Commitments to the SDGs that promote decent work, gender equality and good health and wellbeing all help to promote stability, security, loyalty and efficiency within the workforce.

Conclusion

There is a widespread belief that the business community has a vital role to play in contributing to the achievement of the SDGs. However, much remains to be done, and companies across all sectors face a number of major challenges if they are to make a significant and a lasting contribution to the achievement of the SDGs. Addressing these challenges may threaten their current business models and possibly their very existence. It may require a truly cataclysmic global event to trigger collective, rather than individual, self-interest, to precipitate widespread corporate engagement with the SDGs. An alternative view is that the SDGs have given new impetus to the drive for sustainability and that we are now witnessing a recognition

that the SDGs represent an opportunity to reduce risk, improve relationships with customers and employees, and spur business growth and innovation. It is to be hoped that this more positive reading of events prevails in the years up to 2030 and beyond.

Reference

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