

Who will reach the SDGs?

Article written by Matteo Pisano et Lara Franken, young reporters for the environment.

Unknown! Such was the SGG forum for us, two young people.

Yet over the course of two days, a wide range of stakeholders from civil society, the private sector and policy makers came together to discuss the future of the SDGs.

It was an acronym repeated over and over again by the speakers, on the banners and on the giant screen in the plenary hall. Behind this acronym lie the 17 Sustainable Development Goals.

The Sustainable Development Goals, a tool developed by the UN in 2015, aim to extend our society by reducing its harmful ecological, social and economic effects. They have a period of 15 years before being updated to 2030 - ambitious but vital targets.

The dates of the SDG Forum are unusual in that, as well as preceding the COP29 climate change conference in Baku, Azerbaijan by a week, it coincided with the US elections.

It's 9am on November 5th. The main hall of the Flagey building in Ixelles, the former home of the Institut National de Radiodiffusion (INR), is filling up as a Handpan player welcomes arrivals with his music.



Zakia Khattabi

Afterwards, the plenary session begins with words from the Minister for Sustainable Development, Zakia Khattabi, who opens the event for the 3rd and probably final time, because her party is not involved in the negotiations to form the future Belgian federal government.

According to Ms Khattabi, *'Every minister should be a minister for sustainable development'*. She also argues that governance is the key to tackling social inequalities and the climate crisis. Since governance is the meeting point between the public sector and pressure groups, the SDGs can be seen as a tool for it.

Then came, Nathalie Guillaume, General Secretary and Director of Sustainable Development at Danone Benelux.

Ms Guillaume spoke about her company and the responsibilities of businesses in achieving sustainable development objectives. To round off the plenary session, she was joined by 2 other speakers, Luc Van Liedekerke as moderator and Anton de Ryckere, Director of the Association of Flemish Provinces.

The programme then consisted of various conferences and workshops held at the same times.

Each conference or workshop session is divided by lunch breaks and discussions between the various participants.



Nathalie Guillaume

It is during these breaks that visitors and speakers meet each other in a less formal way to exchange ideas to forge new contacts to set up new initiatives and partnerships.

As we passed between the tables, we heard English, French, Dutch and even Spanish. Laughter, serious faces and hugs were also part of the intervening landscape.

The next day, after an eventful political night, the SDG forum starts again. But no one could ignore what had just happened.

On the first day of the SDG forum, Trump's name was whispered from time to time in the halls and corridors of the building. But the next day, the day of his victory, his name was echoing in those same corridors. The eyes of those who mentioned him were worried. The slap in the face was all the stronger because everyone knows the impact that his first victory in 2016 had on the Paris agreements, on abortion rights and on the invasion of the Capitol on the last day of his presidency. Everyone is also anticipating 4 years of much more brutal, violent and dangerous years for Americans and for all citizens of the world.

On this second day it became even harder to hope an achievement of the SDGs, being already difficult to attain. Even more so that reality is locked in its most painful troubles.

It is against this politically frightening backdrop that the second day is taking place. The workshops resumed, with discussions between members of NGOs, working groups,

companies and the general public in full swing. Although there were fewer people than on the first day, the debates were no less relevant.

At around 11.45am, visitors gathered one last time in the room that had launched the 7th SDG forum more than 24 hours ago.

'But who really wants to achieve these goals today? Who?', echoed in the room.

This was the question asked by a member of the audience to Manuela Gervasi during this final plenary session.

At a time when our political spectrum is shifting to the right in many countries, who among the political players really care about the SDGs? Who among the multinational companies really want to achieve the SDGs? Who can we trust? How can we continue to believe in these objectives when the United States, a country with gigantic economic and political power, is now in the hands of Trump ?

These questions were with us throughout the two days of the SDG Forum.

This forum offers a place to look for answers to these questions.



¹ Lieve Verboven during the last plenary session

Over the past two days, we have heard statements full of good intentions.

'No jobs on a death planet '1

'There is no planet B'

'We will not solve this through excel sheets'

We have seen companies such as Danone highlight their sustainable action plan and their vegetable protein products. We have heard of draft legislation such as the *'due diligence law'*, which obliges large companies to take account of their entire value chain, with a particular focus on human rights and the environment.

We have seen progress. We saw the enthusiasm of young and old alike to work together for the future of this planet.

And yet, despite two days full of discussion, doubts persist. And this citizen's question is floating in our heads. Who really wants to achieve these goals ? Where are the concrete actions and their large scale results? Actions that will drastically reduce greenhouse gases (it keeps increasing every year). On the contrary, these questions remain unanswered, because between the words spoken and reality, the pit doesn't seem to be closing.