



Strategy Gap

Moderator



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Here's some background to our discussion of filling the Strategy Gap:

In almost every organisation there's a gap between its intention to do good and actioning the systems change that's needed to realise that ambition. For the SDGs, the issue is how to assess the nature of the gap and identify proper action along with creating the right conditions to make the most of the SDGs' potential.

The gap between an organisation's intention (promise and talk) and action (performance and walk) presents a challenging assessment for academia and consultants. Are these organisations stuck because they have no real intention to become sustainable – which suggests greenwashing – or are they genuinely engaged in a positive transition pathway towards greater sustainability which is not easy to establish and takes time?

It's always challenging to manage, evaluate or leverage the strategic pathways that lead to action. Organisations must resist cherry-picking the easiest options and avoid crowding out genuinely systemic approaches.

They have to consider certification schemes and the role of social enterprises, as well as think about using the SDG agenda strategically.

Most companies present their sustainability strategies as a work-in-progress, but a constant gap between ambition and operationalisation creates the risk of undercutting the overall credibility of the strategies they have chosen. In the words of former CEO of Unilever [Paul Polman](#), "The cost of not acting is becoming bigger than the cost of acting."

So what should organisations do?

While we are debating the Strategy Gap, we should bear in mind two strategic considerations:

- The strategic opportunity is still considerable: most CEOs of multinational corporations have supported the SDGs, not least because they immediately recognised the strategic opportunity (worth more than US \$12 trillion) that the SDG agenda offers the needs of society, both now and in the future. There is no lack of intention to move the SDG agenda forward. But studies show a sizable gap between intention and realisation. The *UN Global Compact Progress Reports 2019* found that whereas 67 per cent of their corporate signatories are committing to sustainability at the CEO-level, only 48 per cent are implementing sustainability into operations.
- And the gap does not require 'one-size-fits-all' strategies: recent studies identified many complementary pathways to fill the strategy gap towards achieving the SDGs – in which the effective management of cross-sector partnership portfolio has become a prerequisite for seizing the strategic opportunities of the SDG agenda. While 71 per cent of CEOs recognise the critical role that business could and should play in contributing to the delivery of the SDGs, only 21 per cent of CEOs believe that business is actually playing that role. Other studies show that 87 per cent of companies have a gap between their strategy intention and realising it – and 46 per cent of companies with a gap have assessed it themselves as 'sizable'. Research based on the [Better Business Scan](#) shows that many Dutch companies are somewhere in between a reactive and an active approach to sustainability issues, but most are also committed to make the change for positive reasons.