

Collaboration between public and private sector key to delivering UN sustainable development goals

Written by Martin Banks and Brian Johnson on 7 December 2016 in News
News

One year on from COP21, sustainability conference looks to put SDG aims into practice.



Collaboration between public and private sector key to delivering UN sustainable development goals | *Photo credit: Fotolia*

Europe's businesses need to take advantage of the opportunities available through the UN sustainable development goals (SDGs) and put into practice their own visions for sustainability, a Brussels conference has been told.

Speaking in Brussels on Tuesday, Stefan Crets, executive director of CSR Europe, opened the day-long debate at the Concert Noble, saying, "Globalisation has brought a lot of benefits, but it also has an unacceptable downside.

"We need to change radically and one thing there should be is a change in growth models. The change should be at the level local, national, regional and global levels."

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He referred to the climate goal targets agreed at COP21 and reinforced by COP22 and the Paris agreement.

He added, "COP21 is a language - a common language on where we want to go. Measurement is important but you don't want to waste too much time so the message is to take action now."

There are, he said, two basic requirements- how are companies embracing new business models and what the process is. The key, he added, is collaboration between the public and private sector.

He called for an "internal transformation" of companies and more collaboration at the public-private level but also within value chain.

He told the audience, "We can act and that is what this conference is all about."

"As CSR Europe we think we are uniquely placed to push this through the leveraging the power of the CSR Europe network and by collaborative action towards the implementation of the SDGs."

Crets said CSR Europe can also contribute to achieving the UN SDGs "through innovative and collaborative action and co-creating solutions for the future."

The conference also heard from Alan Aicken, chief sustainability officer with Huawei, who reminded participants of his company's contribution to tackling environmental and sustainability issues.

He said Huawei had made "massive cuts" to greenhouse gas emissions at its many facilities around the world.

"As a result we have witnessed some amazing results," he said, adding, "In 2015, Huawei reduced its CO2 emissions by 40,000 tonnes, saving 44.3 million kWh of electricity a year. This massive emissions cut was achieved thanks to technological and management improvements, as well as partnerships and a strategic focus on ICT energy efficiency."

"Of course we have the clout to make it happen but we are fully aware of the part we can play and the huge responsibility we have."

He added, "CSR is now integrated into company. It is delivering tangible results but, even so, collaboration is crucial."

"Working with partners has been essential in achieving results across the global supply chain. Our collaboration project with Orange is an example of how we are putting this idea in practice at a European level."

Aicken said the two companies had joined up to build energy-efficient telecommunications networks. Since they began working together in 2013, the partnership had "already achieved several milestones, including the design of energy-saving customer connector cards and radio equipment for mobile networks.

"In the years to come, we will be working together on solutions for more energy efficiency, such as low-power network architecture and renewable energy technology."

Aicken told attendees that Huawei's sustainability commitment also spanned employee protection, cyber security and a focus on contributing to local communities.

"At a European level, actions to bridge the digital divide and address the eSkills challenge are at the heart of these efforts. As a leading global ICT solutions provider, we are very much aware of the part that we can play in achieving sustainable progress."

He also used his address as an informal call for further collaborative action, "to use this opportunity to express our hopes of joining forces with all of you, to collaborate on long-term investments in a Europe that lives up to the vision of the Paris agreement and the 2030 agenda for sustainable development."

In a video address to the conference, former senior European Commission official Karl Falkenberg admitted that a "social element" of the market economy was often overlooked and said it was "shocking" that an estimated one in four Europeans risk "slipping into poverty."

"This has led to problems," said Falkenberg, a former director general at the Commission's environment directorate who was a keynote speaker at a conference on sustainable development.

The event was hosted by CSR Europe in cooperation with Huawei Technologies.

Falkenberg, who served as DG from 2009-2015, said an estimated 120 million people in Europe were at risk of poverty.

He believes growing numbers of people risk being marginalised, which was one reason behind the rise of populist political parties in Europe.

"It is both surprising and shocking that one in four Europeans are at risk of slipping into poverty," Falkenberg told the conference, 'Taking Action: One year on from COP21 and the launch of the SDGs'.

"We have to realise that the societal aspects of the market economy are important as well," he said. "This doesn't mean that we reject growth but it has to be a different type of economic growth. We have to offer future generations new and interesting jobs."

The SDGs are a UN initiative and part of the so-called 2030 agenda for sustainable development, a set of 17 aspirational "global goals" with 169 targets.

Falkenberg, who now advises the Commission on sustainable development issues, said the SDGs present Europe with a "real opportunity" for achieving sustainable development in Europe and around the world.

Falkenberg, who has authored a new policy paper, called 'Sustainability Now', also said Europeans "have to make better use of the planet's limited resources."

"Our policies today are not in line with what nature requires," he argued. "We need to reconsider the

value of waste and improve recycling rates."

Sue Riddleston, CEO and founder of sustainability charity Bioregional, took part in a panel session and opened by asking, "How can we live natural healthy lives within the natural limits of the planet?"

She went on, "It's about being resource efficient, but it's about a better quality of life. It's really possible and it is heartening to see how quickly COP was ratified. It shows we can champion a better way of life.

"I am inspired by how curious everyone is about implementing the SDGs. All of you here can do something. But we've got to embrace the opportunities and run with them. The message from me today is: become a frontrunner and leave the competition behind in the dust."

Christine Faure Fedigan, head of corporate climate strategy at French electricity and energy utility ENGIE, said, "Climate change is not news for us. Global energy and climate action is at the core of our thinking and is driving what we do.

"Since last year we have doubled our emissions reductions and new contracts sourced in France will be 100 per cent renewable.

"Europe is in energy transition. Putting a price on carbon everywhere is key driver to company investment but in Europe we need a minimum price on carbon. Happily, there is a trend on reduction of pricing. Not even a Trump presidency can change the mood. But we still need to go to two degrees or less.!

Sabine Denis, CEO of Belgian sustainability network, The Shift, said there was a "broad coalition" in support of achieving the SDGs, adding, "The SDG agenda not only for business. It's a common language."

Another panellist, Steven Moore, of Sustainable Business, at UK telecoms giant BT, said, "Energy and carbon have the biggest impact on the climate. At BT we first measured our carbon footprint back in 1992 and have started to procure 100 percent renewable electricity. By 2020 for our company this will be global."

The consultant said the "flip side" to mitigation is adaptation and Moore had a "simple but important" message for the audience: "Make sure we adapt."

The event was moderated by Peter Woodward who said that Europe is, and can remain, a "major player" when it comes to encompassing all dimensions for achieving sustainable development.

However, he cautioned, "Sustainability will be a challenge for decades to come."

About the author

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