

Editorial

Editorial for the Special Issue “Business Strategies Concerning the Sustainable Development Goals and the SDG Compass”

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The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) explicitly call for the active involvement of companies in transforming political agreements into real environmental and social changes. This is both a challenge and an opportunity for companies and can lead to a “win-win” scenario in which their contribution to sustainable development provides companies with long-term competitive advantages and new business opportunities. However, achieving the SDGs requires companies not only to “do things differently” by behaving in a way that is more compatible with sustainability, but also to “do different things”.

As stated by António Guterres, Secretary-General of the United Nations, “to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic and deliver global sustainability, we need an urgent rescue effort for the SDGs” [1]. However, in practice, business involvement in achieving the SDGs has been limited [2]. Business contribution to the SDGs requires integrating the SDGs into the core competitive strategy, organizational culture and business model of companies. In this regard, firms must identify “sustainable development trajectories” [3] that enable them to generate positive environmental and social impacts [4] and obtain tangible and intangible economic benefits. Companies that rise to meet this challenge will observe that the SDGs offer meaning and focus to their competitive strategies and value-creation processes.

With these premises, this Special Issue aims to advance the understanding of the possible contributions of companies to the fulfilment of the SDGs and the ways in which integration of SDGs into business strategies can create value for the company and improve firm performance. Thus, the nineteen articles that comprise the Special Issue cover a broad spectrum of topics related to business strategies concerning the SDGs. Broadly speaking, there are a few articles that approach the topic from a theoretical point of view, while most of the papers are empirical studies. Some articles address the SDGs from a generic perspective, while others focus on specific SDGs. The following is a brief summary of the content of each of the articles included in the special issue.

The first article [5] presents a case study examining the impact of the COVID-19 disease in a small Vietnamese early childhood business. In line with SDG 4—Quality Education, early childhood development is key to creating a sustainable generation of adults. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated entrenched inequalities in education, mainly affecting emerging countries where the internet coverage is low [1]. It also has forced companies to reconsider their business model for sustainable economic performance in order to survive in an uncertain environment and contribute to the SDGs. The study shows that business plans are implemented well when the economic environment is stable, but abrupt and destabilizing changes caused by the COVID-19 disease forced the company under study into voluntary liquidation, challenging the assumptions of the theory of planned behaviour.

The second article [6] analyses the strategic engagement with the SDGs of 118 charities serving the First Nations people in Australia. Based on a content analysis of the summary of activities undertaken by these charities to fulfil their mission and a network analysis of the charities’ connections to each other, the authors determined that charities are primarily



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committed to the SDGs most related to social capital, contributing both individually and collectively to their achievement.

In order to measure and evaluate their progress towards the 2030 Agenda and report their contribution to the SDGs, businesses need to develop complete and applicable environmental, social, and governance indicators. In this context, in the third article [7] the need to move from static indicators to “living” indicators is discussed and an innovation in this field is presented: a multi-stakeholder community-based indicators developed by NeXt, a non-profit organization created by consumer associations, trade unions, companies, public administrations, NGOs, and education organizations with the goal of promoting social and environmental responsibility. This approach consists in a dynamic participatory process based on the principles of self-evaluation, stakeholder dialogue and simplification, so that indicators are co-designed by statistical experts, end-users and relevant stakeholders, assuring their quality, relevance, and usefulness. In addition, each indicator is linked with a reference priority SDG and the SDGs Compass platform.

Advocating social causes and issues on social media has proven to be not only an effective marketing strategy, but also a way to contribute to sustainable development, thereby leading to a “win-win” scenario. In this sense, the fourth article [8] analyses more than 2000 posts from popular consumer product brands on two social media platforms (Facebook and Twitter) to explore the ways in which different types of calls to action (e.g., brand programs, external events, games, storytelling, and rewards) drive consumer engagement with CSR-related messages on social media. The research concludes that the most effective CSR messages are those that invite consumers to participate in brand-related programs or games, while rewarding consumers is less effective. Moreover, multiple calls to action in a single message decrease consumer engagement.

The fifth article [9] examines to what extent 13 barriers associated with the adoption of sustainable practices by businesses identified by the prior literature affect small and medium-sized companies belonging to the Brazilian metallurgical sector. Based on a postal survey distributed to 24 experienced managers, the researchers identify the difficulties associated with lack of knowledge and financial resources and incentives for the adoption of sustainable practices as the main barriers affecting companies under study and suggest that governmental support could help Brazilian metallurgical businesses to overcome these barriers, thus advancing towards the achievement of the SDGs.

SDG 13 calls for urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts. The sixth article [10] focuses on the ASEAN region, one of the most affected by climate-related disasters, and assesses the reflection of mitigation efforts made to combat climate change in the actual progress in achieving SDG 13, as measured by the climate change index of the Environmental Performance Index (EPI). The results show that despite the efforts made by ASEAN countries to reduce emissions, their environmental performance on climate change lags behind that of other regions. The findings also show that a country’s wealth and governance positively influence its climate change performance.

In the seventh article [11], a bibliometric analysis of papers focused on the role played by business in the achievement of the SDGs is carried out, determining that research on this topic has experienced significant growth over the years and that Sustainability stands out as the journal with the most publications on the subject. The SDGs that have received the most research attention were SDG 12, SDG 8, SDG 9, and SDG 17. In contrast, SDG 2 and SDG 16 were not analysed individually. According to their topic, the articles were grouped into nine clusters, three of them related to SDG reporting. The articles with the highest research impact address the determinants and nature of SDG reporting as well as the ways in which businesses address the 2030 Agenda.

SDG 12 calls for the adoption of sustainable consumption and production patterns. In particular, the online food-ordering market has grown substantially in the last decade, becoming even more popular due to the COVID-19 pandemic. With these premises, the eighth article [12] analyses the factors affecting the decision to order food through a food-delivery platform. The results obtained from a survey of 1320 consumers in the Thai context

reveal that the perceived ease of use the platform and the perceived usefulness are the main factors explaining such a decision.

The ninth article [13] presents a case study based on information obtained through surveys and workshops with 350 people involved in the process of creating a Local Action Group (LAG) based on the Principles for Responsible Investment in Agriculture and Food Systems (CSA-RAI) in the Junín region (Peru). The analysis demonstrates that LAGs represent an effective governance structure for the implementation and management of rural development projects based on participation and collective action that favours the achievement of the SDGs in rural areas. Thus, the results support the empowerment of civil organizations and their participation in local political decisions related to sustainable rural development.

One of the major environmental problems is pollution from manufacturing businesses and their supply chain. With the results obtained from a sample of Pakistani manufacturing companies, the tenth article [14] analyses the impact of corporate social responsibility (CSR) on sustainable innovation ambidexterity (SIA), sustainable supply chain management (SSCM), and second-order social capital (SOSC). In addition, the mediating effect of the latter two variables on the relationship between CSR and SIA is analysed.

Adopting a systems perspective, the eleventh paper [15] discusses the potential of a new form of organizing, the transformation catalyst (TC), to facilitate the timely achievement of the SDGs. The authors argue that their explicit focus on systems makes TCs better capable of addressing complex problems related to sustainable development and analysing the websites of 27 TCs identified to assess whether their vision, mission, values, and practices are better suited for facilitating the systems-level transformational changes needed to achieve the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs.

Social sustainability in supply chains has received little attention in the literature. As part of social sustainability, many companies have committed to prevent worker rights violations in their extended supply chains. The twelfth article [16] develops “the sustainable supply chain doughnut model” with respect to the SDGs through which the authors investigate worker rights violations in supply chains, determining that they lack all aspects of the social base in regard to workers as one of their key stakeholders.

Sustainable development affects decision-making related to entrepreneurship and innovation, two key issues for economic growth, industrial change, and well-being of citizens. In turn, innovation and entrepreneurship can foster sustainable economic development, in line with the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs. With these premises, the thirteenth article [17] examines the influence of a country’s cultural values and entrepreneurial activity on its levels of technological development, research, and innovation. From a sample of 37 countries, the findings show that some national culture dimensions as well as the country’s entrepreneurial activity rate affect innovation orientation.

The fourteenth article [18] focuses on the logistics operations developed by Brazilian businesses and SDG 9. Based on data obtained through semi-structured interviews with ten experts, the authors relate the structured SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats) matrix and the targets of SDG 9. The findings indicate that strengths identified in the SWOT matrix can be used to drive the achievement of some of these targets, although there are many weaknesses related to infrastructure and innovation that should be addressed.

The fifteenth article [19] focuses on the ways in which prescriptive learning can foster sustainable employee engagement and contribute to the achievement of the strategic objectives of Nigerian pharmaceutical companies, thereby favouring the achievement of SDG 3 and SDG 4. Through a survey of employees of the six most innovative pharmaceutical companies in Nigeria, the authors determine that sustainable employee engagement not only supports the achievement of competitive advantage, but also enables companies to develop adaptive strategies to align with the SDGs and achieve business sustainability. Thus, to the extent that employees adopt proactive and innovative behaviours in their work, companies can develop new products and new ways of conducting sustainable business in

line with the SDGs. In addition, sustainable employee engagement can be strengthened through collaboration in research.

The sixteenth article [20] analyses the ways in which companies' economic performance affects their CSR performance. From data from a sample of 662 Spanish companies in which small companies have a significant weight, the results indicate a negative effect of economic performance on most CSR activities carried out by companies, indicating opportunistic behaviour. The authors also note that the greater pressure from stakeholders on large companies leads them to implement certain CSR actions that small companies do not carry out.

To bridge the current gap between rural and urban areas, the SDGs must be implemented from the bottom up, and local governments must play a key role in achieving them by fostering the overall development of rural areas. In 2015, Indonesia launched an ambitious regional developmental policy, the Village Fund (VF) Program, aimed at enabling villages to manage their economic development programs. The seventeenth article [21] assesses the extent of use of the VF is aligned with the targeted SDGs and which village activities funded by the VF are linked to each SDG. This study provides an overview of the ways in which village leaders address the 2030 Agenda through their preferences in the use of the VF to support engagement to the SDGs. Thus, the authors determined that SDG 9 had the highest VF allocation followed by SDG 11 and SDG 6. In contrast, the lowest allocation corresponds to SDG 15, SDG, and SDG 17 while three SDGs had no allocation at all (namely, SDG 5, SDG 10, and SDG 12).

Agri-food sector plays a key role in sustainable development. Sustainable entrepreneurship in the agricultural sector can contribute to reduce environmental crises and promote the achievement of the SDGs. The eighteenth article [22] analyses the factors affecting the success of entrepreneurs in the agri-food sector. Based on a survey of 86 active entrepreneurs in Iran, the authors identified the following factors that significantly affect the probability of entrepreneurship success as well as the entrepreneur's profits: entrepreneurship experience, risk-taking behaviour, interest rates, and initial capital. The authors suggest that regulators focus on these factors to encourage entrepreneurship and innovation in the agribusiness sector.

Lastly, the nineteenth paper [23] focuses on the Chinese context and analyses the association of corporate philanthropic strategies with the SDGs. The authors focus on four motivations related to the adoption of corporate strategies for the achievement of the SDG-profit maximization (Economics), political interest (Operation), altruistic (Harmony), and managerial utility (Management)-and analyse their relationship with philanthropic donations by Chinese companies. The results indicate that, through charitable donations, Chinese firms mainly seek to obtain corporate legitimacy and benefits in the form of more government subsidies.

In our view, the articles in this Special Issue reflect the multidimensional and inter-related nature of the SDGs and the various ways in which they can be integrated into business strategies at different levels and by different types of organizations.

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