Sustainable Development Goals: A Promising Journey for Spaceship Earth

Peter Bakker*

President & CEO, WBCSD, Maison De La Paix, Chemin Eugene-Rigot 2, Geneve, Switzerland

Abstract
The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) provide us with an all-encompassing agenda for developing our societies while addressing the critical challenges of poverty, environmental degradation and inequality. They represent the start of a new era. In 2015, leaders from civil society, business and government made significant commitments that will transform our economies and societies to achieve a low carbon, thriving economy. 2016 must be the year we start delivering and reporting on these commitments. Only then we will be able to build the sustainable world we urgently need and are accountable for.

Keywords
SDGs, Sustainability, Low-carbon

For those of us working in sustainability, 2015 was an inspiring year, where two long political processes culminated in success. In September, world leaders embraced the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that aim to eradicate poverty, promote peace, fuel inclusive growth and protect the environment. At the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) COP21 in December, the year was capped off when the historic Paris Agreement was adopted: it will set the speed and direction for achieving the SDGs.

Our world is in a systemic crisis: An astonishing 9.6% of the world’s population lives in extreme poverty (World Bank, 2015) [1], according to the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD), 25% of global land is degraded [2]. Global inequality is still unacceptably high - the “top 20% of the global population enjoys more than 70% of total income” (United Nations Children’s Emergency Fund - UNICEF, 2011) [3]. But we needn’t lose hope.

The SDGs provide us with an all-encompassing agenda for developing our societies while addressing these critical issues and making the transition to a sustainable and thriving low carbon economy. They represent the start of a new era.

Building on the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), the SDGs encompass a broader range of sustainable development topics across economic, social and environmental dimensions. The SDGs also differ from the MDGs in their explicit call to action from non-state actors, including business, to achieve their ambition.

At the World Business Council for Sustainable Development (WBCSD), we work with the world’s leading companies to develop and scale up business solutions with integrated economic, environmental and societal benefits. We believe in the innovative potential of business to improve lives across the planet and help protect our climate and ecosystems. Business has historically led technological progress, and going forward it will be a critical implementation partner for governments in addressing our global challenges.

At our Council Meeting during COP21, some 800 global business leaders from 25 countries joined influential political figures such as Al Gore and the United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon. It was a unique moment to share the beautiful Call to Earth video to underline the fragility of our planet and call on world leaders to seize the opportunity to put the world on a sustainable trajectory.

Nothing could have been more powerful than the words of the astronauts against the breathtaking backdrop of the Earth in the horizon. Astronaut Wubbo Ockels said that seeing the Earth from an astronaut’s eyes would lead one to love and want to protect the Earth. Wubbo passed away the day after the interview was filmed, but his words will echo forever. As governments, businesses, members of civil society, but above all, as astronauts on “spaceship” Earth, we have a responsibility to take action for a sustainable world.

Forward-looking companies across the world are already taking this call to action very seriously and integrating sustainability at the core of their business. Their activities range from adopting science-based emissions reductions targets, to removing commodity-driven deforestation from supply chains and procuring 100% clean...
In 2015, leaders from civil society, business and government made significant commitments that will transform our economies and societies worldwide.

But actions speak louder than words. 2016 must be the year we start delivering and reporting on these commitments. Only then we will be able to build the sustainable world we urgently need and are accountable for.

References