

All-Inclusive Sustainability? The Sustainable Development Goals at the Antwerp Port Authority

Teaching Notes

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Abstract

Launched in 2015, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) represent an authoritative global agenda to achieve sustainability. Many organizations have been adopting the SDG and linking it to their sustainability strategies. When the Antwerp Port Authority (APA) adopted the SDGs, it initially focused on five out of these 17 goals. After consulting its stakeholders, APA concluded that its initial choice should be replaced by a choice for focusing on the entire set of SDGs. Since 2017, the SDGs constitute the overarching framework for APA's sustainability strategy. This brief case aims to enable students to explore and reflect on business organizational approaches towards the SDGs.

Keywords: Sustainability, sustainable development, Sustainable Development Goals, stakeholders, stakeholder consultation, materiality, maritime sector

Case usage

The case ‘All-inclusive sustainability’ is suited for students of business administration, both on an undergraduate and a graduate level, in general and those interested in sustainability strategy management in particular.

1. Learning Objectives

- Get acquainted with the Sustainable Development Goals
- Explore ways in which organizations may adopt the Sustainable Development Goals
- Develop a critical stance towards the influence of stakeholders on organizational decision-making

2. Discussion Questions

Q1. Is it practically possible and/or desirable for companies to focus on the entire set of 17 SDGs instead of only a few that align with companies’ core business?

Q2. Can the realization of certain SDGs compromise the realization of others? If so, which Sustainable Development Goals may conflict?

Q3. Should organizations always recognize the interests and expectations of their stakeholders?

3. Theory Discussion

The issue of materiality is important in contemporary interpretations of companies’ engagement in sustainability. Stemming from the discipline of accounting, materiality is defined as “the threshold at which sustainability topics become sufficiently important that it should be reported” by an organization (GRI, 2016: 5). While this definition leaves room for interpretation (e.g., important according to whom? What does sufficient mean, exactly?), companies tend to follow similar criteria when identifying material sustainability issues, including the level of (economic) risk topics pose for the organization or factual sustainability impact of the topic on the hand and the level of importance their key stakeholders attribute to these topics on the other (cf. Zadek & Merme, 2003). When a topic scores high on both dimensions, it is identified as a material topic. By implication, this means that topics that do not score high on one of these dimensions are not deemed as material. So, for instance, when a sustainability topic is deemed as important by the company and not by its key stakeholders (as well as the other way around), the company generally decides not to focus on it. It is clear that such an approach could easily ignore sustainability topics that are important to focus on. Interestingly, the SDG framework poses that all SDGs are equally important to all companies, which reflects a very comprehensive interpretation of the roles and responsibilities of companies, also in terms of geographical scope. Hence, from the perspective of the world’s most pressing sustainability challenges, traditional materiality assessments are flawed, urging for reinvestigating methodologies for performing materiality analyses, especially in the context of sustainability.

In addition, materiality analyses tend to ignore the effects of topics of more and lesser importance on each other, potentially distorting the basis of corporate decision-making. This interdependence of sustainability topics especially becomes clear within the SDG framework. In a recent study into an SDG performance index of countries, Wackernagel et al. (2017) showed that high rankings on this index correlated with high per person demands on nature, or ecological footprints. This is an important insight, since it implies that a substantial part of the 2030 Agenda cannot be achieved without putting an additional strain on Earth's limited supply unreplenishable of natural resources and without further comprising global levels ecological quality.

4. Answers to Discussion Questions

A1. As it reflects many of today's most pressing sustainability issues, the scope of the SDGs is immense. As such, it may present organizations with an unattainable challenge. Many organizations would argue that they do not have the resources available, influence, or actual impacts that would legitimize focusing on all 17 SDGs. In addition, many may contend that multiple SDGs do not reflect the (local) context in which they operate. However, some organizations have more sustainability impacts than they are willing or able to recognize, either direct or indirect impacts, while others may feel responsible for the SDGs beyond their impacts. At the same time, organizations make practical considerations when acting on sustainability, which may be perfectly understandable.

A2. The realization of some SDGs may influence the realization of others, both positively and negatively. For instance, it is generally thought that the issue of gender equality (SDG 5) may positively influence other sustainability issues, including eradicating hunger (SDG 2) and decent work and economic growth (SDG 8). On the other hand, decent work and economic growth (SDG 8) may negative impact CO2 emissions and hence compromise SDG 13 (Climate action), 14 (Life below water) and 15 (Life on land).

A3. Whether an organization should always recognize stakeholder interests and expectations, is a matter of opinion, political belief and perhaps worldview. Stakeholders may not be fully aware of (strategic) considerations organizations make or may represent minority interests. A central issue here is whether one thinks if an organization is more than the sum of the interests and expectations of its stakeholders and if an organization should always respect stakeholders' interests and expectations – even if stakeholders are able and willing to put a lot of pressure on the organization. This also relates to the function of stakeholder dialogue: should it be possible, for instance, to agree to disagree?

5. Teaching Tips/Activities

- Have a group of students pick one SDG and challenge them to analyze on which other Sustainable Development Goals the goal of their choice potentially has positive and negative impacts.
- Challenge students to come up with a top-3 of actions they think should be undertaken to realize each of the SDGs, both from a global level and from the perspective of their locality.

- Let students buy a random product in a nearby shop and analyze its sustainability claims and those of its manufacturer – from the perspective of the SDGs.

References

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