

CORPORATE SUSTAINABILITY IN THE AGE OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS: A NEXUS APPROACH

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1. INTRODUCTION

In 2015, the leaders of all countries have adopted 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as an overarching sustainable development agenda. In the words of United Nations (UN) Secretary-General António Guterres, the 17 SDGs seek to *“free humanity from poverty, secure a healthy planet for future generations, and build peaceful, inclusive societies as a foundation for ensuring lives of dignity for all”* (UN, 2017:4). For the SDGs to be achieved by 2030, the private sector’s causal role in interconnected sustainable development challenges has to be addressed (Scheyvens, Banks, and Hughes 2016; Kourula, Pisani, and Kolk 2017; Pogge and Sengupta 2015; Kumi, Arhin, and Yeboah 2014). At the same time, companies’ unique capabilities in, for example, innovation, developing new business practices, and mobilizing financial resources, can deliver on sustainability goals (Scheyvens, Banks, and Hughes 2016; Hajer et al. 2015; Lucci 2012; Porter and Kramer 2011; UN Global Compact 2017). Companies are thus not only seen as part of sustainable development’s problem, but also of the solution (Kolk and van Tulder 2010). The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the intergovernmental agreement outlining the SDGs, reflects this position: *“We acknowledge the role of the diverse private sector, ranging from micro-enterprises to cooperatives to multinationals ... in the implementation of the new Agenda”* (United Nations, 2015:10).

The call on companies to reduce negative and increase positive impacts on sustainable development is as timely as it is urgent. Theories related to corporate sustainability, the main concept used to address the role of companies in sustainable development¹, have become part and parcel of international business research (Starik and Turcotte 2014; Hahn et al. 2017). However, most studies ask why companies would engage in corporate sustainability and what is in it for them, rather than investigating how a company impacts sustainable development (for discussions, see e.g. Hahn et al., 2017; Kolk, 2016). In doing so, the business case for corporate sustainability – following a win-win paradigm - has been frontloaded in extant research (Hahn et al. 2010; Van der Byl and Slawinski 2015). These efforts have been valuable for legitimising corporate sustainability research (Van der Byl and Slawinski 2015).

But because such studies are predominantly linearly focused on corporate and industrial effects (Whiteman, Walker, and Perego 2013), research following the business case for sustainability implicitly ignores the interactions of companies with the social-ecological systems in which they are embedded (Williams et al. 2017). It remains silent on the fact that win-win scenarios might not materialise and that trade-offs and even dilemmas between corporate impacts on financial and sustainability ends, as well as among sustainability themes themselves, have to be navigated (Hahn et al. 2014; Van der Byl and Slawinski 2015; Hahn et al. 2010, 2017; Margolis and Walsh 2003). Given that the status quo of corporate sustainability is unsustainable (Lozano 2015) there is a need to go beyond the business case for corporate sustainability (Dyllick and Hockerts 2002) and thereby 'beyond business as usual' (Scheyvens, Banks, and Hughes 2016).

To be sure, this discussion does not necessarily mean that companies are unwilling to effectively address the interconnected sustainability challenges that are relevant in their social-ecological systems. It could also imply that companies find it difficult to understand how their actions impact specific sustainable development themes, how these themes are interconnected, and what their implications are for today's as well as tomorrow's generations across different geographic locations (Hahn et al. 2015; Slawinski and Bansal 2015; Williams et al. 2017). It has long been asserted that ambiguity can arise in understanding sustainability issues, in comprehending the implications of these issues for organisations, and in delineating ways to respond to these issues (Sharma 2000; Wijen 2014). This ambiguity could mean that companies face serious managerial and strategic difficulties in "making it work" in practice (van Tulder, Verbeke, and Strange 2014). Hence while one challenge for companies to contribute to sustainable development is to better understand their impacts on the social-ecological systems in which they are embedded (Marcus, Kurucz, and Colbert 2010; Starik and Kanashiro 2013; Whiteman, Walker, and Perego 2013; Williams et al. 2017), a follow-up challenge is to articulate how corporate sustainability policies that contribute to sustainable development could look like, and what is needed to implement such policies (Hahn et al. 2017).

This conceptual paper aims to shift the status quo of corporate sustainability by exploring how companies can better contribute to sustainable development. We firstly argue that the SDGs can be understood as the ends that corporate sustainability has to pursue. But because the SDGs spell out diverse sustainability themes, it is nearly inevitable that tensions in corporate sustainability arise. Dealing with such tensions is complex and likely to require a paradox perspective to corporate sustainability (section 2). In section 3 we build on recent advances in sustainability sciences to explore how nexus approach may accelerate contributions to the SDGs. We apply this nexus approach to the corporate realm in section 4. A nexus approach to corporate sustainability contributes to the literature by clarifying how a company is embedded in the social-ecological systems that determine sustainable development. Moreover, by integrating the SDGs across different sectors a nexus approach helps improve the coherence of policies that intend to contribute to the SDGs.

By arguing how corporate sustainability policies can better contribute to sustainable development this paper sheds light on a too long overlooked topic in the corporate sustainability literature. We respond to diverse calls for interdisciplinary research in international business research in general (e.g. Cheng, Birkinshaw, Lessard, & Thomas, 2014), and on the role of business in society in specific (e.g. Kolk, 2016; McWilliams, Siegel, & Wright, 2006), by integrating perspectives from the sustainable development and organizational/management fields. The need to study corporate sustainability framed in the context of the post-2015 development agenda (Kolk 2016; Van Zanten and Van Tulder 2018), with particular reference to the diverse linkages among SDGs (Kourula, Pisani, and Kolk 2017), is at the heart of the paper.

2. COMPANIES AND THE SDGS: A NEED FOR IMPROVED SUSTAINABILITY MANAGEMENT

2.1 The SDGs as the ends of corporate sustainability

Corporate sustainability “refers to a company’s activities [...] demonstrating the inclusion of social and environmental concerns in business operations and in interactions with stakeholders” (van Marrewijk & Werre, 2003: 107) and it emphasises the benefits that businesses are expected to deliver to society in the long run (Schwartz and Carroll 2008). As such, the concept of corporate sustainability is frequently used to convey an organisation’sⁱⁱ management – including the formulation, implementation, and evaluation – of decision and actions related to sustainable development (cf. Starik & Kanashiro, 2013).

However, sustainable development is a complex, often contested topic. It is not an end state that can be achieved, but a ‘moving target’ that is continuously changing and improving (Gaziulusoy, Boyle, and McDowall 2013; WCED 1987). It includes economic, social, and environmental aspects that are relevant to today’s as well as future generations (cf. WCED, 1987). Defining sustainable development is challenging and most definitions are too general to include the diversity of challenges within the concept’s scope. This non-specificity has the advantage of being easy to agree to (Giddings, Hopwood, and O’Brien 2002; Robinson 2004). But without a shared and concrete understanding of what sustainable development encompasses and seeks to achieve, it is difficult to define what role companies have to play in contributing to sustainable development. Hence, a more tangible understanding of sustainable development is needed for companies to meaningfully contribute to sustainable development (Baumgartner 2014).

The SDGs provide a specific understanding of sustainable development and can therefore help meet this need. The 17 SDGs with 169 supporting targets and 300+ indicators are a comprehensive view of sustainable development. The SDGs seek to stimulate action in five areas in particular: i) *People*, meaning the ending of poverty and hunger and the realisation that all human beings can fulfil their potential in dignity and equality; ii) *Planet*, or the determination to protect the planet from degradation; iii) *Prosperity*, including the objective that everybody can enjoy prosperous and fulfilling lives; iv) *Peace*, which affirms that sustainable development and peace are mutually dependent; and v) *Partnership*, which calls on a revitalised Global Partnership for Sustainable Development (UN, 2015). The SDGs are generally considered as the leading frame of the global development agenda until 2030 (Kolk 2016; Pattberg and Widerberg 2016; Sachs 2015). Through their global adoption and by having the support of major stakeholder groups, the collection of SDGs and their supporting targets and indicators can be understood as a globally relevant and highly specific definition of sustainable development. As a result, when corporate sustainability is defined as the lens through which corporate engagement which sustainable development is viewed, it follows that the SDGs are the ends that corporate sustainability has to pursue.

2.2 Can corporate sustainability contribute (more) to the SDGs?

Meeting the transformative ambition of the SDG agenda calls for innovative sustainability management approaches. Even though companies’ current engagement with the SDGs is high, they mainly engage with SDGs that are internally actionable and on SDGs that aim to “avoid harm”, compared to externally actionable SDGs and those that seek to “do good” (Van Zanten and Van Tulder 2018). This makes their engagement also relatively reactive and questions whether companies will make significant contributions towards realising the SDGs by 2030. This could be explained by the fact that well-vested management theories do not focus on sustainability and as a result do not systematically address pressing sustainability issues (Starik and Kanashiro 2013). Moreover, most of the literature on corporate sustainability pays limited attention to a company’s embeddedness in natural and social systems (Starik and Kanashiro

2013; Williams et al. 2017; Whiteman, Walker, and Perego 2013). Recognising that a company's activities bear diverse interactions with social, economic, and environmental themes seems a precondition to devising policies that can generate greater impacts on sustainable development and reduce negative effects.

Appreciating such interactions further draws attention to the complex policy space of corporate sustainability. Since corporate sustainability has to address numerous sustainable development concerns simultaneously, it is likely to face conflicts, tensions, and paradoxes (Hahn et al. 2010; Van der Byl and Slawinski 2015). For example, while environmental protection and social well-being are both desirable and intertwined sustainable development goals, contributing to both ends may present a tension (Hahn et al. 2015). Such tensions have to be well managed in order for corporate sustainability initiatives to effectively address sustainability concerns at the systemic, societal, level (Van der Byl and Slawinski 2015).

In their review, Van der Byl and Slawinski (2015) argue that there are four broad approaches to managing tensions in sustainability. First, the predominant *win-win* approach is instrumental and aims to avoid tensions by optimising sustainability elements to maximise profits (Van der Byl and Slawinski 2015). This approach assumes that sustainable development ends are, at least to some extent, in harmony with each other and corporate sustainability should contribute to cases in which economic, environmental and social objectives can be achieved simultaneously (Hahn et al. 2010). Second, the *trade-off* approach avoids tensions by preferring one sustainability element over another (Van der Byl and Slawinski 2015; Slawinski and Bansal 2015). This approach recognises that multiple sustainable development objectives may not be achieved simultaneously (Hahn et al. 2010). Such trade-offs represent a win-lose scenario and in most cases the trade-off approach leads to favouring economic over environmental and social outcomes (Van der Byl and Slawinski 2015; Hahn et al. 2014). Third, an *integrative* approach equally weighs diverging sustainability elements, thus managing tensions by not preferring one sustainability outcome over another (Van der Byl and Slawinski 2015). It is an emerging view that states that economic, environmental and social aspects need to be simultaneously addressed by corporate sustainability without a priori preferring one aspect over another, even if this brings tensions (Hahn et al. 2015). Finally, the *paradox* approach embraces tensions, acknowledging that there are benefits in considering the coexistence of contradictory goals (Van der Byl and Slawinski 2015). Instead of resisting or avoiding tensions, a paradox approach leads conflicting but interrelated economic, environmental, and social concerns to be simultaneously attended to (Lewis 2000; Gao and Bansal 2013; Smith and Lewis 2011; Smith and Tushman 2005; Hahn et al. 2014).

Of these four approaches, the paradox approach can be argued to be most promising for helping companies contribute to the SDGs. It admits that a company may face different types of linkages between diverse sustainability themes, which are therefore in need of different policies. Contradictory forces simultaneously exist and have to be embraced (Smith and Tushman 2005). This way, the paradox perspective enables companies to achieve competing sustainability objectives simultaneously and it generates opportunities for greater corporate contributions to sustainable development (Hahn et al. 2018). However, the paradox approach is still in its infancy and it lacks frameworks for identifying and dealing with tensions in corporate sustainability (Hahn et al. 2018). Hence there is a need for better defining how companies interact with social, economic and environmental aspects, and how these interactions can be managed for greater corporate contributions to the SDGs.

3. A NEXUS APPROACH TO THE SDGS

To contribute to filling this gap in the literature, and thereby theorise on how companies can manage for greater sustainability impacts, we draw on recent advances in the sustainability literature. In this section we firstly explore interconnections among the SDGs, and then argue how these interconnections are critical for policy-making.

3.1 The SDGs: An interconnected agenda

The adoption of the SDGs has given an impetus to viewing the SDGs as interrelated sustainable development themes (Boas, Biermann, and Kanie 2016). The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development acknowledges the existence of interactions among the SDGs. It notes that the SDGs “*are integrated and indivisible and balance the three dimensions of sustainable development*” (UN, 2015:2). By integrating economic, social, and environmental themes into one framework, the SDGs seek to ensure that “*the short-term achievement of improved human well-being does not occur at the cost of undermining well-being in the long term by damaging the underpinning social and environmental capital on which our global life support system depends*” (Stafford-Smith et al., 2017:912). In his research on how the SDGs’ targets have been formulated, Le Blanc (2015) found that most SDGs are related at this political level.

Yet despite the existence of these political interconnections in the 2030 Agenda, they are argued to be weak and rarely structural or transparent (Boas, Biermann, and Kanie 2016). As a result, they do not adequately reflect the SDGs’ actual - natural and socio-economic – relations, which are far greater than the interconnections that are explicitly acknowledged in the 2030 Agenda (ICSU and ISSC 2015). The relatively limited attention paid to the interlinkages and interdependencies among the SDGs (Stafford-Smith et al. 2017; Nilsson, Griggs, and Visbeck 2016) leads many SDGs to remain primarily sectoral in their basic formulation (Boas, Biermann, and Kanie 2016). This causes agents to have incomplete guidance in addressing the complex interdependencies among the SDGs (Costanza et al. 2016; Le Blanc 2015). Hence in order to guide actions towards achieving the SDGs, these natural and social connections between the goals need to be better understood (Lu et al. 2015).

Based on research in sustainability sciences, three broad types of relationships between the SDG targets can be identified: positive, neutral, and negative. Within these three types of relations Nilsson, Griggs, and Visbeck (2016) propose a seven point scale to rate the SDGs’ interactions to help highlight priorities for policy-making. Positive relations among SDGs occur when SDGs are *enabling*, when they are *reinforcing*, or when they are *indivisible*. Neutral, or *consistent*, interactions describe a situation in which contributions towards one goal does not yield significant positive or negative interactions with another goal. Finally, negative interactions arise when goals are *constraining*, *counteracting*, or *cancelling* (see Nilsson et al., 2016 for a more detailed discussion and for examples for each of these seven types of interactions). Hence, this discussion clearly reveals the need for policies that take the interconnections between the SDGs into account.

3.2 A nexus approach to SDG policies

Because today’s sustainable development challenges are interconnected, resolving them demands integrated approaches that take interrelations between these challenges into account. Various concepts and arguments advocate for addressing the interrelations between sustainability policy domains in an integrated manner. As discussed in Boas, Biermann, and Kanie (2016), this includes the ‘integrated earth system’ (Schellnhuber and Wenzel 1998) and integrated ‘earth system’ governance (Biermann 2014) approaches that situate socio-economic activities within the overall earth system (Griggs et al. 2013), the ‘principle of environmental policy integration’ (Nilsson, Pallemmaerts, and von Homeyer 2009; Biermann, Davies, and van der Grijp 2009) that argues for integrating environmental objectives into policy-making within

non-environmental sectors (Lafferty and Hovden 2003), the idea of ‘planetary boundaries’ that delineate critical thresholds of the earth system, which together denote the ‘safe operating space of humanity’ (Rockström et al. 2009; Steffen et al. 2015), and the ‘nexus approach’ that reflects the observation that different sustainability issue areas are intrinsically interconnected and have to be governed as such (Weitz, Nilsson, and Davis 2014; Obersteiner et al. 2016; Boas, Biermann, and Kanie 2016).

Of these concepts, the nexus approach can account for novel interconnections between the economic, social, and environmental dimensions of sustainable development, and especially for the interconnections among the SDGs and their targets (Boas, Biermann, and Kanie 2016). Such a nexus approach goes beyond the traditional “silo” approaches to sustainable development, which have often led to unsustainable policy and development choices (Weitz, Nilsson, and Davis 2014). Instead, it argues that policies have to focus on the interlinkages between sustainability goals because gains in one of the nexus’ domains may negatively lead to losses in, or could positively contribute to, another domain. Examples include the interactions between water, energy, climate, and land and food systems (Ringler, Bhaduri, and Lawford 2013; Allouche, Middleton, and Gyawali 2015; Howells et al. 2013), between gender, education, health, and poverty (Clancy, Skutsch, and Batchelor 2003) and between education, health, and water (Kitamura et al. 2014). This nexus approach builds on expansive systems analysis and is supported by vast scientific evidence (Weitz, Nilsson, and Davis 2014; Obersteiner et al. 2016), which is one of its main benefits (Boas, Biermann, and Kanie 2016).

Policy makers are strongly advised to adopt a nexus approach in order to increase outcomes on the SDGs (Obersteiner et al. 2016; Weitz, Nilsson, and Davis 2014; Boas, Biermann, and Kanie 2016). A nexus approach acknowledges that the SDG framework seeks to attain diverse sustainable development outcomes. Given this wide scope, siloed policies focused on individual sectors will not suffice, and instead different policy domains have to be integrated so as to increase the overall impacts on the SDGs across sectors (Obersteiner et al. 2016; Weitz, Nilsson, and Davis 2014). For instance, the water, energy and food sectors are highly interconnected, causing actions in one of these sectors to influence outcomes on another (Boas, Biermann, and Kanie 2016). An example here is the development of bio-energy, which has led to the production of water- and land-intensive fuels that impact water availability and food production (Weitz, Nilsson, and Davis 2014). A nexus approach takes such interconnections into account, thereby helping to make the SDGs cost-effective and efficient, reducing the risk that actions on the SDGs undermine each other, and promoting sustainable resource use (Weitz, Nilsson, and Davis 2014).

4. A NEXUS APPROACH TO CORPORATE SUSTAINABILITY

The nexus approach is currently primarily applied as a macro-level concept. However, the approach’s principles are equally relevant at the micro level of individual agents, including companies, because of their interactions with the SDGs. We first explore such interactions between companies and the SDGs. Then we argue how these interactions provide critical inputs to corporate sustainability and can help manage for greater corporate impacts on sustainable development.

4.1 The nexus between a company and the SDGs

Similar to the natural and social relationships between the SDGs themselves (section 3.1), a company can have positive, neutral, and negative interactions with the SDGs. Positive interactions indicate that a company enhances an SDG. Negative interactions reveal adverse corporate impacts on an SDG. Neutral relationships point to a position in which a firm’s impacts

are unrelated to a specific SDG. Any company will touch upon diverse SDGs in different ways and therefore have numerous types of SDG interactions. All of a company's interactions with the SDGs combined can be understood as a company's embeddedness in sustainable development.

The scope of a company's SDG interactions could be debated. We propose to explore a company's interactions with the SDGs on an inclusive basis and take everything a firm is responsible for into account. This includes their production processes, their (tangible and intangible) resources, and the goods and services they produce. Goods and services delivered by a firm have rather visible interconnections with SDG: selling soap bars and solar panels can respectively contribute to SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being) and 7 (Affordable and Clean Energy), flights emit greenhouse gases that afflict our climate (SDG 13 – Climate Action), and cars have neutral relations with gender equality (SDG 5). The same types of interconnections apply to the resources and capabilities used by firms to produce products and services. For example, tangible resources such as machinery, office buildings, and inputs sourced from suppliers, have economic, social, and environmental impacts, intangible assets like corporate culture affect gender equality, and capabilities that companies employ in their specific business functions, such as financial management and marketing, can all be managed in responsible ways that promote SDGs, but can also result in the opposite.

A nexus approach facilitates visualising interconnections. In this discourse such visualisations may enhance our understanding of how companies are actually embedded in, and thereby affecting, sustainable development. As an illustration, figure 1 shows a simplified – hypothetical - SDG nexus of an airline company. The flights it operates enhance connectivity between cities (i), thereby contributing to economic growth (ii). Yet they also emit greenhouse gases (iii) which problematizes the environmentally responsible delivery of its services (iv) and afflicts the environment (v and vi). To make the planes, the company relies on a gender inclusive corporate culture (vii) that contributes to reducing inequalities (viii). It further has occupational health and safety policies (ix), develops its employees through training programmes (x) that contribute to decent employment (xi). Overall, its operations contribute to the economy and the provision of jobs (xii). As it is an illustration, the figure only includes the most obviously attributable SDG interconnections. Naturally, the scope can be extended in specificity and incorporate much more detailed SDG interconnections. The size of the interconnections can furthermore be included.

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4.2 A nexus approach to managing corporate sustainability

A nexus approach enables companies to strategically identify which sustainable development challenges are relevant for inclusion into corporate policies. The nexus between a company and the SDGs describe the sustainable development themes the company has positive and negative impacts on. This includes direct as well as indirect interconnections. Including indirect SDG interconnections is critical for providing a system's perspective to corporate sustainability (cf. King, 1995; Shrivastava, 1994; Whiteman et al., 2013; Williams et al., 2017). It ensures capturing the fact that gains achieved in one area may reduce progress in other areas. Thus, a nexus approach to corporate sustainability embeds the company into its unique natural and social environment which is a typically overlooked aspect of sustainability management theories (Starik and Kanashiro 2013). Because the SDGs in a company's nexus are – directly or indirectly - affected by the company, they can be argued to be most relevant, or material, for inclusion into corporate sustainability policies.

The nexus approach conveys a clear strategic goal for corporate sustainability. The nexus between a company and the SDGs informs the nature of desired corporate sustainability policies by defining how the company directly and indirectly impacts sustainable development. As these SDG interactions can be positive, neutral, or negative, it is imperative for policy-makers to create mutually reinforcing actions and avoid, or minimize, trade-offs (Biermann, Kanie, and Kim 2017; Nilsson, Griggs, and Visbeck 2016). This objective can be directly transposed to corporate sustainability policies: for corporate sustainability to contribute to sustainable development, positive SDG interactions have to be created and maximised while negative SDG interactions have to be avoided or minimised.

However, corporate sustainability currently has a rather sectoral outlook on the outcomes it sets out to achieve. Most firms focus on selected indicators in isolation, such as water use, waste, greenhouse gas emissions, labour issues, and so forth, without actively managing the interconnections between these sustainability themes. Such narrowly focused sectoral policies are attractive because they are relatively easy to conceive and implement (Obersteiner et al. 2016), as well as to monitor and to communicate to diverse stakeholders (Boas, Biermann, and Kanie 2016). But fragmentary approaches to corporate sustainability creates policy incoherence and may lead to a failure in achieving the SDGs (cf. Boas et al., 2016; Obersteiner et al., 2016). When linkages across sector are not fully taken into account and acted on, there is a risk that opportunities to benefit the SDGs are untouched as potentially positive effects are not fully achieved, and that potentially negatively effects not effectively minimised.

We therefore argue there is a need for corporate sustainability to adopt a nexus approach, thereby actively managing a company's impacts on the SDGs in an integrated manner. This requires companies to improve their understanding of the SDGs that they contribute to. Having this understanding enables the possibility to identify adjacent SDGs that support this same goal. Once a nexus of mutually supportive SDGs is identified, integrated sustainability management policies can be developed that seek to further drive the contributions to these SDGs.

At the same time, the nexus shows that corporate sustainability requires companies to simultaneously act on diverse, typically interrelated, and potentially conflicting sustainable development goals. As such, corporate sustainability management has to handle negative effects on the SDGs, too. This clearly reveals the importance of applying a paradox perspective to corporate sustainability (cf. Hahn et al., 2018). A paradox perspective matches this endeavour as it embraces the diverging interactions, and particularly the tensions, a company may have with sustainable development outcomes. It induces companies to identify, accept, and "work through" paradoxes (Smith and Lewis 2011) which, in the context of corporate sustainability, would prompt companies to attend to multiple competing sustainability goals at the same time "with the objective of achieving superior business contributions to sustainable development" (Hahn et al., 2018:237).

A nexus approach to corporate sustainability can improve companies' management of tensions and conflicts among corporate ends and the SDGs, and between the SDGs. This makes the approach a suitable candidate for managing and increasing a company's impacts on sustainable development, which the paradox perspective to corporate sustainability seeks to achieve (cf. Hahn et al., 2018). Rather than working through each tension that companies may experience in sustainability individually – as appears to be the current practice – a nexus approach would consider a company's interactions with SDGs collectively and define optimal policies based on the overall contributions realised towards the SDGs. Tensions are thus viewed as an inherent aspect of corporate sustainability. Instead of shying away from such tensions, corporate sustainability has to manage the collection of SDG interactions simultaneously. The aim would be to increase the overall impacts on the SDGs by creating synergies and reducing trade-offs, directly (i.e. interactions between the firm and SDGs) as well

as indirectly (i.e. the subsequent interactions among the SDGs). Hence, a nexus approach manages interactions with sustainability outcomes at a system's level, rather than at the currently predominant micro level.

5. CONCLUSIONS

This paper built on recent developments in the sustainability sciences to introduce a nexus approach to corporate sustainability. Such an approach appreciates that the SDGs can be integrated across sectors. Contributions made to one SDG may strengthen contributions to another. At the same time, policies that contribute to an SDG may have adverse effects on other SDGs. A nexus approach captures such interactions and advocates for integrated policies that maximise the overall contributions to the SDGs. While typically applied at the macro-level, the approach yields equally valuable insights at the micro-level of individual companies. We have argued that a company's resources, its production processes, and the goods and services it produces, can have positive and/or negative interactions with the SDGs. These interactions acknowledge and display a company's embeddedness in social-ecological systems. As such, they provide critical inputs to the development of corporate sustainability policies. Introducing the nexus approach to corporate sustainability urges companies to develop policies across sectors, with the aim of building and strengthening mutually supportive effects, and minimising negative effects.

Given that this nexus approach is inherently built on the diverse interactions that a company may have with the SDGs, it promotes the needed paradox perspective to corporate sustainability. The paradox perspective that we offer draws from interdisciplinary perspectives and embraces complexity. Through the nexus approach it is intended to make this complexity manageable thereby advancing our understanding of corporate sustainability in the age of the SDGs.

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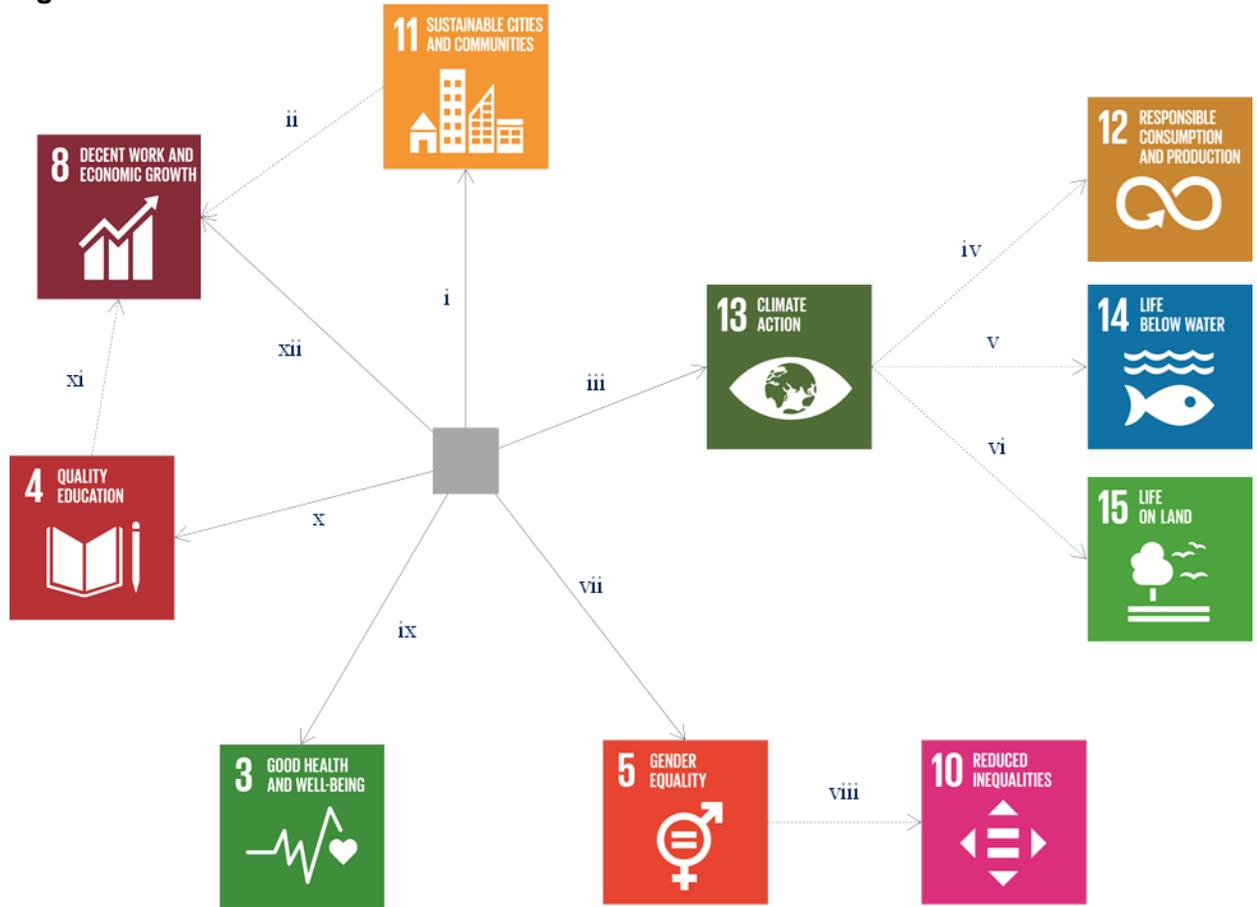
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Figure 1 – An illustration of the SDG-nexus



ⁱ A discussion on terminology is beyond the scope of this paper. We use the term corporate sustainability liberally and inclusively to refer to any efforts companies may initiate to contribute to sustainable development.

ⁱⁱ Sustainability management can apply to the individual, organisational, and societal levels (Starik & Kanashiro, 2013). Since we are concerned with corporate sustainability, we use the term to refer to the organisational level.