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Title: From Global Goals to Corporate Sustainability Action – an organizational ethnography on cross-level interactions

In 2015 the United Nations set the 17 sustainable development goals (SDGs) to replace the millennium development goals (United Nations, 2015). These 17 goals with 169 targets address governments, the private sector, and the civil society alike. However, the goals do not clearly define actions for the private sector to take to translate these global sustainability goals into practice.

The UN SDGs call all sectors to commonly achieve sustainable development (United Nations, 2015), and the role of the private sector in achieving these goals is growing. While many companies have already integrated environmental aspects in their corporate strategy, focusing on the UN SDGs is advised to bring new insights about ways to improve conditions instead of focusing on reducing harm, as well as integrating environmental with social solutions.

Understanding corporate sustainability as business’ contribution to the SDGs, in this paper, I aim to study when and how the private sector translates these global goals into practice. Findings of my research are based on a nine-month ethnography in a company that has included the SDGs in their corporate strategy. They will be discussed in relation to the (1) “issue selling literature”, which says that e.g. issues being labeled as “urgent” and “feasible” are more likely to result in organizational action than issues that are not (Dutton and Duncan, 1987). Results reveal if and how this applies to the aspirational SDGs. Further, (2) building on the paradox perspective in corporate sustainability research, which acknowledges and accepts tensions between interdependent and sometimes conflicting objectives (Schad et al., 2016; Hahn et al., 2018; Hahn et al., 2015), the research unveils tensions between the internal communication’s risk of perceived SDG-washing and needing to communicate internally to motivate to reach the SDGs, among other findings.

Mobilizing the private sector is key in achieving the UN SDGs. My ethnographic study on when and how the private sector translates the global goals into practice can help companies understand how to identify and promote business behavior aligned with the SDGs. Moreover, these insights may assist policy-makers in facilitating SDG-thinking to mobilize the private sector towards a more sustainable economy.