



BUSINESS & SDGs HIGH LEVEL MEETING

Outcomes of the 2nd edition of the “*Business & SDGs High Level Meeting*” promoted by the GCNI Foundation

The **second edition of the *Business & SDGs High Level Meeting*** was held at the Edison SpA headquarters in Milan on 18th May. It was sponsored by the GCNI Foundation as an opportunity to encourage a shared reflection at the highest level amongst prominent actors in the national sphere, regarding the role the private sector is called upon to play in support of the *2030 UN Sustainable Development Agenda*. People from the highest offices (*Presidents, Managing Directors, Leading Managers*) of large and medium-sized Italian companies from various production sectors, with a solid sustainability profile, met together around the table: **A2A, AirPlus International, Alcantara, BNL – Gruppo BNP Paribas, Borsa Italiana, E&Y, Enel, Edison, Gruppo Hera, Saipem, Salini Impregilo.**

The content of this meeting was further enhanced by the contributions made by distinguished guests who took part in the discussion: **George KELL** - Vice-President of Arabesque and former Director General of the UN Global Compact; **Sergio MERCURI** – Minister Plenipotentiary, Coordinator for Sustainability Issues – Directorate General for Globalization and Global Issues, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation.

The meeting opened with introductory remarks by **Marc BENAYOUN**, Managing Director of Edison SpA, who began with the reflection on the principle that companies should be considered at both national and international levels as being “*key-players*” for the achievement of the *17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)* incorporated in the *United Nations Agenda*. “*The energy sector in particular,*” he stressed, “*now faces the issues of climate change, access to energy and production and sustainable consumption, which are three top priority goals for 2030, as stated by the UN*”.

“*From this acknowledgment of the centrality of firms in global sustainable development strategies,*” **Marco FREY**, President of the Global Compact Network Italy Foundation, affirmed “*SMEs, which account for 95% of Italian businesses, cannot and should not be excluded. It is therefore necessary to strengthen all the tools, be they financial, relating to supply-chain management, to industrial policy or to partnerships so that they can facilitate the contribution of different types of business to the SDGs.*”

After that, during his speech, George Kell developed Benayoun's opening remarks, recalling that the *2030 Agenda* intends to primarily address the world of real and financial economy by providing all actors of the sector with both a source of general inspiration, and an indication of what to do in order to be able to contribute positively and incisively to the Planet, to Peace, and to global prosperity in the years to come. Kell also wanted to underline that the *United Nations Sustainable Development 2030 Action Plan* contains a clear call for businesses to act according to a collaborative, synergistic and partnership approach. In the pursuit of the *17 SDGs*, firms are invited to network and promote team work with institutions, civil society and the non-profit sector broadly speaking, and with the world of research.

In the immediate future, private firms and stakeholder organizations are invited to manage together, while considering ethical and sustainable development, three global trends that Kell describes as significant:



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1. The *digital & technology transformation* and its impact on the labour market;
2. the introduction of *constraints on the use of natural resources* in support of the fight against the impoverishment of land and peoples and the right of access to public goods;
3. The affirmation of a *bottom-up participation in global phenomena* whether that be of a social, political or economic nature.

In addressing the current challenges of inclusive and sustainable development, according to Kell, the only way forward is by: - the integration of *SDGs 2030* into *corporate-level* strategies; - the integration of the *materiality principle* into the implementation of corporate policies; action in *partnership*.

"Sustainability never represents a cost for firms, extra spending," Kell reiterated. According to the Vice-President of Arabesque, it is known and proven, indeed on the international level, that long-term sustainable development strategies positively influence organizational profits and make the markets more stable. For this reason, Kell closed his speech by inviting the participants to consider their commitment to sustainability as a "potential fly wheel" for reinforcing Italian brands in competitive global markets.

The second part of the meeting, which followed the talks mentioned above, provided the opportunity for companies to present their action plans to support *SDGs*. Sharing experiences allowed them to highlight a series of action priorities that proved to be more relevant than others and coherently converge on company strategies and commitment statements from their respective corporate leaders:

- **PEOPLE**: Protecting their rights and valuing them both within the company (employees) and externally (clients and communities). With regard to people in the firm, the priorities identified are about guaranteeing equal opportunities for recruitment and career development for men and women; *Diversity Management*. With reference to people outside the firm, the commitment to transparency and to the ethics of the product prevails; to the promotion of social/economic inclusion with regard to the weaker categories at risk of marginalization who are most affected by the effects of the global economic crisis (women, young people and immigrants).
- **ENVIRONMENT**: energy saving, efficient resource management, de-carbonization, circular economy as increasingly integrated goals.

It emerged from the meeting in *CSR/Sustainability Management* terms that the corporate leaders are broadly in agreement with the following approach:

- Sustainability cannot be imposed from above, but must be subject to a gradual process of maturing, supported by awareness raising and providing information which the company promotes for its internal and external stakeholders. Such maturation develops through some fairly complex phases, which ultimately lead the organization to perceive sustainability as being an intrinsic element of what it does.
- Sustainability leadership must be exercised through action and facts, not just words. Indeed, it is necessary to find the right balance between brand image and what the company does, or rather, between what is stated and the strategies and policies implemented. Monitoring by the company is at the highest levels.
- Human Resources must be involved in the firm's CSR and sustainability issues and policies. Employees can contribute to sustainable development goals through their day-to-day operations and are a key element of change.
- Adherence to national and international standards is important, but the priority for companies must be to innovate and create new tools to support *SDGs* and put the actions into practice.



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In 2016, the Global Compact Network Italy Foundation promoted the establishment of an “**Itinerant round table**” (*Business & SDGs High Level Meeting*) with the main purpose of enabling a discussion on sustainability issues among the highest directors and managerial levels and sharing ideas and innovative practices on integrating *SDGs* into corporate strategies. The event, which takes place at least once a year, aims to encourage, first and foremost, the launch of new partnerships for sustainable development.

The **first round table** was held in Rome on 13th September 2016 and was kindly hosted by Enel SpA.

The *Business & SDGs High Level Meeting* is organized under the broader program launched by Global Compact Network Italia in support of the United Nations 2030 Agenda.

>> For further information: <http://www.globalcompactnetwork.org/en/network-activities-eng/sdgs-roadmap.html>



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