

# Launching the United Nations Decade of Action and Delivery during a Time of Crisis

## Priorities for the UN High Level Political Forum (HLPF) 2020:

*The Business and Industry Major Group (B&I MG)*

*to the United Nations in New York*

-----  
The Business and Industry Major Group (B&I MG) appreciates this opportunity to share its vision of priorities and next steps relating to the UN HLPF in 2020 and beyond.

As the UN Decade of Action and Delivery faces the continuing fall-out of the COVID19 pandemic, business as usual is now obsolete for the private sector, as well as for the international community. **It is in the DNA of business to turn challenges into opportunities and to innovate and develop practical and realistic solutions for the problems we face, and B&I MG members are ready to join forces with governments and the multilateral community to respond forcefully to this crisis while maintaining and increasing momentum towards the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.**

Now is the time to be bold and innovative in the linked deliberations to deliver the 2030 Agenda by strengthening ECOSOC and taking the HLPF forward. Business and Industry calls on the UN system to seize these linked opportunities to address both ongoing sustainable development commitments and tackle new challenges on economic, social and environmental fronts, working more closely than ever before with business.

The B&I MG calls on the UN community to crowd in experts and “do-ers” from the private sector, and to mobilize countries and other stakeholders to rebuild better and stronger throughout their COVID-19 recovery working within the framework of the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Member states have stated the need for business to actively engage, and both the UN Global Sustainable Development Report 2019 (GSDR) and the SG’s recent report on Economic and Social Impacts of the COVID-19 crisis have highlighted the crucial role of business.

This submission will:

- present business priorities for a convergence of implementation across the SDGs, and integrated actions towards COVID19 response and recovery;
- review some “entry point” areas highlighted in the 2019 Global Sustainable Development Report (GSDR), with a focus on where business can contribute;
- suggest next steps for strengthening HLPF, particularly with regard to engaging with business and other stakeholders.

## ***Delivering Business solutions and partnerships for COVID19 in the framework of the 2030 Agenda***

Members of the B&I MG highlight the necessity of continuing and stepping action to advance the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in spite of the ongoing COVID19 crisis. Despite significant uncertainty about the full force and duration of this unprecedented event, businesses of all sizes and nationalities, across every sector of the global economy are rallying to contribute to solutions by addressing the pandemic through private sector innovation, investment, and partnership.

B&I continues to regard the 2030 Agenda as a road-map for truly effective responses to alleviate the economic, employment and social impact of the crisis, to develop and deploy new healthcare solutions, and to lay foundations for a recovery that will reflect lessons learned from this pandemic and put us on track to sustainable development that leaves no one behind.

Linking these far-reaching agendas of sustainability and recovery will be challenging in light of serious humanitarian and socio-economic impacts, and will require integrated and prioritized policies, collaborative cost-effective actions, and substantive opportunities for businesses of all sectors and sizes to contribute. This year's HLPF should set a new course for international cooperation based on the 2030 Agenda to build a sustainable and resilient recovery, with business as an essential partner.

### ***Delivering Sustainability, Recovery and Resilience working with Business***

#### **- Advancing Human Wellbeing and Poverty Eradication**

COVID-19 is having a disastrous health, economic and employment impact, especially in developing and least developed countries. In particular, micro enterprises (MSMES), Small and medium sized companies (SMEs) continue to suffer tremendously under lock-down measures and their disastrous impact on the economy and supply chains. MSMES and SMEs form the majority of the business community and are the primary employers in developed and developing countries.

According to the ILO's latest estimates, around 436 million enterprises in the hardest-hit sectors worldwide are currently facing high risks of serious disruption. More than half of these – some 232 million – are in wholesale and retail trade. The unfolding collapse of companies and their supply chains in the inter-connected global economy leads to catastrophic employment impact.

There is a need for urgent support for business continuity to help those millions of people around the world whose lives and livelihoods are being upended today through real or impending job loss brought about by the pandemic.

Unemployment is a central cause underlying the risk of poverty, and having a job is the basic condition for doing well and succeeding in life. Open, dynamic and inclusive labor markets are needed which reflect the changing labor market realities and respond not only to companies' needs to be able to grow and employ people, but also allow people to seek and maintain employment in a way that tailors to their personal situations and preferences. It is of crucial importance to remove employment barriers, particularly for those groups which are currently under-represented on the labor market.

Informality is a key reality in many economies, leading to grave productivity and tax revenue losses. It is in the informal sector, where the decent work deficits are the highest. In countries with large informal sectors, regulations regarding property rights, company law, labor law, tax law, and social security are particularly complex and restrictive thereby creating a high barrier for people to participate in the formal economy. These countries should review their legislative and administrative frameworks to reduce these barriers and facilitate participation in the formal economy.

## - **Environmental Innovation, Stewardship and Resilience**

The SDGs recognize that environmental challenges cannot be tackled in a narrow framing, and have to be considered within economic and social contexts, and with the involvement of all non-governmental entities, including business.

In the aftermath of the pandemic, a pragmatic, real-world approach to environmental challenges such as climate change will be needed. Business is a source of solutions, knowhow and management systems that are essential to reducing waste and pollution, promoting innovation towards resource efficiency and a circular economy, finding substitutes to toxic materials, and engineering products and processes that are better for people and the environment.

Lessons learned from vulnerabilities and joint solutions to the pandemic crisis should be reflected in planning for resilience to future transboundary challenges, using the SDGs as a blueprint for international cooperation.

## - **Restoring and Strengthening Access to Essential Services: Food Security, Energy and Healthcare**

The pandemic and its socio-economic impacts has highlighted as never before the essential services that society depends on: food, energy and health care. These correspond to SDGs 2, 3, and 13 and restoring and strengthening these critical needs of modern society to that they are sustainable should be the center of attention in this and future HLPF sessions.

## - **Economic Growth and Empowerment**

The rate of global progress towards SDG 8 has not kept pace with the ambitions of the 2030 Agenda, and the disruptive and widespread impacts of the economic downturn resulting from the pandemic have dealt a serious blow to economies all over the world.

To address inequality exacerbated by the pandemic, the international community should strengthen efforts to ensure equality of opportunity, vertical mobility and reward for good performance as well as, self-evidently, to guarantee a minimum living income for the needy and to reduce and prevent social exclusion. Education is an essential condition so that everyone has the chance to deploy his or her talents and abilities optimally in society and to contribute to economic life. Better education systems and ensuring access for all, is a crucial imperative to improve access to equal opportunities and to leaving no-one behind.

Private sector entrepreneurship and innovation are key drivers for job creation and economic growth, and they must be directed and incented towards sustainability and recovery-related solutions, focusing on essential services. Start-ups and young entrepreneurs bring vibrancy and innovation to economies. Three points need to be prioritized to advance progress towards SDG8 while:

- Effectively and regularly assessing the impact of regulation on businesses and job creation and easing the burden of registration, when necessary.
- Enabling greater access to a variety of funding sources for SMEs and particular female entrepreneurs
- Creating innovation-friendly framework conditions through, among other measures, sufficient R&D spending.

## - **Local Action**

The SDGs are implemented primarily at national and local levels. At the national level, legal and government policy frameworks do not yet adequately integrate the SDGs. Collaborative structures at national and global level to share expertise, engage in dialogue and launch partnerships will be needed. In that regard, ECOSOC and HLPF should continue to build in meaningful opportunities for business and other stakeholders to observe and be part of assessment, policy dialogue and collective action.

Business encourages the UN to build connections between the UN Resident Coordinators (RCs) and national employers' organizations to advance implementation and build capacity on SDGs and pandemic response and recovery. Employers organizations play a key role in the planning, implementation and follow-up of Agenda 2030 related concerns with companies of every size and sector, notably MSMEs and SMEs.

As a central feature of the HLPF and embodiment of national implementation, it is critical to strengthen and improve VNRs and the process of their preparation and review. The VNR process should be more inclusive especially at the national level, enabling greater input from business and civil society. Employers and business organizations should be invited to participate in the shaping of VNRs at the national level.

Going forward, the VNR process under HLPF will be taking place under the challenging circumstances of the pandemic's fallout, and in the context of response and recovery, and will have to adapt to provide information on progress towards SDGs while addressing the pandemic. Reporting of SDG action impact should use flexible yet comparable reporting formats, frameworks and metrics to identify challenges and gaps across goals.

The HLPF and VNR processes are not ends in themselves. They should lead to peer learning which should in turn trigger change on the ground. To this end, VNRs need to be more action-oriented and provide concrete recommendations that can be evaluated. All of this requires governments to engage constructively with representative business groups, such as local chambers.

More and better data are needed to monitor progress on SDG targets. Up-to-date, linked and open databases on the SDGs would make this information accessible to assist in tracking progress.

## ***Mobilizing solidarity – Investment, Finance and Technology Cooperation***

Inadequate financial resources from public and private sources are a major obstacle to achieving the 2030 Agenda commitments and pledges. Resource mobilization and synergies across COVID-19 response, stimulus and response, should prioritize the right enabling conditions to deploy private sector resources, solutions and know-how, making full use of multilateral trade and investment as well as domestic resources mobilization

HLPF must help ensure that COVID-19 funds being mobilized by multilateral development banks are directed to developing countries for needed social protection systems and programs to provide critical liquidity to maintain the financial viability of SMEs and sustain employment—to prevent closures, to provide bridging support until operations can resume, and to provide technical assistance in restarting.

The B&I MG calls on members of the HLPF to safeguard and advance free, fair, non-discriminatory, transparent, predictable and stable trade and investment environments, and to keep markets open. Such commitments should entail agreements to refrain from imposing new trade-restrictive measures that would inhibit the necessary flow of goods and services, including essential medical, healthcare, food and energy goods, that would undermine COVID19 response and implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

Technology and innovation are essential to creating new sources of wealth and development accessible to any region, culture or people with the right skills. Digital and cognitive revolutions are opening more opportunities to foster the growth and development of countries. In this context, governments have a unique opportunity to promote people's development, so it is imperative to re-think the global approach to education and employment that will enable societies to stay ahead of the ever-changing present.

New technological revolution will transform the landscape of skill demand. We have the responsibility to craft a transition to the next era that keeps up with the pace of technology in a way that is inclusive and accelerates our social and economic growth. This means to invest in appropriate digital infrastructure to allow broad-based access to digital learning solutions and enabling the integration of digital learning solutions into the physical teaching environment.

### ***The Next Phase of HLPF: Enhancing substantive business engagement for sustainability and recovery solutions that provide shared value***

This year is pivotal for the strengthening of this critical Forum, and in particular to enhance its inclusiveness and effectiveness in advancing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development while rising to the substantial humanitarian, health, economic and social challenges of the pandemic crisis.

The HLPF will be the institutional support system for the UN Decade of Action and Delivery, and as such should:

- prioritize the essential enablers for action across the SDGs. For business, those fundamental enablers have to do with advancing human well-being and building human capacity, eradicating poverty, access to quality basic services, such as health, education, water, energy, sanitation, among others.
- approach recovery from the triple shock of the COVID-19 crisis to healthcare, jobs, food security and economic activity on the foundation of basic good governance and rule of law. The GSDR does identify governance as the first “lever” for transformation for good reason.

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development calls for stronger cooperation between the private and the public sectors, and COVID-19 has made this collaboration and collective action essential. Yet as several UN assessments have shown, the United Nations needs to improve the way it engages with representative business and with the private sector. The potential of the private sector to work with governments and the international community to address the impact of COVID-19, to build a prosperous and sustainable global economy and to address common sustainability challenges has not been fully realized and should be a focus for the coming years of HLPF's work.

With its far-reaching, holistic and expanding agenda, the current structure of the HLPF provides very limited time and space for the thematic or the VNR discussions. In its next phase, the HLPF should afford both government representatives and stakeholders adequate opportunity to present, discuss and synergize on successful efforts to implement the SDGs.

The B&I MG urges governments to support and provide new interfaces and better opportunities for the UN system, governments, businesses and other stakeholders to work together, and we encourage the UN to provide specific guidance, streamlined procedures and adequate institutional infrastructure on how and where business can engage and collaborate with the UN system in the UN Decade of Delivery and Action.