



DESA | Department of
Economic and
Social Affairs



**14 July
2020.**

Chief Sustainability Officers for SDGs

Building back better: navigating business risks and opportunities in a post COVID-19 world

Across the world, the COVID-19 crisis has dramatically revealed our systemic vulnerabilities, exposing the fragility of human life, our economies, supply chains, social welfare systems and institutions. The way we respond to this crisis will be decisive in delivering the transformations required to achieve the SDGs in the decade ahead.

In an interactive session co-hosted by the World Business Council for Sustainable Development (WBCSD) and the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA) with focus on navigating business risks and opportunities in a post COVID-19 world, leaders from business, government and the United Nations exchanged views on the lessons learned, highlighted transformative solutions, and discussed how to build collaborative synergies around the new normal we want.

Here are the key takeaways:

- 1. COVID-19 has affected everyone, everywhere but not equally or to the same severity.** Prior to the pandemic the world was off track to achieving the SDGs. COVID-19 added challenges of unprecedented magnitude and scale. Pre-existing inequalities have been exacerbated and injustice has been propelled, affecting the most vulnerable disproportionately – in particular with regard to poverty, nutrition, access to healthcare, education, and sustaining livelihoods.
- 2. SDGs need to be the North Star for recovery and response.** Placing the ambitions that sit at the heart of the SDGs at the core of global response efforts offer ample opportunity for innovation, global collaboration, building resilience, and redefining business success.
- 3. The pandemic is only the rehearsal for greater challenges like climate change; sustainability and concerted action at global level have never been more relevant.** COVID-19 provides us with the chance to create the world that the SDGs aim to create, putting the world on a healthier trajectory, one that is driven by new forms of productivity, greener transportation, more sustainable consumption and production patterns, more flexible working arrangements with less environmental impacts.
- 4. Resilience is moving centerstage – a concept that needs to be unpacked and differentiated from sustainability.** We need to understand why we are not on track to achieve the SDGs and what we need to do differently. We need to understand how resilience and sustainability differ from and complement one another. This is key to achieving much greater personal, societal, economic, and planetary resilience.
- 5. Calls to reinvent capitalism are getting louder and louder.** The current model under which we operate Success depends on global collaboration between governments, business, and civil society.

leaves us ill-prepared with the waves of shocks triggered by COVID-19. Real change is uncomfortable, and it takes business and governments to reflect, rethink and reinvent policies, supply chains, investments, and business models as a whole.

6. The global response needs to focus on people, be human centric and place solidarity at its core

without creating tradeoffs when it comes to efforts to conserve nature. The “S” in ESG is gaining much more traction, yet it is the least defined. In essence, it is about the focus on people, how people are impacted and how governments and businesses interact with people. To lift the most susceptible out of their vulnerability a human centric approach is vital.

7. Policies need to be more consistent with development objectives outlined in the SDGs.

Policies need to focus on rights and equality as we have entered the Decade of Action. Policy barriers placing disadvantages upon existing innovative technologies also need to be eliminated to ensure competitiveness in the marketplace.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

[SDG Essentials for Business](#) (available in English, Japanese and Spanish)

[SDG Business Hub](#)

[Vision 2050](#)

[The consequences of COVID-19 for the decade ahead](#)

[Business & Human Rights Gateway](#)

[SDG Acceleration Actions](#)

[Society 5.0](#)

Warm thanks to the speakers and moderators for the insights shared:

- Alexandra Brand, Chief Sustainability Officer, Syngenta
- Alan Knight, General Manager Corporate Responsibility, ArcelorMittal
- Caroline Rees, President & CEO, Shift
- Elliott Carlton Harris, Assistant Secretary-General for Economic Development and Chief Economist, DESA
- Linden Edgell, Global Sustainability Program Director, Environmental Resources Management Limited (ERM)
- Martina Guarnaschelli, Embassy Secretary, International Organizations Department, and focal point for the National Social Policies Coordination Council, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, International Trade and Worship of Argentina
- Masaya Futamiya, Director–Chairman, Sompo Japan Insurance Inc. and Chair, Keidanren Committee on Responsible Business Conduct & SDGs Promotion
- Noppadol Dej-Udom, Chief Sustainability Officer, C.P. Group
- Sanda Ojiambo, CEO and Executive Director, United Nations Global Compact