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Work, growth, innovation and equality

Penny Walker looks at corporate action on building a more sustainable, equitable and decent economy in part six of our series on the UN 2030 goals

8 DECENT WORK AND ECONOMIC GROWTH



Decent work and economic growth

For too many, work is underpaid, insecure and dangerous. The International Labour Organization estimates that 327 million people with jobs live in extreme poverty. To help to address this, the UN sustainable development goal (eight) for decent work and economic growth aims to expand the global economy and improve productivity. Targets include full, productive employment for all, regardless of ethnicity, religion, gender, abilities, sexual or gender identity. These issues are also relevant to goal ten – reducing inequality within and among countries (below). Child labour, forced labour, trafficking and modern slavery are also given special attention, as are the rights of migrant workers.

A strategy being adopted by US food business General Mills is to enable local suppliers in lower-income countries to find ways to add value to the products they make. The firm, whose brands include Cheerios, Häagen-Dazs and Yoplait, buys vanilla from hundreds of farming families in Madagascar. Since 2013, it has run a programme in the Sava region, training farmers in how to cure vanilla pods. These sell for significantly more than uncured ones. The initiative is helping General Mills work towards its target of sourcing 100% of its vanilla by 2020 in ways that improve the livelihoods of smallholder farmers.

Decoupling economic growth from environmental impact is a key aspiration underpinning the sustainable development goals. Unilever has set a public goal to decouple its environmental footprint from its

underlying sales growth. The fast-moving consumer goods firm is a global partner of the Ellen MacArthur Foundation's Circular Economy 100 programme, which aims to accelerate progress towards a circular economy.

A much smaller player, also contributing to the circular economy, is Rype Office, which refreshes and remanufactures office furniture. One of its clients is Public Health Wales. Sally Attwood, head of strategic programmes and facilities at the health body, says: 'We were moving more than 500 people from nine buildings to one larger building. We wanted a modern workplace to support collaboration and connectivity.'

Rype Office worked with Greenstream Flooring to maximise the reuse of furniture and flooring. Some 94% of more than 2,500 items of furniture were either remanufactured or refurbished. South Wales social enterprise Orangebox made the small quantity of new furniture needed, providing training and work for people who had been long-term unemployed.

Attwood is enthusiastic about the multiple benefits: 'Public Health Wales stands for valuing things, re-loving things, taking care of neglected assets. We wanted to spend our money to create maximum public value.'

Further information

- Ellen MacArthur Foundation Circular Economy 100 Programme – bit.ly/2kmBVGI
- Sustainable Vanilla Initiative – bit.ly/2laBI9M
- Sustainable office furniture – bit.ly/2lFQkDL

9 INDUSTRY, INNOVATION
AND INFRASTRUCTURE

Industry, innovation and infrastructure

Meeting the aspirations of the 8.5 billion people forecast to be living in 2030, when the SDGs should be achieved, for decent, healthy lives demands technological innovation and smart infrastructure: mass transit, renewable energy, information and communication technologies, resilient and eco-efficient engineering and construction, clever planning and design.

Targets under goal nine include planning and implementing infrastructure at a regional level rather than be constrained by national boundaries. There is a focus on affordability and equitable access to critical services, both physical (such as water and flood protection) and intangible (internet access and affordable credit). Research, development and innovation are essential to underpin all the other UN sustainable development goals.

Information and communications technology infrastructure is essential for access to markets, services and education. According to BT, people in Africa pay ten times as much of their salary for broadband than those in other parts of the world. BT has delivered free broadband access, via satellite, to SOS Children's Villages, which provide homes for orphaned and vulnerable children in 13 African countries. The free broadband also benefits the wider community, bringing clinics, families and community workers online.

Upgrading and improving physical infrastructure is also badly needed in disadvantaged areas, and it needs to be resilient to climate shocks. In Mexico, it takes ten years on average for road and pavement projects to be completed in low-income neighbourhoods. Mexican building materials business Cemex has developed a microloan programme to help communities fund this infrastructure and complete projects in less than 18 months. The Mejora tu Calle (Improve your street) initiative is providing more than 35,000 such loans

to fund paving. Cemex also invests in research and development, one product benefiting from this being porous and insulating concrete to help reduce flooding and improve energy efficiency.

Marshall's is another building materials company heavily engaged in the research and development of products such as permeable surfaces to reduce flash flooding and recharge groundwater. It has also developed what it says is the world's first carbon-neutral paving system, called Bioverse. Group marketing director Chris Harrop says: 'Bioverse consists of reduced-carbon concrete, specially formulated grass seed and a carefully designed sub-base. The elements of the system together create a hardstanding area which is not only attractive and hardwearing, but is also a biosphere which takes carbon from the atmosphere.'

Where the problem is too little water, efficient irrigation is key. Netafim has pioneered drip irrigation technologies for use in agriculture and extractive industries. Research and development is focused on reducing the chemicals needed to keep water clean, and more precise delivery of the right quantity of water at the right time.

Financing the infrastructure of the future is central to insurance business Aviva's target of investing £500m a year from 2015 to 2020 into low-carbon infrastructure, such as energy efficiency measures in NHS hospitals, onshore wind and rooftop solar. Aviva's strategic response to climate change states: 'The transition to a low-carbon economy requires capital. A large proportion of this will need to be directed towards infrastructure.'

Further information

SOS Children's Villages – bit.ly/1wOggSi
Netafim – bit.ly/1KdVzpN

10 REDUCED
INEQUALITIES

Reducing inequality

Economic growth in countries or regions of widening inequality fails to translate into improved quality of life or environmental protection. According to the UN, the richest 10% of people earn up to 40% of global income, and for the poorest 10% it is somewhere between 2% and 7%. Economic inequality is overlain and accelerated by discrimination, on grounds of race, gender, age, disability, sexuality, religion and immigration status. In many countries, there is legal and institutional backing for equal treatment, but some companies go beyond this.

Targets for goal ten include income growth for the poorest, inclusion, equality of opportunities and outcomes. The cost of remittances home by migrants and the importance of well-managed migration

policies are highlighted, as well as inequalities between countries in international trade negotiations.

P&G's worldwide policy prohibits all forms of discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity and expression. In Spain the fast-moving goods firm has gone beyond the legal minimum. Doreen Chow, HR leader for company's homecare businesses in Europe, India, Middle East and Africa and sponsor for its gay, ally, bisexual, lesbian employees (GABLE) Europe network, says: 'All of P&G's policies in Spain were reviewed to ensure staff benefits apply equally to same-sex and different-sex couples. These include health insurance, life insurance plans, leaves of absence and other company benefits such as company cars and relocation support.' P&G took part in Spanish Pride

in 2016 and is a member of Stonewall's network of global diversity champions. The LGBT equality charity provides expertise on how to support employees and promote inclusion in countries where the prevailing culture and legal context is challenging. Staff have been trained about unconscious bias, and suppliers are required to follow the sustainable business guidelines, which include anti-discrimination clauses.

For people with disabilities in low-income countries, ADD International is a source of support. The organisation stresses the importance of government action, while also working with businesses to help people with disabilities into jobs. Mosharraf Hossain, director of global policy, influencing and research, says: 'Businesses have an essential role to play in ensuring persons with disabilities are not left behind in development. We urge businesses to work with organisations of persons with disabilities to identify contextually appropriate ways to

make their practices more inclusive.' ADD International's margins-to-mainstream project in Bangladesh helped more than 650 people with disabilities to set up their own businesses or do work placements with member companies of the Bangladesh Garments Manufacturers and Exporters Association. Tailored training and advice on workplace accessibility were a key focus.

M&S has UK-based and international programmes to help disadvantaged people through its Marks & Start work placement programme. The firm is also part of Business in the Community's Ready for Work network, helping long-term unemployed people, care leavers, ex-offenders and other vulnerable people to improve their employability.

Businesses can also co-operate with local charities to support people into employment. IEMA corporate member Willmott Dixon Interiors has been working with the Amber Foundation in south-west England. Amber runs residential centres and supports young people who have been homeless, have been affected by substance misuse or have been in trouble with the law. The interior fit-out and refurbishment company has provided work experience placements for Amber clients. It is contributing to the company's long-standing commitment to transform the lives of 10,000 young people by 2020.

Further information

Stonewall – bit.ly/2laH3Oj

ADD International – bit.ly/2jU0mWW

Business in the Community – bit.ly/1zEqd65

Willmott Dixon Interiors – bit.ly/2kJYCn7

The Amber Foundation – bit.ly/2lfdcQx

Penny Walker is an independent consultant. She is facilitating a season of conversations for sustainability leaders in 2017. Go to bit.ly/2lfsGFa for more information.

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