

The private sector and cross-cutting gender issues in UN Sustainable Development Goals

Pascale Bracq Co-founder and Vice-President - ONU FEMMES FRANCE

March 25 2020



In order to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030, the public policies of the signatory states have been placed at the heart of the mechanism. But the private sector has an undeniable role to play.

In September 2015, the UN General Assembly adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, a historic agreement negotiated and approved by the majority of UN members. The Agenda is broken down into 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and 169 targets measured by 232 indicators that tackle the economic, social, environmental and political aspects of sustainable development in a comprehensive and integrated manner with the aim of achieving a sustainable planet by 2030. All member states must commit to this agenda by complying with targets and measuring the indicators that underpin each of the SDGs.

GENDER EQUALITY AND EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN AND GIRLS ENSHRINED IN GOAL NO. 5

Of the 17 goals, the fifth is specifically devoted to gender equality. Already in 1995, the initiatives proposed at the Fourth UN World Conference on Women held in Beijing advocated a cross-cutting approach to guarantee the empowerment of women and gender equality. The action plan contained in the Beijing Declaration, signed by 189 of the UN's 193 member states, advocated an integrated, cross-cutting approach based around specific goals. Indeed, goals enshrined in public policy concerned all aspects of society and they were devised from a concrete, egalitarian perspective to apply at all levels. Naturally, the cross-cutting nature of gender, which already underpinned the Millennium Development Goals in 2000, was taken up and reinforced in the SDGs that succeeded them.

Of the various UN agencies tasked with deploying and tracking SDGs, UN Women - the agency

responsible for gender equality and the empowerment of women – tracks goal No. 5. This is used to oversee and monitor national initiatives, notably to tackle violence against women, promote equal professional opportunities and the access of women to senior positions, and to improve sexual and reproductive health. Gender now cuts across the 54 gender-specific indicators based around the targets of the other 16 SDGs. UN Women has also drawn up a specific roadmap that provides governments with guidelines on how to incorporate gender into public policy¹

WHAT CAN THE PRIVATE SECTOR DO?

Sustainable Development Goals are also intended to provide different public and private stakeholders with common guidelines on converging measures for achieving SDGs. Consequently, a lot of private economic stakeholders have factored them into their strategy, actions and communication initiatives. Nevertheless, we may still wonder whether the cross-cutting nature of gender is accorded all of the importance it deserves in light of the potential leverage it provides for achieving most of the SDGs?

SDG No. 5 sets out clear targets for the private sector: indicator 5.1.1 tracks progress on improving the access of women to jobs and economic benefits; indicator 5.2, which deals with violence, also covers violence in the work environment; 5.5 tackles the under-representation of women in senior management positions; 5.a seeks to give women equal ownership rights; and finally, 5.b strives to provide them with equal access to new technologies. These guidelines and focuses provide organisations, especially companies, with strategic pointers for their in-house policies (recruiting women and developing their careers, especially in critical sectors where there is a shortage of people) as well as in areas where they may be able to use their influence (relations with sub-contractors, customers, etc.).

Conversely, as regards SDG No. 7, focusing on affordable and clean energy, we may wonder whether the companies concerned have realised that women are greatly affected by exposure to dirty fuels? Aside from the harmful impacts of indoor air pollution on their health, a study commissioned by 22 African countries estimates that women and girls spend on average two hours a day gathering fuel. This hard work exposes women to the risk of injury, physical or sexual attack, or attacks by animals (snakes, etc.), as well as taking up valuable time that could be used for their education, work or leisure.

SDG No. 11, dealing with girls and sustainable communities, indicates how more secure public spaces are needed to combat harassment and other forms of sexual violence currently experienced by women in public places, on the street, on public transport, in public toilets, at water and food collection points and in parks. Goal No. 13 on climate action points out how a quarter of the world's working women work in agriculture. While forecasts² indicate that climate change will reduce rice, wheat and corn output between now and 2050, many female agricultural labourers are already confronted with massive inequalities in access to land, credit and essential inputs (i.e., fertilisers, irrigation, technology, information and markets). They generally have poorer access to climate change adaptation and mitigation strategies requiring the use of advanced heat- and drought-resistant crop varieties. All of these developments can make it more difficult to feed their communities and, more generally, to develop effective practices for tackling climate change.

Sustainable Development Goals are also intended to provide different public and private stakeholders with common guidelines on converging measures for achieving SDGs.

It is worth noting that the World Bank believes that “green jobs” in agriculture, industry, services and government will help preserve biodiversity and cut consumption of energy, CO₂ emissions, waste and all forms of pollution. At least 80% of such jobs should be created in sectors in which

women are currently under-represented. It is therefore a major issue both in terms of the workforce and equal access to work.

The impact on, or produced by, women is rarely confined to just one SDG and frequently affects a number of goals simultaneously. For example, certain development programmes focusing on women may concern up to 14 goals.

The impact on, or produced by, women is rarely confined to just one SDG and frequently affects a number of goals simultaneously. For example, certain development programmes focusing on women may concern up to 14 goals. Moreover, for its own flagship programmes, UN Women has built a SDG sub-matrix to highlight the different goals impacted by each programme.

AND WHAT ABOUT FINANCE

Several studies show that projects run by women register better performances and are more sustainable³. Transposing these findings into financial terms highlights the potential leverage provided by investments that target women (female entrepreneurs, feminisation of corporate governance, scientific and technological training, etc.). This raises the issue of how to amplify and accelerate the achievement of SDGs by 2030 through more effective targeting of programmes and funding for projects headed up by women.

While forecasts indicate that climate change will reduce rice, wheat and corn output between now and 2050, many female agricultural labourers are already confronted with massive inequalities in access to land, credit and essential inputs.

As was the case with financing the energy transition and the battle against global warming around the time of the Paris Agreement, new financial solutions need to be devised to refocus on investments that empower women in the broadest sense, as understood across all of the SDGs. To trigger this new momentum, we need to identify the data that most effectively highlights gender equality performance standards and metrics, and design financial products proving that gender-specific investment generates positive financial and social returns, thus accelerating the achievement of SDGs. This is the work currently being performed by UN Women in liaison with stakeholders from the financial arena (data aggregators, asset managers and custodians, etc.).

New financial solutions need to be devised to refocus on investments that empower women in the broadest sense, as understood across all of the SDGs.

CONCLUSION

As we have seen, the private sector has a considerable role to play in achieving SDGs in general, and in reducing gender equality and empowering women more specifically. The Fifth UN World Conference on Women will be held in Paris in 2020. This historic Generation Equality Forum will be organised by UN Women and the French and Mexican governments. It will provide an opportunity for governments, civil society and the private sector to assess the progress made by women in the twentyfive years since the Beijing Conference; also a time for forging coalitions for action to boost all aspects of gender equality ten years before the programme deadline of 2030.

1 In "Turning Promises into Action: Gender Equality in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development". Available at <http://bit.ly/39LxACR>

² Estimates provided by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO). Available at <http://bit.ly/39N54Ru>

³ For example, the World Bank survey "Women, Business and the Law", available at <http://bit.ly/39Opj12>

© 2020 – Private Sector & Development