



The SDGs and businesses

The UN's Sustainable Development Goals are targets for how we, on a planetary basis, need to restructure our economies, production, use of natural resources, and the living circumstances of men, women and children around the world.

The 17 goals fall into 4 broad categories:

- **environmental issues** (land, water use, energy, climate change)
- **social issues** (poverty, hunger, health, education, equality)
- **economic** (businesses, worker rights, production & consumption)
- **governmental / international improvements** (infrastructure, cities, peace/judicial institutions)

Goals and Targets

Each goal has multiple subgoals, called targets. For example, SDG #2, which calls for an end to hunger, improved nutrition and food security and sustainable agriculture, has Targets that include:

- ending hunger for all people by 2030
- ending malnutrition by 2025
- doubling the productivity of small-scale farmers by 2030
- making sustainable food production systems that are resilient - that is, adaptable to climate change by 2030
- promoting the genetic diversity of seeds and animals by 2020

To learn more about the SDGs, visit: <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/>

Businesses and the SDGs

There are global movements to get businesses to incorporate relevant SDGs into their business practices, including the [UN Global Compact](#) that promotes corporate responsibility; there is a [Swiss branch](#).

Companies are encouraged to look at their supply chains (are their suppliers respecting human rights? paying fair wages? preventing sexual exploitation of women?), environmental activities (are they minimizing waste? using recycled or waste products? reducing how much water they use?), and overall business plan (can they redesign their product or processes to be more environmentally friendly?).

The goal is to harness many small activities from local businesses and multi-national corporations to create a combined large impact on society and the planet. It's not the size of the impact but how much the SDGs are embedded in the business plan of the company. A baker who chooses to use only organic flour, eggs and butter can reasonably claim to be having a positive impact on the environment, even if only 500 loaves of bread are baked a day - much fewer than the millions produced by corporations (who may or may not use organic ingredients, despite their leverage with suppliers).

But...

Companies often tout how they are working to achieve the SDGs. But sometimes they claim more credit than is appropriate.

For example, a company that pays fair wages in factories in lower-income countries can reasonably claim to be fighting poverty (SDG #1) and hunger (SDG #2). But is it really also improving health (SDG #3) or education (SDG #4)? As German-speakers say, "Jein" - yes and no. Perhaps the higher wages allow the workers to pay for more medical services or send their children to school, but it's hard to prove and a bit of a stretch because there are other factors involved (prejudice against girls going to school; availability of medical care in the region; what families choose to spend their additional income on).

One small businessperson with whom I have worked recently told me that he has been pushed to claim credit for more SDGs than was reasonable, given his business activities. His company focuses on the circular economy (SDG #12 - sustainable consumption and production) through the use of durable, sustainably-made wood furniture (SDG #15 - ecosystems, forests and land degradation) in order to fight global warming.

But he knows he can't claim credit for SDG #13 - climate change. Why? Because SDG #13 focuses on government activities - integrating climate change into national policies, raising funds from developed-countries to address the needs of developing countries to respond to climate disasters. If a business truthfully says they're helping the environment but then claims credit for SDG #13, then you know they didn't read the actual text of the SDG.

Be careful of greenwashing - or SDG-washing, as perhaps it should be called.