

UN GENEVA SDG LAB DEBRIEF ON BUILDING BRIDGES 2021



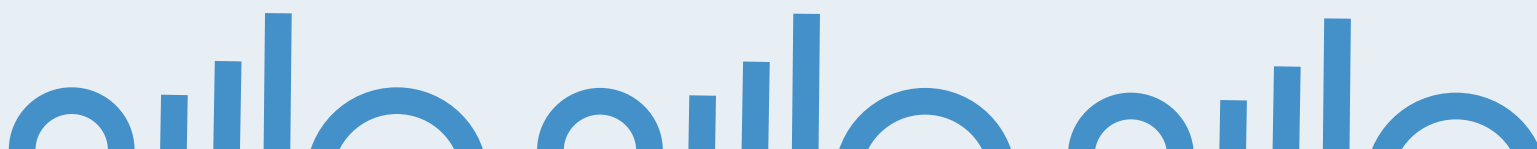
[Building Bridges Summit and Week \(BBW\)](#) was held in Geneva from 29 November to 2 December 2021. It was reaffirming to see that Building Bridges delivered on the overarching goals that we consider key:

- **Pushing the “cross community” dialogue** and understanding of sustainable finance for the SDGs.
- **Advancing concrete collaborations** among the finance and sustainable development communities.
- **Leveraging the know-how and expertise** of the Geneva and broader Swiss ecosystem for sustainable finance.
- **Mobilizing Building Bridges beyond a ‘conference’ and into a collaborative movement between different communities of expertise**—with more than 1400 people participating in 73 events, Building Bridges has evolved into a premier sustainable finance forum.

This second iteration of Building Bridges demonstrated a welcomed and dramatic shift in representation of voices and perspectives when compared to the first edition held in 2019. This was an intentional result of UN Geneva—and other close partners within the BBW committees and high-level steering group—in pushing for greater inclusion and diversity of actors.

Speakers and events better reflected the broader sustainable finance community in 2021, with representatives of governments, civil society, academia, the private sector, foundations, as well as the UN and other international organizations; and bridges were built between communities and actors that usually do not meet or work together.

Building Bridges Week also underscored the critical function of the UN to differentiate good practice from good marketing, denounce ‘green, impact and SDG washing’, and hold actors accountable for tangible results on the ground.



It is also necessary to emphasize that COVID-19 developments – i.e., Omicron variant and related last-minute travel restrictions – had a significant impact on Building Bridges 2021, with many cancellations of key speakers, including the UNDP Associate Administrator, as well as representatives from developing countries, the United Kingdom, and parts of Europe.

Despite setbacks, the coordinating teams successfully handled the challenge and focused on maximizing the participation of confirmed speakers, with overall engagement remaining high and rich.

Through the presence of the Deputy Secretary-General of the United Nations and other high level UN representatives, the UN played a key role in keeping the SDGs at the centre and in reaffirming the role and expertise of the UN in driving more capital to where it directly accelerates the implementation of the SDGs. The presence of Ms. Amina J. Mohammed also demonstrated, in practice, the essence of “building bridges”—ensuring that sustainable finance becomes increasingly a theme addressed among different and complementary communities of expertise.

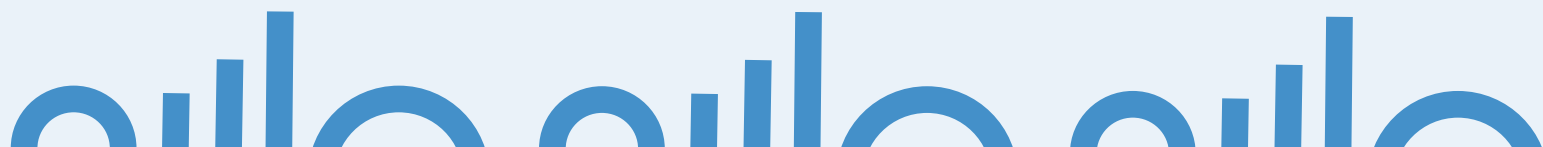
The following sections provide a snapshot of UN Geneva’s SDG Lab’s engagement in Building Bridges, some key outcomes and materials, and a section on ways to improve Building Bridges for future iterations.

UN Geneva’s SDG Lab main contributions

In the lead up to and throughout Building Bridges Week, the SDG Lab focused on keeping the SDGs at the centre, ensuring diversity of views and voices, and demonstrating tangible and concrete examples of “building bridges” collaborations. Highlights include:

♦ **Keeping “SDGs at the centre” of sustainable finance & promoting a common UN message**

While from a UN perspective this may appear as a given, in conversations with the finance community, we experience that the SDGs often slide off the radar with an emphasis rather on ESG metrics. A key contribution of the UN and the SDG Lab was to ensure that the SDGs were consistently and repeatedly referred to as **the** framework for a sustainable future that all sectors, including the finance sector, should address and respond to.



This standpoint was articulated at key moments during Building Bridges, including through the interventions made by the Deputy Secretary-General and the Director-General of ILO, Guy Ryder. The efforts of UN Geneva's SDG Lab to secure their high-level participation resulted in showing that the UN has experience and value to add to sustainable finance and values the collaborative nature of Building Bridges.

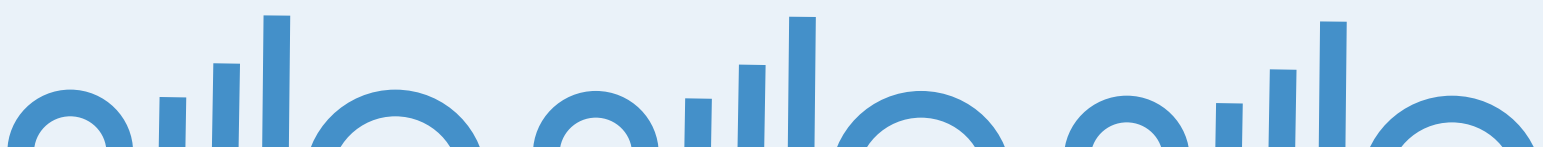
Country viewpoints and calls to action were brought forward at different levels and occasions—perspectives that, otherwise, would not have been present at Building Bridges. Concretely, the SDG Lab made possible the presence of the Vice-Minister for Multilateral Affairs of Costa Rica, Christian Guillermet-Fernández, and the Permanent Representative of Colombia, Alicia Victoria Arango Olmos. The Lab team also facilitated [video messages](#) from the President of Costa Rica, HE Carlos Alvarado Quesada, the President of Ghana, HE Nana Akufo-Addo, and the Senior Advisor to the Minister of National Development Planning for Social Affairs and Poverty Reduction of Indonesia, Vivi Yulaswati.

♦ Framing the SDG finance narrative – editorial and interviews

An opinion piece by SDG Lab Director Nadia Isler and Sustainable Finance Geneva Director Sandrine Salerno was published in [Geneva Solutions](#) (English) and *l'Agefi* (French) ahead of BBW. In the article, they made the case as to why sustainable finance must factor in the “S” (social considerations) and how platforms such as Building Bridges are key to boosting collaboration for the 2030 Agenda. Their article was the only such commentary to be published on this theme in the lead up to the event.

In a [special newsletter](#) of the Canton of Geneva for its Interparliamentary Group on International Geneva, UN Geneva Director-General Valovaya wrote on the importance of ‘building bridges’ with the finance community and underscored how the 2030 Agenda represents an unparalleled business opportunity.

An additional contribution of the Lab to BBW was interviewing key Building Bridges Summit speakers for social sharing. Nine short [“capsules”](#) were conducted with key invitees, including the UN Deputy Secretary-General, Ambassador Christian Frutiger of the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, the President of Building Bridges, Patrick Odier, and Marianne Haahr, the Executive Director of Green Digital Finance Alliance (GDFA), among others.



♦ Participation of the Deputy Secretary-General (DSG)

The in-person participation of the DSG at the Summit set the tone for the high-level day and the entire Week. Her presence demonstrated the role of the United Nations in sustainable finance and allowed to emphasize the need to go beyond the environment and climate if the international community is to achieve the SDGs.

Speaking alongside Swiss Federal Councillor Ueli Maurer and Building Bridges President Patrick Odier, Ms. Mohammed used her [keynote address](#) to call on participants to deliver more ambition, action, and scale in delivering on the 2030 Agenda. She also urged for concrete actions and commitments to emerge from the Week. As part of her visit to Geneva, the Lab organized an [exclusive interview](#) for the DSG with Geneva Solutions, and her overall engagement was profiled by the [UN News](#) global site.

Showcasing concrete country engagement & examples

To demonstrate concrete examples of “building bridges” collaborations, the SDG Lab organized the [SDG Lab Pipeline Builder event](#), which captured how capital can be driven towards the SDGs through greater engagement between both the private and public sector and the UN.

Through the direct engagement of the UN Resident Coordinator in Ghana, Charles Abani, who joined virtually, as well as the presence of the Chief Executive Officer of the Ghana Investment Promotion Centre, Yofi Grant, and a Ghanaian investor, Jerry Parkes, who also spoke at the Building Bridges Summit, the event was an illustration of the value proposition of ‘building bridges’ in action.

Supporting the SDG Lab’s efforts to highlight the social dimension of sustainable finance, both in the lead up to and during Building Bridges, the above-mentioned speakers and other voices articulated the importance of boosting social investments in tandem with environmental and climate finance. Furthermore, the speakers underscored the importance of ‘building bridges’ from Geneva and Switzerland with the rest of the world to ensure sustainable finance reflects country realities and are not developed in a vacuum.

In addition to ensuring country examples, the SDG Lab also provided examples of how the development community can collaborate with the finance community. A [short document](#) was produced to inspire more UN entities, other international organizations and NGOs to engage with the finance industry.



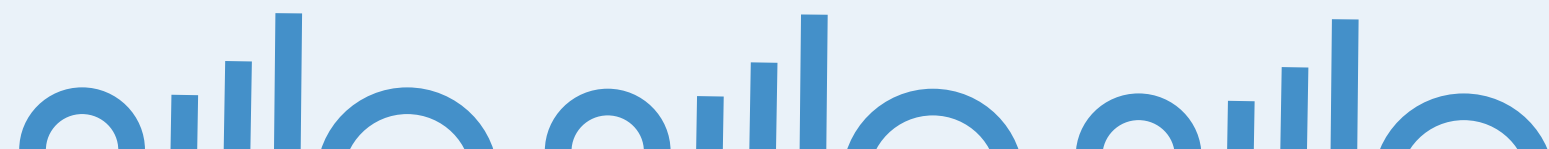
Other key events & initiatives

- ♦ **Advancing the Pipeline:** In addition to the [Pipeline Builder panel discussion](#), the project team held one-on-one meetings between Ghanaian counterparts with potential funders and partners of the Pipeline Builder pilot in Ghana. This included an introductory meeting with Liliana de Sá Kirchknopf of the Swiss State Secretariat for Economic Affairs (SECO), in relation to its new [SDG Impact Finance Initiative](#), and Banque Pictet, who acknowledged that the Pipeline Builder project was mature enough now for them to engage.

The Lab played a leading role in enabling the Pipeline Builder to gain visibility during BBW, and specifically with high-level BBW partners. The SDG Lab team also handled all logistical aspects related to the Pipeline Builder event and successfully managed to bring to the session three key supporters from Ghana – two in person and one online. In addition, a concise summary of the session has been prepared on the [outcomes](#).

- ♦ **Measuring the “S” through enhanced data:** The Geneva 2030 Ecosystem, convened by the SDG Lab and International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD), hosted [two data workshops](#) that saw participants engage in dialogue on how to measure the social dimension of sustainable finance. The two workshops, which were attended by a diverse mix of stakeholders from both the finance sector and the sustainable development community, clearly signaled a need and an appetite from the community to tackle the challenges associated with measuring the social impact of investments. The strong response to these two workshops demonstrated how this issue is maturing and the important niche the Lab has in this evolving space. The Lab will respond to this by continuing the work with the Geneva 2030 community on the issue in 2022.
- ♦ **Partnering for gender:** The International Trade Centre, in partnership with the SDG Lab, officially launched the publication [“Twelve lessons in gender lens investing”](#). The report focuses on the lessons learned and shared by financiers and addresses the remaining gaps to meet women-led businesses’ needs. Using its convening role, the Lab brought to the discussion Permanent Representative of Colombia, Alicia Victoria Arango Olmos, and Gwendolyn Zorn, Head of Impact at Phatisa, a private equity fund focusing on sub-Saharan Africa and implementing its own SDG-aligned gender investing strategy.

The dialogue with key stakeholders, including capital providers, women entrepreneurs, government officials and international agencies, provided insights into challenges related to adopting gender lens investing strategies and the actual needs of women-led businesses. The participants expressed strong intention to continue to break silos in discussions and engage during the next iteration of Building Bridges.



Building Bridges 2022—looking ahead

The next iteration of Building Bridges must elevate and take to the next level the momentum created in 2021. Concretely, this means to:

Continue to place front and centre the message of the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda as the unifying focus of sustainable finance.

Continue to “build bridges” among different communities of expertise relevant to sustainable finance and ensure all actors “build bridges” with other parts of the world.

Underscore how sustainable finance is much more than environmental and climate finance. There are 17 SDGs and fighting the climate crisis is just but one of them.

Strengthen the inclusion of the “S” (social dimension) in sustainable investing through a focus on enhancing how impact gets measured, including to serve as a follow up from the Lab’s two data workshops on the topic.

Bring in more of the skeptics and initiate a deliberate ‘fishing out’ of those actors and players that have not been involved in the sustainable finance conversation or who should be engaged but are weary to do so.

Ensure even greater diversity of speakers at the Summit panels and the Week’s side events. At the 2021 edition, representatives from the finance community continued to outnumber those from the UN and other international organizations and Member States, among others.

Propose a “speed dating” format of interactions for more direct and focused conversations between representatives of different communities. The role of a ‘connector’ is necessary to help pair representatives from finance with other sectors. The Lab can play that role, and a dedicated space for this to happen needs to be part of the official Building Bridges programme.



Resources

Recap of livestreams:

- Building Bridges [Summit high-level segment](#)
- [SDG Lab Pipeline Builder event](#) (session starts at 13:13)
- [Twelve lessons in Gender Lens Investing](#) in partnership with the International Trade Centre (session starts at 8:15)

Collaboration to finance the SDGs: a [2-pager](#) by the SDG Lab and IISD on how the development community can collaborate with the finance sector to advance financing for the SDGs.

News articles (in French and with paywall):

- Le Temps - "[Building Bridges: un événement plein de promesses](#)"
- Le Temps - "[Comment est née la conférence Building Bridges](#)"
- Le Temps - "[Building Bridges: un grand pas en avant](#)"

