Journal of Business Ethics (2022) 180:959–973
https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-022-05189-9

ORIGINALPAPER

Fostering Social Impact Through Corporate Implementation of the SDGs: Transformative Mechanisms Towards Interconnectedness and Inclusiveness

Simona Fiandrino[1] · Francesco Scarpa[2,4] · Riccardo Torelli[3]

Received: 17 April 2020 / Accepted: 21 June 2022 / Published online: 12 July 2022
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Abstract
The United Nations (UN) 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development has considerable potential for achieving a more sustainable future. However, the concrete realisation of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is impeded by how they are implemented by a diverse set of competent agents. This conceptual paper draws on social impact theory to investigate how businesses can utilise the SDG framework to achieve positive social outcomes. We identify two pathways that can guide businesses to improve their SDGs interventions, which entail considering the *interconnections* between the goals that are directly or indirectly affected by the initiative at stake and the *inclusiveness* of the actors affected by the SDGs. Building on the literature on hybrid organising (to frame interconnectedness) and the literature on multi-stakeholder partnerships and deliberative governance (to frame inclusiveness), we discuss a set of organisational mechanisms and transformations that can help businesses ensure that their SDGs interventions are more socially impactful. By doing so, this paper extends the literature on the role of companies for sustainable development and provides some practical implications.

Keywords Sustainable Development Goals · Corporate sustainability · Social impact · Interconnectedness · Inclusiveness · Hybrid organising · Stakeholder engagement · Multi-stakeholder initiative

Introduction

The United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are at the heart of the *UN Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* (UN, 2015, hereinafter the UN Agenda 2030), which was adopted by all UN member states in 2015. The SDGs consist of a framework of 17 core goals and 169 accompanying targets to be reached by 2030, which, as stated by the UN, "provides a shared blueprint for peace and prosperity for people and the planet, now and into the future".[1]

Nevertheless, scholars still disagree about the relevance and efficacy of this framework to guide efforts towards building a more sustainable future. On the one hand, some consider the SDGs as "the most important frame of the global development agenda until 2030" (Van Zanten & Van Tulder, 2018, p. 209) and praise the ambition to tackle major development (e.g., economic growth, responsible production, etc.), humanitarian (e.g., poverty, hunger, disease injustice, etc.), and environmental challenges (e.g., climate change, biosphere integrity, etc.) in the same plan (de Bakker et al., 2020; Maak, 2007; Van Tulder, 2018) with the primary purpose that "no one will be left behind" (UN, 2015, p. 1). On the other hand, some critical voices frame the UN Agenda 2030 as a set of irreconcilable trade-offs and contradictory sustainability goals (Gupta and Vegeling, 2016; Hickel,

✉ Riccardo Torelli
riccardo.torelli2@unicatt.it

Simona Fiandrino
simona.fiandrino@unito.it

Francesco Scarpa
francesco.scarpa@unive.it

1 Department of Management, University of Turin, Corso Unione Sovietica 218 Bis, 10134 Torino, Italy

2 Department of Management, University of Bergamo, Via dei Caniana 2, 24127 Bergamo, Italy

3 Department of Economic and Social Sciences, Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Via Emilia Parmense 84, 29122 Piacenza, Italy

4 Present Address: Department of Management, Ca' Foscari University of Venice, Cannaregio 873, 30121 Venezia, Italy

[1] https://unosd.un.org/content/sustainable-development-goals-sdgs

2019), which tend to prioritise "commercial interests over commitments to universally ensure entitlements to address fundamental life-sustaining needs" (Weber, 2017, p. 400) and cannot lead to win–win solutions (Menton et al., 2020).

In this paper, we interpret the UN Agenda 2030 as a framework that may lead to different sustainability outcomes, depending on how it is implemented by the diverse set of competent agents (Pogge & Sengupta, 2015), including governmental and non-governmental institutions, companies and individual citizens. In other terms, we agree that the SDG framework has a transformative potential (Hajer et al., 2015; Stevens & Kanie, 2016), which can be realised only through appropriate implementation (Bowen et al., 2017; Hajer et al., 2015).

In this paper, we focus on companies' implementation of the SDGs. As noted by Caprani (2016, p. 103), "throughout the SDG development process a consensus maintained that business had a crucial role to play in achieving transformational global development". Much scholarly attention has been devoted to examining the role of businesses for SDGs (Kolk et al., 2017; Mio et al., 2020; Pizzi et al., 2020). For instance, recent studies have investigated how institutional traits influence corporate engagement with the SDGs (Van Zanten & Van Tulder, 2018), the drivers of SDGs reporting (Rosati & Faria, 2019; van der Waal & Thijssens, 2020), how companies can contribute to the enactment of SDGs (Montiel et al., 2021; Van Zanten & Van Tulder, 2021), the process of prioritising the SDGs (Ike et al., 2019) and the role of social and environmental accounting in pursuit of the SDGs (Bebbington & Unerman, 2018; Sobkowiak et al., 2020).

Nevertheless, a comprehensive and dynamic understanding of how companies can implement the SDG framework (Redman, 2018) to make a real and meaningful contribution towards a more sustainable future is still at an embryonic development stage (Pizzi et al., 2020; Van Zanten & Van Tulder, 2021). To contribute to this debate, we draw on social impact theory (Latané, 1981) to delineate the pathways that can help businesses improve their engagement with SDGs. We show that this entails developing actions and initiatives that more seriously consider the *interconnections* between the goals that are directly or indirectly affected by the initiative and the *inclusiveness* of the actors affected by these goals. Building on the literature on hybrid organising (to frame interconnectedness) and on multi-stakeholder partnerships and deliberative governance (to frame inclusiveness), we discuss some organisational mechanisms and transformations that can help businesses improve their ability to achieve positive social impact through SDGs interventions.

By doing so, our research aims to make the following contributions. First, we add to the debate about the connections between business and SDGs (Pizzi et al., 2020) and the role of firms "as sustainable development agents" (Mio et al., 2020, p. 1), discussing some mechanisms that enable organisations to tackle sustainable development based on the SDG framework (Stevens & Kanie, 2016). Second, our paper contributes to advancing the understanding about how to deal with the alleged trade-offs and contradictions within the UN Agenda 2030 (Hickel, 2019). Third, this research engages the debate about the hybrid organisations' ability to make a strong contribution towards sustainable development (Hahn, 2020; Haigh & Hoffman, 2012).

Our research also has practical implications. It can guide firms in adopting some organisational changes to enhance the relevance and the efficacy of their engagement with SDGs. Furthermore, our research can support policymakers in strengthening the UN Agenda 2030 by providing businesses with more guidance on appropriate implementation actions.

The remainder of the paper is organised as follows. The next section offers an overview of the SDG framework. The third section introduces our framing within social impact theory and the criteria of interconnectedness and inclusiveness. In section four, we discuss the mechanisms and organisational transformations that can enable businesses to enhance their social impact through SDGs interventions. Section five discusses the theoretical contributions and practical implications. Finally, we conclude by presenting the limitations and some future research directions.

Paths Towards a Sustainable Future: The Role of the SDGs

Since 1987, when the Brundtland Commission, in the report *Our Common Future*, defined sustainable development as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987, p. 41), most social actors (companies, communities, governments, institutions, etc.) started to think about their activities from a new perspective.

The role of companies in sustainable development has been discussed since at least 1997, when Elkington (1997) developed a framework to evaluate business performance from a broader perspective, including the economic, environmental and social dimensions. This framework is known as the triple bottom line or 3Ps (people, planet and profit). Similarly, Bansal (2005) argued that companies are productive resources of the economy. Consequently, they can have a significant impact on three typical areas of sustainability: environmental integrity, economic prosperity and social equity.

Corporate sustainability is usually defined as "company activities—voluntary by definition—demonstrating the

Fig. 1 The UN Sustainable Development Goals framework

inclusion of social and environmental concerns in business operations and in interactions with stakeholders" (Van Marrewijk, 2003, p. 102). In the last decade, corporate sustainability has been conceptualised as an impact-oriented concept (Martinuzzi & Schönherr, 2019). From this perspective, companies face the challenge of linking activities aimed at social, environmental and economic macro-changes (Vildåsen, 2018) with the ultimate goal of looking at what has been achieved (Martinuzzi & Schönherr, 2019).

The SDG framework offers an important contribution to the impact-oriented interpretation of corporate sustainability by providing a set of clear and precise objectives, underlining the links between them and defining smaller targets to which companies can easily refer and bind themselves (GRI et al., 2015; Le Blanc, 2015). The UN Agenda 2030 is built upon and replaces the Millennium Development Goals which characterised the period from 2000 to 2015 (Caprani, 2016). The first drafts of the SDGs were developed by the Open Working Group of the United Nations General Assembly between January 2013 and September 2014.[2] They were discussed and revised until September 2015, when the final version was released (Fig. 1).

As highlighted in the UN Agenda 2030, the SDGs are intended to "stimulate actions over next 15 years in areas of critical importance for humanity and the planet" and to "take the bold and transformative steps which are urgently needed to shift the world onto a sustainable and resilient path" (UN, 2015, p. 5). The SDG framework includes five broad principles to guide agents' actions: people, planet, prosperity, peace and partnering.

Nevertheless, significant disagreements exist among scholars with regard to the relevance and the efficacy of the SDG framework (Reinwick, 2015). Supporters of the SDGs view this framework as an opportunity to galvanise global efforts against the main societal and environmental challenges of today's world (UN Global Compact, 2019; Van Tulder, 2018). Opponents argue that these goals are too broad, unfocused and unrealistic, and only "a statement of aspirations" (Pogge & Sengupta, 2015, p. 572). Pogge and Sengupta (2016) noted that the SDG framework builds on a diachronic comparison with historical benchmarks rather than on a synchronic comparison with what would be possible, given the available knowledge and resources. The lack of specific guidance about "who is responsible for each proposed goal and who is supposed to do what to get each goal accomplished" (Pogge & Sengupta, 2015, p. 573) is another criticism, as are the alleged trade-offs and contradictions between the sustainability objectives that favour the economic dimension over the social and ecological ones (Gupta & Vegelin, 2016). For instance, Hickel (2019) showed how pursuing continued economic growth as outlined in SDG 8 is not compatible with the environmental sustainability objectives (SDG 12 and SDG 13).

We interpret the UN Agenda 2030 as a framework whose relevance and efficacy for achieving a more sustainable

[2] Open Working Group Proposal for the Sustainable Development Goals. Available at: sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/1579SDGs%20Proposal.pdf.

future depends on how it is implemented by competent agents (Pogge & Sengupta, 2015). The UN Agenda 2030 was originally conceived as a set of aspirational targets that need to be implemented by governments, businesses, civil society, etc. (UN, 2015). We recognise that the implementation activities (Bowen et al., 2017; Hajer et al., 2015) play a crucial role in unlocking the transformative potential of the SDG framework (Stevens & Kanie, 2016).

Focusing on the role of businesses, this paper builds on social impact theory to better understand how companies can apply and implement the UN Agenda 2030 in a sustainable way. In the next section, we discuss two main implementation criteria, interconnectedness and inclusiveness, which can be derived from social impact theory to help companies make a positive social impact by utilising the SDG framework.

Theoretical Considerations

Social Impact Theory

According to Stevens and Kanie (2016), "global collective action does not end when decisions are reached, but these decisions introduce new practises in a complex political process that can bring in new actors, new ideas, and new action for sustainability" (p. 394). This new course of action requires careful reflection on the design and decision-making processes to have an effective impact on true sustainability (Stevens & Kaine, 2016). While neither design ideas nor decision-making processes automatically lead to effective transformations, they allow for a better understanding and evaluation of potential social impacts (Stevens & Kanie, 2016).

Social impacts include all consequences that have a direct or indirect impact on people's lives caused by "any public or private actions that alter the ways in which people live, work, play, relate to one another, organise to meet their needs, and generally cope as members of society" (Burdge & Vanclay, 1996, p. 59).

In the last decade, scholars have extensively dealt with the concept of social impact and in particular with the process of social impact assessment, an operational tool increasingly used by different types of actors (governments, public entities, companies, NGOs) to define which strategies to adopt and with which results and expected impacts for society in general (Alomoto et al., 2021; Kah & Akenroye, 2020). The requests and expectations of stakeholders for common and global objectives, as well as the ever-increasing demand for transparency and accountability, are the decisive pushes towards social impact (Hiruy et al., 2022). The challenges of the UN Agenda 2030 reinforce the need for continuous interaction between companies (and other social actors) and stakeholders to ensure that the latter can understand and evaluate the expected impacts on their lives and that companies have an operational guidance on which paths to take and focus on (Clifford & Barnes, 2022; Paterson-Young & Hazenberg, 2022). Stakeholders do not only act as receivers of the outcomes of the application of these operational tools but must also act as active participants, especially through complex and multi-directional involvement processes (as in multi-stakeholder engagement) (Costa & Pesci, 2022). In addition to the predominant role of social impact assessment, over the last decade it has become clear that targeted investments in particular activities and projects with real impacts on society and/or the environment (the so-called 'Impact Investments') are an effective tool for pursuing SDGs (Islam, 2021).

We further develop this perspective drawing on the theoretical lens of Latanè's (1981) social impact theory, a set of propositions for how to achieve positive social outcomes Thus, this theory can provide the theoretical basis for properly designing and implementing a strategic and operational model aimed at changes and transformations (Fowler et al., 2019). Latané's (1981) theory is based on three different principles/rules: social forces, psychosocial law and multiplication/division of impact. The first is represented by the equation $I = f(SIN)$, which indicates that social impact is affected by strength (S), immediacy (I) and the number of actors (N). Consequently, there is more social impact when the actors are more powerful, when the action is more immediate and when the number of actors is greater. The three elements of the equation are necessary and complement each other. If one element is absent (equal to 0 in the equation), the whole process is invalid. The second rule, ($I = sN$^t), refers to the power of the actors (t) and the number of people (N) multiplied by the scaling constant (s). Its practical application is grounded in psychological and social aspects. The third and last rule refers to the equation $I = f(1/SIN)$. This is the impact division rule, which is closely related to the principle of the diffusion of responsibility. The greater the strength (S), immediacy (I) and number of actors involved (N), the more the social impact will be divided among the different targets to be attained.

The first rule of social impact theory will be used and applied in the remainder of this paper as it can provide valid theoretical/conceptual elements to analyse and model the achievement of positive social impacts through the pursuit of the SDGs. The third rule will be addressed in the final discussion to highlight some limitations inherent in this model of action that social impact theory points out.

In considering the first rule (social forces), we introduce Latané's element of "strength" that refers to the influence, power or intensity that the actor is able to impose on the target. It is related to the amount of available resources (human, relational, financial, intangible, temporal, etc.), but also to the ability to target the problem in the right way and stimulate a concrete response. It is not only a matter of ability to have an impact on the set objective. It refers to the ability to achieve a result and to the subjective characteristics of the actors (such as size, assets, set of relationships, role in society, etc.) that are actively involved in these processes. With this regard, it is important to note that also the power of organisational stakeholders can affect a firm's social impact. According to Michell et al. (1997) stakeholders' power to affect the firm is one of the key attributes in the theory of stakeholder salience, and it is defined as "the extent it has or can gain access to coercive, utilitarian, or normative means, to impose its will in the relationship" (Mitchell et al., 1997, p. 865). Hence, powerful stakeholders can influence corporate engagement with SDGs, for instance by prioritising goals differently (Tang & Tang, 2012) or affecting the value distribution among stakeholders (Boaventura et al., 2020). Williams and Dair (2007) show that the lack of power of those stakeholders who are interested in sustainable technologies represents a barrier for the adoption of these innovations, while Berardi (2013) shows the impact of stakeholders' power on firms' approaches to sustainability.

Although we recognize that the element of "strength" applies to any kind of commitment related to the UN Agenda 2030, it has not been considered in our research because we investigate companies' implementation to the SDGs without focusing on their individual features.

In the following section, we apply the first principle of social impact theory (Social Forces—I = f(SIN)) through immediacy (I) and number of actors involved (N) to the SDG framework to theoretically elaborate on the criteria of interconnectedness and inclusiveness.

Achieving Social Impact Through the SDGs: Interconnectedness and Inclusiveness Criteria

As previously discussed, the UN Agenda 2030 has the potential to act as a strategic, operational and unifying tool to change and improve current approaches to the economy, society and the environment. To transform that potential into reality, we need to understand how this framework can be implemented to achieve a positive social impact. To investigate and facilitate this process, we start by applying the first rule of social impact theory to a company's commitment to the SDGs. First, we focus on the element (I): Immediacy. This refers to the temporal dimension, that is the speed with which one reacts to a problem or need (Latané, 1981), as well as to the removal of the barriers and/or filters that can weaken or limit the social impact. The concept of immediacy echoes with the "deep interconnections and many cross-cutting elements across the new Goals and targets" (UN, 2015, p. 9) in the UN Agenda 2030.

The SDGs and their targets "can be seen as a network, in which links among goals exist through targets that explicitly refer to multiple goals" (Le Blanc, 2015, p. 177). The UN Agenda 2030 also emphasises the relationships between individual objectives, creating widespread and intertwined links between all the SDGs (UN, 2015). Le Blanc (2015) showed how the descriptions of 60 targets refer to at least one goal other than the one to which they are connected, and 19 targets refer to at least three different goals. As argued by Pradhan et al., (2017, p. 1177):

> All the SDGs need to act as a system of interacting cogwheels that together move the global system into the safe and just operating space. No SDG will do that individually, and the whole SDGs should not be seen as an additive structure but as a system of synergistic re-enforcement. Hence, attainments of SDGs will greatly depend on whether synergies can be leveraged and trade-offs identified and tackled.

Therefore, Latané's (1981) notion of immediacy implies that businesses can achieve a social impact through SDGs only if they consider the interconnections, synergies and relationships between the goals and their target (Gore, 2015). Achieving the SDGs requires a series of changes and transformations that can be accomplished only through a holistic and multidisciplinary vision and approach (Filho et al., 2018). Thus, when implementing an SDG initiative, companies should consider that the results achieved with regard to a specific goal will inevitably have an impact on other goals. For instance, common pool resources (Gabaldon & Gröschl, 2015) and marine protected areas (MPAs) have become compelling areas of ecosystem-based management due to ecosystem decline and a global environmental crisis that affects all natural heritage sites. MPAs constitute a valuable territory of SDGs implementation because there is a need to harmonise the goals and expectations of various categories of stakeholders, ranging from the institutional to the workforce levels. Therefore, to protect biodiversity and enhance the resilience of the natural area it is necessary to engage all stakeholders. The institutionalisation of MPAs positively contributes to SDG 14—target 14.5 (the conservation of coastal and marine areas), leading to the protection of the marine ecosystem, marine biodiversity and coastal area. However, this initiative also affects the local fishing industry and the community. Consequently, its impact extends to SDG 1 (poverty eradication) and SDG 2 (food security) and depends on transparent and effective governance and the co-management of the MPAs (Edgar et al., 2014; Nilsson et al., 2018). If the management of the MPAs reconciles multiple interests with stakeholder empowerment actions based on reciprocal trust, knowledge-sharing, a balanced relationship between powerful and powerless stakeholders and, consequently, dialogue and training, even SDG 4 (quality education) is achieved. In fact, when fishermen—generally considered to be low-power stakeholders—are fully engaged as decision-makers, they become spokespersons and foster an entrepreneurial mindset to enhance new business models in the local community (Freeman et al., 2018). This may lead to the improvement of SDG 8 (decent work and economic growth) because a shared vision of conservation and responsible development of the MPAs has been enhanced by this effective co-management based on stakeholder empowerment.

Some scholars have investigated how an integrated approach to the SDGs can be implemented (Camacho, 2015; Nilsson et al., 2016, 2018). Camacho (2015) noted that SDGs connections establish priorities by distinguishing objectives as ends in themselves against goals as instrumental preconditions for reaching other objectives. That can be the case for food security and adequate nutrition, which can be considered to be antecedents for ending hunger. In such a vein, the more abstract aim ('end hunger') will arise as a consequence (Camacho, 2015, p. 20). Similarly, according to Nilsson et al. (2018), the achievement of better prioritisation is also favoured by the application of an SDG interactions framework. This framework supports the definition of possible interrelationships between the targets and goals and the differentiation between positive (where the achievement of one goal favours the achievement of the other) and negative (where the achievement of one goal hinders the achievement of the others) relations. Understanding the interconnections and systematically exploring them, beyond simply addressing trade-offs, can provide valuable support to the decision-making process and allows to define synergies and implement sustainability actions that maximise positive relationships and minimise negative ones (Nilsson et al., 2016).

In summary, applying the element Immediacy from Latané's (1981) social impact theory equation in the context of SDGs implies that companies can achieve social impact through SDGs involvement only if, and to the extent to which, they address the relevant interconnections between the goals and targets.

The third element of the equation on social forces concerns the number of subjects/actors that are active in the process (N) who have an influence on the objective. It is evident that the greater the number of actors who take action to change something, the greater the final social impact, with the same level of strength and immediacy. When this principle is applied in the context of the implementation of the UN Agenda 2030, it is clear that the number of actors involved is directly linked to the principle of inclusiveness, that is the ability to include different categories of stakeholders in the process of mobilisation and commitment to SDGs. Indeed, the UN Agenda 2030 highlights the importance of partnerships and collaborations among actors and addresses the global and cross-border challenges that affect a multiplicity of actors with a variety of interests and needs. As noted by Pogge and Sengupta (2015), both the goals and the targets fail to identify the recipients of the proposed actions and who should be responsible for accomplishing what each goal requires. The SDGs cannot be achieved by one actor acting alone. Their realisation requires a profitable collaboration among all the different actors involved in sustainable development. It has been suggested that one of the reasons for the failure of the MDGs was due to the lack of a choral, coordinated and shared commitment among different sectors, institutions, nations and actors (Le Blanc, 2015). The importance of networking and collaboration among actors is clearly highlighted in SDG 17 (partnerships for the goals). Encouraging the joint engagement of a multiplicity of actors, such as governmental and non-governmental institutions, businesses and individual citizens, appears to be a critical condition for realisation of the UN Agenda 2030.

In summary, the application of the element Number from Latané's (1981) social impact theory equation in the context of SDGs implies that companies can achieve social impact through SDGs involvement only if, and to the extent to which, they mobilise all the relevant actors involved in the goals at stake.

Implementation Mechanisms to be(com)ing Socially Impactful Through the SDGs

Drawing on social impact theory, we present two pathways that can help businesses make a meaningful social impact through their SDGs interventions: seriously addressing the interconnections between the SDGs that are directly or indirectly affected by the initiative at stake and fostering the inclusion of all relevant actors. In this section, we develop a theoretical model that explains how businesses can advance on these paths by implementing appropriate mechanisms and transformations, derived from the literature on hybrid organisations (to frame interconnectedness) and on multi-stakeholder partnerships and deliberative governance (to frame inclusiveness).

Enhancing Interconnectedness: Hybrid Organising Mechanisms

The social impact made by companies embracing the SDGs is a function of their ability to adopt an integrative approach to the UN Agenda 2030 by managing the interactions between the multiple goals. As stated by Van Zanten and Van Tulder (2021, p. 13), "companies' contributions to sustainable development stand to be improved if they contribute to nexuses of integrated SDGs, rather than treating the SDGs as isolated silos". Thus, when pursuing an initiative for SDGs, companies must use their capacity to consider and act on all the goals that are directly or indirectly affected by their intervention. Sustainability actions focused on a single SDG entail the risk of generating negative repercussions in any other areas (Camacho, 2015), compromising the overall social impact of corporate sustainability efforts. Atomistic engagement on an individual goal is typical of firms framing their SDGs involvement around the business case logic (Schaltegger & Burritt, 2018), which leads to a contingent selection of the sustainability issues that better align with and contribute to corporate financial performance (Salzmann et al., 2005).

However, moving towards more integrated and holistic SDGs interventions raises serious challenges for companies since it demands that they accept and embrace the tensions among different sustainability goals (Hahn et al., 2015). In corporate sustainability, tensions refer to competing and contradictory elements between economy, society, and the environment and/or between present and future temporal contexts (Hahn et al., 2015; Van der Byl & Slawinski, 2015). These contradictory sustainability elements are commonly viewed as paradoxical because they are interrelated and persistent over time (Van der Byl & Slawinski, 2015). This means that economic, social and environmental goals "seem logical when considered in isolation but irrational, inconsistent and even absurd when juxtaposed" (Smith & Lewis, 2011, p. 386). Van der Byl and Slawinski (2015) have identified four approaches in dealing with sustainability tensions: the win–win approach aligns/optimises sustainability elements; the trade-off approach choses one sustainability element over another; the integrative approach shifts the focus from economic objectives to social and/or environmental one; the paradox approach accepts and explores tensions. Therefore, applying a paradox perspective on corporate sustainability means to accept tensions and address different sustainability objectives simultaneously—even if they are conflicting—rather than seeking to align environmental and social aspects with financial performance to eliminate tensions—as the business case does (Hahn et al., 2018). A paradox perspective creates "leeway for superior business contributions to sustainable development because it regards environmental and social concerns as an end in themselves, not just as a means to the end of profit maximization" (Hahn et al., 2018, p. 235) by developing a wide range of differentiated knowledge, competences, abilities, practises and processes that embrace tensions rather than eliminating them (Lüscher & Lewis, 2008).

To understand how businesses can successfully address these challenges in the application of a paradox perspective, we draw on the literature on hybrid organisations, which are defined as firms that combine and integrate multiple identities, institutional logics, organisational forms and/or societal-level rationales (Battilana et al., 2017). Several authors have discussed how hybrid businesses are distinct from companies practising mainstream corporate sustainability practises (Haigh & Hoffman, 2012), and have emphasised their potential for strong contributions to sustainability (Hahn, 2020; Hestad et al., 2021; Tabares, 2021). Other studies have investigated how hybrids can sustain their efforts over time, despite the tensions arising from integrating multiple and conflicting elements (Davies & Doherty, 2019; Mair et al., 2015). Therefore, we see hybrid organising as a framework that businesses can use to embrace a more serious and successful approach to the SDGs-interconnectedness. We drew on current studies investigating how hybrid organisations can sustain their efforts over time to derive a set of organisational mechanisms and transformations that can help companies (more) effectively address the SDGs-interconnections:

(1) *Role of leaders*. Organisational leaders have a prominent role in guiding and supporting other members to combine divergent aspects (Cornelissen et al., 2021; Kannothra et al., 2018). Leaders can re-figure and re-ground prior labels and prevailing understandings, in "a way in which alternative understandings can be combined and 'laminated', or stacked, on one another" (Cornelissen et al., 2021, p. 1325). Through their thinking, talking and actions, leaders should guide other organisational members to form an integrative and holistic understanding of the UN Agenda 2030 to enable them to arrive at sustainability initiatives that combine, and implement, multiple and conflicting goals. Teaching and reinforcing the behaviours and values desired in an organisation's members, socialisation processes and systems must be considered (Battilana & Dorado, 2010).

(2) *Governance mechanisms*. Governance is a crucial organisational mechanism to combine and balance multiple goals continuously. A key governance mechanism includes a board membership that does not prioritise representatives of one dimension of sustainable development (Mair et al., 2015). The governing board plays a critical role in reconciling potentially competing goals by developing appropriate control strategies for monitoring SDGs interventions in a way that is explicitly tied to measuring the contribution to the UN Agenda 2030 as a whole (Ebrahim et al., 2014). A second mechanism, selective coupling (Pache & Santos, 2013) can be used to deal with a diverse range of pressures on sustainability issues. This involves the selective adoption and enactment of elements associated with different SDGs. Third, when hiring, priority should be given to people with individual capabilities in line with the conflicting SDGs the organisation is attempting to address, to ensure the success and the sustainability of an integrated approach to the UN

Agenda 2030 (Battilana & Dorado, 2010; Mair et al., 2015). Finally, the use of spaces of negotiation, where organisational members in charge of different sustainability areas can discuss and agree on how to handle the trade-offs, may provide a mechanism to successfully coordinate differentiated staff with competing sustainability interests (Battilana et al., 2015).

(3) *Turning antagonistic objectives into complementarities*. Hybrid organisations create value through unique "combinations of assets that market incumbents have neglected due to their perceived antagonistic nature" (Hockerts, 2015, p. 84). Businesses can improve their ability to address the interconnections between SDGs either by identifying hidden complementarities or by developing new ones between different sustainability objectives. This demands that businesses address competing objectives and outcomes through a process of sensemaking, which involves "an iterative cycle of action and retrospective interpretation to generate stable meaning and organized action" (Jay, 2013, p. 140). This approach seems particularly relevant to help companies develop innovative solutions to reconcile SDG 8 with environmental SDGs, such as SDG 13 (Hickel, 2019), by developing products or organisational processes that sustain a firm's economic growth in ways that contribute to combating climate change. For instance, Patagonia's commitment to make products that last for years contributes to reducing consumption while simultaneously helping the firm achieve a competitive advantage by offering high-quality goods.

To sum up, building on literature on hybrid organising, we suggest that leaders, governance mechanisms and turning antagonistic objectives into complementarities can help businesses to improve their ability to develop SDGs initiatives which address more seriously the interconnections between goals.

Enhancing Inclusiveness: Multi-Stakeholder Initiatives

As previously noted, achieving the SDGs requires the joint efforts of multiple actors in tackling societal issues (Van Tulder, 2018). Multi-stakeholder partnerships "are utilized not only to implement global sustainable development goals such as the SDGs but also to feature prominently in adjacent issues such as climate change, biodiversity, and natural disasters" (Pattberg & Wildenberg, 2016, p. 49). The purpose of these partnerships is to develop multi-stakeholder initiatives (MSIs) that bring together a range of stakeholders to create governance solutions for social and environmental problems (Moog et al., 2015, p, 470; see de Bakker et al., 2019 for a cross-disciplinary literature review). An MSI is characterised by collaboration, a focus on an issue and a regulative approach. First, an MSI brings together a wide range of different actors, who collaborate to find a solution to a common problem. According to Mena and Palazzo (2012, p. 535), MSIs "result from the cooperation of at least two of the following actors: governments, corporations and civil society". MSIs are issue driven: they emerge when a particular problem becomes urgent for a number of stakeholders who believe they need to do something about it but cannot approach it on their own (Airike et al., 2016). Thus, an MSI brings different actors together to work on a specific issue (Roloff, 2008). Finally, MSIs have been commonly conceptualised as "private governance mechanisms" (Mena & Palazzo, 2012, p. 528; Soundararajan et al., 2019, p. 386) or, similarly, as "self-regulatory governing arenas" (Rasche, 2012, p. 679).

Ways of enhancing the governance of MSIs have been criticised. First, some actors may attempt to shirk their commitment to MSIs' challenges. Second, it may be difficult to encourage relevant actors, guarantee an open and transparent process of decision-making and decouple managerial decisions and processes. These difficulties may lead to poorly effective solutions. Third, "large power asymmetries in terms of sheer financial and human resources and information can be detrimental to trust among members from different sectors of society" (Pattberg & Widerberg, 2016, p. 47).

Literature on multi-stakeholder partnerships and deliberative governance (Derkx & Glasbergen, 2014; Dryzek, 2009; Pattberg & Widerberg, 2016; Soundararajan et al., 2019) suggest that three key aspects of governance architecture can sustain MSIs: collective stakeholder orientation (the posture of a MSI's participants), deliberative democracy (decision-making based on inclusive, competent and respectful dialogue) and meta-governance (the 'organisation of self-organisation' or the 'regulation of self-regulation'). We posit that these governance mechanisms can be useful for companies to enhance the degree of inclusiveness in their SDGs initiatives, and we provide the following related arguments:

1. Collective stakeholder orientation. The achievement of a high degree of inclusiveness in firms' SDGs initiatives requires companies to embrace a collective stakeholder relationship. Maintaining relationships with ìstakeholders means that companies take honest actions that consider the consequences of their decisions (Noland & Phillips, 2010) and engage in future exchange relationships through stakeholder connectedness (Crane, 2020) and empowerment (Freeman et al., 2018) to maintain long-lasting relationships with stakeholders (Moratis & Brandt, 2017; Provasnek et al., 2018). A stakeholder orientation acknowledges stakeholders' reciprocal interests (Zadek & Raynard, 2002) and implements stakeholder engagement as a precondition for organisational decision-making (Richter & Dow, 2017, p. 428). Stakeholder engagement is the practice of managing stakeholders' interests and enhancing value creation (O'Riordan & Fairbrass, 2014) with an integrated mindset of how companies and stakeholders actually work together (Harrison & Wicks, 2013; Kujala & Sachs, 2019). Effective stakeholder engagement examines stakeholder relations, communicates with stakeholders, learns with and from stakeholders and implements a joint decision-making process (Freeman et al., 2017; Kujala & Sachs, 2019). This means translating simple one-way communication into dialogue between companies and stakeholders to cultivate the vital tasks of listening to and learning from one another (O'Riordan & Fairbrass, 2014) and building collaborative partnerships in pursuit of common goals (Freeman et al., 2017).

2. Deliberative democracy. A second mechanism to enhance the degree of inclusiveness in firms' SDGs initiatives is based on deliberative democracy. Deliberative democracy is the political process through which ''non-governmental organizations, civil movements, and other civil society actors map, filter, amplify, bundle, and transmit private problems, values, and needs of the citizens'' (Scherer & Palazzo, 2011, p. 918). In the context of sustainable development, deliberation is a means to initiate decentralised voluntary collaboration and address collective problems related to societal and environmental challenges (Soundararajan et al., 2019). A deliberative system induces noncoercive reflection, connects claims to more general principles and, ultimately, impacts collective decisions or social outcomes. Thus, with deliberative democracy, actors carefully examine a problem or an issue, identify possible solutions, establish or reaffirm criteria and use these criteria to find an optimal solution (Carpini et al., 2004). Deliberation contributes to global governance composed of multiple actors, including businesses and civil society organisations (Voegtlin & Scherer, 2017) as the architecture for building multi-stakeholder partnerships.

3. Meta-governance structure. Meta-governance is ''an indirect form of governing that is exercised by influencing various processes of self-governance'' and is aimed at ''enhancing coordinated governance in a fragmented [regulatory] system based on a high degree of autonomy for a plurality of self governing networks and institutions" (Sørensen, 2006, p. 100) and overcomes the risk of 'conflictive fragmentation' of uncoordinated and institutional arrangements, often leading to functional overlap and competition among initiatives and norms (Biermann et al., 2009, in Pattberg & Widerberg, 2016, p. 47). Global governance facilitates innovations for sustainable development and the SDGs by providing incentives for businesses to collectively participate in problem solving. These incentives include access to information, reputational benefits and the prospect of minimising problems of agency and free riding by means of increasing transparency (Voegtlin & Scherer, 2017, p. 238). Enhancing a global governance architecture, the problem structure on the social and political contexts, entrepreneurial leadership and a proper goal-setting process require thoughtful consideration in the start-up phase of a partnership. Then, transparent procedures, adequate management skills, active monitoring and reporting and sustained funding and feedback-loops for higher-level learning can only be designed and implemented for tailor-made solutions rather than a ''one-size fits all'' approach (Pattenberg & Widerberg, 2016).

Therefore, we posit that companies can enhance the degree of inclusiveness in their SDGs initiatives by implementing collective stakeholder orientation, deliberative democracy and meta-governance structures as be(ing) part of their DNA.

Discussion: Theoretical and Practical Contributions

This conceptual paper makes theoretical and practical contributions to the field. From a theoretical perspective, it firstly advances the academic debate of the role of businesses for SDGs (Pizzi et al., 2020; Mio et al., 2020). Drawing on social impact theory, we presented a theoretical model that depicts how companies can improve their ability to be socially impactful through the SDG framework (Fig. 2).

By doing so, our research also contributes to the sustainable development literature, since it reconciles the contrasting positions on the relevance and efficacy of the UN Agenda 2030, suggesting to focus on the implementation activities from the competent agents, such as companies. Furthermore, this paper refines the literature on hybrid organising and sustainable development (Hahn, 2020; Haigh & Hoffman, 2012) by presenting the mechanisms which enable hybrid organisations to translate apparently contradictory SDGs into opportunities.

Our model shows how companies can enhance their social impact through the SDGs by taking more seriously the interconnectedness of the goals and the inclusiveness of actors. First, we discussed the role of leaders, the acknowledgement of complementaries rather than trade-offs and governance mechanisms as those organisational changes that can enhance companies' capacity to take more seriously the interconnectedness of the SDGs. These mechanisms help businesses to embrace a more holistic approach when pursuing the SDGs, rather than undertaking atomistic initiatives focused on individual goals related to their core business. Second, we propose stakeholder orientations, deliberative democracy and meta-governance structure as mechanisms that can enhance companies' ability to develop more inclusive SDGs initiatives.

Furthermore, we argue that the criteria of interconnectedness and inclusiveness complement each other. On the one hand, the interconnectedness of the SDGs can be addressed

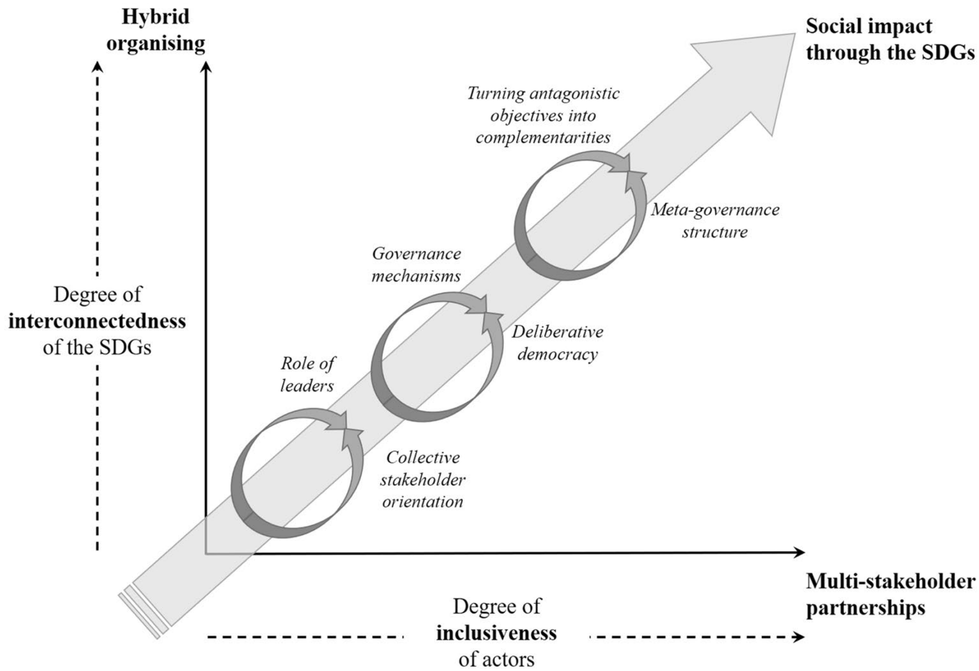

Fig. 2 Conceptual model to enhance companies' social impact through SDGs' implementation process

by considering the complementary nature of the different values against the maximisation of a single value that consequently polarises a set of decisions (Van Der Linden & Freeman, 2017). This requires to balance different stakeholders' claims (e.g., preserving the natural environment for future generations, dealing with voiceless and low-power stakeholders) (Freeman et al., 2018) and to consider "the jointness of stakeholder interests…(as) a question of value" (Freeman, 2010, p. 15). On the other hand, the inclusiveness of actors can be addressed with a deliberation process in which various actors with different backgrounds and perspectives can identify the synergies and interconnections that might not be evident for an actor acting alone. Therefore, pursuing the inclusiveness of actors for the SDGs implies that companies should build and maintain relationships with stakeholders with a cooperative logic by considering SDGs' multifaceted interconnectedness as inherently tied together.

From a practical viewpoint, our model can help companies improve their use and implementation of the SDGs framework, suggesting how to design and focus on the interconnectedness of the SDGs and the inclusiveness of actors. Thus, we presented some key organisational and governance mechanisms that companies should consider throughout all stages of the SDGs' implementation process. Furthermore, this paper addresses, in practical terms, the underlying challenges that companies may face during the implementation phase when addressing the interconnectedness of the SDGs and the inclusiveness of actors. Possible challenges include passive or instrumental interactions between companies and other actors, the 'bystanders' effect in relation to the willingness to take responsibilities, and the open-endedness concerning the outcomes of stakeholder engagement. First, passive or instrumental reciprocal interactions between companies and their environments can jeopardise the interconnectedness of the SDGs. Being a passive network member or a purposeful instrumental actor (Lashitew et al., 2020) is counterproductive for this interconnectedness. Indeed, being passive does not proactively stimulate positive externalities, while instrumentality is not sufficient to prevent negative externalities. Second, achieving the inclusiveness of actors is a compelling and complex issue, which creates a "risk of the 'bystanders' effect: all parties have to take on responsibility, but they find the risk too high to do it on their own" (Van Tulder & Keen, 2018, p. 322). Therefore, a willingness to take joint responsibility is required, but this can be problematic to achieve. Third, leaders and managers face challenges when building and nurturing social ties, as these processes require significant time and resources. Thus, stakeholder engagement is a precarious accomplishment that depends on the contextual specificities at hand (Spicer et al., 2004). Therefore, leaders should acknowledge the open-endedness concerning the outcomes of stakeholder engagement when building stakeholder participation, inclusion, and democracy. To do so, they could take iterative steps by addressing design questions based on (1) a problem and context analysis, (2) a stakeholder analysis, (3) an analysis of the intended changes, and (4) assumptions grounded in evidence (Van Tulder & Keen, 2018). In addition, they could implement process and learning components, such as intervention strategies and critical conditions analysis (Van Tulder & Keen, 2018). If companies can tackle these issues, they can implement the SDGs with a positive social impact.

Concluding Remarks

In this paper we have theoretically elaborated how companies can implement the UN Agenda 2030 to make a positive social impact as 'sustainable development agents'. Drawing on social impact theory, we have presented the interconnections between the goals that are directly or indirectly affected by the initiative and the inclusiveness of the actors affected by the SDGs as pathways to be(com) ing socially impactful through the SDGs. Building on the literature on hybrid organising (to frame interconnectedness) and on the literature on multi-stakeholder partnerships and deliberative governance (to frame inclusiveness), we have developed a model which describes the path to enhance firms' social impact through SDGs. This highlights the importance of the joint efforts to shape the interplay between the interconnectedness of the SDGs and the inclusiveness of actors.

Our research is not without limitations. The main shortcoming is that our model is based on desk research. Thus, it needs to be empirically tested and refined by further studies. Moreover, our model is based on two elements of social impact theory which led to considering inclusiveness and interconnectedness as the only core criteria for achieving the UN Agenda 2030. However, we lacked to discuss the third rule of the social impact theory equation and other important requirements, such as the intensity of wickedness, institutional void and complexity (Van Tulder, 2018). A second limitation is that our study does not consider institutional factors and different cultural environments, even if they can influence how companies behave for the SDGs.

Despite these drawbacks, we consider this study and the stream of research on the role of companies for the SDGs to be a compelling arena that deserves further scrutiny. In particular, our research opens new venues to empirical research on which case studies may be fertile ground for testing and refining our model. Additionally, future longitudinal studies can examine how, and under which conditions, companies change their form of engagement with the SDGs over time, implementing different types of initiatives and/or exhibiting different orientations towards the UN Agenda 2030.

To conclude, companies can play an essential role in tackling societal and planetary sustainability challenges and, then, in achieving the SDGs. The key challenge is to understand how to pursue a harmonious balance between addressing the interconnections of the SDGs in a systematic way and addressing the inclusiveness of actors in a collaborative way, in order to make a real contribution towards a more sustainable future.

Acknowledgements We are grateful to the participants of the GRONEN Reading Group 21st Session for their constructive comments and suggestions. We thank Silvana Signori and Edward R. Freeman for their suggestions on earlier versions of the article. We also benefited significantly from the useful feedback of two anonymous reviewers. We are grateful to the guest editors of this special issue.

Funding Open access funding provided by Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore within the CRUI-CARE Agreement.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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