The Agenda 2030 recognizes the important role of private business activity, investment and innovation to drive productivity, inclusive economic growth and job creation. It does an appeal on its creativity and innovation to solve sustainable development challenges, like reducing poverty and eradicating hunger. The question arises why private businesses should voluntarily engage in the provision of such public goods or values while being principally shareholder value oriented.

Since the launch of the SDGs in 2016, sustainability consultants, impact investors and business councils have started to encourage businesses to engage with the SDGs and these have started to embrace them to various extents according to practitioners’ reports. However, little is known about the extent, nature and drivers of SDG adoption in the policies of large stock listed corporations in this early stage.

This study aims to make an inventory of actual SDG practices as emanating from their sustainability reports among the world’s 2000 largest stock listed corporations in the Forbes Global 2000 list. We quantitatively explore patterns of adoption by correlating SDG mentioning to company attributes such as size, country of origin, industry, UN Global Compact membership, sustainability performance and report characteristics. For 25 leading SDG reporters we qualitatively explore the nature and reasons that companies give for their engagement with the SDGs.

We find that SDG mentioning is strongest among Global Compact members. Surprisingly, companies publishing integrated reports, often regarded as indicative of a shared value approach, refer significantly less to the SDGs. The SDGs are used mostly in content tables indicating relevant themes. Only a few companies explain at this stage more profoundly how they view the relevance of the SDGs for their business strategies. They do not only use stakeholder management arguments, but also mention business opportunities and risk management arguments.

The relevance of the study lies in taking stock of an emerging practice, exploring avenues for better understanding and guiding of SDG involvement and highlighting the need for companies, reporting practitioners and sustainable finance actors to develop improved planning and reporting methodologies.