



## Networked Multilateralism, Partnerships, and the Private Sector at the UNGA 76

*By Elena Marmo*

The UN General Assembly (UNGA) began its 76th session in September 2021 with a series of High-level meetings—in both hybrid and in-person formats—under the theme of 'Building Resilience through hope to recover from COVID-19, rebuild sustainably, respond to the needs of the planet, respect the rights of people, and revitalize the United Nations'. As the UN Decade of Action progresses, efforts to secure human, economic, and environmental health are vital. During the UNGA High-level week and throughout the month Member States focused on the need to create a more inclusive future and stronger global cooperation.

With regard to plans to revitalize multilateralism and achieve the break-neck speed needed to meet the 2030 Agenda amid the COVID-19 pandemic, Member States and the United Nations system are calling for all hands on deck, including those of the private sector.

On 10 September ahead of the official start of the UNGA High-level week, UN Secretary-General António Guterres presented his [Our Common Agenda report](#), in response to the request from Member States outlined in the [UN 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Political Declaration](#).

At the second annual [SDG Moment](#), which followed the High-level week, Member States and other stakeholders met to take stock of progress on the 2030 Agenda. Simultaneously the Global Compact held a parallel process, "[Uniting Business Live](#)", which culminated in the SDG Business Forum, all geared towards engaging corporate and private sector players in efforts to achieve the SDGs.

On 21 September, the UNGA opened its General Debate, during which Heads of State or Government articulated priorities for the current session and highlighted interests and concerns for upcoming processes. Across these High-level meetings, Member States, UN leadership, and members of the business community are advocating for greater engagement with the private sector, not only as financing partners, but as co-creators and collaborators.

### *Our Common Agenda*

As presented by the Secretary-General, Our Common Agenda, based on the 12 points outlined in the Political Declaration, aims to "look ahead to the next 25 years and represents the Secretary-General's vision on the future of global cooperation" and his call for an "inclusive, networked, and effective multilateralism".

In presenting the report, Guterres outlined its four main foci: "strengthening global governance, focusing on the future, renewing the social contract, and ensuring the United Nations is fit for a new era". The final section, titled "Purposes and principles: adapting the United Nations to a new era" outlines direction for the UN system to implement the agenda, including enhancing civil society engagement, and includes a mandate for the UN Office of Partnerships (UNOP) to become the main interlocutor to

support these efforts. UNOP states as its main [objective](#) to “serve as the operational interface between the United Nations Foundation and the United Nations system in support of high-impact projects implemented throughout the world by UN system agencies”. It describes itself as “your global gateway to connect and co-create UN partnerships to deliver the SDGs”. Historically, it has focused primarily on promoting engagement with the private sector, primarily corporations, in support of the United Nations development system.

Many Member States welcomed the report, signaling national relevance and highlighting key areas of agreement and potential challenges moving forward. Most acknowledged that while this presentation was a starting point, much work lay ahead to operationalize the Agenda.

- **Bangladesh**, on behalf of the UN75 Leaders Network stated: “But rather than an end to a process, the presentation of Our Common Agenda marks the beginning of a new one”.
- The **European Union** agreed that the briefing was “certainly not the last one to discuss Our Common Agenda, which I believe should be central to our work moving forward”, adding that the EU and its member states are still analysing the report: “And we are to still fully form positions, of course, in discussions with others. But I can say that we certainly recognize very many positive elements in the report.”
- **Singapore** stated that “we think that it is important to find and devise a process to follow up on the common agenda. We agree with you, Mr. Secretary-General, that it is a starting point, but we do not want to end up in a cul de sac. We need to collectively focus on substance, on concrete action. We don't want the common agenda to be drowned in debates, to be paralysed by processes or buried in bureaucracy. We need to collectively work on a pathway for clear and urgent action.”
- **Canada** echoed this, declaring that “we are not going to decide today whether we agree with each and every one of them. But what we need to create is a process that will, in fact allow us to address the need for change.”

#### *The SDG Moment and the SDG Business Forum*

On 20 September, the Secretary-General convened the second annual SDG Moment for the Decade of Action, underlining the need for equitable and inclusive recovery efforts. Designed to draw attention to priority issues such as the digital divide, gender equality, youth engagement, and strengthening partnerships and institutions, this year’s SDG Moment included a series of roundtable conversations and moderated dialogues in a new hybrid format, patterned on a television news programme. The dialogues sought to offer a variety of perspectives from a range of stakeholders. But, a look at the [Final Programme](#) shows that UN entities, government representatives, financial institutions, philanthropy and the private sector held many more speaking slots than members of civil society organizations.

Private sector speakers included: Jeffrey Sachs, Special Adviser to the Secretary-General on the Sustainable Development Goals; Melinda French Gates, Co-Chair and Trustee, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation; Solange Maria Pinto Ribeiro, Deputy Chief Executive Officer of Neoenergia and Vice-Chair of the board of UN Global Compact; and Mari Pangestu, World Bank Managing Director of Development Policy and Partnerships.

Ambassador Collen Vixen Kelapile, President of the Economic and Social Council, highlighted the call for multi-stakeholderism: “During my Presidency, ECOSOC and the HLPF will work in an inclusive manner,

listening particularly to the world's youth, the poorest and most vulnerable, involving women and girls and civil society organizations, as well as promoting effective multistakeholder partnerships for SDGs achievement”.

Prime Minister Solberg of **Norway** reiterated this: “The 2030 Agenda and the SDGs are the roadmap to the world we want and we must mobilize political will to implement it. We must do more in partnership as governments, private sector, academia, and civil society. And we must work together at the multilateral level.”

Prime Minister Merkel of **Germany** agreed: “Sustainability touches all areas of life and work. It is a task for society as a whole. It is for this reason that the involvement of interest groups and affected parties in the UN HLPF is so important.”

Running parallel to the SDG Moment, and referenced in its programme, was the sixth annual [SDG Business Forum](#) in conjunction with [Uniting Business LIVE](#). The SDG Moment programme included a planned break from its broadcast from 11:45 AM to 2:00 PM to display the business event on the official SDG Moment streaming page on UN WebTV. The event was co-hosted by the International Chamber of Commerce (ICC), the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, and the UN Global Compact. It self-identifies as “one of the largest annual gatherings of business leaders at the United Nations”.

The SDG Business Forum claims to “drive pivotal momentum towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals and leveraging the power of the private sector in co-creating lasting solutions for some of the most critical issues of our times, such as sustainable and resilient recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic; climate change and nature loss; social inequality and economic exclusion”. However, taking place in parallel to the official UN agenda, it diverted attention away from the Member State policymaking spaces, and into, as the forum website indicates, “real-time networking opportunities, expo areas, and major sustainability announcements from leading businesses”.

The Uniting Business Live [list of speakers](#) included some of the UN system's biggest proponents of public-private partnerships, financial institutions, and private corporations. Among these were Secretary-General António Guterres, Deputy Secretary-General Amina Mohammed, Special Representative for Sustainable Energy for All Damilola Ogunbiyi, Special Envoy for the Food Systems Summit Agnes Kalibata, Princess Noura Turki Al-Saud of Saudi Arabia, Prime Minister Commodore Josaia V. Bainimarama of Fiji and several senior ministers from Member States, as well as prominent business leaders such as Executive Chairman of Mastercard Ajay Banga, Executive Director of ITC, Pamela Coke Hamilton, CEO of Alecta, Magnus Billing, Chairperson and CEO of Kokusai Kogyo, Sandra Wu, CEO of GIST Advisory, Pavan Sukhdev, among others.

#### *Partnerships in the UNGA General Debate*

Partnerships and a revitalized multilateralism were also a feature across the UNGA General Debate, held at the level of Heads of State or Government. Member States highlighted successes of their own public-private partnerships and called for inclusion of the private sector in decision-making more broadly.

#### **Public-Private Partnerships**

- “Over the last eight months, I prioritized rebuilding our alliances, revitalizing our partnerships, and recognizing they're essential and central to America's enduring security and prosperity”.

– *President Biden, USA*

- “Brazil has the largest public-private partnership program of its history. A programme that is a reality, and it is being fully implemented”. –*President Bolsonaro, Brazil*
- “Many Korean businesses are voluntarily joining the RE100 Campaign and expanding their investment in hydrogen and other new and renewable energy, while pushing forward ESG management and carbon neutrality with greater force. The government, for its part, will firmly back up the private sector in technology development and investment.”

-- *President Moon Jae-in, Republic of Korea*

- “In Switzerland, there is close cooperation with universities and the private sector to find innovative technological approaches for development and poverty reduction projects”.

--*President Parmelin, Switzerland*

### Call for private sector engagement

- ...the UN can be revitalized through the reform of its own governance structures which must reflect the changing world we live in today.... The UN must also have greater impact on people’s lives through a strategic focus on peace-building activities which are in line with the Sustainable Development Goals. Furthermore, to revitalize the UN and the impact of its activities across the world, we must seek to strengthen public-private partnerships to overcome the financing challenge.” -- *President Farmajo, Somalia*
- “This will make the US the leader in public climate finance and with our added support together with increased private capital from other donors, we’ll be able to meet the goal of mobilizing 100 billion dollars to support climate action in developing nations”. – *President Biden, USA*
- “There’s an enormous need for infrastructure in developing countries.... Done the right way, however, with sustainable, transparent investment, in projects that respond to the country’s needs and engage their local workers... infrastructure can be a strong foundation...to grow and prosper.... Together with the private sector and our G7 partners, we aim to mobilize hundreds of billions of dollars in infrastructure investment.” – *President Biden, USA*

Global leaders are acknowledging that today’s challenges are vast and overwhelming. As such, the call to mobilize all stakeholders, including the corporate sector along with its immense financial resources, is clear. But at what cost? The private sector may offer untapped resources, but strong accountability mechanisms and action needed for equitable COVID-19 recovery and to achieve the SDGs are among the many priorities on the international agenda.

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