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The UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are a great gift to business!

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Abstract

Environmental degradation and social tensions have put societies under severe pressures the past couple of decades to such a degree that a historic global political agreement was made in September 2015, when 193 countries signed the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals for 2030, the so-called SDGs or “Global Goals”. The SDGs, and their sub targets, represent a crystal ball for business to “look into the future” and seek long term guidance for investments and new business opportunities. Novozymes, the world’s largest manufacturer of enzymes and microbes for industry, has been a frontrunner in sustainability and to our knowledge the first company in the world to align its company purpose, strategy and long term targets with the SDG’s. Novozymes is now in the process of evaluating and prioritizing its innovation pipeline by potential SDG impact and sourcing new partners for SDG impact. With the SDGs in place, business now have a much clearer set of long term global priorities with political tail wind, and the alignment between policy makers, civil society and the private sector is much stronger. The SDGs are a great gift to business!

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1. Development of The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for 2030

Environmental degradation and social tensions has put societies under severe pressures the past couple of decades, with the growing populations and increasing per capita consumption as the key drivers. Pressures, that in September 2015, led to a historic global political agreement, when 193 countries signed the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals for 2030, the so-called SDGs or “Global Goals”. [1]

Already back in year 2000 an agreement for global development was landed when the UN member states agreed to the so-called Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) aimed at driving the global development agenda in the time period 2000–2015. The MDGs targeted eight key areas: poverty, education, gender equality, child mortality, maternal health, disease, the environment and global partnership. Each

goal was supported by 21 specific targets and more than 60 indicators to monitor.



Fig 1. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

The MDG's came out of a typical political UN process with limited interactions outside UN and government circles. The outcome of the process, the MDG's, primarily had appeal in the political and regulatory system, as well as to aid- and civil society organizations. The private sector in general did not see its role in relation to the MDGs.

In many aspects MDGs were successful and became recognized as the most successful global anti-poverty push in history. Governments, international organizations, and civil society groups around the world helped reduce the world's extreme poverty rate by more than 50%. Today, much more girls are in school and much fewer children are dying from disease and malnutrition thanks to the focus and actions driven by the MDGs.[2]

However, despite the success of the MDG's, already midway to 2015, it became increasingly clear that the MDG's were not going to solve all major global challenges. Many new and severe societal challenges surfaced in those years and called for global action with a much wider scope. Among the new challenges, that were generally recognized as material, were the many different environmental and social issues related to the fast growing industrial production, consumption and urbanization.

With its focus on poverty, education and diseases the MDG's were primarily driving a political agenda for the developing world. However, with the many new sustainability issues materializing it became very clear that the sustainable development agenda was as much an agenda for the developed world, and especially also for the private sector.

When the revenues of large companies exceed the GDP of many countries, and supply chains stretch around the world, the private sector plays a key role in achieving a global sustainable development – environmentally and socially.

The private sector defines to a large degree the social and environmental performance levels through the entire value chains in which they operate, from production to consumption and disposal of consumer goods. It became widely recognized, also in the UN system, that the sustainable development agenda would only be successful with significant engagement and contributions coming from the private sector.

The SDG development process was formally kicked off at the RIO+20 UN Earth Summit, in Rio De Janeiro, Brazil 2012. The intent was to create a new set of global goals to address the growing challenges to a sustainable development, and to continue the journey started with the MDGs.

From the beginning of the process the private sector was invited to contribute via a so called Open Working Group (OWG) established early 2013 to coordinate the interactions between the UN system, civil society and business [3]. This opening of a major UN process to the private sector represented a significant paradigm shift in the way UN operates.

2. Business and the SDG's

In general, businesses succeed when they can meet people's needs with solutions that people want, and when a rewarding business model can be established around that interaction. In general business ask policy makers for clear and robust long term policy frameworks, in which they can operate and which they can use to guide investments, target

innovation and support business development decisions. The new open UN SDG process initiated in 2012 thus motivated many businesses to engage. The private sector in general hoped to be able to inform, inspire and influence the process to deliver an outcome with much more private sector relevance and appeal compared to the MDGs.

The private sector hoped that the SDG development process would deliver the desired long term political framework that effectively could enable more private sector contributions to a global sustainable development, which were in better sync with societal needs and long term priorities, and therefore which could help secure the long term license to operate and success of the business.

From 2013, where the OWG was formally established, to 2015 many representatives from the private sector, including the major business organizations, provided their inputs to the SDG development process.

With the signing of the SDG's in September 2015 the private sector in many ways got the gift it had asked for. The 17 SDG's, the 169 specific targets and the thousands of indicators represent a long term political framework for business to contribute to sustainable development. They outline exactly that long-term guideline for what will be needed, accepted and supported by societies in the coming decades and therefore, consequently, what will be demanded by the markets long term. As such they offer a crystal ball for business to "look into the future" and seek guidance for investments and new business opportunities and they represent a new tool box for innovation and market development. To other companies, who may be in the business of "SDG unfit" solutions, the SDGs provide similar guidance to reduce risk and costs, and in some cases perhaps to transform the company and change its business models into more sustainable versions.

However, from high level political agreements, like the SDGs, to real and short term market impact is a long distance. A distance which may be overwhelming for many short term focused businesses who may be unfamiliar with the processes of collaborating with the UN and policy makers.

Progress is certainly being made at the political levels. Since the signing of the goals in September 2015 the 193 individual UN Member States have all begun to develop and implement SDG plans at national level. In July 2016, the first 22 countries volunteered to present their plans¹. In July 2017, 44 more countries², presented their plans and the rest of the UN Member States are due to follow each year until 2020.

The SDG implementation plans are set to guide and drive country specific focus areas, policies, regulations, financing, stimulus programs, awareness campaigns and many other activities aimed at delivering to the achievement of the SDGs at national level. Progress reporting and review of the national plans is set to take place at the UN over 5 year cycles.

¹ China, Colombia, Egypt, Estonia, Finland, France, Georgia, Germany, Madagascar, Mexico, Montenegro, Morocco, Norway, Philippines, Korea, Samoa, Sierra Leone, Switzerland, Togo, Turkey, Uganda, Venezuela.

² Afghanistan, Argentina, Azerbaijan, Bangladesh, Belarus, Belgium, Belize, Benin, Botswana, Brazil, Chile, Costa Rica, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, El Salvador, Ethiopia, Guatemala, Honduras, India, Indonesia, Iran, Italy, Japan, Jordan, Kenya, Luxembourg, Malaysia, Maldives, Monaco, Nepal, Netherlands, Nigeria, Panama, Peru, Portugal, Qatar, Slovenia, Sweden, Tajikistan, Thailand, Togo, Uruguay, Zimbabwe.

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