Corporate Social Responsibility in Belgium

Shades of Gray: Patterns of SDG Adoption and Implementation Belgium

Lars Moratis, Jan Beyne, and Valerie Swaen

Abstract Corporate social responsibility (CSR) in Belgium has developed particularly since the early 1990s, its focus changing from addressing environmental issues to more comprehensive approaches towards CSR, notably the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This chapter sets out to describe the development of CSR and the CSR institutional infrastructure in Belgium from the 1990s onwards. Since current CSR discourse in Belgium has clearly pivoted towards the SDGs, the lion's share of this chapter addresses the intersection of the SDGs and Belgian industry, based on the findings of the first baseline study on the SDGs in Belgium, the SDG Barometer. The SDG Barometer explores the extent, nature and characteristics of commitments of Belgian organizations with the SDGs, including driving forces, prioritization of SDGs, internal coordination and communication of the SDG commitments. After the results are presented, these findings are discussed and several avenues for future research based on the findings of the SDG Barometer are identified.

1 Introduction

The attention for corporate social responsibility (CSR) in Belgium has grown considerably over the past few years. Its development has gone through several stages, starting in the early 1990s with companies taking predominantly

L. Moratis (✉) · J. Beyne
Antwerp Management School, Antwerp, Belgium

Breda University of Applied Sciences, Breda, Netherlands
e-mail: Lars.Moratis@ams.ac.be; Jane.Beyne@ams.ac.be

V. Swaen
UCLouvain, LouRIM, Louvain, Belgium

IESEG School of Management, Lille, France
e-mail: valerie.swaen@uclouvain.be

environmental actions and a large role for the Belgian government. Currently, CSR discourse is dominated by the UN Sustainable Development Goals, which illustrates that CSR in Belgium has come a long way and has matured considerably.

In this chapter, we describe the development of CSR and the CSR infrastructure in Belgium in more detail, specifying the topics that have been addressed by Belgian companies and the state and non-state actors that have played a role in the maturing of CSR. Clearly, the Belgian government has taken a large role in encouraging the uptake of CSR by companies which has had repercussions for the way Belgium companies, in general, have taken up CSR.

Since contemporary CSR discourse in Belgium particularly revolves around the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), a good deal of this chapter reports on the findings of the SDG Barometer, a recent survey among Belgian companies. The findings concern a wide range of topics, including the motivation for Belgian companies to adopt the SDGs and the SDG focus of these companies. The chapter ends with a discussion of these findings and with several suggestions for further research.

2   CSR in Belgium: A Short History and Characterization[1]

The constitution of institutional CSR infrastructures is determined by different factors, including the level of industrialization, the types of economic activity that are dominant in a country, its social-economic structure, legislative systems, dominant political ideologies, and national culture (Matten & Moon, 2008; Waddock, 2008). As a highly industrialized country having an important transportation infrastructure, the Belgian economy is characterized by a highly productive and skilled workforce, a high Gross National Product (GDP), and a high level of per capita exports. Small and medium-sized enterprises repesent the most common type of company in Belgium, accounting for more than two-thirds of GDP: over 80% of Belgian companies have less than ten employees and only 3% employ more than 50 people (CSR Europe, 2010).

Characterized by federal governance with three regions (Flanders, Wallonie, and the Brussels Region), the state system in Belgium is rather complex and each of the regions has developed its own CSR initiatives. Against the background of regional environmental laws in the 1990s, many of these (voluntary) initiatives originate from a law on coordination of the federal policy for sustainable development that was established in 1997 to ensure a cycle of continuous improvement through federal plans. Rather than being constraining or relying on hard regulation, this law defined an overall the strategic framework with several priority areas and actions, including CSR. An institutionalized dialogue between employees and employers in the unions contributed to this development (Heene, Langenberg, & Dentchev, 2005).

---

[1]This section is partly based on CSR Europe (2010).

2.1 Popularizing CSR

While the term 'CSR' had only been used scarcely until then, it quickly became more widespread from the year 2000 onwards (SERV, 2007). An important reason for this was the establishment of Trivisi, a CSR supporting organization founded by the Flemish Minister of Employment and Tourism with the purpose of creating awareness and knowledge in Belgium around CSR and its underpinning triple bottom line concept. Whereas a plethora of CSR manuals and tools was created and disseminated through Trivisi, this organization also had a supporting role in developing the so-called Belgian social label (Hutjens, Dentchev, & Haezendonck, 2015). This world-first government label for products and services that are bought and sold in Belgium relied on meeting the conditions of the international conventions of the ILO regarding freedom of association, child labour, discrimination and forced labour. The idea behind this label was to contribute to the reduction of negative social impacts inherent to production and consumption through guiding consumers in the identification of socially sustainable products and to encourage manufacturers in developing socially sustainable products and services. This label has however been criticized for its limited implementation and its introduction is not considered to be successful (Louche et al., 2008). While Trivisi ceased its operations in 2004, many of the knowledge and initiatives developed through Trivisi were brought together in a digital CSR knowledge center called MVO Vlaanderen from this year onwards. MVO Vlaanderen still exists today and actively informs companies about CSR, promotes different tools, notably the so-called Sustatool, to enable companies to implement CSR, and coordinates several CSR funding programs.

Another factor in popularizing the CSR concept in Belgium has been the development of the CSR network organization formerly known as Business & Society Belgium. This action-driven and business-driven network organization was created to inspire organizations (both for profit and not for profit) to integrate CSR. In June 2015, Business & Society Belgium and the NGO network organization KAURI joined forces to create a multi-actor network called The Shift. Bringing together more than 400 organizations, The Shift now is as the central Belgian meeting point for people and organizations that want to spur the transition to a more sustainable society and economy. The Shift serves as the Belgian contact point for the World Business Council for Sustainable Development and UN Global Compact, taking the UN Sustainable Development Goals as its common framework to connect, engage and encourage its members to take action in the CSR realm.

2.2 Further Operationalizing the Strategic Framework

In order to further operationalize the aforementioned legal strategic framework, a Federal Action Plan for CSR in Belgium was developed, which was launched in October 2006. Its overall objective was to promote CSR in Belgium mainly through

encouraging companies to integrate CSR in their management processes and systems, promoting ethical investment, increasing transparency, stimulating knowledge exchange and good practices on CSR, and financially assisting companies that are active in the so-called social economy (predecessors of what are now called social enterprises). Belgium is among only a few countries that has such as legal framework for CSR and this framework can be considered to be the culmination of a period in which CSR was through an increasing number of public initiatives (Hutjens et al., 2015; Louche et al., 2008).

It should be noted that whereas the Belgian government can hence be seen as a very important driving force in the development and adoption of CSR, this has an important drawback: companies may behave rather passively when it comes to CSR and show a compliance orientation towards sustainability issues. Indeed, researchers have noted that Belgium scores lower on both the social and environmental dimension of CSR due to high levels of regulation and institutionalized stakeholder involvement and dialogue, arguing that there is less scope for companies to take CSR actions that go above and beyond the law (cf. Crutzen & Hoerisch, 2013; Jackson & Apostolakou, 2010; VBO, 2007).

Following these developments and given that the main environmental challenge for Belgium is to reduce its CO_2 emissions, a Belgian climate law was introduced in 2009. The main objectives of this law are to enhance the coordination of and achieve more efficient policies on climate in Belgium. Regional governments have been promoting eco-efficiency investments financially (e.g., installation of energy saving installations and renewable energy investments, waste reduction, development of environmental technologies). The federal government has also adopted plans to foster sustainable public procurement and has created awareness around sustainable private procurement as well. This has contributed to Belgian companies increasingly adopting eco-certification schemes including ISO 14001 and *Entreprise Eco-Dynamique* in the Brussels Region.

2.3   The Social Dimension

On the social dimension of sustainability, Belgian companies have focused mainly on diversity in the workplace and work-life balance. Collective bargaining and freedom of association are mandated by law and well integrated into companies. Since most Belgian companies are small and medium-sized enterprises active in the service sector, they are usually not confronted with issues associated with forced labour or child labour. However, multinational enterprises in the industry sector are confronted with such issues and have reported on it, albeit a minority of them.

Research has shown that the topic of human rights has been hardly addressed in annual reports of companies (Louche et al., 2008). Interestingly, the results of the Corporate Responsibility Barometer that was held in Belgium in 2015 show a remarkable positive change in the domain of human rights: no less than 60% of the companies surveyed indicated that they address human rights issues through

comprehensive management systems. However, few companies address such issues through their supply chains nor assists suppliers on these issues (Swaen, Louche, Van Liedekerke, & Vanwalleghem, 2015).

When it comes to community support and development, Belgian companies are not showing much progress and these efforts remain local. Support for humanitarian projects in developing countries remains limited (ibid.).

3 Reorienting CSR: The SDGs as the Current Sustainability Compass

Current sustainability discourse in Belgium has clearly pivoted towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Since 2015, when the SDGs were launched as part of Agenda 2030, organizations across the board have been keen to take ambitious SDG-related initiatives in order to contribute to the realization of this agenda. In fact, the SDGs seem to have been embedded rather quickly and firmly into the institutional infrastructure of CSR in Belgium.

In line with article 7bis of the Belgian constitution, which states that sustainable development is a common goal of Belgian governments, national, federal, regional and local SDG policies have been established, each with their own accents. Notable examples of such policies are the Federal Plan Sustainable Development, Vision 2050 in Flanders, 'Stratégie Wallonne de Développement Durable' in Wallonia, the Brussels Regional Development Plan, and the National Strategy 'Nachhaltige Entwicklung' in the German speaking community.

Also, in November 2017, Belgium published a voluntary national SDG review. This document (1) has intensified reflections on the best way to operationalize the SDGs within government departments and agencies, (2) set in motion working methods whereby sustainable development (SD) is no longer just a matter for specialized SD administrations or designated SD focal points, but rather a whole-of-government affair, (3) allowed progress in the work on a Belgian SDG indicator framework, (4) emphasized the need to ensure all relevant actors are truly on board in a comprehensive approach coherently combining development, defense, diplomacy and rule of law instruments abroad, and (5) has given a renewed impulse in terms of collaboration with civil society stakeholders and private sector. Most importantly, it has allowed for the first time to deliver a wide-ranging overview of the panoply of actions which, domestically as well as externally directed, are currently ongoing and contributing to SDG attainment (Government of Belgium, 2017).

Non-governmental organizations have also embraced the SDGs and have jointly formulated a series of suggestions for governments to apply the SDGs for national and international governmental policy. In addition, The Shift (the focal network for sustainable business in Belgium) has been actively promoting the SDGs through 'SDG Cafés' and sharing SDG ambitions from their partner network with the wider

public. The so-called SDG Voices, an initiative by The Shift and the Federal Institute Sustainable Development (FIDO), is a notable cross-sector initiative where selected businesses, non-profit, other organizations, and the Belgian Queen Mathilde act as ambassadors to inform people about the SDGs, and inspire them with actions and initiatives related to the SDGs.

While anecdotal evidence based on, for instance, sustainability reports, corporate presentations, and press releases show the business sector has also taken initiatives on the SDGs, a good overview of companies' engagement with the SDGs has not been available to date. In order to shed light on patterns of SDG adoption and implementation, Antwerp Management School, the University of Antwerp, and Louvain School of Management (UCLouvain) took the initiative to conduct a national research project called the SDG Barometer.

This chapter reports on key findings from the SDG Barometer. The SDG Barometer was conducted as an extensive online questionnaire in the 2nd and 3rd quarter of 2018. In total, 641 organizations responded to the questionnaire. The questionnaire contained several different routings, based on the answers respondents gave to the questions. In addition, interviews were held with a selected number of organizations that have an SDG engagement. The first part of this chapter takes the reader through the most significant findings from the research. Among other subjects, it explores the current state of affairs regarding the type of engagement, the implementation, and the communication on the SDGs of Belgian organizations. The second part of this chapter provides a discussion of several of these findings. In closing, the chapter identifies several avenues for future research based on the findings of the SDG Barometer.

3.1 Key Findings from the SDG Barometer

3.1.1 Awareness & Action

With virtually all responding organizations (96%) indicate that they are dedicating some or a lot of attention to sustainability, 87% are aware of the SDGs (Exhibit 1). Notably 63% of the surveyed organizations are not only aware of the SDGs, but are also acting on the goals – either through implementing them in their organization or through partnerships. Of these organizations, 85% believe that all relevant sustainability topics are reflected in the SDGs. These findings seem to indicate a higher level of commitment to the SDGs in Belgium than compared to global figures. For instance, international research by Globescan (2016) showed that 66% of organizations still had to adopt the SDGs. On the other hand, 24% of the Belgian organizations are aware of the SDGs, but have no knowledge about or action plans for the goals in place. A mere 13% are not aware at all of the SDGs. Despite the noted unawareness or lack of knowledge, there is a strong willingness among respondents (90%) to adopt the SDGs in the future.
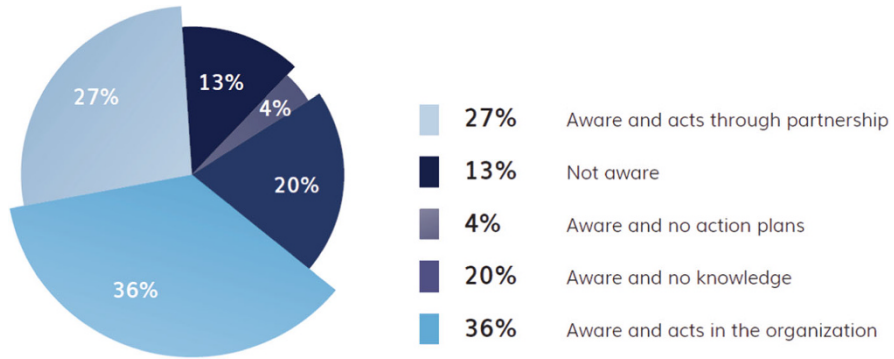
Exhibit 1 Awareness of the SDGs

The attention for sustainability and willingness to adopt the SDGs are yet to be fully translated into action on the SDGs. Looking at the type of action that Belgian organizations are undertaking on the SDGs, it appears that they mainly set specific objectives on the SDGs (55%), engage in partnerships (40%), design SDG-oriented strategies or programs (36%) and measure their impacts on the SDGs (32%). It should be noted that this study does not reveal the quality of the action taken by the organization.

Most of the responding organizations (85%) believe that all relevant sustainability topics are reflected in the SDGs. Interestingly, several other sustainability themes were suggested to be relevant which respondents did not recognize in the SDGs, including sustainable tourism, freedom of speech, consumer rights, consumer trust, career management, family planning, civic participation and animal welfare. Also, part of the respondents indicated the need to develop clear and measurable objectives for the SDGs. These results clearly suggest that work is needed to improve awareness and knowledge about the SDGs, since these topics are, directly or indirectly covered by the SDGs and since the SDGs already include specific targets to attain.

3.1.2   Motivations and Driving Forces

The reasons that organizations have attention for sustainability in general indicate that this is mainly in order to innovate and differentiate their organization to provide unique advantages to stakeholders and enhance their competitive advantage (68%). This result is similar to that of the 2015 CR Barometer, which found that companies identified 'innovation of products and services' as an important motivator for introducing CR management practices. Complying with sustainability standards appears to be the least important reason to have attention for sustainability (48%).

Interestingly, looking at the reasons why organizations adopt the SDGs, a different picture emerges when compared to the reasons why organizations have attention for sustainability. The fact that the SDGs may provide benefits for the organization is
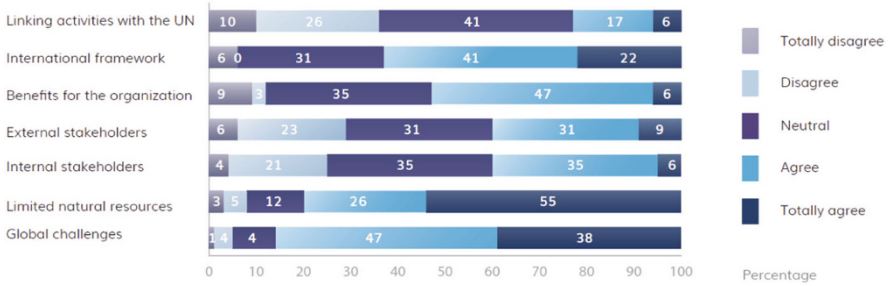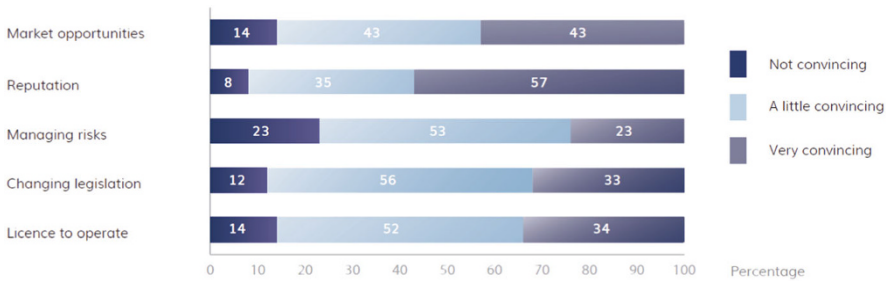
Exhibit 2 Reasons for adopting the SDGs

Exhibit 3 Driving forces for adopting the SDGs

not a top-3 reason for organizations to take up the SDGs, although 53% of respondents agree that the SDGs do so. The findings indicate that far more important reasons for organizations to adopt the SDGs are the fact that the SDGs reflect important global challenges (85%) and the fact that organizations have a sense of the limited supply of natural resources (81%). Also, it appears important for Belgian organizations to adopt the SDGs because of the fact that they represent an international framework (63%). Stakeholder pressure or linking their activities to the United Nations, however, are relatively unimportant reasons for organizations to adopt the SDGs (Exhibit 2). These findings are consistent with international analyses that show that the urgency of sustainability issues is frequently mentioned as a reason for organizations to adopt the SDGs (e.g., Globescan, 2016).

While motivations for adopting the SDGs may originate predominantly internally, driving forces are rather found externally. Looking at the driving factors of the SDGs, reputation (57%) and market opportunities (43%) appear to be the most convincing driving forces for Belgian organizations (Exhibit 3). It should be noted here that organizational reputation is something different from marketing and is crucial for longer-term success. For instance, in the current organizational context intangible assets constitute the lion's share of the market value of large corporations and organizational reputations are linked to many important aspects, including the ability to attract and retain employees, increase consumer and supplier loyalty, and organizations' overall license to operate (GRI et al., 2015). Indeed, securing this

license to operate is also mentioned as a convincing driving factor by respondents (34%).

These findings suggest that organizations mainly see the 2030 Agenda as a broad window of opportunities – as a way to achieve a good fit with their environments, align with the expectations of society, and be in sync with broader economic and societal developments rather than viewing the SDGs as a way to manage organizational risks. It is clear that in sectors such as food and agriculture, urban development, energy and materials, and health and well-being, organizations can contribute to achieving sustainability through their core activities, including goods, services, and business models, and improve overall prosperity (SDG Fund, 2015; WBCSD & DNV GL, 2018).

3.1.3 SDG vs. Sustainability Strategy

There are obvious links between organizations' existing sustainability strategy and the way in which they approach the SDGs. The findings of the SDG Barometer show that organizations mainly adopt the SDGs through building on their sustainability strategy (48%), while only 4% of the responding organizations appear to have replaced their sustainability strategy with the SDGs. Some 43% of the organizations state that the SDGs have many similarities with their existing sustainability strategy. These results suggest that organizations tend to embed SDGs into their existing sustainability strategies rather than re-designing their sustainability strategy or developing a new, additional SDG strategy. This embedding of the SDGs – either within an organization's sustainability strategy or its overall strategy – is generally viewed as important for the SDGs to be truly effective.

3.1.4 SDG Prioritization

The findings of the SDG Barometer clearly show that most organizations (80%) that adopt the SDGs tend to prioritize a few SDGs rather than focusing on the entire set of goals. Only 15% of the responding organizations consider the 17 SDGs equally important; 5% of them gives priority to one SDG (Exhibit 4). This is in line with international results (PWC, 2015) showing that the majority of companies narrow down their choice to a subset of SDGs that they deem most relevant to their operations. It should be noted that prioritization varies with the age of the organization: organizations that have existed for less than two years prioritize the SDGs less when compared to organizations that have existed for more than two years.

On average, responding organizations perceive themselves to have the highest impact on SDG 8 (Decent work and economic growth) and SDG 3 (Good health and well-being). Organizations that are either not aware of the SDGs or are aware but lack knowledge or have not (yet) taken action consider SDG 5 (Gender equality), SDG 7 (Affordable and clean energy) and SDG 9 (Industry, innovation and infrastructure) as significantly more important compared to organizations that have
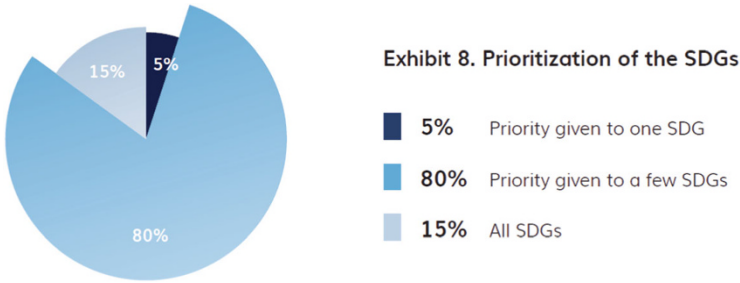
Exhibit 4 Prioritization of the SDGs

	Organizations that are either not aware or are aware but lack action/knowledge	Organizations that are aware and have adopted the SDGs
1	SDG 3 (Good Health and well-being)	SDG 8 (Decent work and economic growth)
2	SDG 8 (Decent work and economic growth)	SDG 3 (Good Health and well-being
3	SDG 5 (Gender equality)	SDG 17 (Partnerships)
4	SDG 9 (Industry, innovation and infrastructure)	SDG 9 (Industry, innovation and infrastructure)
5	SDG 7 (Affordable and clean energy)	SDG 13 (Climate action)
6	SDG 12 (Responsible consumption and production)	SDG 12 (Responsible consumption and production)
7	SDG 11 (Sustainable cities and communities)	SDG 7 (Affordable and clean energy)
8	SDG 13 (Climate action)	SDG 11 (Sustainable cities and communities)
9	SDG 17 (Partnerships for the goals)	SDG 5 (Gender equality)
10	SDG 1 (No poverty)	SDG 4 (Quality education)
11	SDG 4 (Quality education)	SDG 6 (Clean water and sanitation)
12	SDG 10 (Reduced inequalities)	SDG 15 (Life on land)
13	SDG 6 (Clean water and sanitation)	SDG 10 (Reduced inequalities)
14	SDG 15 (Life on land)	SDG 1 (No poverty)
15	SDG 14 (Life below water)	SDG 16 (Peace, justice and strong institutions)
16	SDG 2 (Zero hunger)	SDG 14 (Life below water)

Exhibit 5 SDG prioritization according to different 'SDG maturity'

adopted the SDGs. Organizations that have adopted the SDGs, on the contrary, consider SDG 9 (Industry, innovation and infrastructure), SDG 13 (Climate action) and SDG 17 (Partnerships) as the most important focus points (Exhibit 5).

There appears to be consensus about the SDGs that organizations think they have the least impact on: SDG 2 (Zero hunger), SDG 14 (Life below water) and SDG 16 (Peace, justice and strong institutions). This result is again in line with international findings where a similar set of SDGs were ranked low. Research by Globescan (2016) shows that progress has been particularly slow in the areas of Reduced inequalities (SDG 10), Life Below Water (SDG 14), Life on Land (SDG 15) and

No Poverty (SDG1). These findings suggest that these SDGs are deemed as less relevant to many organizations and their core activities and are more difficult to translate into concrete objectives. Other SDGs, such as SDG 16 (Peace, justice and strong institutions) and SDG 2 (Zero hunger), are perhaps perceived as being primarily aligned with the roles and responsibilities of governments or a small number of specific companies (e.g., United Nations, 2017).

3.1.5 Internal Coordination of the SDGs

Some 83% of the organizations that have adopted the SDGs appeared to have appointed a dedicated person to work on the organization's SDG initiative on a regular basis. Not surprisingly, larger organizations appear to be more likely to have such a person appointed. Recent research has shown that it is particularly the sustainability function within organizations that is most engaged in the SDG agenda (WBCSD, 2018). Here, an interesting result emerged: within organizations that have not engaged in an SDG partnership, the person assigned to coordinate activities related to the SDG initiative is most likely someone from the middle management layer. Within organizations that have entered into an SDG partnership, this person is more likely to be operating at boardroom level. Also, people working on the SDG initiative within organizations that have entered into an SDG partnership are more likely to directly report to the board of directors (72%) than within organizations that have no such partnership (51%).

3.1.6 Partnerships on SDGs

Next to what research suggests (e.g., Kamphof & Melissen, 2018; MacDonald, Clarke, Huang, Roseland, & Seitanidi, 2018), through SDG 17 the SDG framework itself acknowledges that the success of the 2030 Agenda will be highly dependent on the efforts and partnerships between all stakeholders involved and affected. From bilateral partnerships to multi-stakeholder cooperation, these initiatives are seen to be better able to deal with the complexities and interconnectedness of the SDGs and offer, among other benefits, efficiency gains, mutual opportunities for learning, better access to financial means, and a pooling of human resources.

When it comes to the type of partners, collaborative endeavors with non-governmental organizations seem to be slightly preferred by respondents over partnership with governmental organizations and sector organizations. Interestingly, educational institutions are considered to be the least preferred partner by organizations for realizing SDG objectives. Higher education, however, has a big role to play in spurring the adoption of the SDGs by developing knowledge and generating new insights through research and through educating future leaders for companies, governments, and non-governmental organizations alike.

3.1.7   Communication on the SDGs

Most organizations appear to communicate on sustainability, both internally (87%) and externally (82%). Of the responding organizations that have adopted the SDGs 63% communicated about the goals, either internally or externally. The extent of communication about the SDGs does not seem to depend on the type of SDG engagement organizations have: the interviews that were held as part of the SDG Barometer indicate that organizations that have a strong SDG engagement do not always communicate about it.

Recent research has noted that the SDGs are relatively complex and elaborate, causing most organizations to face difficulties when reporting on these goals (GRI & UNGC, 2018), a result that is corroborated by the interviews that were held for the SDG Barometer. Currently, there is no uniform methodology available which enables companies to specifically measure or report on progress and impact of the SDGs. A collective initiative by the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI), the UN Global Compact (UNGC) and the World Business Council for Sustainable Development (WBCSD) has been started in recent years in order to classify business metrics according to the SDG indicators and the monitoring framework.

3.1.8   Barriers for Engaging with the SDGs

The results of the SDG Barometer show that organizations perceive internal stakeholders (e.g., employees, directors, investors) and external stakeholders (e.g. suppliers, clients, competitors) to be the most important barriers for sustainability in general. Looking specifically at barriers for adopting and implementing the SDGs, internal stakeholders not having attention towards the SDGs are identified by organizations as the main barrier, more important than other barriers, such as the (lack of) availability of financial resources and the perception of the SDG framework not bringing benefits to the organization. External stakeholders that may not be interested in the SDG are seen as somewhat of a barrier rather than being a high barrier for organizations. Interestingly, organizations do not perceive the SDGs as the sole responsibility of government and it does not inhibit them from taking action.

3.2   Discussion

The findings of the SDG Barometer paint a contemporary picture of the state of SDG adoption and implementation in Belgium. Overall, the picture that emerges is one that demonstrates a substantial uptake of the goals, especially given the fact that their implementation has only started in 2016. At the same time, there appear to be many shades of gray when it comes to corporate SDG activity. Against this background, it seems fair to state that the uptake of the SDGs in Belgium will continue in the

following years. While this finding can arguably be deemed as a positive develop-
ment, other findings point at patterns of organizational behavior in the context of the
SDGs that deserve discussion. As the final section of this chapter, we will critically
reflect on several of the findings of the SDG Barometer and discuss some of
the implications of these findings. We will deal with the way companies approach
the SDGs in relation to their overall sustainability strategy, their prioritization of the
SDGs, and the role of partnerships in spurring the realization of the SDGs.

3.2.1 SDGs vs. Sustainability Strategy

From the results, it appeared that most companies see the SDGs as building blocks
for their sustainability strategy. Although some percent points lower, a comparable
number of respondents indicate that they consider the SDGs as a reflection of their
sustainability strategy. By implication, it could be argued that respondents tend to
perceive a hierarchical relationship between the SDGs and their sustainability
strategy. While the latter is the primary, overarching way of setting strategic
direction, the former is merely a means ('ingredient') to this end.

At first glance, one may argue that this is normal situation when it comes to
sustainability strategy-setting. After all, companies develop sustainability strategies
in a context-specific way, recognizing the peculiarities and idiosyncracies inherent
to, for instance, the type and geography of their organization and the business they
are in (cf. Murillo & Lozano, 2006; Perrini, Russo, & Tencati, 2007) as well as the
preferences and demands of internal and external stakeholders (Maon, Lindgreen, &
Swaen, 2009). The reason why this finding may actually point at a problem is
twofold. First, it suggests that the SDGs are not perceived by companies to reflect
the most prominent, urgent challenges that should be addressed through placing
them in the lead when it comes to their orientation towards sustainability. The
SDGs – or a selection of them (see the following paragraph for a discussion of this
particular issue) – may well be treated as 'bolt-ons' or 'plug-ins' that enable a
company to superficially ameliorate or polish its sustainability strategy rather than
serving as an authorative, global, moral compass. Considering the SDGs as building
blocks for sustainability strategy would then result in the risk of companies operating
an 'SDG strategy by association' at best, or signal 'rainbowwashing' (a variant to
greenwashing based on the colourful presentation of the SDGs) at worst. Second,
framing the SDGs within an overaching sustainability strategy will in most cases
mean that they will be encapsulated within business case approaches to sustainabil-
ity. While this point relates to a more common critique on sustainable business (i.e.,
sustainability being a means to an economic end), it is important here to state that
bringing the SDGs into such instrumental straitjacket will equally result in an erosion
of the non-economic value propogated by them. It can be argued that the SDG
Barometer's finding that relates to the SDGs mirroring companies' sustainability
strategies reflects a similar risk, since this suggests that companies primarily rely on
their existing strategy when assessing the value offered by the SDG framework.

3.2.2   Prioritization of the SDGs

The SDG Barometer clearly shows that companies prefer to give priority to a few SDGs rather than embracing and implement the entire set of goals. From the perspective of business practice this seems a logical route to take as it is considered to be common practice to have a sharp focus on the sustainability issues that are relevant from an individual company perspective. In fact, companies may find legitimation for doing so since materiality analyses have become part and parcel of the sustainability policy and reporting repertoire and standards such as ISO 26000 emphasize that organizations should focus on those issues that they have the highest impact on and those that fall within their sphere of influence.

However, the UN resolution that sets out Agenda 2030 clearly states that the SDGs are "integrated and indivisible" (United Nations, 2015: 3), implying that any approach towards the goals should capture all of them instead of companies 'cherry picking' the set of SDGs based on whatever consideration they make. The pattern of SDG adoption as demonstrated by the SDG Barometer findings, then, are not in line with the entire idea of engaging with the SDGs. As an extension of this point, another interesting finding in this regard relates to the actual SDGs that companies tend to prioritize. Here, the results show that SDG #2 ('No hunger') only appears at the bottom of their list of priorities, whereas this goal is deemed as central to realizing the other SDGs, according to Agenda 2030.

3.2.3   The Catalyzing Role of Partnerships

As a third interesting finding, the SDG Barometer shows that the locus of SDG coordination within a company (in many cases a CSR or sustainability manager) tends to report more often to a boardroom level member when his or her organization has engaged in an SDG partnership than is the case when an organization has no SDG partnership. While the data do not allow for delving deeper to explain what is behind this finding, it may well have to do with perceived potential reputational damage. Companies tend to communicate externally about partnerships for sustainability, notably through press releases and sustainability reports, since this type of CSR communication has value for them (cf. Du, Bhattacharya, & Sen, 2010). When they communicate about such partnerships, they make a part of their CSR activities as well as the motivations and ambitions behind it explicitly visible for their stakeholders, including customers and media. By taking these actions, the company runs reputational risks that may backfire in case of adverse events, such as underperformance of the partnership or a corruption scandal on side of the partner. It may be argued that a company's higher management wants to be in control when it comes to preventing, reducing, or containing negative reputational effects. Another, complementary explanation for this finding may lie companies aiming to better capture the value such partnerships may bring for the company. Both the internal

and external legitimacy of partnerships can be expected to increase when they are under the management of upper echelons in the company.

3.3 Future Research

Based on the findings of the SDG Barometer, several avenues for future research may be identified.

A first line of research could focus on clarifying the dynamics that are behind SDG partnerships as discussed in the previous section. Following our speculations, research may point at the role of partnerships in placing the SDGs on more strategic levels in the organization, potentially leading to more strategic corporate commitments to the SDGs. Also, it may be worthwhile to uncover SDG partnership patterns, both in terms of the SDGs that partnerships are being formed around and the type of partners companies prefer to collaborate with. Research into this topic could provide insight into the SDGs and partners that are 'left behind' in achieving the ambitions of Agenda 2030.

Second, the findings of the SDG Barometer should in our view prompt research into the materiality analyses of companies that underpin their sustainability strategies. When it comes to prioritizing SDGs, it would be interesting to see to what extent existing materiality analyses and the methods behind these lead to the (absence of) identification and prioritization of the different SDGs. Since materiality analyses tend to be based on criteria relating to the (economic) importance or risk of sustainability issues for the company and its stakeholders, it may be expected that most SDGs will not result directly or result not at all from these analyses. This, in turn, would prompt the question if new methods for materiality analyses are necessary in order to spur companies' engagement with the SDGs.

Third, since the SDG Barometer does not shed light on the type of SDG activity companies are taking, it would be interesting to identify both the nature and actual impacts of corporate SDG actions. One of the benefits of having information available about the nature and impacts of such actions would be to identify which actions are most impactful and what the estimated actual impact of corporate SDG activity in Belgium is.

References

Crutzen, N., & Hoerisch, J. (2013). *Is Belgium lagging behind in sustainability management? An international comparative analysis.* Paper presented at the 27th British Academy of Management Conference, Lieverpool, 10–12 September.

CSR Europe. (2010). *A guide to CSR in Europe: Country insights by CSR Europe's national partner organisations.* Brussels: CSR Europe.

Du, S., Bhattacharya, C., & Sen, S. (2010). Maximizing business returns to corporate social responsibility (CSR): The role of CSR communication. *International Journal of Management Reviews, 12*(1), 8–19.

Globescan. (2016). *Awareness of sustainable development goals (SDGs) vs. millennium development goals (MDGs)*. Accessed September 10, 2018, from https://globescan.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/Radar_eBrief_SDGvsMDG.pdf

Government of Belgium. (2017). *Pathways to sustainable development: First Belgian National Voluntary Review on the Implementation of the 2030 Agenda*. Accessed December 12, 2018, from https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/15721Belgium_Rev.pdf

GRI, & UNGC. (2018). *Integrating the SDGs into corporate reporting: A practical guide*. Amsterdam: GRI & UNGC.

GRI, UNGC, & WBCSD. (2015). *SDG compass: The guide for business action on the SDGs*. Amsterdam/Geneva: GRI, UNGC & WBCSD.

Heene, A., Langenberg, S., & Dentchev, N. (2005). A hot topic in contemporary management. In A. Habish, J. Jonker, M. Wegner, & R. Schmidpeter (Eds.), *Corporate social responsibility across Europe* (pp. 77–86). Heidelberg: Springer.

Hutjens, A., Dentchev, N., & Haezendonck, E. (2015). CSR implementation in Belgium: Institutional context, the role of CSR managers and stakeholder involvement. In S. Idowu, R. Schmidpeter, & M. Fifka (Eds.), *Corporate social responsibility in Europe: United in sustainable diversity* (pp. 57–80). Heidelberg: Springer.

Jackson, G., & Apostolakou, A. (2010). Corporate social responsibility in Western Europe: An institutional mirror or substitute? *Journal of Business Ethics, 94*(3), 371–394.

Kamphof, R., & Melissen, J. (2018). SDGs, foreign ministries and the art of partnering with the private sector. *Global Policy, 9*(3), 327–335.

Louche, C., Van Liedekerke, L., Everaert, P., Le Roy, D., Rossy, A., & d'Huart, M. (2008). Belgium (country report). In S. O. Idowu & W. Leal Filho (Eds.), *Global practices of corporate social responsibility* (pp. 125–148). Heidelberg: Springer.

MacDonald, A., Clarke, A., Huang, L., Roseland, M., & Seitanidi, M. (2018). Multi-stakeholder partnerships (SDG #17) as a means of achieving sustainable communities and cities (SDG #11). In W. Leal Filho (Ed.), *Handbook of sustainability science and research. World sustainability series*. Heidelberg: Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-63007-6_12.

Maon, F., Lindgreen, A., & Swaen, V. (2009). Designing and implementing corporate social responsibility: An integrative framework grounded in theory and practice. *Journal of Business Ethics, 87*(1), 71–89.

Matten, D., & Moon, J. (2008). Implicit' and 'explicit' CSR: A conceptual framework for a comparative understanding of corporate social responsibility. *Academy of Management Review, 33*(2), 404–424.

Murillo, D., & Lozano, J. (2006). SMEs and CSR: An approach to CSR in their own words. *Journal of Business Ethics, 67*(3), 227–240.

PWC (2015). *Make it your business: Engaging with the sustainable development goals*. London: PWC.

Perrini, F., Russo, A., & Tencati, A. (2007). CSR strategies of SMEs and large firms: Evidence from Italy. *Journal of Business Ethics, 74*(3), 285–300.

SDG Fund. (2015). *Business and the United Nations. Working together towards the sustainable development goals: A framework for action*. New York: SDG Fund.

SERV. (2007). *Maatschappelijk verantwoord ondernemen: Van goede indruk maken naar duurzame indruk achterlaten*. Brussels: Social Economic Council Flanders.

Swaen, V., Louche, C., Van Liedekerke, L., & Vanwalleghem, D. (2015). *2015 corporate responsibility barometer for Belgium*. Antwerp: Antwerp Management School.

United Nations. (2015). *Transforming our world: The 2030 agenda for sustainable development*. UN Resolution A/RES/70/1. New York: United Nations.

United Nations. (2017). *The sustainable development goals report 2017*. New York: UN.

VBO. (2007). *Focus: Maatschappelijk verantwoord ondernemen*. Appendix in Infor VBO, nr. 17.

Waddock, S. (2008). Building a new infrastructure for corporate responsibility. *Academy of Management Perspectives, 22*(3), 87–108.

WBCSD. (2018). *SDG sector roadmaps: How to leverage the power of sectoral collaborations to maximize business impacts on the sustainable development goals*. Geneva: WBCSD.

WBCSD, & DNV GL. (2018). *Business and the SDGs: A survey of WBCSD members and global network partners*. WBCSD: Geneva.

Lars Moratis (1977) is a part-time Professor of Sustainable Business at Breda University of Applied Sciences and Professor of Corporate Social Responsibility at Antwerp Management School. He holds an MSc and PhD in management sciences, which he obtained from Rotterdam School of Management and the Open University respectively.

His research interests include sustainable business models, Sustainable Development Goals, responsible management education and critical studies in sustainability. Together with Frans Melissen he has developed the concept of sustainability intelligence. He has (co-)authored several books and many articles, both scholarly and practitioner-oriented. His publications has appeared in journals such as Corporate Social Responsibility & Environmental Management, Business & Society Review and Journal of Management Inquiry.

In addition, he is the founder of Impact Academy, an education provider in the Netherlands that focuses on delivering new insights to sustainability professionals.

Jan Beyne is a researcher and teacher at the Sustainable Transformation Lab of Antwerp Management School. He obtained a Master's degree in Social Economic Sciences and a post-Master's in Diplomacy in International Affairs at the University of Antwerp. Currently he is working on his PhD.

His research is focused on the implementation of sustainability, sustainable transformation and change—with a special interest in the Sustainable Development Goals—and the effectiveness of integrating sustainability within organizations on value creation.

He has been active as a trainer and program manager with CIFAL Flanders, a UN training center in Belgium focusing on the promotion of the Sustainable Development Goals. During the past few years, Jan has built experience in strategic sustainability consulting and creative change management.

Valérie Swaen is Full Professor of Marketing and Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) at the Louvain School of Management (UCLouvain, Belgium) and at IESEG School of Management (France). Since September 2019, she is the president of the Louvain Research Institute in Management and Organizations (LouRIM, UCLouvain).

She is also the head of the Louvain CSR network that gathers and supports researchers and practitioners who seek to put responsible leadership and sustainable production and consumption at the heart of their research and strategy (see https://uclouvain.be/en/faculties/lsm/csr-network.html). In this context, she holds (or held) different corporate chairs in CSR and sustainability (with Engie, essenscia, Proximus, Solvay, and Spadel).

Valérie's research interests include relationship marketing, consumer behavior, CSR and more specifically stakeholders' reactions to CSR communication. She has published papers in international journals such as Journal of Management, Journal of Management Studies, Journal of Organizational Behavior, Journal of Business Ethics, and Marketing Letters.