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Feature

Putting the SDGs Back on Track

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Putting the SDGs Back on Track

Worldwide
SDG
efforts are failing.
How can businesses
do their part
to make
things right?

BY AMANDA WILLIAMS, PATRICK HAACK & KNUT HAANAES

In 2015, the United Nations General Assembly established the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), a set of 17 ambitious objectives to promote peace, prosperity, and sustainability around the globe by 2030.

The goals include eliminating poverty and hunger, promoting good health and well-being, and taking dramatic action to combat climate change. Each SDG is supported by numerous subtargets and indicators.

In July 2022, at the halfway point to the end date, the United Nations released *The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2022*. It stated that progress on the 17 goals was heading in reverse and called for “urgent action in order to rescue the SDGs and deliver meaningful progress for people and the planet by 2030.”

The conclusion should not have surprised anyone. Multiple interlinked and cascading emergencies, including the COVID-19 pandemic, the climate crisis, and the war in Ukraine, have impeded progress toward achieving the world’s shared vision for sustainable development by 2030. According to the latest facts and figures, the pandemic has reversed four years of progress on poverty alleviation, sending 93 million additional people into extreme poverty. Global emissions are also expected to increase by 14 percent by 2030. And a record number of people are being displaced from their homes, due to conflicts across the globe. In addition to impeding progress on the SDGs, the aftermath of the cascading crises continues to impact the resilience of supply chains and businesses. Last winter, inflation threatened economic growth, and countries across Europe scrambled to ensure a stable energy supply as Russian gas exports were disrupted.

The sunny optimism that greeted the SDGs in 2015 is gone. Back then, many corporations quickly demonstrated support for the agenda as crucial partners in achieving the world’s vision of sustainable development on a global scale. Companies swiftly adopted the goals and incorporated them into their communications and sustainability

Illustrations by Jason Holley

reports. The SDGs quickly became the lingua franca among all stakeholders pursuing sustainable development.

This widespread adoption marked a monumental achievement. The previous UN-led 15-year agenda—the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)—envisioned business merely as a deep pocket for financing progress, instead of as a joint-implementation partner. Business had entered a new era of global sustainable development, and the SDGs offered hope for a holistic, systemic, and inclusive vision for collective action toward a better world.

But companies have largely fallen short of taking any new concrete actions to achieve the SDG goals. Their underwhelming engagement looks more like SDG washing, akin to the greenwashing companies commit when they market as “green” products that are only marginally more environmentally friendly than their counterparts. Companies that SDG-wash claim to contribute to societal-level sustainability goals but lack proper evidence and actions to support the claim. In fact, SDG washing is more encompassing and potentially more detrimental than greenwashing, because it includes social, economic, and governance domains and is communicated to a broader range of stakeholders, including governments and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs).

We have conducted intensive research into the integration of the SDGs into the corporate strategy of firms. Our investigation has found that the majority of companies do engage with the SDGs, yet typically for PR and reporting purposes. More often than not, their activities lead to SDG washing.

However, we also identified a handful of companies that seek to integrate the SDGs into their corporate strategy. We then focused our research on these firms to better understand these rare cases of in-depth SDG integration, so that they may serve as models for other companies in their industries at large. The practices and examples we highlight are based on the research, although we add several additional examples for illustrative purposes.

SDG Washing

OUR RESEARCH STARTED shortly after the launch of the SDGs. We wanted to understand the different ways in which companies engaged with them, such as for communication purposes, sustainability reporting, mapping, and setting strategy. Coauthor Amanda Williams collected data and conducted research from 2015 until 2020 about corporate SDG engagement practices. The data include 48 interviews with sustainability directors from various industries, such as manufacturing, finance, health care, consumer goods, services, and software, and various geographical areas, including Europe, North America, Africa, and Asia.

Our research found that when companies adopted the SDGs, they typically began their efforts with SDG mapping—i.e., an evaluation of how the company’s activities related to the 17 SDGs. A comprehensive approach to SDG mapping includes an evaluation of both positive and negative impacts from owned operations and along the value chain at the SDG subtarget level. A thorough

approach to SDG mapping would ensure that no opportunities or risks associated with the SDGs are overlooked. When done well, SDG mapping provides a promising first start for corporate engagement with the global agenda. However, our research found that comprehensive and transparent SDG mapping was a rare exception, rather than the norm.

Evonik, a German-headquartered chemical company, developed a useful four-step process for SDG mapping:

Step 1: Determine the scope of SDG impacts, including significant positive, neutral, and negative impacts in their absolute or relative (to comparable products) terms.

Step 2: Evaluate all upstream, gate-to-gate, and downstream impacts for all 17 SDGs.

Step 3: Evaluate the significance of the SDGs for key stakeholders.

Step 4: Consolidate, prioritize, and transparently report the outcome.

Evonik should be commended for such a comprehensive approach. But the company’s public reporting could be improved by increasing the transparency of negative impacts. (One can assume Evonik followed its own process internally, but its report mentions only positive SDG contributions.)

By contrast, Samsung, the South Korean conglomerate best known for its consumer electronics, has reported on both direct and indirect negative impacts. For example, Samsung’s 2018 sustainability report for consumption and production (SDG 12) claims direct or indirect impact on the depletion of natural resources, and for climate action (SDG 13), direct or indirect impact on climate change and air pollution. Although Samsung is transparent about some negative impacts, end hunger (SDG 2) and good health and well-being (SDG 3) are missing from the report, without explanation.

Many companies still report only on their positive impacts at the goal level, highlighting and showcasing how their existing philanthropic efforts contribute to the SDGs, overlooking the impacts of the core business. What’s more, their sustainability reports do not go beyond their shallow SDG mapping.

Corporate interest in the SDGs remains high. According to the World Business Council for Sustainable Development’s 2022 annual review of its member companies’ sustainability reports, *Reporting Matters*, 94 percent of members reference the SDGs in their reports. Member companies have also improved their sustainability reporting over time. For example, in 2022, 16 percent of members—up from 6 percent in 2019—linked their key performance indicators (KPIs) to the SDGs.

But the tendency toward SDG washing remains common. A 2018 survey by Ethical Corporation of 1,542 business professionals from around the world found that the presence of SDG washing is high: 51 percent of respondents used the SDGs to communicate about sustainability impacts in their sustainability reports, but only 12 percent had integrated them across the company, with clear goals. NGOs, trade organizations, and business competitors have accused companies of hypocrisy, and corporate managers fear being maligned.

One of many such examples, ExxonMobil, the oil-and-gas multinational, tweeted about its contributions to decent work and economic growth (SDG 8): “ExxonMobil has a global work-force of over

72,000 employees pursuing careers in many fields including business, engineering, research, operations, and many more—helping the UN in its work to make the Sustainable Development Goals a reality. #SDG8.” Ian Brooks, a university lecturer and consultant in sustainable IT and business, responded: “Disgusting #SDGwashing promoted to my Twitter feed. Let’s see them make #SDG13 Climate Action a reality now.”

German car-manufacturer BMW demonstrated support of all 17 SDGs by covering the side of one of its electric cars with wallpaper of the SDG icons and posted it on Twitter with the hashtag #SDGsCar. Olivier Ferrari, a Swiss expert on sustainable development, replied, “A good allegory of the contradictions inherent to #SDGs: #SDGwashing a (electric) car company, fueled at 80% by fossils (in US), with components from mining exploitation in Congo, symbolizing a society where only growth matters and showing how non-systemic the strategy is.”

Even an industry targeted explicitly by the SDGs can use them for PR purposes.

The tobacco industry was an early adopter of SDG rhetoric, even though it showed no interest in changing its core business. According to a 2018 report titled *Highjacking the SDGs?*, by five Germany-based NGOs, “Looking closely, alcohol and tobacco are in fact the only consumer products explicitly mentioned in the SDGs. This is mainly because of their toll on public health. ... [T]he tobacco industry uses the SDGs in a broad strategy to circumvent regulation. This way, the example of tobacco companies is a cautionary tale that shows the limitations of corporate engagement in the SDGs and the need for governments, international institutions as well as civil society to protect the SDG process from undue corporate influence.”

More generally, our investigation found three ways in which companies engaged in SDG washing.

Claiming positive contributions to all 17 SDGs | Large multinational companies are likely to find tenuous links with the SDGs, which is why they must start the SDG mapping process with all 17 goals to make sure that no positive or negative impacts are imagined or overlooked. Starting holistically with all 17 can also help improve the chances of identifying untapped SDG opportunities and uncovering potential trade-offs and interdependencies.

However, a single company is unlikely to drive net positive change toward all 17 goals. Take, for example, Leaf, a large, multinational tobacco company. (We are using a pseudonym for this and some other companies, because the institution where two of our coauthors are employed has provided education and training to the companies.) Leaf claims positive contributions to all 17 SDGs by linking existing sustainability initiatives to all the SDG targets. For example, Leaf’s work on paying living wages demonstrates a contribution to no poverty (SDG 1). But further investigation into the company’s sustainability report reveals that minimum-wage violations along the supply chain still exist in countries with unreliable

A few initiatives aimed at positive contributions to the SDGs cover for the negative impacts and unsustainable core of the firm’s product.

monitoring and reporting of contract workers. Therefore, Leaf’s contributions to no poverty are more aspirational than actual. High ambitions are admirable, but companies must do more before claiming a positive contribution to the societal-level goal of no poverty.

Leaf makes similarly dubious claims for the 16 remaining SDGs. Good health and well-being (SDG 3) is, of course, an important issue for a tobacco company. Leaf actually claims a positive impact on public health because of its development of alternatives to combustion cigarettes, such as e-cigarettes that are smoke-free but release a vapor. Long-term health data are not yet available to demonstrate that alternatives to cigarettes are less bad for health; regardless, the words are twisted to frame a potentially less negative as a positive. No one would claim that e-cigarettes, for example, contribute positively to health.

Claiming positive contributions to all 17 SDGs in the way Leaf does undermines the value of the framework. Research shows that the SDGs are interconnected and that both positive and negative spillover effects are possible. Because of such trade-offs, a single company is unlikely to generate a net positive impact on all the SDGs. Such trade-offs occur when progress on one goal hinders progress on another target.

For example, sustainability researchers Måns Nilsson, Dave Griggs, and Martin Visbeck write that “using coal to improve energy access (goal 7) in Asian nations, say, would accelerate climate change and acidify the oceans (undermining goals 13 and 14), as well as exacerbating other problems such as damage to health from air pollution (disrupting goal 3).”¹¹ Starting with all 17 SDGs can help companies avoid trade-offs by gaining a holistic perspective on potential courses of action and weighing the alternatives with the least harm.

Hiding core negative impacts | Bubbles (a pseudonym), a large, multinational soft-drink company, prioritizes six SDGs: gender equality (SDG 5), clean water and sanitation (SDG 6), decent work and economic growth (SDG 8), sustainable consumption and production (SDG 12), life below water (SDG 14), and partnerships for the goals (SDG 17). But Bubbles’ glaring omission is SDG 3: good health and well-being. Carbonated beverages have high sugar content. The company mentions its efforts to reduce sugar but does not link them to the SDGs, except in an internal document.

Most companies can easily mention positive impacts on select SDGs, such as decent work and economic growth (SDG 8) and partnerships (SDG 17). All companies potentially contribute to economic growth and should provide decent jobs. And most corporate sustainability efforts are conducted in partnership with other organizations because of the scale of the problems. But for a beverage company, clean water is, along with health, a crucial issue, especially in areas where access to clean drinking water is limited. Bubbles recognizes the concern but deflects blame by holding responsible for water usage all production from any company that requires water.

The firm's clean-water initiatives are philanthropic—e.g., establishing wastewater treatment plants outside Bubbles' manufacturing facilities. Wastewater treatment plants do help restore drinkable water to surrounding communities, but this approach offsets the firm's negative impacts on clean water after the harm is already done, instead of tackling the root cause of the problem. Furthermore, since the operations are outside the core manufacturing facilities, Bubbles' efforts are disconnected from its core business operations.

Additional potential negative impacts for a soft-drink company are sustainable consumption and production (SDG 12) and life below water (SDG 14), which are affected by the production of plastic waste that finds its way into oceans. Bubbles mentions its innovations in reduced plastic packaging and ambitions for collecting waste but ultimately places the blame on others by claiming that the issue of waste is more widespread than one company. A few initiatives aimed at positive contributions to the SDGs cover for the negative impacts and unsustainable core of the firm's product: Mass-produced sugary beverages in plastic bottles have negative consequences for many SDGs.

Framing existing efforts as societal change | Wings (a pseudonym), an international commercial airline, focuses on seven SDGs, including quality education (SDG 4). Wings says it is committed to aviation education, training, and continuous development of all employees. Employee training and development existed long before the SDGs—the company boasts more than 50 years of experience in aviation training. The costs of the programs are not disclosed, but the company's website for its aviation-training academy mentions that the costs are kept reasonable. Here the company looks at pre-existing activities, seeing where they might align with the SDGs, and reframes the existing efforts as an SDG contribution. But aviation training programs (to benefit the greenhouse-gas-emitting airline industry) can hardly count as contributing to the UN's objective of quality education (SDG 4): to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all. Often the activities that companies reframe in SDG language were never intended to propel change at the scale required for the SDGs.

SDG Best Practices

WHAT CAN individual companies do to ensure that their SDG efforts are driving meaningful change? Our research revealed three inspiring examples of SDG engagement with the potential for organizational transformation from companies that are not the usual sustainability pioneers. To encourage other companies to restimulate their SDG commitments in an era of SDG reversal, we identify three best practices from these exemplars.

Align the SDGs with revenues. | Mapping is not enough—it provides only a static picture of a company's SDG impacts. Ramboll, a global engineering, architecture, and consulting services group based in Copenhagen, Denmark, went beyond mapping by measuring SDG profits as a means to integrate the SDGs into strategy.

Shortly after the SDGs were released in 2015, Ramboll was preparing for its next core strategy cycle, which it undertakes every three years. At the time, the company held sustainability as one of the five core components of its strategy, and the executive board and sustainability team saw the SDGs as an opportunity to prioritize sustainability even further. They saw that the SDGs provided a global language to leverage Ramboll's influence on markets when advising clients. The SDGs also provided an opportunity to further the company's strategic objective to be the recognized sustainability leader in environmental consultancy. Instead of quickly prioritizing the most relevant SDGs at the goal level, the sustainability team conducted a thorough analysis of all 169 SDG subtargets to identify relevant KPIs and positive and negative impacts.

Ramboll works along clients' value chains to deliver sustainable solutions in six markets—buildings, transport, energy, environment and health, water, and management consulting—each of which is overseen by a director. Ramboll decided to measure annually the six markets' revenues that contribute to the SDGs. The company found that some markets, such as water—Ramboll aims to protect water resources by increasing efficiency and improving wastewater handling—aligned well with the SDGs, particularly clean water and sanitation (SDG 6). In other markets, such as transport, revenues were less aligned with the SDGs. For example, the high-emitting aviation industry needed a major transformation to become sustainable. By measuring revenues against the SDGs every year, Ramboll can ensure that its value-adding activities contribute to the SDGs; as the percentage of contributions to the SDGs increases, potential negative contributions to the SDGs diminish over time. In this way, the SDGs serve as a baseline for continuous sustainability improvement.

Ramboll has continued to increase the percentage of revenues in each market that contributes to the SDGs every year. To do so, each market has developed its own sustainability strategy, in addition to the company's core strategy. Developing a custom strategy for each market has helped to infuse sustainability throughout the organization and place ownership of sustainability issues at the director level, which was not previously the case. Ramboll has also implemented training framed around the SDGs for all employees to further integrate sustainability across the company. Naming Ramboll employees from different functional departments as sustainability ambassadors has also helped to advance progress.

Two challenges stood in the way of the sustainability team's goal of fully integrating sustainability into corporate strategy. First, cost was a concern. The sustainability team made a strong business case internally for any sustainability initiative that they implemented; once they proved the business case, upper management was supportive.

Second, sustainability is difficult to measure. The SDGs pose a particular challenge, because they are overarching and include social goals. The company claimed it was difficult to measure the negative impacts that hinder progress on the goals, because the SDGs are interconnected—any solution in one SDG may generate trade-offs. Thus, the company decided to focus on increasing positive impacts and improving measurement over time. In addition, because the company provides services, it is difficult to determine whether the solutions its customers adopt are more sustainable

than other alternatives. Ramboll therefore decided to focus only on more direct impacts.

The SDG revenues framework was a customized approach that established a yardstick for Ramboll to measure sustainability progress. However, customized approaches have the shortcoming of making comparison with other companies challenging. Therefore, in addition to its customized SDG approach, Ramboll has welcomed the rapidly changing world of sustainability standards, ratings, and other measurement initiatives, such as ESG reporting and science-based targets. All of these advances have helped Ramboll to measure sustainability, demonstrate its progress, and prove the value of having sustainability at the heart of its strategy.

Despite its difficulties in working with the goals and measuring impact, Ramboll used these efforts to calculate revenues in light of the SDGs to align its portfolio with the SDGs and ignited changes in corporate strategy—something that most companies have not achieved, according to our research. In 2022, Ramboll launched its new corporate strategy with the slogan “The Partner for Sustainable Change.” The company elevated sustainability from being only one part of its corporate strategy to the pillar of its entire strategy and the only driver of its growth. Every employee is expected to contribute to making that strategy a success. For Ramboll, the SDGs are a strategic guide and benchmark to show whether the strategy is moving toward complete integration with sustainability.

Ramboll has achieved its aspiration of becoming a sustainability leader. According to Environment Analyst UK, Ramboll is the seventh-largest environmental and sustainability consultancy and first in climate change and renewable energy.

Integrate the SDGs with the company’s purpose statement. | Many companies claim to have integrated the SDGs into their corporate mission and strategy, but Safaricom stands out for its success in achieving this goal. A mobile network operator headquartered in Nairobi, Kenya, Safaricom seized the opportunity to embed the SDGs throughout the organization and support its transition from a telecommunications company to a technology company driven by the purpose of transforming lives. Safaricom took a decentralized approach by setting SDG priorities for each division and employee. The company was already prepared for the opportunity that would come with the SDGs, because it was actively involved in a multistakeholder initiative to raise awareness of the predecessor MDGs across Kenya.



When the SDGs launched in 2015, Safaricom was in the early phases of formalizing a sustainability strategy but had already established an internal network of sustainability champions to support its strategic efforts. Safaricom has always been a purpose-driven organization. Since its inception in 2000, the purpose of transforming lives through the power of mobile technology has guided its activities. In particular, Safaricom’s M-PESA fintech mobile phone application has provided affordable financial services to more than 51 million customers and deepened financial inclusion in Kenya.

Instead of quickly prioritizing a few SDGs, Safaricom’s corporate sustainability team saw the SDGs as the perfect opportunity to further integrate sustainability through a dual top-down, bottom-up approach. The bottom-up approach empowered all employees from all levels and functions of the organization to interpret what the goals meant for their day-to-day work and the functioning of their division. Individual interaction with the SDGs was facilitated with an internal campaign called “What’s your goal?” and other opportunities, such as open conversations and workshops.

The sustainability team started the bottom-up discussions from their relationship to the core business objectives and potential

untapped business opportunities. At first, employees were skeptical. Some wondered whether the SDGs were the same as the company's philanthropic efforts, while others struggled to see the connections between high-level societal goals, the company's core strategy, and their daily work. Discussions between the sustainability team and the employees continued in an iterative and flexible manner until they reached a consensus on how the SDGs could enhance business performance.

To help employees associate the SDGs and business performance, the sustainability team has integrated the SDGs with the company's purpose of "Transforming Lives" and built a narrative that links explicitly to the SDGs: "We commit to deliver connectivity and innovative (Goal 9) products and services that will provide unmatched solutions to meet the needs of Kenyans by enabling access (Goal 10) through our technologies and partners (Goal 17) and by exploring opportunities in Health (Goal 3), Education (Goal 4), and Energy (Goal 7). We will do so by managing our operations responsibly (Goal 12) and ethically (Goal 16). This will stimulate growth and generate value (Goal 8) for our company, society, and economy."

In addition to these efforts, Safaricom has also adopted a top-down approach, in which the sustainability team has worked with the senior leadership team to set division-specific goals. For example, the finance division shares the following aim: "We, the Finance Division, will encourage ethical behaviors in our supply chain by promoting decent work and good labor standards (Goal 8), ensuring transparency and visibility on our procurement practices and fighting corruption in all its forms (Goal 16) within our business and our business ecosystem. We will also support the company to make informed decisions about responsible consumption and production (Goal 12)." Each division supports its SDG goals with targets, KPIs, and action plans. Integrating the SDGs throughout each division ensures that the whole company works in the same direction.

To further decentralize and integrate the SDGs, individual employees set SDG-related objectives as part of their annual performance goals. For example, one of Safaricom's technology teams has a net-zero target for 2050. To support the net-zero target, employees from the team select the relevant climate-related SDGs and aim to transition a certain number of sites from fossil fuels to solar energy for their individual performance objectives, which empower each employee to play an active role in helping Safaricom support SDG progress.

The costs of SDG integration have never barred implementation. One of the main costs, training, has been kept low by relying on existing or online training and by developing a joint program with Strathmore University called Developing Great African Leaders. The company sends several employees to the program annually to be trained as sustainability champions. Because Safaricom helped to

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develop the program, these participants receive training from the university at a favorable cost. When sustainability champions leave the company, replacement champions are onboarded through these training opportunities.

SDG engagement has also been strengthened externally through partnerships. Safaricom's proactive approach to the SDGs, combined with the common language the framework provides, has opened the doors for many SDG partnerships. One notable example is M-TIBA, a mobile technology that enables individuals to save for health-care spending provided by verified and quality providers. Health-care coverage is not widespread in Kenya, and when individuals face health emergencies, expenses are subsidized through informal crowdfunding. The technology is provided thanks to a partnership with CarePay, the mobile technology developer behind M-TIBA. CarePay was financed by an initial investment from the M-PESA foundation, the philanthropic branch of M-PESA, Safaricom and Vodafone's mobile payment application. According to Safaricom's 2022 sustainability report, M-TIBA has reached 4.8 million active users, verified 4,731 health facilities, and covered more than \$12 million in health-care payments.

To date, Safaricom claims the SDGs still inspire and are at the core of its strategy and purpose to transform lives. Success is measured by the numbers achieved for each prioritized SDG. For example, the DigiFarm platform, which provides services for farmers, such as access to financial institutions, reached 160,000 active users, improved their yields by 15 percent, and contributed toward the goals of decent work and economic growth (SDG 8); industry, innovation, and infrastructure (SDG 9); reduced inequality (SDG 10); and partnerships (SDG 17).

Innovate and partner for SDG impact. Sustainability is too important to leave to others and wait for their contributions. Novozymes, a Denmark-based biotechnology company, stands apart in proactively pursuing innovation and partnerships. The firm began participating in the SDG initiative in 2012, in advance of the SDG launch and before most companies, in order to help shape the development of the goals. At the time, the company was also developing a new strategy that was set to start in 2015. The company sought to become a sustainability leader, so it flagged its sustainability values prominently on the career pages of its website and found that doing so attracted applicants with the appropriate values. It also onboarded new employees with special training sessions that included sustainability.

Then Novozymes took the opportunity to leverage the SDGs to reimagine its company purpose and long-term goals. Novozymes' purpose was and still is to "improve industrial performance while preserving the planet's resources and helping to build better lives." But by integrating the SDGs into its purpose, Novozymes has made contributing to the goals the core of its business and growth.

In order to advance and monitor its SDG activities, Novozymes established an internal governance structure in 2018 that consists

of two SDG governance boards made up of leaders from across the organization. The Foundation Board is responsible for SDG performance in the current operations and the supply chain, with the aim of maintaining sustainability leadership. The Impact Board is responsible for strategic direction based on the SDGs. Identifying SDG risks and opportunities is central to the work of both boards. Many companies define SDG risks as those that the company will face if the world achieves the SDGs. Instead, Novozymes defines its SDG risks as the negative impacts it causes that may impede progress in achieving the SDGs, such as Novozymes' greenhouse-gas emissions. The company determines risks and opportunities based on science using life-cycle assessments and stakeholder input.

At Novozymes, innovations and partnerships are also important for SDG success. New positive impacts can be captured by developing innovations or business models that are outside the scope of a company's current operations. When innovations enter the development pipeline, the company conducts a potential SDG impact assessment based on 15 impact categories derived from the 17 SDGs and 169 subtargets. Innovations that have a high positive impact on the SDGs are accelerated, assuming they can obtain investment. But despite the accelerated timetable, developing a solution that can create change at scale can take as long as 10 to 15 years. Nevertheless, the company constantly explores new strategic areas for innovation. For example, Novozymes recently identified human oral and gut health and alternative proteins as opportunity areas.

Partnerships play a large role in scaling positive impacts by developing infrastructure to produce products, improving practices along the value chain, and delivering solutions to the end user. In particular, partnerships with chemical companies are needed to bring biological solutions to end users. For example, Novozymes partners with Univar Solutions, a global chemical company, to bring more sustainable and safer cleaning products to the market.

Another partnership strategy is the use of open innovation. Novozymes coled a temporary open-innovation platform called Hello Science to develop solutions for the SDGs through partnerships. The platform served to drive and support entrepreneurial ventures that may inform Novozymes' own explorations into innovation and help to achieve the SDGs. For example, SolarSack, a technology that uses solar power to purify water, was developed through Hello Science.

Revamping SDG Efforts

WE HOPE THESE exemplars will inspire other companies to ramp up their SDG efforts. Of course, some companies may find it easier and more straightforward than others to align their core business with the SDGs. Cost of implementation, as well as the availability of resources and internal support, play a major role. Industry-specific norms and peer pressure may either slow down or speed up the transformation process in firms. Industries with heavy infrastructure will face greater challenges and more transformational change than service companies.

Nevertheless, the three exemplars have several commonalities that are worth noting for future SDG efforts. First, all three companies sought to integrate the SDGs into their core business strategies. This objective complemented the companies' already existing sustainability ambitions, and the SDGs came at an opportune time for strategic renewal based on the new global agenda. Thus, the companies seized the SDGs as opportunities for future business development and growth. Aligning the SDGs with the company's core business can help ensure that SDG contributions go beyond mere philanthropic activities, ultimately coupling the company's value-generating activities with achieving the SDGs. Integrating the goals across all departments can deepen a company's SDG engagements and prevent the siloing of SDG efforts in the sustainability department.

Second, because these companies wanted to integrate the SDGs into their core strategies, they resisted the temptation to do a quick SDG mapping and handpick a few of the most relevant SDGs to prioritize. This is a mistake that most companies make. Such absence of detailed analysis and integration often leads to SDG washing. By contrast, Ramboll decided to develop an SDG revenue-alignment measure, Safaricom linked the SDGs to divisional targets and employees' individual goals, and Novozymes set up a governance board to continuously assess and monitor SDG risks and opportunities. These efforts ensured continued engagement with the SDGs.

Third, all three companies customized their approaches to SDG engagement, demonstrating that SDG efforts need to be tailored to the specific needs, ethos, and culture of a company. The SDGs are societal-level goals; customization is required to bring them down to an operational level. Ramboll, as an engineering consulting group, found that conveying the SDGs through numbers and measurements resonated best with its employees. As a purpose-driven company, Safaricom found that using the SDGs to support its purpose statement made the most sense. As for Novozymes, given that innovative solutions are at the core of its business, it approached the SDGs by developing custom internal and external innovation processes.

It is not too late for companies to put progress toward the SDGs back on track. Seven years remain to achieve the ambitious global agenda that the goals have set, and we need all the help we can get. ●

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¹ Mans Nilsson, Dave Griggs, and Martin Visbeck, "Policy: Map the Interactions Between Sustainable Development Goals," *Nature*, vol. 534, 2016.