

# Private sector must accelerate efforts on sustainability

By [Lesedi Ntuli](#)

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The sustainability issues facing societies - including accelerated climate change, natural resource depletion and social inequality, all against the backdrop of a rapidly growing population - are threatening the well-being of people across the globe.



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In response to this, businesses the world over have started placing greater emphasis on sustainability to position themselves as development agents. Business leaders have now become increasingly aware of the sustainability imperatives and are resultantly adopting measures to ensure that they do not appear to be experiencing profitability in isolation from those communities impacted by their actions. They are somewhat stepping up to the plate, navigating the competing demands of shareholders to deliver maximum profitability in the short-term, and the demands of communities and various other role-players to respond to long-term sustainable development challenges.

In 1987, the UN World Commission on Environment and Development published its report *Our Common Future* in which sustainable development is defined as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”. This ethic is beyond dispute.



## Embracing CSI as a strategic business function

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## Leveraging knowledge, resources and skills

When discussing sustainable development, it is mostly about leveraging knowledge, resources and skills the private sector can bring to the table to support and implement the sustainable development goals. Presently, there is broad concession that private sector businesses are all about creating capacity in their local contexts, economic growth and long-term viability of their operations.

However, a responsible private sector is neither a given nor an end in itself but rather one of the most critical means to attain the sustainable development goals. Until recently, governments and non-governmental organisations had relatively clear-cut roles in the sustainability agenda, whereas the private sector's participation was often viewed through the lens of its contributions to socio-economic development and poverty reduction. This has now changed, with businesses having recognised their roles and ability when it comes to addressing these issues. But, concerningly, the sector is simply not moving rapidly enough.

In a report shared last year by the UN Global Compact, while 84% of business leaders said they are acting on the SDGs, only 61% are developing products or services that contribute to the SDGs, with 46% embedding them into their business.



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## Businesses must step up their efforts

Even as we wrestle with the resultant consequences from the Covid-19 pandemic, businesses must step up their efforts to ensure that we ultimately achieve the SDGs. Businesses must create comprehensive and clearly defined strategies and refrain from contributing to the agenda in an ad hoc manner that is not adequately labelled or targeted.

Certainly, it is encouraging to see some businesses taking a stand for positive change, but it is equally important that they carry this out well. Now more than ever, the world needs a different kind of leadership and passionate dedication to act rapidly and meaningfully on this sustainability agenda. Our communities urgently need businesses to collectively recognise the challenges they face, to prioritise them, design solutions for dealing with them, and to boldly articulate these to others in simple language.

In doing this, businesses would be helping define how all of us should behave so that the generations to come will have the best chance to enjoy the wonder of being alive.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lesedi Ntuli is a former student activist and scholar who is intensely committed to the advancement of the sustainable development goals and achieving gender equality in particular.

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