The Sustainable Development Goals in Norway

What motivates large Norwegian companies to adopt the Sustainable Development Goals, and how are the goals prioritised?

Ana Radic & Patricia Hackman

Supervisor: Ivar Kolstad & Winson Chiu

Master thesis in Economics and Business Administration

Strategy and Management & Energy, Natural Resources and the Environment

NORWEGIAN SCHOOL OF ECONOMICS

PREFACE

This thesis is written as a part of the Master of Science in Economics and Business Administration programme at the Norwegian School of Economics (NHH). This thesis is worth 30 credits and is written as part of the two majors *Strategy and Management* and *Energy, Natural Resources, and the Environment*. The chosen topic on what motivates large Norwegian companies to adopt the UN Sustainable Development Goals and how the goals are prioritised can be considered a satisfactory fit for both majors.

Writing this master's thesis has been an enriching and challenging process. This dissertation reflects the hard work put into it over the past five months, during which we have deepened our knowledge of this interesting and important topic. During the semester, we have not only worked together but also lived together and supported each other as friends. Together we have managed to laugh our way through the highs and lows that come with conducting this type of study. Even though this has been our last semester at NHH, and it is bittersweet to leave, this thesis is a nice way to say goodbye. We hope that this thesis will be as insightful to read as it has been to write.

This research project would not have been possible without the help of several people. Firstly, we would like to thank our supervisor Ivar Kolstad and co-supervisor Winson Chiu for their support throughout the research process. Their valuable insights and feedback have been of crucial importance for this project. We would also like to express our sincerest gratitude to all interview participants who agreed to take part in this study. We are incredibly grateful that they took the time from their busy schedules and provided us with valuable insights. This thesis would not have been possible without their great engagement. Lastly, we would like to thank our friends and family for the support and encouragement they have given us throughout the semester.

<div style="text-align:center">

Bergen, December 2021

Ana Radic and Patricia Hackman

</div>

ABSTRACT

The increasing engagement of businesses with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) presents a shift in the role the private sector has in the global sustainable development agenda. The purpose of this thesis is to explore what motivates large Norwegian companies to adopt the SDGs and to understand how the goals are prioritised. This qualitative study is based on semi-structured interviews with ten informants from ten large Norwegian companies. Together, these interviews resulted in the following findings.

The findings of this research project suggest that while the process of adopting the SDGs varies between companies, it tends to be gradual and continuous. Further, firms seem to have internal preferences for wanting to contribute towards the SDGs, such as a desire to do good. Others were motivated by a desire for a common language or a framework for the sustainability strategy. However, the main internal reason for adopting the SDGs was to use the goals to communicate. The study also identifies that stakeholder pressure and market expectations are key external reasons that drive SDG engagement.

When it comes to prioritisation, the findings indicate that firms vary in their choice of SDGs. The companies agree that not too many goals should be selected, and that prioritisation should be based on how business-relevant the goals are as well as where the company can contribute. Beyond this, the findings suggest that company characteristics such as business area might impact the SDG selection. Finally, the findings indicate that while the companies feel that the SDGs are important, the goals have not been transformational for the businesses.

This thesis contributes to fill a research gap and adds to the limited literature present on the SDGs. Furthermore, the findings provide several practical implications and can, for instance, be used as inspiration by companies who consider adopting the SDGs. This study does have its limitations, such as its sample, which should be addressed in future research on this topic. Overall, this research project manages to bring more awareness towards the SDGs by highlighting how and why the Norwegian private sector engages with the 2030 Agenda.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CES – Corporate Environmental Sustainability

CSR – Corporate Social Responsibility

ESG – Environmental, Social and Corporate Governance

EU – European Union

GRI – Global Reporting Initiative

MDG – Millennium Development Goal

MDGs – Millennium Development Goals

NGO – Non-Governmental Organisation

KPI – Key Performance Indicator

SDG – Sustainable Development Goal

SDGs – Sustainable Development Goals

TBL – Triple Bottom Line

UN – United Nations

UNGC – United Nations Global Compact

1. INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents the background and problem definition of the study, as well as the purpose and research question guiding the paper. Lastly, an overview of the thesis is provided.

1.1 Background and problem definition

The sustainability field has experienced exponential growth in the last couple of decades as businesses have become more concerned with engaging in corporate sustainable behaviour (Kourula, Pisani and Kolk, 2017). Along with this, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have also garnered increased popularity. The SDGs are a collection of 17 goals that work as a blueprint and guide actions towards a more sustainable future (United Nations, 2021a). The goals were set up in 2015 by the United Nations General Assembly, with the intention of being reached by 2030 (United Nations, 2021a). While originally aimed at states, the SDGs are being voluntarily incorporated into businesses (Silva, 2021). This pattern of interest for the SDGs among firms can also be observed in the Norwegian market, as almost three-quarters of the 100 largest companies in Norway have adopted one or several SDGs (Young, Knudsen and Bergland, 2021). This seems to be an encouraging sign, considering that literature indicates that the private sector must be involved for the 2030 Agenda to succeed (Ike, Donovan, Topple and Masli, 2019; Jones, Hiller and Comfort, 2016).

While several companies have adopted this initiative, there is still limited literature on business engagement with the SDGs (Heras-Saizarbitoria, Urbieta and Boiral, 2021; Ike et al., 2019). This thesis tries to address this research gap by exploring what motivates Norwegian firms to adopt the SDGs in their sustainability work and how the goals are prioritised. This is an exciting topic to study because of the voluntary nature of the SDGs and because most companies tend to prioritise only some of the goals even though the 17 SDGs are deemed equally important (Ranängen, Cöster, Isaksson and Garvare, 2018; Ike et al., 2019). To our knowledge, no study has been conducted in this context. Nonetheless, nearing the halfway point of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, it is now perhaps more than ever necessary to understand why and how companies are engaging with the SDGs (Santos and Bastos, 2020).

1.2 Purpose and research question

Based on the increased popularity of the SDGs in the Norwegian private sector and the limited research on this topic, this study aims to explore the motivations large companies have for

adopting the SDGs and understand how the goals are prioritised. The identified research gap, background and purpose of this study has resulted in the following two-part research question:

What motivates large Norwegian companies to adopt the UN SDGs in their sustainability work, and how are the goals prioritised?

The authors of this master's thesis, hereafter the researchers, chose a qualitative research design to answer the research question. More specifically, the thesis takes an exploratory deductive approach which allows for gaining insights into a topic while being guided by theory and previous research. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with representatives from ten large[1] Norwegian companies operating in the private sector[2]. During the interviews, the researchers strived to understand what, according to the informants, motivated the companies to adopt the SDGs and how the goals have been prioritised. An additional interview was conducted with a sustainability expert to bring insights and inform the discussion chapter. While the interviews with the company representatives served as the primary data source and were used in the data analysis, secondary data was also collected from company websites, annual reports, sustainability reports, and LinkedIn. This material was gathered to understand the differences between firms related to the SDGs, elect companies and interviewees for this study, and create specific interview questions. Measures have been taken to ensure that the study will be of high quality and provide an insightful answer to the posed research question.

1.3 Outline

This thesis consists of seven chapters. The second provides an overview of topics on sustainability and the SDGs specifically, along with relevant theories and literature. Further, the third chapter discusses the research setting and presents the firms included in the study. In the fourth chapter, the methodological choices are explained and justified. In addition, the quality of the study and ethical aspects are discussed. Further, chapter five presents the findings of the data collection and analysis. The findings are discussed against relevant theory in chapter six, which also includes a presentation of the contributions of the study, limitations, as well as suggestions for further research. Finally, the seventh chapter concludes the thesis.

---

[1] A large company in this thesis is defined as a company with over 100 employees, according to the Norwegian Næringslivets Hovedorganisasjon (NHO).

[2] In this thesis, the private sector refers to for-profit businesses.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This chapter aims to build a solid theoretical foundation that will be used when discussing the findings. It begins by broadly presenting sustainability and UN initiatives before focusing on the SDGs. After that, theories from the sustainability and CSR field are presented and connected to the SDGs to comprehend what motivations companies might have for adopting the SDGs and how the goals are prioritised. The chapter rounds off with a critical look at the presented theory.

2.1 Sustainability

The sustainability field has experienced exponential growth in the last couple of decades as firms have begun to engage more with corporate sustainable behaviour (Kourula et al., 2017). This increased attention has contributed to the vast number of sustainability definitions currently present in the literature (Young and Dhana, 2013). Among these definitions, one of the most renowned emerged from the Brundtland report, where sustainable development is defined as *"development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs"* (WCED, 1987, p.41). This definition is transferred to a business context by Dyllick and Hockerts (2002, p.131), who define sustainability in business as *"meeting the needs of a firm's direct and indirect stakeholders (…), without compromising its ability to meet the needs of future stakeholders as well"*. The authors elaborate that for firms to achieve this goal, they must maintain as well as increase their economic, social, and environmental capital levels.

This coincides well with the definition of corporate social responsibility (CSR) provided by the Commission of the European Communities (2001, p.6) who describe CSR as *"a concept whereby companies integrate social and environmental concerns in their business operations and in their interaction with their stakeholders on a voluntary basis"*. As the definition suggests, CSR comprises three dimensions: economic, environmental, and social. This is also the case for sustainability (Hansmann, Mieg and Frischknecht, 2012), and as such, sustainable development should address these three dimensions. Dyllick and Hockerts (2002) claim that these three pillars of sustainable development must be conceptualised in a triple bottom line.

Before expanding upon the concept of a triple bottom line, it is worth mentioning that there are several drawbacks to the sustainability literature. First, there is a lack of consensus regarding how sustainability and CSR should be defined. Due to the interconnected nature of the terms,

CSR and sustainability will throughout the thesis be used interchangeably. Furthermore, some, like Milton Friedman (2007), argue that it is not the firm's responsibility to act sustainably, as the business is only tasked with increasing shareholder profits. However, others argue that corporations need to act responsibly and contribute to sustainable development (Zadek, 2001). For instance, Porter and Kramer (2002) state that executives are increasingly pressured to deliver on CSR and argue that including the private sector is key to solving several world issues. As they put it, *"In the long run, then, social and economic goals are not inherently conflicting but integrally connected"* (Porter and Kramer, 2002 p. 3).

2.1.1 Triple bottom line

The concept of a triple bottom line (TBL) was developed by John Elkington during the 1990s. The intention was to challenge business leaders to rethink capitalism by expanding their focus from solely profits to include improving the lives of people and the well-being of the planet (Elkington, 1997; Elkington, 2018). The TBL functions as a sustainability framework that examines the impact companies have on the economic, social, and environmental dimensions of sustainability (Elkington, 1997; Elkington, 2018). These three pillars that make up the TBL are sometimes referred to as the three P's: *people*, *planet*, and *profit* (Kraaijenbrink, 2019). In essence, the triple bottom line tries to capture how companies influence the world along these three dimensions, which according to Elkington (1997), companies need to do to become a sustainable business.

Elkington (2018) states that the triple bottom line can be considered a crucial component of the sustainability agenda. Despite the popularity of the TBL concept, Hansmann et al. (2012) point out that it can be rather difficult to integrate the three sustainability dimensions and ensure coherence amongst them within a business. Furthermore, Elkington (2018) himself points out that the concept of the triple bottom line is at times misunderstood as companies tend to focus on their financial performance and incorporate the TBL more as an accounting and reporting tool (Elkington, 2018; Dyllick Hockerts, 2002). In other words, instead of using the TBL as a framework to improve sustainability, companies use it to portray their current work. Therefore, it could be argued that frameworks such as the TBL might not be the best approach to engage businesses in sustainable development.

While the TBL framework has limitations, it can help change the way companies work with sustainability if implemented as intended. The global initiative, the 2030 Agenda, by the United

Nations captures the concept of the triple bottom line and offers guidance and direction both for nations and businesses towards sustainable development (Scheyvens, Banks and Hughes, 2016; Rendtorff, 2019). Hence, this thesis now moves on from exploring the three sustainability dimensions to diving into the UN and the 17 Sustainable Development Goals.

2.2 The United Nations

The United Nations was founded in 1945 in the aftermath of the second world war to ensure peace and prosperity (FN Sambandet, 2021c). Today, the organisation boasts over 193 member states who work together to solve common problems (United Nations, 2021a). In addition to peace and security, and human rights, the third core area the organisation works with is sustainable development. The UN has several organisations and programs related to solving these key global issues (FN Sambandet, 2021b). Among these programs, and the focus of this thesis, are the Sustainable Development Goals. These goals build on the previous UN initiative, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Before presenting the SDGs, the United Nations Global Compact (UNGC) and the MDGs are discussed to provide information on voluntary sustainability initiatives and the challenges associated with them. While independent from the other two initiatives, the UNGC was a step towards including the private sector in sustainable development.

2.2.1 The UN Global Compact

The Global Compact is a global network launched in 2000, primarily aimed at engaging businesses in sustainability (FN Sambandet, 2021a ; Fortin and Jolly, 2015). The initiative has over 12 000 member firms, making it the most extensive network related to corporate social responsibility. The UNGC is guided by ten principles related to human rights, work standards, environment, and anti-corruption. All members are encouraged to integrate the principles into their operations, communicate their efforts and form partnerships that contribute towards the sustainable development agenda (FN Sambandet, 2021a). The UNGC is a voluntary initiative, and, as such, no authorities are regulating the member's behaviours (UNGC, 2021). Instead, the program depends upon the full cooperation of the participants.

The voluntary nature of this initiative has resulted in some criticism. For instance, Bruno (2002) suggests that the UNGC contributes to the problem of 'bluewashing' by allowing companies that do not adhere to the Compact's principles to 'wrap themselves' in the UN flag. Berliner and Prakash (2014) find support for this, as their study indicates that firms, despite their UNGC

membership, avoid making significant changes to their social and environmental practices. Schiavi and Solomon (2007) claim that this is a widespread problem regarding voluntary initiatives due to their non-regulated nature. Despite their shortcomings, voluntary initiatives are on the rise (Schiavi and Solomon, 2007). This trend is also reflected in the UN, which continuously relies on such programs. Another voluntary initiative that emerged around the same time as the UNGC, but independent of it, are the Millennium Development Goals.

2.2.2 From the Millennium Development Goals to the Sustainable Development Goals

The Millennium Development Goals came to fruition after the Millennium Summit in 2000, where the UN member states committed to eight development goals (UN, 2021). These goals were aimed at developing nations and addressed global issues related to extreme poverty, gender equality, education, and the environment. Each goal came with quantitative targets, and the deadline to reach them was set for 2015 (Sachs and McArthur, 2005). Sachs (2012) argues that the MDGs' simplicity and voluntary nature contributed to their success. A 2015 report shows that the goals, among other things, resulted in a decline in extreme poverty and worldwide starvation (UN, 2015). There is limited research on how businesses impacted the MDGs. However, Stuart, Gelb, Lucci, Scott and Williams (2016) express that while most firms did not directly engage with the goals, they contributed heavily to their achievement.

Despite their success, most goals were not reached during the expected timeline (Kumar et al., 2016; Sachs, 2012). There are several reasons why the MDGs fell short of their purpose. Sachs (2012) points to a lack of private sector engagement and too few worldwide investments in sustainable development. Fukuda-Parr (2016) argues that as well as having too narrow targets, the goals were not transformational enough and did not address the complex reasons behind the issues they were trying to solve. The MDGs were also criticised for upholding the appearance that sustainability issues only exist in developing nations (Saith, 2006 in Fehling, Nelson and Venkatapuram, 2013). The shortcomings suffered by the MDGs paved the way for the post-2015 agenda and a new round of global goals (Fukuda-Parr, 2016; Sachs, 2012).

2.3 UN Sustainable Development Goals

The Sustainable Development Goals build on the previous MDGs and present an increased convergence of the development agenda (Kumar et al., 2016). The SDGs were launched in 2015 as part of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (Fukuda-Parr, 2016; Sachs, 2012).

The SDGs are 17 goals, presented in *figure 1*, which together represent the joint global response to challenges such as climate change and social inequality. These new goals are intended to be achieved by 2030 (FN Sambandet, 2021b).

SDG 1	No Poverty	End poverty in all its forms everywhere
SDG 2	Zero Hunger	End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture.
SDG 3	Good Health and Well-being	Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages.
SDG 4	Quality Education	Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.
SDG 5	Gender Equality	Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls.
SDG 6	Clean Water and Sanitation	Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all.
SDG 7	Affordable and Clean Energy	Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable, and modern energy for all.
SDG 8	Decent Work and Economic Growth	Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all.
SDG 9	Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure	Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation.
SDG 10	Reducing Inequality	Reduce inequality within and among countries.
SDG 11	Sustainable Cites and Communities	Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable.
SDG 12	Responsible Consumption and Production	Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns.
SDG 13	Climate Action	Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts.
SDG 14	Life Below Water	Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development.
SDG 15	Life On Land	Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt biodiversity loss.
SDG 16	Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions	Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels.
SDG 17	Partnerships for the Goals	Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development.

Figure 1: An overview of the Sustainable Development Goals. Own creation based on (United Nations, 2021a).

While the SDGs extend the work of the MDGs, there are several crucial differences between the two. Firstly, the SDGs cover a broader range of issues through their 17 goals and 169 associated targets (Fukuda-Parr, 2016; Kumar et al., 2016). While the MDGs were mainly focused on poverty, the SDGs include this problem as part of a broader agenda that encompasses sustainable development through all three pillars of sustainability (Fukuda-Parr, 2016). Another difference is expressed by Scheyvens et al. (2016), who point out that the SDGs are universal, and all the UN member nations are expected to contribute. This is in stark contrast with the MDGs, which were aimed at developing countries (Fukuda-Parr, 2016; Kumar et al., 2016). Even though both initiatives were originally developed for nations, a key difference between the two is the involvement of the private sector. While businesses had limited engagement with the MDGs, the private sector has actively participated in developing the SDGs and contributing towards them (Pedersen, 2018; Scheyvens et al., 2016).

2.3.1 The UN SDGs and the three sustainability pillars

The SDGs cover the previously discussed triple bottom line approach to sustainable development (Scheyvens et al., 2016). However, as the goals are highly interconnected, it complicates the matters of goal achievement and classification (van Tulder, 2018). Van Tulder (2018) presents three ways one can address this interconnectedness. The first approach refers to work by Le Blanc (2015), who illustrates that topics related to the SDGs are interlinked. However, van Tulder (2018) provides no further elaboration on how one might handle this problem besides stating that assessing the interactions among the SDGs is crucial. The second approach was developed by the Stockholm Resilience Centre (2016), which uses a hierarchical approach to the SDGs. The three sustainability categories each represent their own layer in a cake where the biosphere, or environmental, layer makes up the foundation, followed by the societal and economic layers (van Tulder, 2018). The typology categorises the SDGs as follows: goals 8, 9, 10, and 12 are economic; goals 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 7, 11, and 16 are social; while 6, 13, 14, and 15 are environmental. SDG 17 on partnership is independent and connects all the goals (Stockholm Resilience Centre, 2016; van Tulder, 2018). Finally, the third approach relies on the UN classification of the 5Ps of *planet*, *prosperity*, *peace*, *people* and *partnership* (United Nations, 2021b). The SDGs each fit under the classifications (van Tulder, 2018). However, the categorisations of the 5Ps seem to offer a limited degree of utility as some of the goals are difficult to classify intuitively. This is also the case for the first approach. Neither of these approaches will thus be implemented in this thesis. Instead, the typology by the Stockholm Resilience Centre (2016) will be used to categorise the SDGs. This approach is respected and

has a natural relation to the triple bottom line concept. Even though this approach is well-suited for its purpose in this research project, it is acknowledged that there are other ways to classify the SDGs that could have been used (Delli, Paoli and Addeo, 2019).

2.3.2 The private sector and the UN SDGs

Even though the SDGs initially are designed for nations and voluntary for companies, they have gained increased attention among firms in the private sector (Christ and Burritt, 2019). This interest is key because the sustainable development agenda is dependent on the involvement of the private sector to succeed (van Zanten & van Tulder, 2018; Pedersen, 2018; Ike et al., 2019).

However, there are some key challenges related to incorporating the business sector into the global sustainability agenda. For instance, Scheyvenes et al. (2016) point out that the private sector's bottom-line focus and short-term orientation clash with their ability to contribute towards the goals. They further criticise the voluntary nature of the SDGs, which literature has pointed out tends to have a relatively low effect on business practices (Jones and Phillips, 2016). This could be because soft approaches to corporate responsibility are completely reliant on voluntary compliance from self-interested companies (Pingeot, 2015). The lack of reporting standards related to the SDGs complicates the matter of voluntary compliance further. For instance, Schramade (2017) points out that while the SDGs are present in the communication of an increasing number of companies, there is a lack of reporting on related key performance indicators (KPI). Another problem many actors in the private sector face is how to interpret, prioritise and implement these broad SDGs into an existing sustainability strategy as all goals are deemed of equal importance (Jones et al., 2016; Ike et al., 2019).

While there certainly are challenges related to incorporating the SDGs into the business, the goals might also present opportunities for the private sector. For instance, Jones et al. (2016) state that the SDGs can be used to identify business opportunities, such as potentially untapped markets in less developed economies. Lomazzi, Borisch and Laaser (2014) point out that while most of the MDGs were not reached, the private sector played a significant role in contributing to them. They further point out that the private sector is in a unique position when contributing to sustainable development due to its economic influence. Thus, it seems unlikely that the private sector would not be able to contribute to the SDGs. The involvement of firms with the SDGs is already high, and Pedersen (2018) even claims that the SDGs are like a present to businesses providing a framework that can be translated into a long-term market strategy.

However, in order to capitalise on this the SDGs, need to be adopted by the organisations. There is no one-size-fits-all guide for how the private sector should implement the SDGs. However, in the following section, a few of the commonly used approaches will be presented.

2.3.2.1 Process of adopting the SDGs

According to Pedersen (2018), even though firms have adopted the SDGs, some still struggle to get it right. To help with this, the Global Reporting Initiatives (GRI), the UNGC and the World Business Council for Sustainable Development have developed a tool, the SDG Compass, to help firms incorporate the SDGs in their strategies (SDG Compass, 2021). The SDG Compass is a framework that guides companies on *"how they can align their strategies as well as measure and manage their contribution to the SDGs"* (SDG Compass, 2021, p. 5). It provides a five-step method to maximise the contributions to the SDGs and explains how the SDGs affect business. Further, it offers tools for incorporating the goals in the strategies (SDG Compass, 2021). The main point of the framework is that companies should seize business opportunities from the SDGs. This entails assessing the positive and negative impacts of the SDGs across the whole value chain (SDG Compass, 2021). The framework suggests that some of the goals should be prioritised. The assessment of impacts aims to help identify where the company can make a difference, and the goals should be prioritised according to this. It is also highlighted that sustainability should be integrated into the core business.

Silva (2021) identified two main ways companies address the SDGs. Companies may either map their current business activities to the SDGs or use them as inspiration to develop new ideas. In addition to this, Silva suggests that companies face the decision of whether to link their SDG contributions to their core business or activities that can be seen as add-ons. Add-ons are sustainability activities outside the core business, such as donations to charity (Silva, 2021). Silva found that most firms map their current core business activities to the SDGs. According to Silva, this only entails symbolic changes where firms simply change how they portray their sustainability work. Scott and McGill (2018) claim that selecting SDGs that match existing business activities indicates that businesses see the SDGs as a reporting tool instead of an opportunity and responsibility for the business. Mhlanga, Gneiting and Agarwal (2018) suggest that businesses need to drastically change their engagement with the SDGs if they are going to play a key part in achieving the goals. If this does not happen, they argue that there is a high chance that the goals will simply end up serving as a colourful communication tool. To address the problems of superficial engagement with the SDGs, companies could conduct a

materiality analysis[3] to determine which goals to select (Heras-Saizarbitoria et al., 2021). Silva suggests that using the SDGs as inspiration to drive changes in the business model has the potential to create substantive changes, which is necessary to reach the 2030 Agenda (Dakhlmann et al., in Silva, 2021; SDG Compass, 2021).

2.3.3 The SDGs in Norway

Like the other United Nations member states, Norway is committed to working towards the achievement of the SDGs. To succeed with this, the Norwegian government has presented an action plan which aims to place the global goals in a Norwegian context and show how different actors, such as companies, can integrate and use the SDGs in their work (Regjeringen, 2021). It is highlighted that, to achieve the goals by 2030, all parts of society need to contribute, including Norwegian firms. However, the government also claims that not all the 169 targets are as relevant in a Norwegian context, partly because developed and developing countries do not face the same challenges (Regjeringen, 2021).

The Sustainable Development Report is a global assessment of how UN member states have progressed in achieving the SDGs (Sachs, Kroll and Lafourtune, 2021). In the 2021 Sustainable Development Report, Norway ranks number 7 out of 165 countries. The report presents both the overall country score as well as the score on each goal. Norway scores high on most of the goals, however, there is room for improvement on SDGs 13 and 12 (Sachs et al., 2021). Jones et al. (2016) and Pedersen (2018) suggested that the SDGs can be used to identify new business opportunities. Hence, these challenges related to the SDGs on a national level may present opportunities for Norwegian companies to contribute.

As UN member states are committed to the SDGs, more businesses around the world have started showing an increased interest in them (García-Meca and Martínez-Ferrero, 2021). This is also the case in Norway, as three-quarters of Norway's 100 biggest companies already have adopted one or more SDGs (Young et al., 2021). The number of companies working with the SDGs in Norway has increased over the years, as only half of the companies did so in 2018. Among the firms that have adopted the goals, the three most popular SDGs are number 13, 8

---

[3] Definition of materiality analysis: *"Materiality analysis is a multi-purpose tool for prioritizing sustainability issues from the double perspective of companies and stakeholders, meaning that both parties contribute to identify the present and emerging social and environmental risk and opportunities"* (Calabrese, Costa, Ghiron and Menichini, 2019 p.1)

and 12, while the least popular ones are SDGs 1, 6, and 2 (Young et al., 2021). Interestingly, two of the most popular goals among firms in Norway are also the ones the country scores the worst on (Young et al., 2021; Sachs et al., 2021). It could be the case that companies are prioritising these goals as they see potential business opportunities related to them. However, previous research suggests that this may not be the case if firms are just highlighting their current work through the goals but not changing their businesses (Silva, 2021; Heras-Saizarbitoria et al., 2021; Scott and McGill, 2018). This is only one of the criticisms that have been directed towards the goals.

2.3.4 Criticism of the SDGs

As was the case for their predecessor, the SDGs have also been subject to a fair share of criticism. *Chapter 2.3.2* introduced some criticism related to the SDGs, which will be expanded upon in the following.

Fortin and Jolly (2015) criticised the UN-business relationship for being too reliant on voluntary initiatives such as the SDGs. They argue that such voluntary engagement might reduce the impact these initiatives could have and cause binding agreements to be delayed. The authors comment that if companies engage with UN voluntary initiatives without making any transformative business changes, this could manifest as 'bluewashing'. Van Zanten and van Tulder (2018) also express concern that the SDGs might evolve into something that is used for superficial communication to cover up company negligence. Furthermore, Fukuda-Parr (2016) points out that the 2030 Agenda potentially could be hurt through selectivity during the implementation process, which could result in important goals and targets being neglected. The author points out that this was the case for the MDGs and that goals aimed at addressing structural issues, like SDG 10, are likely to suffer this fate. This problem of 'cherry picking' is also raised by Preston and Scott (2015), who find that firms mostly focus on goals that are deemed business relevant. While this could be a practical approach, it could also lead to the most transformational SDGs being neglected (Preston and Scott, 2015). For instance, Young et al. (2021) point out that almost a fourth of firms did not conduct a materiality analysis during their prioritisation process of the SDGs, even though this is a key step to avoid greenwashing.

Cerutti and Rossi (2019) also raise the issue that organisations might be tempted to serve the goals superficially, for instance, by not attaching them to the actual core business. This is substantiated by evidence from Silva (2021), who found that the SDGs did not result in any

major changes in business activities, instead simply altering the way companies portray their sustainability work. Similarly, a study by Heras-Saizarbitoria et al. (2021) shows that the SDG engagement seems to be mostly superficial, suggesting the existence of greenwashing or, in this case, 'SDG-washing'. However, as Kumar et al. (2016) point out, the sheer extent of goals, targets and indicators making up the SDGs could inhibit the implementation and monitoring of the goals. As discussed earlier, Schramade (2017) also criticises the lack of structured reporting related to the SDGs and expresses the need for SDG related KPIs. As a final point of criticism, Kumar et al. (2016) also point out the enormous cost associated with reaching the SDGs, which could contribute to the limited transformational capacity.

While it is apparent that the SDGs have potential pitfalls, this framework represents a great long-term view into the future for businesses (Pedersen, 2018). The goals have also garnered widespread societal support and present a positive shift in the sustainable development agenda (van Tulder, 2018). However, for these ambitious goals to be completed, the support and involvement of businesses is critical (Christ and Burritt, 2019). Jones et al. (2016) even go as far as to state that businesses will determine whether the 2030 Agenda will succeed or fail, making it more crucial than ever to understand how the private sector is approaching the SDGs.

2.4 Motivation to adopt the SDGs and their prioritisation

Despite the criticism levied at the SDGs, many Norwegian companies have adopted the goals and started prioritising them. This poses the question of what motivated them to do so and how the 17 goals are prioritised. There is a lot of published work related to the motivation to adopt CSR practices, providing a vast theoretical foundation. For instance, Kotler and Lee (2005) reference looking good for external stakeholders, making internal stakeholders feel good as well as improving the brand and the bottom line. Porter and Kramer (2006), on the other hand, present the four most common justifications for CSR as a felt moral obligation, a desire for sustainability in the form of long-term success, a license to operate required by stakeholders, and to improve the company reputation and image. Additionally, Baumgartner and Rauter (2016) present two reasons organisations might pursue environmental and social goals. The first reason relates to ethical or economic drivers which is categorised as internal preferences in this paper. The second reason stems from the fact that companies might feel pressured to engage in this behaviour due to legislation, rules, stakeholders, and market pressure. This is classified as external pressure. Thus, theory related to CSR, sustainability and the SDGs is categorised under

either internal preferences or external pressure inspired by the categories of Baumgartner and Rauter (2016). It should be noted that companies engage with sustainability for many different reasons and might be influenced by both internal and external drivers. This categorisation helps to structure the research project and its implications. Due to constraints, it is impossible to present all relevant theories explaining such engagement. However, this chapter presents some of the most significant literature related to CSR and sustainability engagement to help explain what motivates companies to adopt the SDGs and understand how the goals are prioritised.

2.4.1 Internal preferences

Starting with internal preferences for CSR engagement, this section focuses on ethical and business reasons. Thus, the ideas of moral obligation (Porter and Kramer, 2006), internal stakeholders (Kotler and Lee, 2005) and altruism (Garay and Font, 2012) are explored as representatives of ethical drivers. When it comes to business reasons, this section presents how the desire for business success can be a strong driver for engaging with voluntary CSR initiatives (Kotler and Lee, 2005).

2.4.1.1 Ethical reasons

According to Santos and Bastos (2020), several companies justify their SDG engagement through ethical reasoning. The authors explain that the motivation to act sustainably may stem from a feeling of social responsibility within the firm. This aligns well with the idea of moral obligation presented by Porter and Kramer (2006), where companies engage with CSR because they feel a responsibility to participate in such activities. In other words, some companies seem to engage in CSR out of a sense of duty towards the general society. However, where this felt duty comes from is harder to identify. As Kotler and Lee (2005) put it, participating in CSR initiatives could feel good for internal stakeholders such as employees and managers, which could motivate them to adopt such behaviour. Santos (2011) points out that the implementation of CSR practices depends on the motivation of owners and managers, supporting the idea that internal stakeholders are key when explaining CSR engagement. Furthermore, Garay and Font (2012) find that companies mainly act responsibly due to altruistic reasons. Put differently, some companies adopt sustainability practices because they wish to do good. From this, it seems likely that companies driven by ethical motivations for engaging with the SDGs wish to prioritise the goals where they can have the greatest positive contribution. To put it in the words of Jordan OBE and Tuffrey (2015, p.4), the SDGs *"provide the gateway for any business to shift from thinking about their own priorities ('my world') to global priorities ('our world')".*

2.4.1.2 Business reasons

While some companies are guided by ethical reasons in their sustainability engagement, other companies rationalise their CSR work through business motives. Here the business reasons are separated into short-term and long-term reasons. While the short-term reasons concentrate on quick returns, the long-term reasons concentrate on benefits such as sustained competitive advantages. The simple fact that the SDGs are predicted to produce market opportunities worth over 12 trillion dollars in just a year could provide an immediate motivation for businesses to engage with them (Elkington, 2017). Thus, perhaps not surprisingly, Naidoo and Gasparatos (2018) found in their literature review that the key element driving retailers to adopt corporate environmental sustainability (CES) strategies were expected economic benefits. Thus, one motivation for companies to commit to CSR lies in the potential profits this could result in.

A literature review by Muhmad and Muhamad (2020) explored the relationship between sustainability practices and financial performance, finding a mostly positive relationship between the two variables. Other studies also suggest that sustainability can be a source of future profitability (Nidumolu, Prahalad and Rangaswami, 2009; Porter and Kramer, 2011). The findings of Flammer (2015) also point towards a causal relationship between CSR and profitability. However, this is not indicative of a general positive relationship between the two, as the author finds that CSR might be profitable for some firms in a certain context. This critique can be directed at the literature here in general, implying that a positive correlation between CSR and financial performance does not have to equate to a causal relationship. Nevertheless, some firms might use the business case for CSR as a justification for adopting sustainability practices like the SDGs. Companies may see the SDGs as an opportunity to gain economic benefits, especially through prioritising the economic goals. However, there is still a lack of sound evidence on how the goals affect financial performance (García-Meca and Martínez-Ferrero, 2021).

However, financial performance is not the only economic driver for committing to CSR practices. Several studies find that companies and executives view sustainability as a path towards more long-term economic benefits, such as future competitive advantage. For instance, Garay and Font (2012) found competitiveness to be a key motivator for company engagement with sustainability. Further, Lacy, Cooper, Hayward and Neuberger (2010) found that managers believe that CSR is critical for future success and that it can enable the competitiveness of firms.

Moreover, Baumgartner and Rauter (2016) list advantages in efficiency, productivity, and risk-reduction as benefits from corporate sustainability programs. These advantages can translate into financial benefits or competitive advantages, for instance, through differentiation. Cartwright (2019) references research that indicates that engaging in sustainable behaviour might be the key to attracting and retaining talented employees. Ugarte, D'Hollander, Tregurtha and Hasse (2017) state that by meeting the SDGs, businesses can access and develop new markets and opportunities. Jordan OBE and Tuffrey (2015) also point out that the SDGs can produce new revenue streams in addition to enabling companies to form new beneficial partnerships. While Santos and Bastos (2020) also found that the private sector may gain competitive advantages from adopting the SDGs, the studied companies did not see this as a key driver for the adoption.

According to Porter and Kramer (2006) as well as Kotler and Lee (2005), companies might justify their sustainability work because this is key for the long-term success of the company. Both author pairings claim that companies engage with CSR due to the potential opportunities related to improving the company brand and reputation. This improvement can, however, only happen if the CSR engagement is communicated. In a similar vein, Santos and Bastos (2020) found that the SDGs help to improve brand and company reputation due to their association with credibility and trust. This makes it reasonable to assume that companies are motivated to adopt the SDGs to improve their brand and reputation, and thus might prioritise goals that they believe will be the most beneficial for this purpose.

2.4.2 External pressure

Several reasons for engaging with sustainability also lie outside the internally driven ethical and economic ones. These include external pressure from stakeholders and the market (Baumgartner and Rauter, 2016). Three frequently used theories related to CSR, namely, stakeholder theory, legitimacy theory, and institutional theory will be used to explore external drivers for CSR engagement. Fernando and Lawrence (2014) argue that these theories explore the relationships that exist between society and companies that operate in it. They state that the theories are complementary and provide deeper insights when applied together.

2.4.2.1 Stakeholder theory

According to the stakeholder perspective introduced by Edward Freeman in 1984, companies need to meet multiple expectations set forth by their various stakeholder groups. The

stakeholders of an organisation are defined as those individuals or groups of individuals that influence or are influenced by the actions of the organisation (Freeman, 1984). According to Phillips, Freeman and Wicks (2003), focusing on the stakeholders and their well-being is the main point of this theory. Ching and Gerab (2017) take it further by arguing that stakeholder theory implies that the long-term survival of any organisation is dependent on stakeholder support. Hence, companies respond to different expectations to preserve good stakeholder relationships (Latif, Mahmood, San, Said and Bakhsh, 2020).

Stakeholder theory suggests that companies might wish to engage with CSR to take accountability and meet stakeholder pressure (Fernando and Lawrence, 2014). Freeman and Dmytriyev (2017) argue that stakeholder theory can explain some of the motives behind sustainability reporting. From this perspective, voluntarily publishing CSR information is a way for companies to meet the information demand from stakeholders when it comes to social and environmental performance. However, the demand from stakeholders might not only be related to information about CSR. The general and dominant opinion in the literature seems to be that stakeholders are the primary drivers of proactive sustainability practices (Darnall, Henriques and Sadorsky, 2010). Perhaps, therefore Pedersen and Gwozdz (2014) and Miles et al. (2006) found that conforming to stakeholder pressure is the dominant response from companies when it comes to CSR (Jakhar, Bhattacharya, Rathore and Mangla, 2020). Building on this, Sarkis, Gonzales-Torre and Adenso-Diaz (2010) present a positive relationship between stakeholder pressure and sustainability practices in organisations. Ditlev-Simonsen and Wenstøp (2013) find that after owners, customers and governments have the most significant effect on having managers practice CSR. While there is strong support for stakeholder pressure affecting how companies engage with sustainability, it should be noted that this effect is not necessarily always positive (Sharma and Henriques, 2005; Tang and Tang, 2018; Yu 2017).

Stakeholder theory is applicable to the SDGs because, in addition to sharing a long-term perspective on sustainability, both incorporate ethical and economic aspects of business. Hörisch, Freeman and Schaltegger (2014) put forth the idea that to contribute to sustainable development and create value for their stakeholders, companies need to link social and environmental issues to their core business. Schönherr, Findler and Martinuzzi (2017) further propose that the SDGs can work as a framework for companies to enhance their CSR engagement to meet changing stakeholder expectations. This is further supported by Scott and McGill (2018), who state that the SDGs can be used as a framework to meet the expectations

of consumers who increasingly want companies to engage in more sustainable and ethical behaviour. Van der Waal and Thijssens (2020) refer to empirical evidence that suggests that responding to stakeholder pressure is among the main motivations to join the UNGC. Orzes, Moretto, Ebrahimpour, Sartor, Moro and Rossi (2018) highlight that pressure from, for instance, the government, investors, customers, and employees is a crucial driver for UNGC participation. Even if there are differences between the SDGs and the UNGC, van der Waal and Thijssens (2020) found that companies consider the goals in very much the same way as the Compact. Therefore, it is not a leap to assume that the motivations to have a UNGC membership could reflect the motivations for engaging with the SDGs. Scott and McGill (2018) found that companies prioritise the SDGs based on, among other things, how material the goals are to their stakeholders. Based on this, an assumption can be made that firms might be motivated to adopt the SDGs to meet and satisfy stakeholder expectations related to sustainability and, hence, prioritise goals that stakeholders see as important. However, a 2017 PwC report indicates that while firms prioritise SDGs, they believe to be relevant to their business, these goals are not the ones that are the most popular among citizens (PwC, 2017).

2.4.2.2 Legitimacy theory

Fernando and Lawrence (2014) present the idea that stakeholder theory and legitimacy theory should be considered complementing theories. While the former concentrates on how core stakeholders influence the business, legitimacy theory develops this further by encompassing the whole society (Deegan, 2019; Ching and Gerab, 2017). Legitimacy is defined as *"a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs and definitions"* (Suchman 1995, p. 574 in Thomas and Lamm, 2012). According to Wæraas (2007), the potential to acquire legitimacy comes from how stakeholders view the organisation. Berrone and Gomez-Mejia (2009) support this by pointing out that firms can improve their legitimacy through meeting stakeholder expectations. Deegan (2009) writes that legitimacy theory emphasises that organisations continuously attempt to be perceived as functioning within the societal norms and bonds in which they operate (Fernando and Lawrence, 2014).

As firms want to gain support and legitimacy from their stakeholders, they might engage in CSR activities to achieve this (Deegan, 2002; Fernando and Lawrence, 2014). This is supported by Silva (2021), who suggests that legitimacy concerns drive sustainability through stakeholder pressure and that ignoring external pressure might lead to a loss of legitimacy (Suchman, 1995

in Silva 2021). Evidence from Miotto and Youn (2020) suggests that engaging in sustainable behaviour can positively impact corporate legitimacy and CSR perception. Furthermore, legitimacy theory can explain sustainability reporting as it can be used as a communication tool by companies to manage and strengthen their legitimacy (Suchman 1995 in Silva 2021). This is supported by García-Meca and Martínez-Ferrero (2021), who find that SDG reporting mostly seems to be encouraged due to legitimacy concerns.

This theoretical perspective can be applied to the SDGs, as companies might adopt the goals to benefit from improved or maintained legitimacy amongst their stakeholders through providing a link to these goals. Something that is supported by Demuijnck and Fasterlin (2016), who claim that adopting the SDGs contributes towards an operational social license for organisations. This aligns well with Porter and Kramer (2006), that express that several companies engage with CSR initiatives to satisfy stakeholder demands and thus be able to stay in business. Silva (2021) further expresses that the way the SDGs are prioritised, for instance, through mapping, reflects the desire of companies to protect their legitimacy. These findings seem to indicate that maintaining or improving organisational legitimacy appears to work as an incentive for companies to incorporate initiatives such as the SDGs into their business.

2.4.2.3 Institutional theory

While there is no universally accepted definition of an 'institution', Scott (2013, p.56) defines them as: *"institutions comprise regulative, normative and cultural-cognitive elements that, together, with associated activities and resources, provide stability and meaning to social life"*. According to Fernando and Lawrence (2014), institutional theory concerns itself with widespread social norms that the corporation's stakeholders indirectly influence. Iarossi, Miller, O'Connor and Keil (2011) write that according to institutional theory, an organisation's business environment will exert pressure on the organisation in question. By complying with the established social norms and institutional practices, organisations will tackle these pressures and maintain legitimacy in their business environment (Fernando and Lawrence, 2014). Companies are increasingly required by their surroundings to pay more attention to sustainability and ethical issues (van Zanten and van Tulder, 2018).

In this regard, institutionalism helps explain why firms engage in socially responsible behaviour (Cambell, 2007 in van Zanten and van Tulder, 2018). Fernando and Lawrenece (2014) expand upon this by stating that, according to institutional theory, companies will conform to generally

accepted norms to survive. Thus, firms will be motivated to replicate other organisations' CSR practices if approved by society. They further state that companies that operate under the same set of environmental conditions tend to become similar through adhering to both well-established norms and institutional practices. This is a concept called isomorphism, developed by DiMaggio and Powell (1983). They imply that uncertainty may be one of the reasons why companies are forced to become similar. DiMaggio and Powell (1983) suggest that the similarity can be achieved through imitation, or a concept called mimetic isomorphism. Mimetic isomorphism is a form of institutional isomorphism and refers to the tendency of organisations to model themselves after other organisations because they believe it will be beneficial (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). The authors claim that mimetic isomorphism happens both intentionally and unintentionally and may occur, for instance, when goals are ambiguous.

The pressure for companies to balance their economic performance with environmental and social practices has been steadily growing (Boso et al., 2017). Perhaps, this is why initiatives such as the SDGs have gained popularity among businesses. Because the goals cover a broad range of topics and there are no clear guidelines on how to implement them, it could be argued that the goals are somewhat ambiguous. Hence, the SDGs may cause uncertainty among companies related to both if they should be adopted and how the goals should be prioritised. As mimetic isomorphism suggests that uncertainty encourages imitation, this may be why companies have adopted the SDGs (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). This is in line with the findings of Latif et al. (2020), who found that firms under high mimetic pressure are more likely to adopt environmental management accounting, which is a way to deal with environmental issues. Following, this logic it can be reasonable to assume that there might exist mimetic pressure related to the adoption of the SDGs. In terms of prioritisation, however, Silva (2021) expresses that apart from industries that have intuitive SDG links, there have not been observations of mimetic behaviour. Although, there does seem to be some evidence indicating that certain goals, such as SDG 8 and SDG 13, might be more prioritised across firms (Scott and McGill, 2018). More literature specifically addressing the prioritisation of the SDGs will be further explored in the next section.

2.4.3 Previous research on SDG prioritisation

While the theories above provide some implications on how the SDGs might be prioritised, this section adds other potential explanations through more empirical evidence. The UN member states agreed on the SDGs as a universal framework, and the goals were deemed equally

important (Forestier and Kim, 2020). However, what can be observed is that certain SDGs tend to be prioritised more frequently (Forestier and Kim, 2020; Scott and McGill, 2018). Forestier and Kim (2020) suggest that even though this was not the original intention of the 2030 Agenda, prioritisation is, to some extent, unavoidable as not all goals and targets are equally relevant.

Van Zanten and van Tulder (2018) studied how multinational enterprises in North America and Europe contribute to the SDGs. Their findings show that SDG 16, closely followed by SDGs 5, 8, and 12, are the most popular goals among the surveyed firms. This is somewhat in line with the findings of Silva (2021), who found that most companies report on SDG 8, followed by 13 and 12. Scott and McGill (2018) and Heras-Saizarbitoria et al. (2021) found the same groups of goals to be the most prioritised in their studies. While these studies looked at companies worldwide, Young et al. (2021) fond the same prioritisation pattern when looking at the 100 largest companies in Norway. Thus, previous literature seems to suggest that SDGs 8, 12, and 13 are among the most prioritised goals. According to the Stockholm Resilience Centre (2016) typology, among the three most popular goals, two are economic, and one is environmental. These goals might be more prioritised because they are broad and can be measured using traditional metrics, which makes them easier to report on (Kaffashi and Grayson, 2021; Scott and McGill, 2019; PwC, 2017). Firms do not wish to engage with SDGs that are too difficult, costly, or that have a low impact on business achievements as well as lack related policies (Kaffashi and Grayson, 2021). Hence, this might explain differences in prioritisation and why companies prioritise SDGs that are in line with existing activities (Kaffashi and Grayson, 2021; Scott and McGill, 2019). Van Zanten and van Tulder (2018) further argue that the idea of 'avoiding' harm is a widespread logic behind prioritising the SDGs. Kaffashi and Grasyon (2021) find support for this, as most of their respondents pick SDGs that minimise negative impact over those where they can contribute positively. This indicates that companies tend to stay within their comfort zone when prioritising the SDGs (Kaffashi and Grayson, 2021).

Van Zanten and van Tulder (2018) found that SDGs 2, 14, and 15 were the least prioritised among the studied firms. The findings of Silva (2021) and Scott and McGill (2018) are somewhat in line with this, as they found that SDGs 2, 14, and 1 were the least prioritised. Heras-Saizarbitoria et al. (2021) also found that the least mentioned goals were SDG 14 and SDG 2. However, Young et al. (2021). found that the 100 largest companies in Norway prioritise SDGs 1, 6, and 2 the least. This may indicate that both country and industry-specific

factors influence the prioritisation. For instance, Norway has a large fishing sector which could potentially explain why overall SDG 14 Life below water is not among the least popular goals in this sample. In fact, Young et al. (2021) provide a list of some industries and illustrate that there are, in fact, differences between industries. For instance, while oil and gas companies prioritise SDG 7 highly, this is not the case for most of the other sectors. In sum, previous literature mostly identifies the least prioritised goals as SDG 2, 14, and 1. According to the Stockholm Resilience Centre (2016) typology, social goals are the least prioritised, along with the environmental goal 14. Scott and McGill (2018) propose that SDGs 14 and 2 may be less prioritised because management views them as governmental responsibilities. Heras-Saizarbitoria et al. (2021) add that SDGs 14 and 2 may be more remote from mainstream sustainability activities and be more applicable for companies operating in specific industries such as the maritime business. Furthermore, healthcare-related companies are likely to priories SDG 3 Good Health and Well-being, while SDG 12 on Responsible Consumption and Production often appears among retail companies (PwC, 2017). This provides additional support for the presence of industry variation in SDG prioritisation.

Thus, characteristics related to geographical location (van Zanten and van Tulder, 2018), industry differences, and mainstream activities (Heras-Saizarbitoria et al., 2021) are all likely to influence the selection of goals. However, other factors, like country development, can also affect prioritisation. For instance, Forestier and Kim (2020) studied how national governments prioritise the SDGs and found that developed countries prioritise SDGs 17, 1, and 8. Additionally, they found that high-income countries prioritise SDG 12 more compared to lower- and upper-middle-income countries. While these findings are on a national level, they again suggest that geographical location impacts SDG prioritisation. This is confirmed in the 2017 PwC report, which states that there are country-specific differences in prioritisation but that the most popular goals remain the same generally across companies as in previous literature (PwC, 2017). For instance, in the report, SDGs 13, 8 and 12 are the most popular goals among Norwegian companies, while Canadian firms also prioritise goals 3, 4, and 9. This can be related to Matten and Moon (2007), who find that American companies tend to be more explicit in their CSR approach compared to European companies. The authors state that this is due to institutional differences in the political, financial, education, labour, and cultural systems. For instance, because the labour market in Norway is highly regulated, companies might not feel the need to prioritise SDGs related to this compared to companies in the US. This could explain

why SDG 5 Gender equality is among the top prioritised SDGs by companies in the US but among the bottom business priorities in Norway (PwC, 2017).

2.5 Theory critique

Research related to the SDGs is relatively limited as the goals were only recently launched. This impacts the theoretical chapter as the discussed theory and empirical evidence mainly focus on CSR and sustainability engagement in general instead of specifically on the SDGs. However, as the topics are closely related, and the SDGs can be seen as a sustainability initiative or a potential blueprint for developing sustainable businesses (Scott and McGill, 2018), this should not present a problem. However, it is noteworthy that the empirical studies in the sustainability and CSR field tend to vary in their findings. For instance, while some studies find that stakeholder pressure affects how firms engage with sustainability, others do not. It is, however, neither possible nor sensible to present all studies that have contradicting findings. Still, to ensure credibility, an attempt has been made to present the literature in a nuanced manner.

Other obstacles related to the presented theory is the lack of clear definitions of concepts such as sustainability and the interconnectedness between the economic theories. This has been addressed somewhat by defining the concepts in question and acknowledging that the theories are complementary rather than opposing. However, the theories are not covered in-depth due to time and space constraints. Thus, issues related to conflicting stakeholder interests or differences in institutional pressure across countries are not raised. Instead, time is spent on relating and applying the theories to the topic in question. Moreover, other theories that could help explain motivations to adopt the SDGs and their prioritisation are left out due to the same constraints. For instance, theories on dominance, bounded rationality, and principal-agent theory could provide critical insight and may be relevant for future research. Despite the criticism, the presented literature provides a solid theoretical foundation that will be used to explore and discuss the motivations and prioritisation related to the SDGs in this thesis.

2.6 Summary and implications

This chapter started by discussing key topics related to sustainability before introducing the United Nations and its voluntary initiative, the Global Compact. Further, the Millennium Development Goals and their successor Sustainable Development Goals were presented before

the latter was related to the three sustainability pillars. From there, the role of the private sector with the SDGs was discussed, along with the process of adopting the goals. Further, the SDGs were presented in a Norwegian context before some SDG criticism was provided.

Then the chapter explored literature and theory related to engaging with CSR and sustainability and related it to the SDGs. Based on the presented literature, an assumption is made that internal preferences and external pressure drive SDG adoption. In terms of internal preferences, a suggestion is made that firms engage with the SDGs because of ethical reasons and business reasons. From the ethical point of view, companies are expected to adopt the SDGs due to a sense of responsibility, because of internal stakeholders or because they desire to do good. Other firms might justify their SDG work through business reasons. As such, it is assumed that business opportunities related to profits, competitive advantage, or improved reputation motivate firms to adopt the SDGs.Further, an assumption is made that firms adopt the SDGs to respond to external pressure. More specifically, to maintain legitimacy or because of pressure from stakeholders and the business environment.

In terms of prioritisation, it is assumed that firms, to some extent, prioritise SDGs where they can have a positive contribution or that present the biggest opportunities for them. Further, it is suggested that the goals that stakeholders see as important or popular goals are prioritised. It is also expected that companies prioritise broad goals and ones that are in line with previous business activities. Further, the geographical location, industry differences and mainstream activities are assumed to impact which goals are prioritised. Finally, institutional differences in countries may impact what firms prioritise.

3. RESEARCH SETTING

This chapter presents the research setting. The section starts with a brief presentation of the companies that are included in the study and their work related to the SDGs. The chapter concludes by summarising some main observations about the companies' SDG work.

3.1 Presentation of companies

All ten organisations in this research project are large Norwegian companies operating in the private sector. There are some similarities and dissimilarities among the companies selected. All firms have in common that they are all well-established and have adopted the SDGs. However, the companies operate in different industries, and their work with sustainability and the SDGs varies. Below, a discussion on the companies and their work with SDGs is provided. However, to ensure anonymity and confidentiality, this section only presents background information about the company characteristics to a limited extent. This chapter builds on the secondary data analysis of the companies' websites, annual reports, and sustainability reports. Hence, the information in this chapter is based on and acquired from these sources but will not be directly referenced to ensure the anonymity of the involved companies.

3.1.1 Company A

Company A is a large company with a worldwide presence. They are a long-term UNGC member and adopted the SDGs already in 2015 as they were involved in developing them. While the goals have been mentioned in the company's annual reports and GRI reports since 2015, it is in a limited capacity until the annual report of 2019. In this report, the company presented its commitment to seven goals. Namely, SDGs 2, 5, 12, 13, 14, 15, and 17. The year after this, some changes were made in the prioritisation, where some were added and others taken out. While the company communicates their commitment to all SDGs, they express that the 11 prioritised SDGs are currently more significant for them. The company has their own corporate KPIs that they map to the SDGs to showcase how well they are performing when it comes to the SDGs. Besides this, the SDGs are referred to in a limited capacity in the report. The current goals are presented below, and they cover quite evenly all three pillars of sustainability (Stockholm Resilience Centre, 2016). Out of the companies present in this study, Company A has selected the largest number of goals.

Figure 2: The SDGs of company A, own creation based on SDG (2020).

3.1.2 Company B

This company is present in Europe and is also a long-time member of the UNGC. The firm adopted the SDGs in 2018, and the introduction was accompanied by a document that describes the selection process, which resulted in the company's choice of four goals, which can be seen below. The pages about the SDGs have remained virtually unchanged since 2018. The reason for this is explained by the organisation in both the 2019 and 2020 sustainability reports, where they note that the goals have not been operationalised yet. The company is, according to the latest reports, currently still working on this operationalisation process. The firm has selected only four SDGs, which in this sample is the company that has selected the fewest number of goals. Three out of the four SDGs are related to the economic pillar of sustainability, and the fourth is a part of the social pillar (Stockholm Resilience Centre, 2016).

Figure 3: The SDGs of company B, own creation based on SDG (2020).

3.1.3 Company C

Company C has locations in several European countries, and like the two previous companies, they also hold a UNGC membership. When it comes to the SDGs, they are briefly mentioned in the annual report of 2016, where a commitment is made to SDG 12 without any further elaboration. In the 2017 report, the company shortly says that they support the goals, in particular SDGs 5 and 12. However, the SDGs receive more attention in the annual report of 2019, where the firm's sustainability targets are related to relevant SDG targets. Here the focus is expanded from two goals to the current seven that can be seen in the figure beneath. The selected goals are rather evenly spread in the social and economic pillars of sustainability (Stockholm Resilience Centre, 2016). The company's latest report presents in a detailed manner how the company has been working with the targets it set for itself in 2019 and how it will continue to do so in 2021. While having removed the visual depiction of the SDGs, they still express how their targets align with the different SDGs the firm is focused on.

Figure 4: The SDGs of company C, own creation based on SDG (2020).

3.1.4 Company D

At present, company D expresses that they focus on ten of the 17 SDGs, as visualised further down. The company appears not to be a UNGC member, and up until 2018, the annual reports are bare from any mention of the SDGs. However, while pictures of some of the SDGs appear in the report of 2018, no further explanations are provided. In the 2019 report, the SDGs are given increased attention. Compared to the previous year, some small changes are made in the prioritisation and the firm expands upon how their work falls under their selected goals. The annual report of 2020 again illustrates an expanded focus on the SDGs, with them taking up a dedicated section. Their current SDGs are presented here, which includes a slight change from 2019. A further distinction is also made with the company stating that they focus specifically

on goals 5, 8, 11, 12 and 13 even though they are also working to achieve the other half of their chosen goals. The selected goals are fairly evenly distributed within the three pillars of sustainability, but the main focus is on the social pillar (Stockholm Resilience Centre, 2016).

Figure 5: The SDGs of company D, own creation based on SDG (2020).

3.1.5 Company E

Company E, like company D, does not appear to be a member of the UNGC. The SDGs make their first appearance in the 2016 sustainability report, which showcases the goals the company considers to be material. In the sustainability report from 2017, the firm explains that they have set their own sustainability targets and connected them to the SDGs. Further, in the 2018 sustainability report, two additional SDGs are introduced. While the goals are still presented in a mostly similar fashion, they are given slightly less attention. Instead, the report focuses more on how the firm's own targets contribute to the SDGs. The 2019 report again presents another change in prioritisation. While the visual representation of the selected SDGs is widely present, the report again focuses on providing the status of the company's own sustainability targets as well as examples of how they work as a sustainable business. The report from 2020 contains yet another revision in the prioritisation and brings us to the current ten SDGs that are visualised below. The firm focuses on all the dimensions of the sustainability pillar. However, most of the selected SDGs are part of the social pillar (Stockholm Resilience Centre, 2016).

Figure 6: The SDGs of company E, own creation based on SDG (2020).

3.1.6 Company F

Company F primarily operates in Northern Europe, and as some of the earlier presented firms, they are a UNGC member. The SDGs make their first appearance in the 2018 annual report, which has a dedicated section that accounts for how the business contributes to promoting the chosen goals and targets. The 2019 annual report holds a revision in terms of layout and prioritisation. In 2020, as in the years before, the firm stressed that it has its own sustainability strategy and targets, which are mapped to the SDGs where the firm believes it can contribute the most. The SDGs are also presented in connection to the firm's own sustainability measures. The chosen SDGs of company F cover all the dimensions of the sustainability pillar but most of the SDGs are part of the social and economic pillar (Stockholm Resilience Centre, 2016). The current selection of the company's five most relevant SDGs is depicted below.

Figure 7: The SDGs of company F, own creation based on SDG (2020).

3.1.7 Company G

Company G operates worldwide and is another long-term member of the UNGC. The SDGs first appeared in the 2016 report but only to a limited extent. The 2017 report roughly follows the structure of 2016 and states that the firm has identified the SDGs where they consider they can contribute the most. Further, the firm's own focus areas for sustainability are presented and divulged. This structure is mostly kept in the annual report of 2018. However, in this report, the prioritisation changes slightly. In the 2019 report, the work related to the SDGs becomes clearer, and a more detailed connection is made between the business activities and selected SDGs. The 2020 report combines elements from all the previous reports by first presenting the SDGs, a materiality analysis, and describing the connection between the business and the SDGs. As depicted below, company G currently works with 9 out of the 17 SDGs, and the prioritised SDGs cover all the dimensions of the sustainability pillar (Stockholm Resilience Centre, 2016).

Figure 8: The SDGs of company G, own creation based on SDG (2020).

3.1.8 Company H

Company H is a business operating in Norway. The firm is a UNGC member and adopted the SDGs as a part of its 2018 sustainability strategy. The goals are mentioned for the first time in the 2019 annual report, where it is elaborated that the firm has its own sustainability topics and targets that are connected to relevant SDGs. The most recent 2020 annual report holds almost the same structure as the one from the year before. However, some new work related to sustainability is presented. The company has not made any changes in prioritisation since the SDGs were first adopted, and the five goals that the company has designated for itself can be found in the figure underneath. The prioritised SDGs cover all the dimensions of the sustainability pillar, but mainly the economic dimension (Stockholm Resilience Centre, 2016).

Figure 9: The SDGs of company H, own creation based on SDG (2020).

3.1.9 Company I

The penultimate company, like most other firms in this sample, has a UNGC membership. The company started the working with the SDGs in 2017 and picked out the goals that they deemed to be the most relevant for the business in the following year. The 2018 report illustrates the prioritised goals and presents how their sustainability topics relate to matching SDGs. The layout stays the same in the 2019 report, but this report also places increased attention on reporting results associated with the SDGs. The 2020 report follows the same principles but slightly reduces the focus on the SDGs. Instead, it focuses on specific sustainability work the company has done throughout the past year. The six prioritised SDGs visualised below cover all three dimensions of the sustainability pillar (Stockholm Resilience Centre, 2016).

Figure 10: The SDGs of company I, own creation based on SDG (2020).

3.1.10 Company J

The final company is a long time UNGC member. The SDGs were adopted right after their launch and presented in the 2016 sustainability report for the first time. In this report, the company expresses its support towards the SDGs and explains how it works with them, emphasising five SDGs as being particularly relevant. No significant changes happened until 2018 when SDG 8 was added. This results in the current six goals of the company, which are depicted below. The 2018 and 2019 reports have roughly the same structure, both describing how the SDGs are business relevant and how they work with them. The 2020 report, however, opts to connect the SDGs to five overarching targets the firm wants to achieve before 2030. The prioritised SDGs cover all three sustainability dimensions, but mainly the economic dimension (Stockholm Resilience Centre, 2016).

Figure 11: The SDGs of company J, own creation based on SDG (2020).

3.2 Summary of the company presentation

Some interesting observations can be made by analysing the companies' SDG work. First, the firms adopted the SDGs at different times, some as early as 2015 and others more recently, in 2018. This could indicate that some firms were motivated to adopt the SDGs earlier than others. Further, most of the companies are UNGC members, which might have motivated them to adopt the SDGs, as they are another UN initiative. Overall, it seems that the firms have started to give the SDGs more attention, which could be because the firms consider them important or because of stakeholder expectations. Finally, several companies have changed their SDG prioritisation over time, indicating that there might be some challenges related to this process.

Regarding prioritisation, previous studies show that the number of chosen goals tends to vary (Forestier and Kim, 2020). Among the studied firms, the selected SDGs vary from 4 to 12. In

this sample, 7,3 SDGs is the average, and the median is 6,5 SDGs. Scott and McGill (2018) also found that companies on average prioritise 7,3 SDGs. However, they claim that choosing too many goals might lead to not giving enough attention to key individual goals. As shown in *figure 12*, SDG 8 is the most prioritised goal, as all studied companies adopted it. Goals 12 and 13 are closely followed and prioritised by 8 out of 10 companies. These goals might be prioritised because they are the most popular among Norway's 100 largest companies (Young et al., 2021) and generally prioritised worldwide (Scott and McGill, 2018). Further, in terms of the least prioritised goals, SDG 1 is not prioritised by any of the firms in this study. Number 6 is the second least prioritised goal, chosen by only one of the studied companies. Only two companies prioritise SDGs 10 and 15. These SDGs might be less prioritised because the goals are seen as less relevant, industry-specific or challenging to connect to the core business.
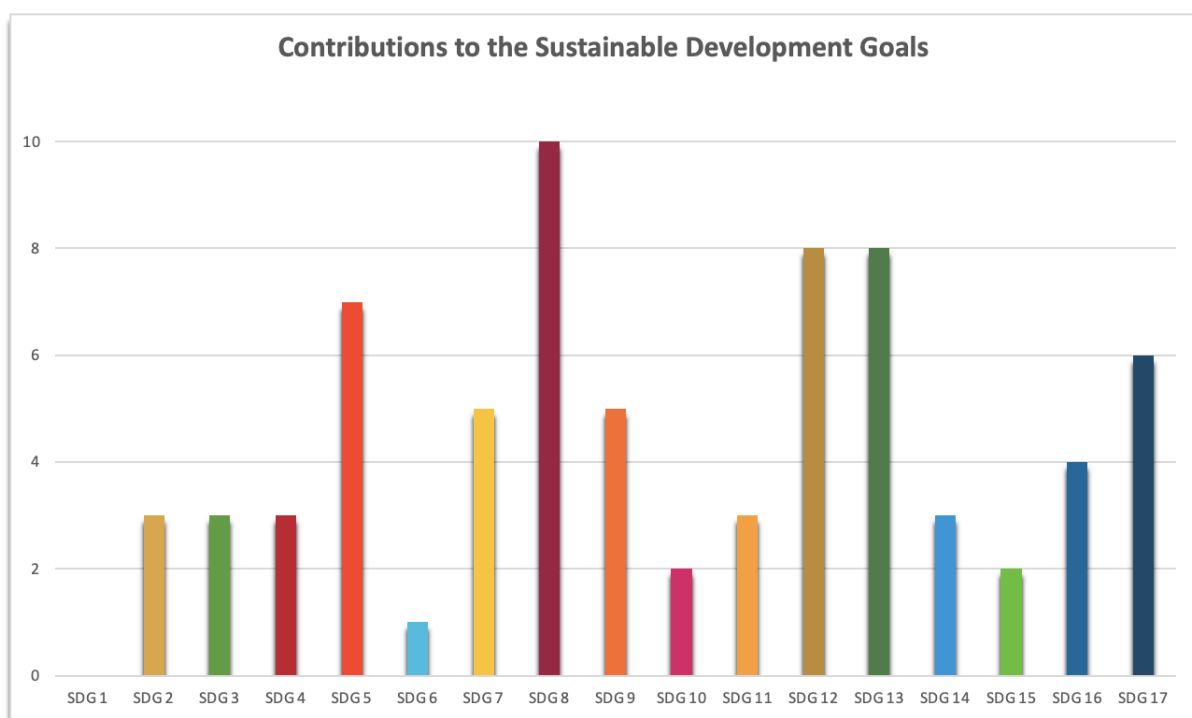
Figure 12: Contributions to the Sustainable Development Goals

When classifying the findings from the figure above based on the Stockholm Resilience Centre (2016) typology, most of the prioritised goals are economic goals (two out of three), and one is related to the environmental dimension. Out of the least prioritised ones, one is a social goal, and one is related to the environmental dimension. Most firms chose a fairly equal number of SDGs from the different dimensions. However, two companies (B and C) did not select any goals from the environmental dimension. The economic goals may be popular among firms because they are broad goals that can be easily related to the business.

4. METHODOLOGY

This chapter discusses the methodological approach used to answer the research question in this thesis. First, the research design is presented, before the data collection and data analysis processes are described. Finally, the research quality is discussed.

4.1 Research design

This study aims to explore what motivates large Norwegian companies to adopt the SDGs and understand how the goals are prioritised. This is a field where research is still limited, which is why the researchers, the authors of this thesis, have chosen a research design that allows for flexibility in order to gain increased understanding to answer the research question. The research design is the general plan for how the research project is structured and how the researcher intends to answer the research question (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019). This section starts by discussing the research design, the methodological choice, and the approach to theory development. Finally, the research objectives and strategies are discussed.

4.1.1 Research design and approach

According to Saunders et al. (2019), the first methodological choice one needs to take is whether the study is qualitative or quantitative. They suggest that an easy way to distinguish between the two is by looking at the data one plans to collect. *Quantitative studies* are often associated with numeric data, whereas *qualitative studies* are associated with non-numeric data. However, Saunders et al. argue that this is a narrow definition as these two methods may be mixed, and elements from both could be included. Saunders et al. further claim that one can distinguish between qualitative and quantitative studies by looking at previous research in the field. A qualitative research design is suitable for studies conducted in a field where previous research is limited. Williams (2007) adds that qualitative studies investigate the phenomenon from the participant's viewpoint. In this thesis, the researchers are interested in exploring the subjective views of the participants, which is best drawn through the collection of non-numeric data, in a field where research is still limited. Hence, the researchers believe that a qualitative approach is best suited for answering the posed research question.

Further, Saunders et al. (2019) distinguish between two main research approaches to theory development: deductive and inductive. They argue that the research project is theory-driven when using a *deductive approach*. This means that one needs to identify a theoretical position

that will be tested using the data collected for the research project. The *inductive approach,* on the other hand, is used when wanting to explore a topic to develop a theoretical explanation. When using an inductive approach, the research project is data-driven. Qualitative research is often associated with an inductive approach. However, it may also take a deductive approach if qualitative methods are used to test existing theory (Saunders et al., 2019).

Saunders et al. (2019) also highlight that it is essential to recognise the purpose of the study. They explain that the nature of the research project may be exploratory, descriptive, or explanatory. *Exploratory* studies aim to ask open questions in order to gain insight into a topic. Further, *descriptive* studies are used to describe events or situations accurately, while *explanatory* studies aim to explain a relationship between variables. This study takes an exploratory approach as the objective is to gain insight into a topic. According to Saunders et al. (2019), exploratory research is usually associated with an inductive approach. Casula, Rangarajan and Shields (2020) add that exploratory research is well suited with a deductive approach as it allows the study to be more connected to theory and previous research. As the SDGs were launched in 2015, literature on what motivates companies to adopt the SDGs and research on how goals are prioritised is restricted. However, there is abundant research present on why companies adopt CSR and sustainability initiatives. As these topics are closely related, here the researchers plan to use existing theory on sustainability, CSR and the SDGs as a basis for understanding what motivates companies to adopt the SDGs, and how they are prioritised. Hence, a theoretical position will be identified using this literature to find a set of themes that may matter. These themes will then be looked at in the context of large Norwegian companies.

In sum, this study has a qualitative design with an exploratory deductive approach. To the researchers' knowledge, no studies have been conducted on this subject in large Norwegian companies. The exploratory design allows the researchers to gain insight into and a deeper understanding of the topic. The research project has a cross-sectional time horizon.

4.1.2 Research objectives and strategy

Saunders et al. (2019) claim that it is necessary to define research objectives to answer the research question and achieve the aim of the research. The research objective states 'how' one intends to structure the research process. The objective of this study is to gain insight into factors that motivate large Norwegian companies in the private sector to adopt the SDGs. Further, the objective is to understand how the companies prioritise the SDGs.

To meet these objectives, a research strategy needs to be defined. The research strategy is the general plan for how the researchers plan on answering the research question (Saunders et al., 2019). There is a great diversity of research strategies suitable for qualitative studies, such as case study research, ethnography, action research, grounded theory, narrative inquiry, and phenomenology (Saunders et al., 2019; Williams, 2007). According to Saunders et al. (2019), *case study research* involves investigating a phenomenon within its real-life setting by using several sources of evidence. Saunders et al. further describe that *ethnography* as a research strategy is used for studying the social environment or the culture of a group. In ethnographical research, it is typical that the researcher becomes a part of the group. *Action research* is further described as *"research in action rather than research about action"* (Saunders et al., 2019, p. 203). This strategy is emergent and aims to develop solutions to issues present in organisations. Moreover, *grounded theory* is a strategy that involves inductive reasoning in order to develop theoretical explanations of different social interactions and processes. It is characterised by very little existing research and may even begin with the collection of data. On the other hand, *narrative inquiry* focuses on the storytelling of the participant. It emphasises that the experiences should be collected and analysed as complete stories rather than fragments. This strategy is often associated with in-depth interviews where the researcher adopts a listener role. Finally, *phenomenology* focuses on the participant's perceptions of a topic or an event and tries to understand an experience from their point of view (Williams, 2007). Phenomenology is well suited for understanding subjective experiences and perceptions of individuals (Lester, 1999).

As phenomenology enables gaining insight into a topic by understanding individuals' subjective experiences and perceptions (Lester, 1999), it is a suitable research strategy for answering the research question and meeting the objectives of this thesis. Interviews are a well-suited method with phenomenology as it allows for collecting subjective views (Lester, 1999). Hence, interviews will be used for data collection. Ethnography could possibly be a good alternative research strategy for this project. However, as this is a master's thesis, time constraints do not allow this strategy to be used.

4.2 Data collection

This sub-chapter explains the data collection phase of the research project. The data sources, data sample and the primary data collection method are discussed.

4.2.1 Data sources

Both primary and secondary data sources have been utilised in this research project. Saunders et al. (2019) claim that primary data is data that is specifically collected for the purpose of the research project, whereas secondary data is initially collected for other purposes.

4.2.1.1 Primary data

This research project utilises primary data as its main data source. The purpose of the primary non-numeric data was to collect information to answer the research question. It was gathered by conducting semi-structured interviews with ten sustainability employees in ten large Norwegian companies. This method allowed the researchers to get an in-depth understanding of the topic, as the interviewees were able to provide thorough answers to the questions, and follow-up questions could be asked. In addition, one interview was conducted with a professor at a Norwegian university. With several years of experience with the SDGs, the professor can be seen as an expert in the area. The expert provided insight related to the SDGs in a Norwegian context. This interview is not included in the analysis and findings. Rather, it was conducted to bring inspiration to the theory chapter and inform the discussion chapter.

4.2.1.2 Secondary data

Further, secondary data was collected to complement the primary data. It was used mainly for three purposes. Firstly, to understand the overarching differences in Norwegian companies when it comes to the SDGs. Secondly, to choose companies and interviewees for this study and, finally, to create more specific interview questions. Saunders et al. (2019) suggest that complementing the primary data with secondary data may be advantageous as it can be used to help answer the research question and meet the objectives of the study. Further, secondary data allows for some longitudinal elements in a cross-sectional design (Saunders et al., 2019). For instance, in this research project, it allowed the researchers to observe if the companies had changed their SDG prioritisation over time. Additionally, it allowed for comparison with the primary data collected from the interviews.

For this study, a great amount of secondary data was collected. Sustainability reports, annual reports and company websites were analysed to understand how Norwegian companies work with the SDGs. The observations related to the participating companies are presented in *chapter 3*. Further, LinkedIn profiles were analysed to select companies and interviewees for this study.

This is further discussed in *chapter 4.2.2*. Finally, the observations from company websites and sustainability reports were also used to create more specific interview questions.

4.2.2 Data sample

Saunders et al. (2019) highlight that selecting an appropriate sampling technique and sample size is key to answering the research question. They further elaborate that the most used sampling techniques are *probability* and *non-probability sampling*. In the former, the possibility of each case from the target population has an equal chance of being selected. In the latter, not all cases have the same chance of being selected.

Based on the explanations by Saunders et al. (2019), it was early determined that non-probability sampling was suitable for this research project. Firstly, as not all companies work with the SDGs, the aim was to find large Norwegian companies in the private sector that have adopted the goals in their business. Secondly, since not all employees in a company have in-depth knowledge about the company's work with the SDGs, the sample needed to consist of people with knowledge in this field. Hence, to find the appropriate sample, non-probability purposive sampling was used. Saunders et al. claim that with this method, researchers use their judgement to select the sample that in the best way possible will meet the objectives of the study. Purposive sampling is often used when selecting particularly informative cases but leads to a sample that is not representative. The sample size is dependent on the research question and objectives. For a homogeneous group, such as in this research project, where participants have similar characteristics, a sample of 4-12 is considered sufficient (Saunders et al., 2019).

To find the ideal sample, the researchers began by analysing the secondary data collected from websites, annual reports, and sustainability reports of large Norwegian companies. This allowed for getting an overview of which companies have adopted the SDGs. After this initial screening, the researchers ended up with a list of 31 companies. Further, company representatives in these 31 firms were assessed based on publicly available information. In total, 22 representatives working with sustainability were contacted on LinkedIn or by email. Companies where the employee had been working with sustainability (or been a part of the company) since the goals were first adopted were prioritised to gain the most accurate information. However, to get a sufficient sample size, employees that had been a part of the company for a shorter period were also contacted. From the initial list of 31 firms, nine were excluded because of one of the

following three reasons: no contact information could be found, no sustainability employee could be identified, or the sustainability employee had been hired less than a year ago.

Out of the 21 contacted, ten sustainability employees agreed to schedule an interview. The table below gives an overview of the participants, their titles, and their experience in the company. Finally, the table shows the approximate length of the interviews.

Company	Role	Company Experience	Interview Length
Company A	Senior Sustainability Manager	~ 9 years	~ 35 minutes
Company B	Sustainability Advisor	~ 9 years	~ 29 minutes
Company C	Head of Sustainability	~ 23 years	~ 45 minutes
Company D	Environmental Director	~ 5 years	~ 30 minutes
Company E	Director of Sustainability	~ 6 years	~ 30 minutes
Company F	Director of Sustainability	~ 10 years	~ 42 minutes
Company G	Group Vice President Sustainability and Governance	~ 11 years	~ 55 minutes
Company H	Head of Sustainability	~ 2 years	~ 42 minutes
Company I	Director of Sustainability	~ 4 years	~ 23 minutes
Company J	Sustainability Ambassador	~ 2 years	~ 50 minutes

Table 1: Overview of participants.

As discussed, the sample is not statistically representative of a population because of the sampling technique used. Further, there may be some biases in the data sample as purposive sampling may be prone to researcher bias because the researchers elect the participants at non-random. However, as all companies were selected based on clear criteria in this research project, the researcher bias is estimated to be small. There may, however, be some biases in the firms that agreed to participate. The companies that agreed to participate in this study may be more passionate about working with sustainability and the SDGs than the average company. Additionally, they may have unknown motives for taking part in the study, or they may have adopted the SDGs earlier than the average company in Norway. Further, the sample of this study does not cover all industries. Finally, the informants may have a personal interest in the

topic and therefore agreed to participate. The interviewees do not all have the same experience or role, which can be seen as a limitation. However, the researchers did their best to find participants with comparable positions. Other biases and issues related to the research quality are discussed in *chapter 4.4*.

4.2.3 Qualitative semi-structured interviews

As discussed in *chapter 4.1.2*, research interviews were used as the primary data collection method for this thesis to gather the subjective views of the participants. Saunders et al. (2019) describe research interviews as a conversation between people where the aim is to explore points of interest and confirm meanings. They may be structured, semi-structured or unstructured. *Structured interviews* involve researchers completing a questionnaire where the same questions are asked in the same order. On the other hand*, semi-structured interviews* are a more flexible approach that is a suitable data collection method for gaining an in-depth understanding of a topic. The method also provides structure and permits the researchers to have a predetermined list of themes to guide the interviews. *Unstructured interviews* are informal and do not allow for predetermined questions or themes to structure the interviews. Based on the above, qualitative semi-structured interviews are used to collect data as their characteristics are seen as important to answer the research question.

4.2.3.1 Interviewing process

An interview guide with 12 open-ended questions on the predetermined theme was created based on previous literature and theory. The questions were reviewed and refined based on feedback from the supervisors and expanded throughout the interviewing process. Before the first company interview, a pilot interview was conducted with a fellow student to see if the questions were understandable. A preliminary interview guide was sent out to the participants approximately one week before the interviews. The reason for doing this was that some questions were about historical events, and sending them in advance allowed the participants time to reflect. This was seen as essential, especially in the questions related to the adoption process of the SDGs, since not all interviewees had been a part of it.

All interviews were conducted digitally via Microsoft Teams over the course of three weeks. The main reason for choosing digital interviews was because the informants were located in different cities. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, businesses have become increasingly accustomed to digital meetings. Thus, the researchers believed that doing the interviews

digitally is not a hindrance and provides a natural setting. The interviewers had their cameras on in all interviews, and the interviewees had a choice to do so if they wanted. All participants had their cameras on and, thus, body language could be observed. The interviews were conducted in Norwegian as all interviewees spoke Norwegian. The researchers felt that the respondents would feel more comfortable and give better answers if the interviews were held in their first language.

The interviews started with the interviewers presenting themselves and briefly introducing the topic and interview process. Further, the interviewees were reminded about their rights and that they may withdraw from the study at any point. Before beginning the actual interview, the interviewees were asked if they consent to be audio-recorded. The interviews began with broad introductory questions related to the role and responsibilities of the employee and the company's background with the SDGs. Further, the questions focused on the motivation the companies had for adopting the SDGs and rounded off with questions related to prioritisation. The English and Norwegian interview guides are found in *Appendix B* and *Appendix C,* respectively. The interviews, which were recorded, lasted approximately 25-55 minutes and were transcribed right after. To improve credibility, the transcribed interviews were sent to the interviewees (Saunders et al., 2019). In some cases, additional questions were sent out per email if the researchers felt the need to get an elaboration or clarification on some of the answers.

4.2.3.2 Interview with an expert

In addition to having interviews with company representatives, one interview was conducted with an expert in the field of SDGs. More specifically, a professor at a Norwegian University. The aim of the interview with the expert was to gain inspiration and insights into the theory chapter as well as discussion. This interview is not a part of the analysis and findings, but the answers are discussed against the findings in the discussion chapter. The interview is referred to in this research project as *personal communication.* This interview was also conducted over Microsoft Teams and lasted approximately 30 minutes. The nature of this interview was semi-structured, and a preliminary interview guide was sent to the expert before the interview. The English and Norwegian versions of the interview guide can be found in *Appendix D* and *Appendix E,* respectively.

4.3 Data analysis

Saunders et al. (2019) claim that data collection and analysis in qualitative research are interrelated and interactive processes. This allows for themes and patterns to be recognised already in the data collection phase. However, Saunders et al. suggest that there are several different techniques to analyse qualitative data, and the appropriate one will depend on the methodological basis of the research. Qualitative semi-structured interviews are often analysed using thematic analysis or template analysis. *Thematic analysis* is a systematic and flexible approach and allows for analysing large quantities of data with the purpose of finding themes and patterns. An alternative approach to thematic analysis is *template analysis*. This method is similar to thematic analysis but more structured as it entails all data items to be coded before searching for themes. However, as thematic analysis is more adaptable, it is utilised in this study to search for themes and patterns in the data set.

This research project follows the approach for undertaking thematic analysis by Saunders et al. (2019). The procedure starts with familiarisation of the data. Further, the data set is coded to search for themes and recognise relationships in the data. Finally, the themes are refined, and the propositions tested. The next section discusses the data analysis procedure, starting from the data preparation and ending with the primary data analysis.

4.3.1 Data preparation

Before analysing the data, it is necessary to prepare the collected data for analysis. The data was prepared by transcribing all the audio recorded interviews. The researchers wanted to avoid the build-up of transcription work, and, hence, the recordings were transcribed verbatim right after the interviews. Additionally, any notes taken in the interviews, for instance, related to body language, were added to the transcript. To ensure consistency across the data, the transcriptions were done in Norwegian Bokmål. Further, to ensure high ethical standards, all factors that could lead to the identification of the company and interviewee, such as names, were removed. The participant's answer was the main focus of the transcripts. However, pauses, incomplete sentences, laughter and sarcasm were also noted in the transcripts. After each interview, the researchers had a briefing to reflect on the interview.

Both researchers went over the transcripts to make sure that they were accurate. After this, the transcripts were sent to the participants to ensure factual accuracy. The researchers made sure

not to schedule more than one interview per day to allow sufficient time to undertake some initial analysis by transcribing and discussing the interviews before proceeding. This is important as it prevents data overload (Saunders et al., 2019). Once all ten interviews had been transcribed, the transcripts summed up to a total of 115 pages of text in the font Times New Roman with 1,5 line spacing. This is the primary data of this research project.

4.3.2 Data analysis and coding

Saunders et al. (2019) claim that in order to analyse large amounts of data, it is essential to fragment the data by coding. However, to code and categorise the data, it is first necessary to develop familiarity with the data. This was done by listening to the audio recordings, transcribing, and reading the transcripts repeatedly and thoroughly.

After familiarisation with the data, the second step was to start coding the data. Saunders et al. (2019) explain that coding is used for categorising data with similar meanings. It involves labelling each unit of data within the transcript with a code that summarises the meaning of the data. A unit of data may, for instance, be words or sentences in the data (Saunders et al., 2019). The coding was done by labelling each unit of data within the transcripts with a code in the margin of the transcripts. To be able to sort codes and units of data later in the analysis, they were transferred into Excel. In the spreadsheet, one column was dedicated to the extracted data unit, and the code was placed in the column next to it. The codes were both theory-driven and data-driven. With the deductive approach in this study, a list of codes was created based on previous theory and then applied to the data (Saunders et al., 2019). However, some codes were also extracted from the transcripts and applied to the data. As suggested by Saunders et al. (2019), the list of codes was updated throughout the interviewing process as the data set grew.

Once the data has been coded, Saunders et al. (2019) suggest that the following step is to analyse the codes and search for patterns, themes, and relationships. More specifically, they suggest that searching for themes involves studying the list of codes and grouping them into broader themes. A theme is a broad category that includes several codes related to each other (Saunders et al., 2019). The same Excel sheet containing the units of data and codes was utilised to study the codes. Utilising Excel for sorting allowed a structured way to get an overview of the data as well as identify similarities and dissimilarities. The researchers analysed all the data in the spreadsheet and grouped codes related to broader themes. Two new columns were created with identified main themes and sub-themes. An identified main theme was, for instance, *motivation*,

with *business opportunity* as a sub-theme. Finally, Saunders et al. (2019) suggest that it is essential to test the propositions emerging from the data to develop credible conclusions. Hence, the last step of the data analysis was to seek alternative explanations and negative cases. As suggested by Saunders et al. (2019), negative cases that do not fit with the analysis are also presented in the findings in order to make the presentation nuanced.

The findings of this research project are presented in *chapter 5*. As the interviews were in Norwegian, the extracted data that is presented as quotations have been translated into English. This can be seen as a limitation and will be further discussed in the following section.

4.4 Research quality

This section discusses how the researchers have established the quality of their research. Both strengths and weaknesses in the research design are assessed. Establishing the quality of research is essential, and a good research design is a crucial element in this process (Saunders et al., 2019). Reliability and validity are terms often used to judge the quality of a study (Saunders et al., 2019; Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Reliability refers to replicability and consistency in the research (Saunders et al., 2019). In other words, whether the same results would occur if a different researcher replicated the study. Validity, on the other hand, is about the relevance of the measures used, the accuracy of the analysis as well as the generalisability of the findings (Saunders et al., 2019). More specifically, internal validity refers to whether the findings are reliable and plausible, whereas external validity refers to whether the results may be generalised. However, it is argued that these concepts are mainly associated with quantitative studies (Saunders et al., 2019). Hence, the quality of the research is discussed using the terms "*credibility*", "*transferability*", "*dependability*", and "*confirmability*" as formulated by Lincoln and Guba (1985).

According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), credibility is used instead of internal validity to determine the plausibility of the findings in a qualitative study. Further, transferability is used instead of external validity, and it addresses how applicable the findings are in other contexts. Moreover, dependability replaces reliability and addresses whether the results would occur if the study was replicated. Finally, confirmability is used to determine if the researchers' views have impacted the results of the study.

4.4.1 Credibility

Great emphasis was placed on achieving high credibility in this study. Saunders et al. (2019) discuss several actions that can be taken to attain plausible and reliable findings. Firstly, they suggest that the researchers discuss and reflect on the study with another person. This was done throughout the study, as it was conducted by two researchers with the assistance of two supervisors. Further, it is suggested that credibility may improve by sending the collected data back to the participants for final checking. Hence, once the interviews had been transcribed, the transcripts were sent back to the interviewees. It allowed the participants to have a second look at their answers and approve them. Finally, Saunders et al. (2019) suggest that credibility can improve by getting someone else's opinion. Hence, the views of the supervisors' have carefully been considered throughout this research project.

According to Saunders et al. (2019), triangulation is another way to improve credibility. It involves combining research methods and using several data sources. Hence, by asking different questions on the same topic and including secondary data, the researchers have been able to improve credibility. Saunders et al. further suggest that semi-structured interviews may lead to a high level of credibility because it allows for asking follow-up questions to properly understand the interviewee's response. During the interviews, the replies of the participants were often summarised to ensure that the interpretation of the answer was correct. Finally, Saunders et al. claim that credibility improves by having two interviewers. Consequently, all interviews were conducted by both researchers. After each interview, the interviewers also discussed and reflected upon the participant's answers.

Some weaknesses related to the credibility of this study can be identified. Firstly, the findings are based on the participants' descriptions. Hence, there is a possibility that the interviewees may have forgotten or remembered past events differently. There is also a possibility that meanings have changed when translating the quotations from Norwegian to English. However, the researchers believe that this likelihood is low, as both were part of the translation process. Additionally, not all informants participated in implementing the SDGs, which means that they might have interpreted this process differently. However, a preliminary interview guide was sent to the interviewees to allow them to reflect on the questions in advance and ask colleagues if they were unsure about something. Finally, a strength of the study is that all interviewees held

similar positions across the studied firms. However, the responses may have differed if other employees, such as company executives, had been interviewed.

4.4.2 Transferability

This qualitative research was never intended to be fully applicable to another context. The intention was to get an in-depth understanding of the companies that have been studied. However, the researchers have made sure to be fully transparent and provided a description of the research design. Therefore, an opportunity is provided for other people to judge the transferability of the study to other settings.

This study is limited to large Norwegian companies operating in the private sector, and the interviewees were selected based on certain characteristics. By interviewing sustainability experts in the companies, the aim was to understand factors that motivate large Norwegian companies to adopt the SDGs and how they prioritise the goals. As stated, the findings were never intended to be fully applicable to another context. However, the authors believe that findings may, to some extent, be applicable in other large Norwegian companies. In other words, this study may provide insights into the motivation to adopt the SDGs and how their prioritisation occurs in big Norwegian companies, but the findings cannot be generalised. The authors believe that if the study was transferred to another context, the findings are likely to vary depending on company size, industry representation, geographical location, and the country's development. For instance, if a similar study was conducted in a developing country, one might find that firms have different motivations for adopting the SDGs and prioritise differently.

4.4.3 Dependability

In a research design that has established a high degree of dependability, the same results occur if the study is replicated. A high degree of dependability can be established by documenting and describing all the phases in the research process as thoroughly as possible (Saunders et al., 2019). The researchers have thoroughly explained the research design, context, and methods in this thesis to establish this.

According to Saunders et al. (2019), there are some concerns related to dependability when conducting semi-structured interviews. Namely, issues related to biases. The first one is *interviewer bias,* which is related to the verbal and non-verbal behaviour of the interviewer.

Further, *interviewee bias* is about the interviewee answering the question untruthfully or misleadingly. Finally, *participation bias* is related to the nature of the participants, and it causing biases in the data sample.

Several measures have been taken to successfully overcome these biases. Firstly, the interviewers have tried to keep a neutral tone when asking questions to limit biases in the interviewees' answers. Furthermore, efforts were made to keep the questions open, neutral, and not leading to avoid imposing the values of the researchers' on the questions. In terms of limiting the interviewee bias, it has been emphasised that participation in the study is voluntary and that the interviewees may choose not to answer questions. Additionally, the researchers highlighted that data would be handled confidentially, and they would remain anonymous. Emphasis was also placed on gaining the interviewee's trust and creating a natural and comfortable setting during the interviews, as discussed in *chapter 4.2.3*. The participation bias cannot be completely overseen, as there may be some characteristics in either the companies or respondents that might have influenced them to partake in the study. While the interviewed companies might have a higher focus on sustainability compared to the average Norwegian company, all the companies were selected based on the same criteria. Other sample biases are discussed in *chapter 4.2.2*.

4.4.4 Confirmability

It is highly important that the findings stem from the characteristics of the context and respondents and that they are not affected by the researchers' interests, biases, and motivations (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Symon and Cassell (2012) discuss that this is connected to reflexivity, a term widely used in qualitative research. They describe that reflexivity relates to the awareness of the researcher's role in the research project. Reflexivity is highly important, as it enables the researchers to acknowledge the way in which they affect both the research process and the outcomes.

Researcher reflexivity includes *"thinking about how our thinking came to be, how a pre-existing understanding is constantly revised in the light of new understandings and how this in turn affects our research"* (Symon and Cassell, 2012, p. 73). Hence, it is essential to reflect on any presuppositions about the topic and if or how this may impact how the research project is conducted. Being transparent and reflexive has allowed the researchers to minimise the effect any personal values could have on the research process, thus ensuring high confirmability.

Further, this study has been conducted by two researchers with the close assistance of two supervisors, which also improves confirmability.

4.4.5 Ethical aspects

It is critical to address ethical concerns to ensure the success of a research project, especially when the research involves human participants (Saunders et al., 2019). Ethical concerns can occur during all phases of a research project. Therefore, the researchers emphasised following high ethical standards throughout the whole research project. To achieve high ethical standards, the researchers have followed the ethical guidelines of the university during the entire research project. Furthermore, as the research project involved collecting data from people, a permission to gather and analyse data was obtained from the Norsk Senter for Forskningsdata (NSD). Before participating, all participants had to sign a consent letter with information about the study, data handling, and their rights as participants. The consent form follows the structure suggested by NSD and can be found in *Appendix A*.

Further, the researchers treated the participants with a high degree of professionalism and respect. Transparency has been ensured regarding the research objective and all parts of the process. Moreover, the participants were informed that participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any point without explanation. Finally, ensuring anonymity and confidentiality was essential. This was done by removing the parts of the transcripts that can be connected to the participant or company. Further, all data has been handled with caution, and the files are kept safely stored in files locked with a password on computers locked with a password. Hence, it was ensured that only the researchers had access to the data and that anonymity was kept. Once the thesis is completed, all data will be deleted.

5. FINDINGS

This chapter presents the main findings from the data analysis. Based on the two-part research question, the findings are separated into what motivates companies to adopt the SDGs and how the goals are prioritised. However, to start with, the process of adopting and selecting the SDGs is presented. The chapter rounds off by presenting other findings, such as perceived challenges related to the SDGs. When the results are presented, interview quotations[4] are used to substantiate the findings. The findings are discussed against the theory in chapter 6.

5.1 What does the adoption process of the SDGs look like?

Before discussing what motivates large Norwegian companies to adopt the SDGs and how they are prioritised, it is essential to discuss the process behind the adoption. The process provides insights that can help inform the motivational factors for adoption and the reasons behind prioritisation. The interviews revealed variation in terms of when the goals were adopted, who was involved and what the process looked like.

5.1.1 Early adopters vs late adopters

There are some differences related to when the interviewed firms adopted the SDGs. Four of the firms can be considered 'early adopters', as they already had adopted the goals by the end of 2016. Out of these four, one company was involved in the development of the SDGs and, consequently, adopted the SDGs already in 2015. Further, two companies adopted the SDGs only slightly later in 2017. The remaining four companies adopted the SDGs in 2018 or 2019. An important note is that some firms indicate that the adoption of the SDGs, in the beginning, was restricted to only show support for the SDGs, for instance, by adding the goals to the sustainability report. For these companies, an extensive process around the goals only occurred a couple of years after the goals were adopted.

> *"We threw in the pictures [of the SDGs] the first time in the report in 2018, I think. Back then they did not get their own page. Then in 2019, they got their own page, and then we improved it in 2020."*

---

[4] The quotes are derived from personal communication with the informants from the sampled companies. The quotes will not be connected to specific informants or companies to keep the anonymity they were promised when consenting to contribute to this research project.

> *"The first time we mentioned it [SDGs] was back in 2017, and then it was a bit at the level of... I have to be honest that we support the SDGs. (...) So, as I said, both in the 2017 and 2018 report we were a bit on the level that we wrote about it in the sustainability report, and then in 2019 very early we went in more actively and had a large workshop lasting over two days about all of it."*

Other companies had more extensive processes in place from the beginning. Often the more comprehensive process included conducting a materiality analysis. One firm mentioned: *"At that time in 2015 we looked at the company's value drivers and based on that the goals were set."*. Another commonly utilised method was to locate where the company had the potential to contribute the most. As one firm highlighted: *"We went through the value chain from cradle to grave and discussed through, in a way, the different influence we have in different parts of the value chain"*. However, despite the extensive process, this firm emphasised that the goals have not been operationalised yet: "*So, since February 2019 (...) we have known which goals we consider being the most relevant for us, but we have not created a concrete plan for how to contribute to the goal achievement yet."*. This indicates that the process related to adopting the SDGs requires continuous effort to result in changes.

5.1.2 People involved in the adoption process

The adoption process also varies between the companies when it comes to the people involved. This variation covers who and how many were involved and whether the process was strictly internal or included external stakeholders. The data shows that the consensus seems to be that most companies conducted the process internally with limited people involved. The most common occurrence was that employees working in the sustainability department were responsible for the goal selection. However, some companies also included the communication and HR departments. A few companies mention that the leadership was actively involved in the selection process. Still, the majority indicate that leaders or board members were mostly tasked with approving the goals after the process had been conducted.

On the other hand, some companies stated that they involved several people in the adoption process. For instance, three companies mentioned that they involved external actors, namely consultants, to help them. Further, two companies mentioned that they included several different departments within the firm in the process. Both further expressed that, especially

large companies need to do this to identify which goals are the most relevant for the company and ways to contribute the most. One of them stated that:

> "We had a discussion about them [the SDGs] again and chose a limited amount from a large pool. And looked at where we can contribute to the local community, in the supply chain, where might we have a negative impact (…)."

This same informant further highlighted the meaning of who is involved in the selection process by stating that: *"If we had had another group of 25 people, to put it like that, we might have had somewhat different results."*. This indicates that the outcomes of the adoption and prioritisation may depend on the people involved in the process.

One informant expressed that while their initial process was limited to only a few participants, sustainability work should not be restricted to sustainability employees: *"And already next year when we will begin to reconsider and update our strategy (…) it is a very important part of that phase (…) to include those who work in different areas."*. Therefore, as stated by the respondent, they will include a larger variety of people when they go over their sustainability and SDG strategy in the future.

5.1.3 The adoption process

As expected, the actual process related to the goal selection also varied between the companies. Some companies selected their goals by looking at their work and mapping this to the SDGs. In other words, they matched the firms' activities and sustainability strategy with relevant SDGs. Informants often expressed this by saying that the goals *"came in the backway"*. Several informants, thus, answered affirmatively when asked about whether the companies had mapped their sustainability work or own goals and targets to relevant SDGs. One stated: *"(…) we did a job of going through all the goals and targets and connected them to our own goals and KPIs."*. This is similar to the processes of some other firms:

> "Yes, we have like 'this is our strategy', 'we work with this', 'this is what is important for our customers' (…) and then we say 'OK, we link it to these goals'. Yes, they came in the backway."

> *"We did a bit of desktop research and looked at what other companies had chosen, and then we became familiar with the goals, read about them and then chose the ones we considered to be the most relevant."*

However, other informants expressed that their firm had conducted a materiality analysis to identify the most relevant topics and include different stakeholders. The most material topics were then mapped or linked to the most relevant SDGs.

> *"So, what we did was that in the autumn of 2019, we did a materiality analysis. We went in and looked 'OK, what are our competitors doing or other companies we can compare ourselves to', 'what are the risks and opportunities in terms of sustainability', 'what kind of influence can we actually have'. And then, we ran a lot of stakeholder dialogues. (…) after setting up our ambitions and goals based on where we can contribute the most, we linked it to the SDGs. Then we said, 'OK, it means that we deliver on this, and this, and this SDG."*

> *"(…) in 2018, we did a slightly more comprehensive process. Then we did a materiality analysis and took the results and connected them with relevant SDGs."*

A few companies also communicated that they looked at other companies' processes related to the SDGs. One company claimed that this was very important for them: *"(…) when we started with the work in 2018, a very important part of our job was to look at what the other large international actors were doing"*. However, another company said that this was of limited use but did provide them with some insight on how to conduct their process:

> *"Yes, we did to some extent (…) without it giving us a lot, I think. We looked a bit more at who is good at reporting, because then we got a lot of information on how they had arranged the process and what was behind their choices."*

Further, two companies answered that they used the SDG Compass as a framework when prioritising the goals. The SDG Compass was used to map the company's value chain and to identify positive and negative impacts. The most relevant SDGs in terms of the positive and negative impacts were then selected. One informant stated that this framework allowed them to focus on *"(…) the impact on the SDGs, first and foremost, and not what we wish to work with"*.

Moreover, a couple of companies also mentioned that the SDG adoption process involved using the goals as a framework for their sustainability strategy.

> *"The sustainability strategy was made in 2018, (…) And then the SDGs were a part of, made up some of the basis, of that strategy."*

> *"(…) the ones [topics] that were chosen as the most relevant, and the associated goals, became the framework for the sustainability strategies that we created in 2018."*

When asked about the process, a few companies, especially in their initial process, had not looked at the 169 SDG targets but only the 17 goals. However, one interviewee criticised this method and stated that it is essential to look at the SDG targets and not only goals: *"(…) if you are working with the SDGs, it is the targets that are interesting. And by looking at the targets, it became very clear to us which SDGs were central to the way we conduct business"*.

5.1.4 Re-evaluating the prioritisation

When the sustainability employees were asked whether they would reconsider their SDG prioritisation in the future, the majority stated that they already have done this or are likely to do so. Several informants stated that it is natural because the work related to the goals is a continuous process. One specifically expressed that it is important to go over the prioritisation as the world is a different place now compared to when the SDGs were first adopted:

> *"(…) the world is a bit different now compared to what it was then. It is a bit like that with sustainability work in general, it is constantly changing. So, you have to take a breather once in a while."*

Another participant stated that they are going to evaluate and update their sustainability strategy along with the SDGs because the company wants to have more ownership over it. The firm initially relied on external consultants in their selection process, but expressed their desire to include internal employees more due to their intimate knowledge of the firm:

"(…) we who work here want to own it [the process] a bit more. And then there is a lot that needs to be in place, including looking at the UN SDGs again. 'Which are we missing', 'which one do we think should go out', something like that."

Another reason that is provided as an argument for assessing the process and prioritisation again is that the initial process was not extensive enough. For instance, one informant stated that they reprioritised because *"(…) it was a matter of interpretation",* and a chosen goal had been misinterpreted. Further, another company claimed that they want to expand their reporting to include environmental and social impact in addition to financial measures. In addition, they state that they wish to incorporate the stakeholder perspective more in the process:

"We will take the next step and follow the double materiality principle where we also look at what has a social and environmental impact, which we believe is related to long-term value creation. (…) Now we will consider even more what we report on. What is the focus area and priorities, and what all the stakeholders are concerned with. Or at least the stakeholder groups that we consider to be the most important for the firm."

Finally, another interesting observation that can be made about the sample is that most of the companies have made changes in the number of goals they prioritise. These changes include both adding and removing goals, with the most frequent changes happening in companies that adopted the SDGs early on.

Most of the informants agreed that as sustainability work is dynamic, the process and prioritisation of the SDGs should also be revisited and reconsidered periodically. However, one informant conveyed that they are satisfied with their prioritisation and are unlikely to re-evaluate their prioritisation unless the SDGs are revised: *"There [in the prioritisation], I feel that we hit very well. So before they are revised, I do not think we will make any changes.".*

5.2 What are the motivations for adopting the SDGs?

This subchapter presents the results of the data analysis related to answering the first part of the research question regarding what motivates large Norwegian companies to adopt the SDGs. As the theory suggests, the interviewed companies had several and varying motivations. For clarity and structure reasons, the motivational factors will, like the theory, be separated into internal

and external drivers. The internal motivation section will present the internal drivers the companies had for adopting the SDGs, such as potential business opportunities, while the external motivation section will inform on the identified external motivations like market expectations. Together these two sections provide a thorough insight into why the sampled companies wanted to include the SDGs into their organisation.

5.2.1 Internal motivation

Several internal motivational factors were identified in the analysis. Internal motivation, in this case, refers to what during the analysis has been classified as motivations stemming from the company itself for adopting the SDGs. Based on the findings, the four main categories of internal factors have been identified. The first category is related to the matter of *contribution*. Further, a general collection of *internal reasons* followed by potential *business opportunities* are discussed. The final category is related to *communication and image*.

5.2.1.1 Contribute

One of the internal influences that impacted the companies' decisions to adopt the SDGs is the desire to contribute to the SDGs and towards a *"better world"* in a broader sense. This idea of contributing is also key in how the companies have decided which SDGs to prioritise and will further be discussed in *section 5.3.2*. However, like mentioned, the desire to contribute was expressed as a motivational factor to adopt the SDGs:

> *"I think that there are some people who are sleeping in class if they have not yet realised that this is something we must focus on [the SDGs and sustainability]. Yes, so I think this is a great tool that is available to anyone who wants to contribute or who realise that they need to contribute."*

> *"(…) first of all, to answer why we work with sustainability, as in the UN sustainable development goals, it is because of this big plan to contribute to a better world, both socially and on climate."*

This last quoted informant also points out that the company's purpose and vision might also affect how one approaches the SDGs. It involves thinking more *"(…) what do we want the business to contribute to in the world"* instead of focusing simply on serving the relevant goals.

5.2.1.2 Internal reasons

An internal motivation derived from the data analysis that impacted the companies' decisions to adopt the SDGs comes from the firm employees. This drive is pointed out by one informant that personally wanted their company to adopt the SDGs:

> *"And then, as an advisor and professional, I had a certain hope and wish that it [adopting the SDGs] would help us to have a clearer framework around (...) our sustainability work. Which I advised the management on and which I think they also had a hope for when we started to address these goals."*

When asked about whether it affected them that other companies adopted the goals, this informant elaborated that the pressure they experienced was based more internally. Another respondent also dismissed external expectations, and like the previous company, pointed to employees within the company as key drivers for their adoption of the SDGs:

> *"Yes, I do not think that we experienced external expectations. It was more internal enthusiasts that thought this was exciting and had begun exploring it [the SDGs]."*

The way the company views the SDGs could also influence whether the goals get adopted. If the companies consider the SDGs a credible and promising initiative, it could increase their likelihood of adopting these goals. This is somewhat reflected by some informants stating that it was completely natural for them to embrace the 2030 Agenda. One company said: *"We knew that we were going to include them [the SDGs]"*, while another pointed out that *"It was completely obvious when they [the SDGs] were launched that, both public and private companies, as well as national states, must contribute"*.

When asked whether there was internal resistance against adopting the SDGs, none mentioned any. Quite the opposite, several stressed that there was *"no resistance",* and one went as far to say that *"It was never really a topic that we were not going to do it [adopt the SDGs]"*. The commonly shared attitude towards the SDGs amongst the interviewed firms seems to be exclusively positive. A few firms do, however, mention that while there was no resistance, there was a need to increase the knowledge and understanding related to the SDGs and sustainability:

"The resistance is more a lack of understanding, I would argue. They just do not know what to do. But [for] the SDGs themselves, there is none because they are so likeable. So, I think one feels more pride if we communicate around the SDGs."

"There was no resistance against it [adopting the SDGs]. It was more like, let us understand what this is (...) we are a very old (...) company, and here you do not turn around and join something without understanding it (...)"

As the last informant highlighted, one of the reasons they had to really understand the SDGs was due to the sheer size of the company. From this, it seems as if firm characteristics can play a part in the motivation to take part in initiatives such as the SDGs. Two companies argued that due to their large sizes, it was important for them to highlight how they work with the SDG. One of them stated that *"It was important [to bring attention to how our strategy and the goals we have set contribute to achieving the SDGs] because we are a major actor [in the market]"*.

This again underlines the previous point about the commonly held positive attitude towards the initiative. A few other companies expressed that they were looking for a framework to structure their sustainability work further. As such, the SDGs were adopted as they were *"(...) a way to structure things that was internationally recognised"*. Furthermore, another respondent credits the SDGs with providing something that other initiatives could not before: *"There had been many, many initiatives from both non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and some frameworks and some legislation, so we perceived this [the SDGs] as a rather unifying and inclusive type of framework."*. In other words, providing a framework for those who wish to utilise it in their sustainability work.

5.2.1.3 Business opportunities

The firms were questioned if they expected that the adoption of the SDGs would be beneficial for the company or result in new business opportunities or whether that had been the case. From their answers, it becomes apparent that most of the interviewed companies did not expect this. One expressed that *"No, I don't think there were many thoughts regarding that [the SDGs leading to business opportunities], it was more like 'yes, now we have this, this we will use. That will be great'."*. This answer clearly indicates that the company did not see potential business opportunities as a driving force behind the adoption of the SDGs. Another informant pointed out that *"(...) no new business opportunities have emerged yet, based on the goals, but*

that there is some potential there, I do think that", which indicates that the SDGs could present business opportunities in the future.

However, a few companies did consider how adopting the SDGs could impact the long-term success of the company, which might have motivated these companies to adopt the goals:

> *"If we go back in time to the point of why we chose to consider the SDGs, then at that point in time we probably viewed it as almost a competitive advantage, to be early in considering the sustainability perspective."*

> *"We believe that sustainability and these things have come to stay, and it is also about being competitive."*

The latter of the two informants also expressed that while increased competitiveness was initially not the biggest driver, they later realised that it can be. Another informant also pointed out that prioritisation of the SDGs can serve to differentiate and, thus, benefit companies competitively. However, as mentioned apart from these few indicators otherwise, most of the findings seem to point towards the fact that among the sampled companies' potential business opportunities have not been part of the equation when they have considered taking on the SDGs.

5.2.1.4 Communication and image

When the interviewees were asked what the companies wanted to achieve by adopting the SDGs, several respondents emphasised *"communication"* and that the aim was to use the goals to bring attention to the firm's sustainability work. One interviewee highlighted that the SDGs work well as a communication tool because *"(…) in a way they are intuitive and understandable for many people".* Others shared this view and claimed that the SDGs are a good way to bring attention to sustainability work because they are clear and easy to understand.

> *"(…) it is easier to say what we do in terms of the SDGs than to say that 'no, we do not work with them because we have our own strategy'."*

> *"(…) we thought that it was a great way to communicate [sustainability], to use these images as symbols for how we wish to run a responsible business."*

Several companies also saw the potential in using the SDGs to communicate with stakeholders.

> *"(…) it is easier for a person who is looking for a job, or a member, or a finance person who is thinking 'what are they doing related to diversity and equality'."*

> *"And I think maybe some potential employees are very familiar with the SDGs."*

The main reason for this seems to be because the goals are well-known and are more likely to be understood by different stakeholders. One company also claimed that the SDGs are good to use when communicating with stakeholders as it *"(…) is easier to compare ourselves with others who communicate through it [the SDGs]"*.

Some other companies mentioned other motivations for adopting the SDGs that can also be classified as internal drivers. Such as the desire for a common language as expressed by this informant: *"I think we had been searching a bit for that common language. Because one saw that the work [sustainability] was both defined differently, as well as it was going in slightly different directions. It was a bit messy. Therefore, we were probably many who welcomed them [the SDGs] with open arms and thought that; 'yes, now we are on our way towards something that is more comparable'"*.

Furthermore, some sustainability employees also brought up the topic of image and emphasised that they wanted to communicate that they are responsible actors and that this could potentially be done by engaging with the SDGs. One participant said that they *"(…) wanted to be seen as responsible and look good"* another similarly expressed that: *"(…) we had the impression, and still have that impression, that it [the SDGs] is a sign of responsibility and it shows seriousness in work related to sustainability"*. This seems to indicate that companies might wish to engage with the SDGs to communicate what they do and how they contribute towards the goals, and because the goals can be used to be perceived as a responsible actor.

5.2.2 External motivation

In addition to internal motivational factors, external motivations were also identified to impact the decision to adopt the SDGs. External motivation refers to motivational factors that stem from outside the company. The external motivational factors that are discussed below fall into the broad category of motivations related to expectations and pressure.

5.2.2.1 Expectations and pressure

When the sustainability employees were asked about factors that had motivated the company to adopt the SDGs, several mentioned expectations from different external actors. Even though not all companies felt external pressure to adopt the SDGs, the topic of stakeholder expectations was brought up by several interviewees. One company highlighted that *"I think that almost all stakeholders have expectations about it [the SDGs] today"*. Others felt that customers and suppliers especially expected the firms to adopt the SDGs.

> *"Yes, we have started to experience more [expectations] from other suppliers. (…) And customers."*

> *"Just as our company has expectations of suppliers, other suppliers also have expectations of us."*

The informants were also asked if the firms felt any expectations to adopt the SDGs from the financial sector, which can be considered a key stakeholder. Only a few companies stated that they saw the finance sector as a motivational factor. However, the answers were given more generally on sustainability than specifically on the SDGs. One company highlighted that *"(…) our bank wants our sustainability report, and they want to know what we prioritise and how we secure ourselves against future risk by engaging in sustainable operations"*. Another company stated that *"(…) it is clear that investors look at the focus we have on sustainability, yes, banks and insurance companies"*. However, several stated that while there were no expectations from the finance sector when they adopted the SDGs, this has changed in recent years:

> *"It could possibly be financial institutions [that have expectations]. Such as, banks have a focus on this now, if they did not have it specifically then."*

> *"Not that many [expectations from the finance sector] in 2019. (…) We had some input from them, but it has become incredibly much stronger now with the EU taxonomy."*

In addition to feeling expectations from stakeholders, companies highlighted expectations about communicating sustainability work through the SDGs. One interviewee stated: *"It is because of the expectations out there that we communicate what we do, so that it is easier for financial*

institutions, governments and our stakeholders to see what we do in terms of the SDGs. So, it is more a communication tool externally rather than having any internal strategical importance.". This indicates that different actors' expectations are the driving factor behind using the SDGs as a communication tool. While another firm highlighted that communicating sustainability work through the SDGs also seems to be becoming increasingly necessary:

> *"Because we see that it is gradually becoming a practice where you in a way have to show that you work with it [sustainability] by using these symbols. It does not matter what words you use if you have not pasted in these pictures."*

Another topic mentioned by several of the company representatives was that they felt that there existed market pressure to adopt the SDGs. This was mainly stated by companies that were not early adopters. One informant, for instance, stated that they adopted the SDGs because *"There was a feeling that there was an expectation in the market, at least in some of the markets that we operate in".* Another highlighted that *"We started using them because we saw a demand in the market and because others were using them".* Furthermore, others emphasised that a large motivational factor was that other firms within their industry and in general had adopted the SDGs. One pointed out: *"It was something everyone started doing",* while others stated:

> *"You could see that gradually, in the past couple of years, the SDGs are something more and more companies work with."*

> *"We saw that a lot of other big companies started highlighting them [the SDGs] to visualise how their business model also contributes to the UN SDGs."*

As discussed in the research setting, several of the companies that are a part of this study are members of the UN Global Compact. When asked about what had motivated the company to adopt the SDGs, some firms listed the membership as a motivational factor as they are committed to reporting on the progress annually.

> *"(…) and since we are members of the UN Global Compact as well, then we are committed in that sense. We are supposed to submit an annual report stating the progress on how we deliver on these goals."*

"(…) as members of the UN Global Compact, we have to report something on this [the SDGs] annually."

One company mentioned that because *"(…) Norway as a country has committed to this and has begun a great amount of work there [with the SDGs]."* there were some expectations that private companies should help towards achieving these goals. However, this expectation is not broadly shared among the companies.

Finally, one company mentioned that they trusted the opinion of experts in this matter and adopted the SDGs because of this. The respondent states: *"(…) we have used consultants as experts in the areas where we do not have the expertise, so then I think that these consultants know that it [the SDGs] is the basis for dealing with sustainability today"*. This indicates that external stakeholders such as consultants possibly also can be a motivational factor. With the general motivations behind adopting the SDGs in mind, this thesis will now present findings related to how the goals are prioritised in Norwegian companies.

5.3 How are the SDGs prioritised?

As shown in *chapter 3*, the prioritisation of the SDGs varies among the studied companies. The number of goals varies from 4 to 12 goals, and while all have selected SDG 8, none have prioritised SDG 1. This presentation, however, provides only limited and descriptive insight into prioritisation. Therefore, this subchapter will present the findings related to the second part of the research question about how the SDGs are prioritised. First, the number of goals selected will be discussed. From this follows a discussion on why companies choose these goals. Since the role of the core business is highly related to SDG prioritisation, this topic is explored under its own heading. As some of the goals are prioritised to a greater extent than others, this discrepancy is also accounted for. This subchapter rounds off by highlighting some challenges that firms have experienced related to SDG prioritisation.

5.3.1 The number of goals

The number of SDGs of each company can be seen in *chapter 3*. As evident by this and supplementing theory, companies have taken the liberty to select which SDGs they wish to contribute towards. This makes it natural to discuss the logic behind which goals and the number of goals. When asked about the latter, several informants mention discussions related

to the number of goals and that it would be inappropriate to serve all 17, even if that is the original intention of the 2030 Agenda:

> *"(...) there was a discussion in the community if it was very appropriate [to focus on a lot of the goals] because then the effort is so spread that it just becomes a way to say that we support them [the SDGs]. Because we can say that too, we support the SDGs."*

> *"(...) not everyone can deliver on all 17 [goals], and it is not right that we do."*

While most of the informants seemed to agree that it would not be appropriate to serve all 17 SDGs, one informant did not view the exact number to be of crucial importance: *"(...) you know what, I think the number of goals is not really that important. I would maybe like [to add] one or two additional [goals] because I see that we contribute to it, in an indirect way."*. However, the consensus seemed to be that serving too many SDGs might be counterproductive, as illustrated by one informant: *"(...) it should not be too much so that it is manageable, and people will understand why [we do this]"*. Another added: *"(...) we actually experienced quite early on that if we were going to be able to focus, then we could not take all of them [the SDGs]."*.

Thus, even though an essential part of the SDGs is the interconnectedness of the goals and that they should be viewed as a whole, the firms argued that this cannot be applied to businesses in the same rigid way. When asked why they serve a certain number of goals, some informants brought up *contributing to the goal* as a key factor. Problems related to limited resources as well as the fact that picking too many goals is viewed as inappropriate were also brought up:

> *"(...) we do not want all of them [the SDGs], that we do not want. Some of them are not significant enough for us [the business] that we can have a role in somehow contributing towards them."*

> *"If we are going to contribute to reaching ten goals, then we are left with a pretty hefty job related to both developing measures and documentation and reporting, which is not the capacity we have as of today. (...) for my part first and foremost (...) it was perceived almost a bit irresponsible to point to a lot [of the SDGs]. So, we ended up with the ones where we felt that we could contribute, in the sense that we had an impact on the goals."*

In addition, another reason offered up for the varying number of goals served by companies is company differences such as business area and size. As one informant put it, *"(...) the firm works very broadly (...), so we do things that are related to very many of the SDGs. We can almost tick off all of them, but we have said that those [their selected SDGs] are where we have a significant impact"*. In other words, in this situation, the informant felt that they held back when selecting the goals. This is supported by another sustainability executive who stated that *"(...) we have such a large business area, so we feel like we have really tried to be very sober about it [the selection of the SDGs] (...)"*.

One informant also brought up the point of company experience related to the SDGs when it comes to the number of selected goals. Stating that *"(...) when you have over half the goals, then I immediately think it will be hard to succeed. How are you going to focus on so many goals at once?"*. This supports what earlier informants have expressed in regard to the idea that one should not choose too many goals. This informant followed this up by saying: *"(...) I think that you should maybe start with 2-3 [SDGs], maybe 3, but not over 5"* before continuing *"But if you have worked with sustainability and maybe the SDGs have been part of the company for a long time, then this might be a reason for why they have added more goals during this time. That is a reason, which sounds sensible if I may say so"*. Thus, this sustainability employee thinks that the increased number of goals served by some companies might be due to them working with the SDGs for a prolonged period.

In short, the companies interviewed generally believe that prioritising among the 17 SDGs is not only natural but necessary to be successful when serving them. The varying number of goals between firms they attribute mostly to firm differences related to size, operations, and experience with the SDGs.

5.3.2 Criteria for prioritisation

The sustainability employees per-request explained the reasons for their prioritisation. Several expressed two key drivers for prioritisation: if the SDGs were considered *"relevant"* and if the firm believed that it would be able to *"contribute"* towards them.

Starting with *relevance,* one person argued that *"(...) we thought that it is better to highlight some of the ones [the SDGs] that are most relevant and explain and justify why they are relevant, instead of sitting and writing a long essay about how we affect all of them"* clearly

insinuating that this is the key when picking SDGs. Similarly, when asked about it, several informants argued that some goals are not relevant for them due to their business and geographical location. For instance:

> *"(...) no poverty [SDG 1] and water quality [SDG 6] and some of these others are not relevant for us. They are not relevant in the market we are in, and (...) our product will not be able to contribute to their improvement."*

This same informant argued that some of the goals and targets are more aimed at solving *"developing country issues"* rather than being intended for or being as relevant for their operations in Norway. This interviewee later followed this up by clarifying that *"(...) what is relevant [the SDGs] have been picked out".* Another informant also had issues seeing how SDG 1 is relevant for their work and stated that *"(...) The goal is very important on a global basis, but we do not quite see how we can contribute…".* A third informant argued the same point and stated, *"For us to deliver on hunger [SDG 2] and on water shortages [SDG 6] and things like that, it is not relevant because then you might end up giving money to someone else to do it, and then it will be more like a charity".* This seems to indicate that not all the goals are viewed as relevant for these countries to prioritise due to the nature of their operations and where they operate, both in terms of industry and geography.

In other words, the companies seem to choose goals that are relevant to their operations and tend to avoid goals where they deem the connection too vague. Relevancy is key, and as one informant put it, *"(...) it is crucial that instead of how many [goals], you create something that is relevant, understandable and manageable for the company".* One additional criterion that drives the prioritisation of the goals is relevance in the form of strategic fit. One respondent clearly draws this line and stated that *"(...) in a way we are driven by our business model, we are driven by our strategies, and based on that these are the outcomes [the picked goals]",* while another one stated that while they focus on all of them, the highlighted goals are *"(...) in a way purely connected to what we have set as strategic goals".*

The idea of co*ntribution* comes up quite a lot related to prioritisation. Several of the company representatives regard the degree to which they contribute towards the SDGs as crucial when it comes to selecting goals. This is conveyed through the idea that they need to prioritise goals where they have the greatest impact, whether that be positively or negatively. For instance, one

informant expressed that *"(...) there must be an aspect where we have a significant negative or positive impact, and in that sense can contribute to change."*. Another person conveyed that *"(...) Where the company can have the greatest possible impact was the main criteria that formed the basis for selecting the [number of] goals we have decided to work strategically towards."*. The consensus among the companies seems to be that the elected SDGs need to be business relevant and be goals that the company can significantly contribute towards.

5.3.3 Core business vs charity

All the interviewees believe that their core business is well reflected in their prioritised SDGs. This could be because the goals are mainly prioritised based on their relevance to the business operations. However, the informants are divided on whether they think companies should serve goals that require the business to take on a more charitable role. One interviewee expressed that delivering on non-relevant SDGs would make the organisation act as a charity and that *"(...) This is not our way of working with sustainability. Then it is much better that we take the money that otherwise would be given to charity and use it to invest in our business so that we can help reduce emissions, for example."*. This informant implies that businesses should concentrate on business-relevant goals as it is where they can make the biggest impact.

This plays into another division that emerges from the findings related to how the companies view their indirect contributions. One of the companies prioritised SDG 4 Quality education even though this goal lies outside the perimeters of their core business. As the representative from the company put it, *"(...) We contribute to strengthening science education in upper secondary school and high school. And there is a selfish intention behind it as we need good engineers, but at the same time, it might contribute to reducing the number of dropouts."* An informant from another company is also of the opinion that goals outside the core business area also can be prioritised. For instance, due to the nature of their operations, they mostly contribute to SDG 13 indirectly through *"buying climate quotas"*. They do, however, point out that it would be easier to contribute towards the redistribution of wealth if they were operating in developing countries.

This contrasts with another firm that stated that while they indirectly contribute towards SDG 4 through educating their employees, this goal is not prioritised as *"(...) it is relevant for us, but we are not an educational institution, so then in a way, it is not the core"*. This company uses

this same logic when explaining why they have elected not to prioritise SDG 1 even if they contribute towards it:

> *"(...) a good example of this, for example, we do not have number one [SDG 1] among ours. It is to contribute to no poverty, and that is something I think we do contribute towards through our product sourcing. But immediately when you put on such a label, of a little distant SDG, then this leads to huge discussions which leads us away from the main goal."*

The findings seem to indicate that most of the sampled companies wish to highlight SDGs connected to their core business and opt not to prioritise goals that they contribute indirectly towards through charity and other add-ons.

5.3.4 SDG 8 - Decent work and economic growth

Previous literature and evidence from this sample illustrate that some SDGs are more prioritised than others. One of them is SDG 8, which is why the interviewees were asked why they had prioritised this goal. Several informants highlighted SDG 8 as *"easy to understand"* and *"easy to relate to the business model"*. The goal seems to be very intuitive for the companies, with is reflected in this answer of one firm: *"(...) [SDG] 8 is very general, it would be well done not to work with this goal. It is a bit of a standard to land on."*. Several informants pointed to a natural connection between SDG 8 and business:

> *"First, if you are not able to achieve financial sustainability, then you have no business. You have no future. It is quite clear that this is almost a foundation in the SDGs."*

> *"(...) Why does this SDG [8] come up again and again? It is clear that as a company, everyone ultimately exists because they have economic growth, and they are trying to survive as a company financially. We cannot get around this unless you are a voluntary organisation. So, it is an important aspect, and you need to be completely honest about that."*

This connection is not limited to the economic aspects of SDG 8, as several of the informants bring up *"human rights"* and *"being a responsible employer"* when discussing the goal. For instance, one informant stated that SDG 8 and 12 are especially relevant *"(...) because they*

[SDG 8 and 12] hit very hard (...) They hit because they are related to how you treat the employees, which everyone has, and it is about how you produce. While some of the others are probably aimed perhaps less at business, but more at civil society in some way.". The sample seems to agree that including SDG 8 is more or less a given in either case. Especially, as one informant pointed out, that this goal and its related targets fit well for a lot of businesses, before continuing to say that *"(....) that is, it [SDG 8] is easy to relate to and understand, as well as report on it and contribute to the goal".*

However, an interesting point is that while several companies find SDG 8 to be easy and an intuitive fit for them, one respondent said that goal is actually *"(...) not just a little, but a very demanding SDG, which is incredibly complicated as well…".* This is, according to the informant, due to challenges in the value chain. In either case, the findings point to well-grounded arguments for the prioritisation of SDG 8.

5.3.5 Context-based prioritisation

While some key explanations for the prioritisation can be found in the previous sections, this section provides additional insight into why certain goals were selected in this sample. One topic that is yet to be discussed is the impact the Norwegian context has on prioritisation. However, the geographical context is brought up by several of the informants when it comes to the relevance of goals. Therefore, key points related to this topic will be presented here, along with other aspects that might influence the selection.

One company, when asked about their exclusion of SDG 5 Gender equality, cited the fact that they operate mainly in Norway as a reason for this choice: *"No, it is probably because we mainly operate in Norway and here the framework for the gender equality work is so clear already. And we experience that we hold a good focus there, and that we do a right and good job.".* The informant expanded on this point and stated that:

> *"(...) I also imagine that gender equality and these types of themes like diversity and gender equality are so regulated in Norway that I think that many think that 'this does not apply to us', to put it with quotation marks. That it [this SDG] is aimed at other parts of the world, even though we, of course, need to focus on it here as well, by all means."*

The choice of another firm not to include SDG 5 follows somewhat the same logic: *"(...) On SDG 5 we made a thorough [risk] assessment of it. Looking at 'is there someone here that thinks this is a risk area, are there things we do not know about or that we know is bad', and then there was not."* this person also continued by saying that *"(...) it is also a bit about not taking all of them [the SDGs] just to somehow appear as if you are fully focused on them. We select the most important areas for us, and then we put pressure there"*. This indicates that how the firm thinks its choices will be perceived also affects prioritisation. This seems to be the case for several companies, for instance, two other firms have added SDG 5 after their initial prioritisation. The reasoning for this addition is expressed in the following:

> *"(...) at first, we thought that decent work [SDG 8] was enough and it was something that covered everything, but then we wanted to highlight our stated goal on gender. Even though the targets there [under SDG 5] are somewhat far-fetched related to how we work, the headline is important. And we are working towards improvement, for equality, as many others do. This might be why it [SDG 5] has become more popular over time. Right now, several new regulations have appeared related to just that, so that could also be a reason."*

> *"And we have experienced that the fact that we did not prioritise goal number 5 about gender equality, we have almost gotten a minus for that. But for us, we experienced that we have worked with gender equality (...) for such a long time that it was more diversity we were concerned with, diversity competence and diversity management. But we were not able to communicate this, so, therefore, we have had to take steps there, and in 2021, this goal will be added."*

Both point crucially to societal perception and the company's image as being key behind their decision to include a previously excluded goal. This perception is influenced by geographical factors, such as culture and view on gender equality in the country in question. Having to account for such factors is emphasised by a company which expressed that *"(...) our market is here, but if you think about all the companies we have as customers, a lot of them are large and international [companies] that have their employees all over the world. We also have a lot of listed companies that need to account for the [EU] taxonomy. It is essential to understand this picture, and in a way contribute as a supplier"*. This suggests that both where you operate and how you view your value chain will affect how you view your potential contribution. This

connects nicely with a point made by one of the companies that stated that while SDG 1 is an important goal, *"(...) we do not really see how we can [contribute]. Yes, we can contribute through being a decent employer for all our employees and in that way contribute towards the goal no poverty. But that is somewhat further out in the value chain (...)"*.

A final point that seems to impact the selection process of the SDGs is the actuality of the goal. This was slightly present in relation to SDG 5 through the companies citing societal expectations as a reason for including this goal. From the answers, it appears that climate goal number 13 has received increased attention due to market and societal expectations as well as the focus on climate change in general. One company, for instance, stated that *"I remember when we looked at goal 13 climate, then we probably all thought that we have to include it."*, while another explained that during their selection process *"the climate goal is [was] quite obvious"*. A third respondent explained this focus by pointing out that there are potential incentives behind it *"(...) I think many people select [SDG] 13 because there is an expectation in the market that there will be CO_2 taxation [in the future]. Target figures have been set nationally. You need to help carry the load so it will be natural to focus on them [this goal]"*.

From this, it seems like several context-based reasons impact the popularity of the goals. Both where the company operates and how it views its value chain can influence the selection process. In addition to this, the way the SDGs is perceived by society is also important, and negative reactions might lead to changes in priority. The general popularity of an SDG topic might impact the rate at which the goal is prioritised, as could potentially be the case for SDG 13, which was elected by eight out of the ten sampled companies.

5.3.6 Challenges with prioritisation

When questioned if they experienced any challenges with the prioritisation of the SDGs, several employees expressed that it had been somewhat challenging to select goals. One informant said: *"Of course it is not that easy [to prioritise] because all of them are important. And (...) there are very few that we do not follow up on in some way or another."* while another explained that *"(...) at some point you need to draw the line, say that 'this is what we are working on', which is somewhat difficult, but also quite fine".* However, another firm's sustainability employee disagrees: *"(...) I think that finding where it [the goals] is relevant, that is not difficult".*

When questioned about it, several firms responded that it can be challenging to translate the SDGs down to a business level. One, for instance, stated: *"Yes, I think it was very difficult (...) because the goals in themselves are just a few words, right? Maybe a maximum of three words, and people are using them quite freely just as fits them. And then when I came and said that 'Yes, but here we have a lot of targets and therefore this [goal] might not fit so well for us', then people got kind of slightly annoyed because 'we can do with this [the SDGs] exactly as we want'."*. Another informant added that some might feel that the goals are too society-focused:

> *"(...) some people might experience that the SDGs are very society-focused, and maybe not necessarily so directly transferable to a company level. (...) but it provides in a sense the big picture for society and more materiality for society than companies."*

The previous informant also expressed that while some of the targets are *"quite specific, measurable and easy to operationalise (...), there are other [targets] that have very lofty wordings. So, there is a need for a revision [of the goals] eventually"*. From the interviews, it appears that several of the companies had difficulty with the broadness of the goals and translating them to fit a business setting. As one person put it, *"(...) eradicating hunger is a very extreme thing, a very extreme goal"*. While several companies expressed that it is crucial to look at the targets to locate relevant goals, this still seems to be a learning process.

It is also important to highlight that several of the companies pointed out that even though there are goals that they have not selected, this does not mean that they do not work with them. Another point that could explain companies being strict in their selection is the fear of greenwashing. One company, when asked about why they had not prioritised certain goals even though they work with them, answered that:

> *"It is communication, and you need to be very careful about the balance between when it goes over into being greenwashing, but now there is also a new term which is SDG washing, right? (...) We are more concerned with delivering. We are going to deliver results, and then we don't necessarily need to brag about having one or the other goal."*

The data shows that several companies encounter difficulties when it comes to their work with the SDGs. The relative size and impact of these challenges do, however, appear to be minuscule, as the firms all claim that they have managed to select the 'right' goals.

5.4 Other findings

The interviews revealed some other interesting findings related to the SDGs that are presented below. The section starts with a discussion about the SDGs not being transformational in the studied firms. Further, some challenges related to the SDGs are discussed, which could help inform why the SDGs have not managed to be transformational. The chapter rounds off with a discussion about the need to collaborate to achieve the 2030 Agenda.

5.4.1 Non-transformational

As previous literature suggests that the SDGs can be used as inspiration for new sustainability activities, the researchers were interested in finding out whether this was the case among the studied firms. Hence, the interviewees were asked how they believed the business would look different if the SDGs had not been adopted and whether the SDGs had been used as inspiration. Interestingly, several respondents revealed that the SDGs had not transformed their business, and the goals were not directly used as inspiration for new sustainability activities. Some companies clearly expressed that their drive to work with sustainability does not come from the SDGs alone and that their sustainability strategies were present before the goals.

> *"We would be working on the things we are working on now, based on the strategy and goals and target that we have put on ourselves, regardless of whether we connected them to the SDGs or not. So, it is not the SDGs that are the reason for the things we focus on. The topics we focus on, we focus on because we know it is important for society, for our members and other stakeholders, that we work with these topics."*

> *"The drive for the company to operate sustainably does not come solely from by the SDGs. (…) It is not the case that, because of the SDGs, we have started to think sustainably. It is a bit like, that sustainability is a part of our strategy, and the strategy came before it [the SDGs]."*

Further, another company highlighted that as they have existed longer than the SDGs is not sensible for them to change their whole business model. The respondent stated: *"I do not think that we can change our business model because the United Nations have some national goals. But it is obvious that we should engage in more conscious thinking around how we should take social responsibility through understanding national goals (…)"*.

Another respondent discussed why the SDGs might not have affected the company that much and stated: *"I do not want to say that it has affected us much. But it probably has to do with the fact that we are quite mature in this area. We are more concerned with what we actually do and the results we deliver than connecting it to the SDGs."*. This indicates that the SDGs might not be transformational in a mature firm that already has sustainability activities in place.

When asked whether the SDGs had been used as inspiration for any new sustainability activities, no one answered affirmatively. One company replied: *"No, we have not done that, (…) but we use our own goals, and it is not the case that any of the SDGs have somehow been like standalone 'oh, this we have not thought about' so far"*. Another one highlighted: *"No, as mentioned, the SDGs came after our own goals and measures. If we are going to do that [use the SDGs as inspiration] in the future, it may be, but I do not know anything about that now. I think there are greater chances of it [the inspiration] coming from other ways than through the SDGs"*. Even though the SDGs have not been directly used as inspiration, a few companies used them as a framework for their sustainability strategies, as discussed in *chapter 5.1.3*.

Even though the SDGs did not lead to any new sustainability activities, some firms felt that adopting the goals has been beneficial in other ways. For instance, one company highlighted that the work with the SDGs has shown how important their activities are: *"I cannot say that, unfortunately [that the goals have been used as inspiration]. But (…) through working with this, is that it has become very clear to us how important what we work with is."*. Another respondent highlighted that it has increased the knowledge and awareness about the business in relation to sustainability.

> *"It is more that we have gained a new focus on our business model and how running it affects climate, environment and taking social responsibility."*

Others felt that the SDGs gave structure and speed to the process related to sustainability. For instance, one respondent stated: *"Maybe we have gotten a little more structure around the goals, but not really that much"*. However, another respondent highlighted that it is unclear whether this is a result of the SDGs: *"(…) the whole process and strategy that we have set for ourselves has meant that we have taken very big steps in a short time. And then I do not know how much the SDGs can get the credit for this. (…) Now it is just a language that both we use, and we use with others."*. The employee also mentioned that they use the SDGs for

communication purposes. This is in line with other companies that said that the SDGs have helped them communicate their sustainability work internally and externally, which has also led to increased awareness. Another respondent added that using the goals for communication has allowed for easier comparison between firms.

"I think that maybe the focus on sustainability would not have happened that quickly (...). And that might have led to increased awareness of the sustainability work, it probably did. Brought it on the agenda in one way or another, or maybe worked as an angle in to get a better understanding within the organisation, and for the employees to be able to communicate and create knowledge."

"But they have been great, absolutely, the way they are, and they have helped us a lot. And they help in the dialogue, and they help us when comparing ourselves with other firms when we look at what measures and goals other companies can set under the different goals."

Even though the SDGs were not directly used as inspiration in the companies, some sustainability employees were positive about its thought. One stated that *"(...) it is certainly in a way inspiration as to whether there is an opportunity of other new business areas"* whereas another shared the same thought and stated: *"I believe that there is a good breeding ground for finding new solutions based on the goals and that it should be an inspiration"*.

These findings suggest that, in general, the SDGs are seen as important. However, they are not transformational in the sense that they change the way companies operate or are used as inspiration for new sustainability activities. This, however, does not mean that they are not beneficial, as several firms expressed that the SDGs have increased knowledge, helped in communication, and sped up the process related to sustainability. Hence, the SDGs are more used as a communication tool and a framework to base the sustainability strategy.

5.4.2 Challenges

Perhaps one of the reasons why the SDGs have not managed to be transformational is that there are some challenges rooted in the goals. Some challenges have already been discussed concerning the prioritisation of the SDGs. However, these will be supplemented by presenting

more general challenges related to the goals. Starting with the fact that there is no clear interpretation of the goals nor a clear reporting standard to adhere to:

"That is a bit of the challenge with the SDGs. You can decide for yourself what is important, but then you need to explain what it is. And that also means that those who sit and evaluate these reports on the other side (…), they sit and evaluate (…) how you 'answer' on the sustainable development goals. You get a worse score if you miss on which goal it [your work] covers. You do the same job, but it is about all of us categorising the same thing into the goals."

This lack of consistent reporting on the SDGs might be hurting the progress of the goals because, as one informant expressed: *"(…) we do not do developmental work just to be able to report well, but there is something about getting that interaction in there"*. This indicates that it could be beneficial for the SDGs to relaunch with clearer reporting requirements. This is underlined by the same respondent who revealed that *"I have never received as much attention in the organisation as when the EU taxonomy was launched, when they understood what this was going to mean or could mean. Significantly more hours have been spent on this than on the SDGs, that is how it is"*.

This limitation is not exclusively related to reporting on the SDGs. According to one informant, there also appears to be a lack of knowledge among company executives: *"It has actually gone so far that there are people in very high positions who have not realised that these sustainability goals are a state initiative, a national thing, and not a company requirement."*. Another respondent stated that the lack of incentives related to the initiative is a major shortcoming of the SDGs and sustainability in general:

"(…) we need incentives both from the financial sector which can say that 'I see the numbers, and I see that (…) you are reporting in accordance with these standards [EU taxonomy] and that you have these certifications and so on and that means that you, for instance, can get a more lucrative interest rate for loans or better terms'. I think we will see more and more of that, and then it is also crucial that we see political incentives that provide tax relief to those companies that manage to be innovative and use finances for green investments. And then also the other way, giving the whip to those who do not do it by giving them higher fees."

When asked to elaborate on this, the last informant expressed that *"there need to be stricter and stricter demands"* related to the SDGs. Several, if not all, of the informants have in some way mentioned the EU taxonomy or ESG reporting during the interviews in the sense that this is how they report on sustainability, thus also incorporating the work related to the SDGs. In other words, while there is support and positivity amongst the companies regarding the SDGs, their transformational potential might be limited due to restricted knowledge, a lack of incentives and no clear reporting standards. These are all points that need to be addressed to make the 2030 Agenda or any future agenda more likely to succeed.

5.4.3 Partnership for the future

As seen in the research setting, SDG 17 was not among the top prioritised goals among the participating companies. However, one informant stated that *"(…) if we would just somehow move away from being competitors in some areas, then I think that we would have come a lot further in collaborating for the common sustainable development goals"*. This suggests that it is essential that companies collaborate in order to achieve the 2030 Agenda. The opinion was not limited to one informant but shared by other sustainability employees.

> *"If we want to have any opportunities whatsoever in reaching them, then this [the SDGs] needs to go down in regions in countries and districts all over the world. And then it becomes very clear that this is not something we can do alone."*

> *"We are in a way clear about the fact that we are unable to face this alone. We have to do it in partnership."*

However, one informant stated: *"I think that in the 'ideal world' we would collaborate a lot more. But it is not an 'ideal world' in the sense that we unfortunately still think that we are competitors. So, we would rather work on thing alone to be the first one, so there is very little collaboration actually"*. This indicates that there is still room for improvement regarding collaboration among firms. However, as several respondents share the opinion that partnership is essential, it may imply that, even though there may not be enough collaboration today, there will be a bigger focus in the future given the right incentives.

5.5 Summary of the findings

The findings related to the SDG adoption process indicate that the process varies between companies, but generally tends to be gradual. Developing from a superficial affair with limited participants to a more extensive operation that utilises tools such as a materiality analysis to identify key impact areas for the firm to address. The interviewed firms mainly mapped their current sustainability activities to the SDGs. The adoption process seems to be continuous, with companies expressing that their SDG prioritisation will need to be re-evaluated in the future.

The companies in the study had mixed motivations for adopting the SDGs. The informants presented several internal motivations for engaging with the SDGs. Among these were a desire to contribute, employees, and a desire for a framework to structure sustainability work. Several companies also adopted the SDGs for communication purposes and to show that they are a responsible actor. While some companies considered the long-term benefits of engaging with the SDGs, none stated that they were motivated by potential business opportunities. Key among the external motivations were expectations from different stakeholders and the market. Among stakeholders, customers and suppliers were mentioned the most. Some also pointed to their UNGC membership and operating in Norway as drivers for adopting the SDGs.

The prioritisation of the SDGs varies in terms of the number of goals selected, which goals have been selected and why. Several informants point out that it is not natural to serve too many SDGs as this lessens the potential impact they can have on the goals. Company characteristics such as business area, size, and experience with the SDGs also seem to affect the SDG selection. Furthermore, the firms overall seem to agree that SDGs should be selected based on their relevance to the business operations and how much companies can *contribute* to them. The findings indicate that SDG prioritisation is affected by industry, geographical and cultural factors, as well as the popularity of the goals. Companies expressed that there were some challenges related to prioritising the goals.

Interestingly, while the SDGs are successfully being used as a communication tool and as a framework for sustainability strategies, they have essentially not been transformational. This can be due to challenges highlighted by the informants, such as a lack of knowledge, incentives, and reporting standards. Increased collaboration between businesses was suggested as one way to increase the contribution of the private sector towards the 2030 Agenda.

6. DISCUSSION

In this chapter, the most central findings from the previous chapter will be discussed and considered in the context of relevant theory and the expert interview. The purpose of this discussion is to provide a deeper understanding of the motivations companies have for adopting the SDGs and how these goals are prioritised in a business setting. After a summary, the study's contributions will be presented along with practical implications. The chapter will round off by addressing limitations and providing suggestions for further research.

6.1 Process of adopting the SDGs

The adoption process related to the SDGs will be discussed shortly, as it provides some background information that helps inform the motivations and the prioritisation related to the SDGs. First, the findings show that the SDGs were adopted at different times ranging from 2016 until 2019. Time of adoption is, however, not indicative of whether the companies had an extensive process related to incorporating the SDGs or not. For instance, some companies in the beginning simply communicated their support for the SDGs before conducting a more substantial process a few years later. Either way, several firms, both early and late adopters, had extensive processes related to mapping their business model or value chain to relevant SDGs.

Previous research suggests that companies are more likely to engage with SDGs that align with their earlier sustainability work (van der Waal and Thijssens, 2019; Silva, 2021; Heras-Saizarbitoria et al., 2021). Silva (2021) further discusses that it is common for companies to map their current business activities to the SDGs. This corresponds well with the findings in this research project, as several informants expressed that they mapped their activities to comparable SDGs. This was also observed when the sustainability reports were analysed, where companies connected their own established goals or targets to the SDGs. For instance, if they had set targets related to reducing emissions, those would be connected to a relevant SDG, such as SDG 13 Climate action. This type of process is problematised by Scott and McGill (2018), who claim that this suggests that the SDGs are being perceived as simply something to report on. However, some firms did supplement this process by conducting a comprehensive materiality analysis to identify the most material topics for the company, which were then mapped to relevant SDGs. This is important as Young et al. (2021) point out that carrying out a materiality analysis is a crucial step towards avoiding greenwashing.

Furthermore, some companies mentioned that they used the SDGs as a framework for their sustainability strategy. While not exactly in the same vein, some authors have noted that there is potential in using the SDGs as a framework to increase CSR engagement and meet stakeholder expectations (Schönherr et al., 2017; Scott and McGill, 2018). Finally, while the SDG Compass is a tool to guide companies on how to implement the SDGs, only two companies from the sample mention using this framework in their adoption process (SDG Compass, 2021). This could indicate that while such tools exist, most companies opt to rely on their own methods for SDG implementation. As our findings and some empirical studies suggest, this tends to involve mapping current business activities to the SDGs (Silva, 2021; Scott and McGill, 2019).

The findings also show that the adoption process differed regarding the methods used and the people involved. Most companies conducted a strictly internal process with participants mainly limited to the sustainability department. The leaders or the board of directors were often included in the process. Still, for several of the companies, this involvement was mainly restricted to approving the SDGs. However, a few companies mentioned that they performed a more inclusive adoption process where several different stakeholders, particularly consultants, were involved. This could imply that some companies have stakeholders who expect to participate in this process and that companies might involve them to maintain good stakeholder relationships (Latif et al., 2020).

Overall, the participants do not seem to favour provided tools and methods such as the SDG Compass in their adoption process. Instead, preferring to lean on their already present activities and strategies. This could potentially be because of the voluntary nature of the SDGs, as firms are free to adopt the goals in the way they find best suited. However, this can be problematic, as Jones et al. (2016) and Ike et al. (2019) suggest companies struggle with implementing the SDGs into their sustainability strategies. Yet, as the findings point out, several companies have gone over their process and prioritisation since the goals were initially adopted and consider this work to be continuous. This leaves the door open for companies to redo their SDG adoption should they wish to. Either way, the adoption process might differ, which is likely affected by the motivations firms have for adopting the goals and how the goals are prioritised.

6.2 Motivation to adopt the SDGs

This chapter presents an analytical discussion of the findings related to the first part of the research question, namely, what motivates companies to adopt the SDGs in their sustainability practices. The findings indicate that firms are mainly motivated by internal factors, such as the desire to contribute and to utilise the goals in their sustainability communication. However, expectations from external stakeholders and market pressure also played a part. Therefore, this section will start by delving deeper into the internal motivations before rounding off by discussing the external drivers the firms have for engaging with the SDGs.

6.2.1 Internal motivation to adopt the SDGs

As presented in the literature, companies sometimes rationalise engaging with sustainability through ethical reasoning (Santos and Bastos, 2020). This is reflected in the findings as some companies expressed that a major motivation for them to adopt the SDGs was to contribute not only towards the SDGs but also to a better world. This aligns with the findings of Garay and Font (2012), who argue that companies adopt sustainability practices due to a desire to do good. Porter and Kramer (2006) also suggest that companies engage with CSR because of a sense of responsibility. However, while the findings indicate that some companies justify their SDG engagement based on ethical reasons and feel a responsibility to engage with the goals, this type of motivation was not the main internal driver in this sample.

According to Kotler and Lee (2005), engaging with CSR initiatives can make internal stakeholders, such as employees or managers, feel good, which could encourage them to participate in these activities. The findings suggest that internal stakeholders, specifically employees, drive the SDG adoption. However, it is unclear whether this is because employees find this work enjoyable. Nevertheless, a few companies mentioned that internal enthusiasts were a driving force for the adoption. In addition, the companies unanimously agreed that there was no internal resistance against the SDGs. This internal positive attitude towards the SDGs could help explain their successful adoption, as Santos (2011) points out that the implementation of CSR practices depends on the motivation of stakeholders.

Previous research suggests that a key motivation for companies to adopt sustainability practices are the expected economic benefits (Naidoo and Gasparatos, 2018). Interestingly, the findings in this research project reveal quite the opposite to be the case for the SDGs. Overall, the

participating companies did not expect any business opportunities to emerge from engaging with the SDGs. This did, therefore, not factor into their motivation for adopting the initiative. However, a few respondents mentioned potential future competitiveness as a motivation, which lines up with the findings of Garay and Font (2012) and Lacy et al. (2010). Some companies expressed that while they did not adopt the SDGs to gain competitive advantages, they have realised that the goals have this potential. While competitive advantages may emerge from engaging with the SDGs, this is not necessarily the biggest driver for adopting them. Overall, this lines up with the findings of Santos and Bastos (2020). Companies might not see how the SDGs can lead to business opportunities as there is still a lack of evidence on how the goals relate to financial performance (García-Meca and Martínez-Ferrero, 2021). However, the expert claims that just like CSR, engaging with the SDGs can lead to increased profits, improved customer relations and a better reputation (personal communication, 16.11.2021).

Porter and Kramer (2006), as well as Kotler and Lee (2005), point out that improving the company brand and reputation is a key reason for companies to engage with CSR. There is support for this in the findings. Some companies mentioned adopting the SDGs because the goals show seriousness related to sustainability and may help them to be viewed as a responsible actor. Surprisingly, the firms did not view this as a business opportunity. Most companies expressed that they adopted the SDGs for communication purposes, such as to convey their sustainability work to their stakeholders. This finding can be related to Suchman (1995 in Silva 2021), who states that communication such as reporting on social responsibility is a tool companies use to manage their organisational legitimacy. Another finding that can be connected to this is that some companies expressed that due to their large size, it was important for them to highlight their SDG work.

Finally, a few firms communicated that they adopted the SDGs due to their potential as a sustainability framework. Not much literature is present on this as a potential motivation, but Pedersen (2018) expresses that the SDGs can act as a framework that can be translated into a long-term market strategy. Additionally, as previously mentioned, Schönherr et al. (2017) state that firms can utilise the SDGs as a tool to strengthen CSR engagement. Further, Scott and McGill (2018) state that the SDGs can be utilised as a framework to meet stakeholder expectations related to sustainable behaviour.

6.2.2 External motivations to adopt the SDGs

The findings in this research project suggest that expectations and pressure from stakeholders and the market are key external drivers for firms to adopt the SDGs. This fits well with previous research related to stakeholder theory, which suggests that stakeholder pressure is a central reason for companies to adopt CSR and sustainability practices (Fernando and Lawrence, 2014; Jakhar, 2020; Sarkis et al., 2010). The findings in this research project show that several companies were motivated to adopt the SDGs because they felt pressure from different stakeholders, and they wanted to meet their expectations. While some companies felt pressure from almost all their stakeholders, customers and suppliers were most frequently mentioned. This is somewhat in line with the findings of Ditlev-Simonsen and Wenstøp (2013), who claim that customers, along with owners and the government, have the largest impact on companies adopting CSR practices. Interestingly, only a few firms mentioned that they felt pressure to adopt the SDGs from the financial sector. However, several stated that the financial sector has become more involved in recent years, but it is unclear whether this is with the SDGs or sustainability in general. Van der Waal and Thijssens (2020) and Orzes et al. (2018) refer to evidence suggesting that one of the main motivations for joining the UNGC was responding to stakeholder pressure. This corresponds well with the findings in this research project showing that stakeholder pressure is a key motivation for companies to adopt the SDGs.

Previous research also points towards the fact that maintaining or improving organisational legitimacy incentivises companies to incorporate sustainability practices, such as the SDGs (Deegan, 2002; Fernando and Lawrence, 2014; Silva 2021). Wæraas (2007) suggests that the potential to acquire legitimacy comes from how stakeholders view the organisation, and it can be enhanced by meeting stakeholder expectations (Fernando and Lawrence, 2014). Previous research suggests that communication can be used to manage and strengthen organisational legitimacy (Suchman 1995 in Silva 2021). The findings of this study are in line with previous research and show that maintaining or improving organisational legitimacy works as an incentive for companies to adopt the SDGs. Several companies state that they adopted the SDGs to be able to communicate their sustainability work through the SDGs to different stakeholders. The findings suggest that it can be beneficial to provide a link to the SDGs because the goals are well-known and easy to understand for stakeholders. Some companies felt that they are increasingly expected to show their sustainability work by using the SDG symbols. This may explain why the firms have increased the focus on the SDGs in their reporting, as discussed in

the research setting. This aligns well with the findings of García-Meca and Martínez-Ferrero (2021), who found that SDG reporting mostly seems to be encouraged due to legitimacy concerns. In sum, the findings indicate that the firms are motivated to adopt the SDGs, not only because of stakeholder expectations, but because they want to show that their actions are desirable and appropriate through providing a link to the SDGs in their communication.

Institutional theory claims that a firm's business environment will exert pressure on the firm (Iarossi et al., 2011), and it can help explain why firms engage in socially responsible behaviour (Cambell, 2007 in Van Zanten and Van Tulder, 2018). The findings of this research project suggest that there were expectations in the firms' business environments that motivated the companies to adopt the SDGs. More specifically, the respondents mentioned market expectations and the increased SDG use by companies both within the industry and in general. Some even stated that this is something *"everyone started doing"*. This pressure can be related to mimetic isomorphism that suggests that firms tend to model themselves after those they perceive to be successful (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). In other words, the findings suggest that the choice to adopt the SDGs is to some extent because of mimetic pressure. DiMaggio and Powell (1983) claim that mimetic isomorphism occurs, for instance, when goals are ambiguous, which the findings suggest that the SDGs are. Several respondents highlighted that there is no clear interpretation of the goals and that they cover a broad range of topics. The findings of this research project line up with the findings of Latif et al. (2020), who claim that companies under high mimetic pressure are more likely to adopt sustainability practices. Further, institutional theory could also help explain why a few companies expressed that their UNGC membership motivated them to adopt the SDGs as they already are committed to report annually. Interestingly, only one company mentioned that they felt some expectations to contribute to the SDGs because Norway has committed to the goals.

6.3 Prioritisation of the SDGs

This subchapter is dedicated to the second part of the research question and discusses how the SDGs were prioritised in the studied companies. The findings show that the most prioritised goals are SDGs 8, 12, and 13, with the average number of goals prioritised being slightly above seven. This lines nicely up with the results of previous empirical research (Young et al., 2021; Scott and McGill, 2018). Overall, SDG 1 is the least prioritised as it does not even appear once. Other than that, SDG 6 is only prioritised by one company. All in all, the firms seem to prefer

to prioritise economic goals, however, most serve goals from the environmental and social dimensions as well (Stockholm Resilience Centre, 2016). In general, the prioritisation between the studied firms varies when it comes to the number of goals and which goals are selected. This section will hence discuss the findings related to the prioritisation, starting with the number of goals, before moving on to criteria, specific goals, and challenges with the prioritisation.

Starting off, several of the informants expressed that it is inappropriate to serve all 17 SDGs and it is necessary to prioritise. This is an interesting finding as this is not in line with the original intention of the 2030 Agenda (Frostier and Kim, 2020). The expert disagrees with this approach, expressing that it is crucial to focus on all the goals (personal communication, 16.11.2021). However, several empirical studies find that the SDGs are being prioritised and that some of the goals are more popular (Scott and McGill, 2018; Van Zanten and Van Tulder, 2018; Silva, 2021). The interviewed companies argued that not all the goals are relevant for their business operations and that serving too many goals might reduce the degree to which they can contribute towards them. This lines up with the findings of Scott and McGill (2018), who argue that prioritising too many goals could result in the attention given towards induvial goals being spread too thin. Some of the informants also claimed that company characteristics such as the size of their business area could impact the goal selection. While not exactly related, previous literature does support the fact that company characteristics such as the mainstream activities of the firm tend to impact the SDG prioritisation (Heras-Saizarbitoria et al., 2021).

From the sample, two key criteria for goal selection were identified. The first one is how relevant the SDG is for the business, and the other is how well the firm believes it can contribute to the goal. While critical of this approach, Preston and Scott (2015) found that companies tend to select goals based on how business-relevant they are. According to a PwC report, businesses tend to prioritise SDGs in this way (PwC, 2017). The expert agrees that some SDGs might be less relevant but claims that this is not an excuse to not serve a goal, as companies always can contribute, for instance, through partnerships (personal communication, 16.11.2021). Several interviewees also emphasised that they looked at how they impact the goals, both negatively and positively, before selecting which goals to serve. This is more in line with what Preston and Scott (2015) think companies should do, as this helps firms avoid 'cherry picking' SDGs. Although, it is unclear in the findings which criteria is the most important. It is also not clear whether the companies tended to prioritise SDGs that minimise their negative impact or SDGs where they can have a positive contribution. This is unfortunate as some studies have pointed

out that companies tend to prioritise SDGs that 'avoid harm' instead of those that 'do good', which can here neither be confirmed nor denied (van Zanten and van Tulder, 2018).

Nonetheless, the findings are fleshed out as the informants mentioned other factors that explain their SDG prioritisation. Several informants argue that in addition to not being business-relevant, some of the goals, for instance, SDG 1 No poverty and SDG 2 Zero hunger, are less relevant for them because of the industry and geographical location they operate in. In other words, even though the companies consider the goals to be important on a global basis, they do not consider them to be relevant for their operations in a Norwegian context. The Norwegian government agrees with this, as they stated that not all the 169 targets are relevant for the country (Regjeringen, 2021). Others also found that the SDG prioritisation varies between industries (Heras-Saizarbitoria et al., 2021; PwC, 2017; Young et al., 2021) and countries (Forestier and Kim, 2020; PwC, 2017). While headquartered in Norway, the companies operate in different countries and industries, which might help explain the variation in prioritisation. On the flip side, however, since not all industries are covered in the sample, this might also result in the variation being skewed in some ways.

The geographical context comes up several times in the findings as a factor that affects prioritisation. For instance, some companies justify not prioritising SDG 5 Gender equality because they operate in Norway, where the legislative coverage is comprehensive. This thinking resonates well with Matten and Moon's (2007) findings that indicate that institutional and cultural differences affect how explicit companies tend to be in their CSR approach. In general, European companies, compared to American companies, tend to rely on more implicit CSR, likely because of operating in more regulated markets (Matten and Moon, 2007). A few informants stated that they received negative feedback for not selecting SDG 5 and thus incorporated it later. This can support the idea that cultural pressure can impact how companies prioritise the SDGs. This also lines up well with institutional theory and the pressure companies might feel to conform to widely accepted social and cultural norms (Iarossi et al., 2011).

Furthermore, the general popularity of the goal could also impact whether it is selected or not. For instance, it is quite interesting that certain goals like SDG 13 Climate action are prioritised across companies (Scott and McGill, 2018). This is mostly the case for the sample in this thesis as well, implying that companies potentially prefer certain goals either due to their general popularity or characteristics. For instance, all the participating companies have elected to

prioritise SDG 8, which is consistent with previous findings (Young et al., 2021; Scott and McGill, 2018). The findings hint towards the fact the companies selected this goal because it is intuitive and easy to relate to the business model. This is in line with previous literature such as Kaffashi and Grayson (2021). They suggest that certain SDGs, like SDG 13, can be measured using traditional metrics, making it an appealing goal to select. Others argue that this is also the case for goals like SDG 8 and SDG 12 (PwC, 2017 and Scott and McGill, 2019). Therefore, it is perhaps not surprising that these goals seem to be so popular, both in the literature as well as in the sample of this thesis.

The findings also suggest that companies prioritise SDGs that align with their core business over goals that require indirect contributions through charity or other sustainability 'add-ons'. This matches well with the findings of Silva (2021), who indicates that companies tend to pick SDGs that are relevant to their core business instead of participating in charitable activities. Hörisch et al. (2014) add that it is essential to link the core business to sustainability issues in order to create stakeholder value. This is interesting, as several firms mentioned that they conducted a materiality analysis in relation to the SDGs. This lines up well with Scott and McGill (2018), who suggest that companies, among other things, prioritise the SDGs based on how material the goals are for the stakeholders. Furthermore, the findings showcase that it can be challenging to prioritise the SDGs, mainly due to the difficulties related to translating the goals from a national level to a firm level. Some companies specifically mentioned that the broadness of the goals made it difficult to approach them. This is supported by Silva (2021), who stated that the SDGs might not be applicable for companies both due to their broadness and because they were initially designed for nations.

6.4 The future of the 2030 Agenda

Previous literature suggests that the SDGs can be used as inspiration for new sustainability actions (Silva, 2021). However, the findings of this study suggest that this has not been the case in the sampled companies. While the SDGs are seen as important, they have not changed the way the businesses operate. Instead, the goals are being used as a communication tool or as a framework for sustainability strategies. Thus, the SDGs seem to have suffered the same faith as the TBL framework, which Elkington (2018) points out is misused as an accounting and reporting tool instead of being used to improve sustainability in companies. This further aligns

with the findings of van der Waal and Thijssens (2019) and Silva (2021), who found that the SDGs often imply symbolic changes rather than substantive changes for businesses.

Scholars have expressed their concerns about this approach to the SDGs. For instance, Fortin and Jolly (2015) claim that the voluntary nature of the SDGs can reduce the impact the initiative potentially could have. Further, they claim that the goals can lead to 'bluewashing' if they do not involve transformational changes. However, some companies stated that because they have existed longer than the SDGs, they already have sustainability strategies in place. Hence, they claim that it is not sensible for them to change their whole business model because of the SDGs. Others pointed out that their drive to work with sustainability does not come from the SDGs alone. Rather, they focus on it because they know it is important for society and different stakeholders.

Van Zanten and van Tulder (2018) further express their concerns about the SDGs becoming a superficial communication tool. However, some firms argued that using the SDGs for communication is beneficial as they are well-known and allow for easier comparison among firms. Some companies also claimed that the general knowledge and understanding of sustainability has increased among stakeholders because of the SDGs. The findings indicate that mature companies might already have sustainability activities in place and explore sustainability opportunities in other ways. Even though the SDGs have not directly been used as inspiration for new activities, a few companies used the goals as a framework for their sustainability strategies. Some companies specifically expressed that the SDGs provided structure and speed to their sustainability work.

The findings and non-transformative nature of the SDGs suggest that some of the issues related to the UNCG and MDGs also apply to the SDGs. The previous voluntary initiatives were criticised for their low effectiveness and for not being transformational (Jones and Phillips, 2016; Fortin and Jolly, 2015). Berliner and Prakash (2015) found that UNGC members did not make significant changes regarding their social and environmental practices. The findings of this research project suggest the same to be the case for the SDGs. Furthermore, Fukuda-Parr (2016) argues that one of the reasons the MDGs failed was because the goals were not transformational enough. Hence, to make the 2030 Agenda succeed, more transformational actions may be needed. This is supported by Mhlanga et al. (2018), who claim that businesses need to drastically change their SDG engagement if they are going to play a key part in

achieving the goals. Silva (2021) further suggests that using the SDGs as inspiration is necessary to reach the 2030 Agenda.

Informants highlighted challenges related to the SDGs, which may explain why the goals have not been transformational. They pointed out their unclear nature as well as the lack of reporting standards, knowledge, and incentives related to the goals. For instance, Kumar et al. (2016) point out that the SDGs might not be transformational due to the sheer extent of goals, targets and indicators making up the goals. Further, Schramade (2017) raises the problem of a lack of structured reporting related to the SDGs and that there is a need for SDG related KPIs. As presented in the research setting, some companies have tried to solve this issue by creating their own KPIs to measure and report their SDG performance. Moreover, when it comes to the lack of knowledge, Jones et al. (2016) and Ike et al. (2019) claim that it is problematic for companies to figure out how to interpret, prioritise and implement the broad SDGs into existing corporate sustainability strategies, as all the goals are equally important. Finally, some informants pointed out that the lack of incentives is a shortcoming of the SDGs. The expert agrees that the current incentives have had limited success and points out that it is essential to have the correct incentives in place to get large companies involved (personal communication, 16.11.2021). Finally, an interesting finding is that some emphasis was placed on increased collaboration to achieve the SDGs. This means that companies, to an increasing degree, would need to set aside the fact that they are competitors and instead explore opportunities that partnerships can bring. The expert adds that it is crucial to continue working globally and keep the business community involved to be able to make a change (personal communication, 16.11.2021).

Some scholars claim that in order to contribute to the 2030 Agenda, businesses need to change the way they work with the SDGs (Mhlanga et al., 2018; Silva, 2021). However, because of the characteristics of the SDGs large and established companies in the private sector seem to see limited opportunities for transformational changes. The findings indicate that increased knowledge, better incentives, and clearer reporting standards could make the 2030 Agenda more likely to succeed.

6.5 Summary of the discussion

This chapter discussed the most central findings against relevant theory. Showcasing that across companies, the adoption process of the SDGs, the motivations for adopting them as well as how

they are prioritised tends to vary. First, the interviewed companies mainly engaged with SDGs that could be connected to their previous sustainability activities. For the most part, the companies elected to figure out and shape their adoption process independently instead of utilising provided tools such as the SDG Compass. Combined the findings indicate that the companies already worked with sustainability before the SDGs, which seems to have impacted the adoption process.

Furthermore, while the companies in this study were motivated to engage with the SDGs for varying reasons, some similarities were present across firms. For instance, several companies expressed a desire to contribute towards the SDGs and towards a better world through them. Others stated that they were motivated to engage with the SDGs due to the potential of communicating their sustainability work through the SDGs. Fascinatingly, none of the informants expressed that they were motivated by potential business opportunities to adopt the SDGs. Instead, the majority said that stakeholder expectations and general market trends were more crucial drivers for SDG adoption.

Overall, the prioritisation of the SDGs also varied among the sampled firms. The findings suggest that companies select SDGs based on how business-relevant the goals are and how much they think they can contribute towards them. The evidence also indicates that company characteristics, along with cultural factors as well as industry and geographical location, effects the goal selection. According to the findings, prioritising the SDGs can prove to be challenging as the goals are broad and intended for states. Additional challenges related to the SDGs were also identified, such as the goals being difficult to interpret and lacking in structured reporting standards. These raised challenges might help explain the other finding that suggests that the SDGs tend not to lead to transformational changes in the companies that have adopted them.

The general attitude towards the SDGs seems to be predominately positive, and there seems to be a genuine desire from firms to select goals they can contribute towards that simultaneously are business-relevant. However, the engagement with the SDGs has not resulted in new sustainability activities. This could be due to challenges related to the goals, or as the companies pointed out because sustainability work already was present and ingrained in the businesses before the goals were launched. Based on this, an argument can be made that there is a need for the SDGs to be revised or at least that the challenges should be addressed for the goals to become transformational for businesses.

6.6 Contributions and practical implications

Based on the increased attention sustainability and the SDGs have received in the private sector and the identified research gap, this thesis has aimed to provide insight into what motivates Norwegian companies to engage with the SDGs and how they prioritise these goals. The findings outline the motives the private sector in Norway has for engaging with the 2030 Agenda and highlight how the related goals are prioritised. Additionally, challenges that might hinder the SDGs from being truly transformational in this setting are identified. This study thus expands upon previous research by conducting an in-depth, focused qualitative study and contributes to the limited literature related to the SDGs. In that way, the thesis contributes to filling a research gap and increasing the knowledge related to this topic in a broader sense. Moreover, the findings provide practical implications for firms, governments, and the UN.

First, the findings can be helpful for the companies involved in the study as they show how large Norwegian companies approach the SDGs. The findings offer an excellent opportunity for comparison and potential improvement. The presented information can also serve as a great springboard for companies considering engaging with the SDGs. The findings might provide them with inspiration for structuring their adoption process, and insight into the challenges other companies have experienced when working with the SDGs. Besides that, this thesis offers sustainability managers the opportunity to re-evaluate their engagement with the SDGs, specifically concerning their view on business opportunities. For instance, the literature points to the untapped business potential of the SDGs that could be seized through increased collaborations with firms, the government, or NGOs.

The findings on why companies choose to engage with the SDGs could help the UN and governments motivate other firms to contribute towards the goals. Alternatively, it could lead to an adjustment of incentives to increase the transformational potential of the SDGs. Furthermore, the information related to prioritisation should be fascinating for the UN as it showcases which goals are prioritised and why. Identifying which SDGs seem to be underserved in the private sector is crucial to changing this pattern. Just as identifying the characteristics of popular goals can help develop new targets and measures for the other goals. Looking at the findings from a broader perspective, they can also help governments and the UN as they provide valuable feedback on how private sector actors approach the SDGs. For instance, the findings of this study point towards the fact that the SDGs might not be designed

in the most optimal way for businesses. Firms have highlighted genuine challenges related to the SDGs, specifically the lack of a standardised reporting tool. This, as well as the other issues raised, is something that the UN potentially should investigate to accelerate the progress of the 2030 Agenda through a more successful inclusion of the private sector.

Overall, this research project brings more awareness towards sustainability, the SDGs and precisely how and why companies are engaging with these goals. This study also provides additional research in a field where this is needed while simultaneously highlighting the need for further studies on this topic.

6.7 Limitations and suggestions for future research

As with any study, this research project has some limitations. Firstly, this is a master's thesis that has been conducted over the course of five months. Due to time constraints, this is a cross-sectional study that is limited to a sample of ten Norwegian companies operating in different industries in the private sector. Furthermore, there are some limitations related to the qualitative nature of the research project and the semi-structured interviews. In terms of the research design, it does not allow for generalisation. Further, as the data consist of people's subjective responses, the responses and findings are shaped by the interviewees' values and understandings. Additionally, as this study explores something that has already occurred, it thus relies on the subjects' ability to recall past events correctly.

The companies and informants might have unknown reasons for participating in the study. As the interviews were held with only one representative from each company, the findings could be different if another representative was interviewed. For instance, while one company participant might not have seen business opportunities as a motivational factor, another one might. Furthermore, if companies from only one sector or firms of a different size had been interviewed, the findings could be impacted. Some efforts have been made to overcome these constraints. For instance, in the sampling process, the researchers have tried to identify a homogenous sample of representatives that are well-suited to answer the interview questions.

Further, another limitation may be that the interviews were held in Norwegian, and the thesis was written in English. Because of the translation, some meanings might have changed or been misinterpreted. However, the researchers believe the likelihood of this to be small, as both have

gone through all the data and partaken in the translation. Finally, an interesting observation and potential limitation is that the line between sustainability and the SDGs was blurry. Some of the interviewees did not particularly distinguish between the two. This unclear distinction, in general, reflects a limitation with some of the literature this thesis builds on.

Because of the qualitative nature of this research project, there are several avenues for future research. Firstly, a similar study could be conducted with a quantitative approach to test if the findings are applicable in a broader context. A similar study could also be conducted with another qualitative research strategy, such as ethnography. Further, as this study is limited to large Norwegian companies operating in the private sector, it may be interesting to look at only one industry in a specific geographical location. Since all companies in this study have been working with sustainability before the SDGs were adopted, another interesting approach could be to look at less established companies that have adopted the SDGs. It could also be fascinating to investigate why some companies have opted to not engage with the SDGs. Finally, as the findings point towards the fact that the SDGs have not been transformational, it could be of particular interest for future studies to explore why this might be the case.

7. CONCLUSION

The aim of this qualitative study has been to answer the following two-part research question:

What motivates large Norwegian companies to adopt the UN SDGs in their sustainability work, and how are the goals prioritised?

This research project finds that how companies adopt the SDGs, what motivates them to do so and how they prioritise the goals tends to vary. In general, the SDG adoption process seems to start off gradually before evolving into a more extensive process. Overall, among the studied companies, most of them elected to map their previous sustainability activities to the goals.

The firms had several and varying motivations for engaging with the SDGs. Among the internal motivations, an important driver was the desire to contribute towards the goals and a better world. Some companies were also motivated by the communication potential related to the SDGs. Moreover, the firms pointed out that external pressure, such as stakeholder and market expectations motivated them to engage with the SDGs. Interestingly, none of the companies listed potential business opportunities as a motivation for SDG adoption. This contrasts with previous literature, which found this to be a driver for CSR engagement. The SDG prioritisation also varied among the studied firms both when it comes to how many goals and which goals were selected. The informants highlighted that not all SDGs are business-relevant and that serving too many goals can reduce the degree of goal achievement. Overall, the firms seem to select goals based on how business-relevant they are and the degree to which the firm can contribute towards the goal. Firm characteristics along with cultural factors as well as the industry and geographical location of the business also seem to impact the SDG selection.

The SDGs have been successful in the private sector in the sense that firms are adopting the goals and utilising them in their sustainability communication. However, the findings indicate that beyond that, the SDGs have not been transformational. Perhaps, this is because of identified challenges, such as the lack of incentives or clear reporting standards related to the goals. Nevertheless, the findings suggest that firms have a predominantly positive attitude towards the SDGs and want to contribute. Therefore, addressing these challenges might be a way to translate this positive attitude into more transformational changes, which might result in a more successful inclusion of the private sector in the 2030 Agenda.

REFERENCES

Baumgartner, R. J., & Rauter, R. (2016). Strategic perspectives of corporate sustainability management to develop a sustainable organization. *Journal of Cleaner Production*, *140*, 81–92. https://doi.org/10.1016/J.JCLEPRO.2016.04.146

Berliner, D., & Prakash, A. (2014). The United Nations Global Compact: An Institutionalist Perspective. *Journal of Business Ethics*, *122*(2), 217–223. https://doi.org/10.1007/S10551-014-2217-5

Berrone, P., & Gomez-Mejia, L. R. (2009). Environmental performance and executive compensation: An integrated agency-institutional perspective. *Academy of Management Journal*, *52*(1), 103–126. https://doi.org/10.5465/AMJ.2009.36461950

Boso, N., Danso, A., Leonidou, C., Uddin, M., Adeola, O., & Hultman, M. (2017). Does financial resource slack drive sustainability expenditure in developing economy small and medium-sized enterprises? *Journal of Business Research*, *80*, 247–256. https://doi.org/10.1016/J.JBUSRES.2017.06.016

Bruno, K. (2002, January 24). The UN's Global Compact, Corporate Accountability and the Johannesburg Earth Summit. *CorpWatch*. https://www.corpwatch.org/article/greenwash-10

Cartwright, G. (2019). *Would you be willing to reduce your salary for the planet?* Totaljobs. https://www.totaljobs.com/advice/would-you-be-willing-to-reduce-your-salary-for-the-planet

Casula, M., Rangarajan, N., & Shields, P. (2020). The potential of working hypotheses for deductive exploratory research. *Quality & Quantity*, *55*(5), 1703–1725. https://doi.org/10.1007/S11135-020-01072-9

Cerutti, M., & Rossi, V. (2019). A Goal in Every Cup. Lavazza Approach in Integrating the SDGs into Strategy. *Symphonya*, *1*(1), 86. https://doi.org/10.4468/2019.1.07CERUTTI.ROSSI

Ching, H. Y., & Gerab, F. (2017). Sustainability reports in Brazil through the lens of signaling, legitimacy and stakeholder theories. *Social Responsibility Journal*, *13*(1), 95–110. https://doi.org/10.1108/SRJ-10-2015-0147

Christ, K. L., & Burritt, R. L. (2019). Implementation of sustainable development goals: The role for business academics: *Australian Journal of Management*, *44*(4), 571–593.

https://doi.org/10.1177/0312896219870575

Commission of the European Communities. (2001). *GREEN PAPER : Promoting a European framework for Corporate Social Responsibility.* https://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/committees/deve/20020122/com(2001)366_en .pdf

Darnall, N., Henriques, I., & Sadorsky, P. (2010). Adopting proactive environmental strategy: The influence of stakeholders and firm size. *Journal of Management Studies*, *47*(6), 1072–1094. https://doi.org/10.1111/J.1467-6486.2009.00873.X

Deegan, C. (2002). Introduction: The legitimising effect of social and environmental disclosures – a theoretical foundation. *Accounting, Auditing & Accountability Journal*, *15*(3), 282–311. https://doi.org/10.1108/09513570210435852/FULL/PDF

Deegan, C. M. (2019). Legitimacy theory: Despite its enduring popularity and contribution, time is right for a necessary makeover. *Accounting, Auditing and Accountability Journal*, *32*(8), 2307–2329. https://doi.org/10.1108/AAAJ-08-2018-3638/FULL/PDF

Delli Paoli, A., & Addeo, F. (2019). Assessing SDGs: A Methodology to Measure Sustainability. *Athens Journal of Social Sciences*, *6*(3), 229–250. https://doi.org/10.30958/AJSS.6-3-4

Demuijnck, G., & Fasterling, B. (2016). The Social License to Operate. *Journal of Business Ethics*, *136*(4), 675–685. https://doi.org/10.1007/S10551-015-2976-7

DiMaggio, P. J., & Powell, W. W. (1983). The Iron Cage Revisited: Institutional Isomorphism and Collective Rationality in Organizational Fields. *American Sociological Review*, *48*(2), 147. https://doi.org/10.2307/2095101

Ditlev-Simonsen, C. D., & Wenstøp, F. (2013). How stakeholders view stakeholders as CSR motivators. *Social Responsibility Journal*, *9*(1), 137–147. https://doi.org/10.1108/17471111311307868

Dyllick, T., & Hockerts, K. (2002). Beyond the business case for corporate sustainability. *Business Strategy and the Environment*, *11*(2), 130–141. https://doi.org/10.1002/BSE.323

Elkington, J. (1997). Cannibals with Forks: The triple bottom line of 21st century business. In *Alternative Management Observatory* (Issue April). Capstone Publishing Limited.

Elkington, J. (2017, May 4). Saving the Planet from Ecological Disaster Is a $12 Trillion Opportunity. *Harvard Business Review*. https://hbr.org/2017/05/saving-the-planet-from-ecological-disaster-is-a-12-trillion-opportunity

Elkington, J. (2018, June 25). 25 Years Ago I Coined the Phrase "Triple Bottom Line." Here's Why It's Time to Rethink It. *Harvard Business Review*. https://hbr.org/2018/06/25-years-ago-i-coined-the-phrase-triple-bottom-line-heres-why-im-giving-up-on-it

Fehling, M., Nelson, B. D., & Venkatapuram, S. (2013). Limitations of the Millennium Development Goals: a literature review. *Global Public Health*, *8*(10), 1109. https://doi.org/10.1080/17441692.2013.845676

Fernando, S., & Lawrence, S. (2014). A theoretical framework for CSR practices: Integrating legitimacy theory, stakeholder theory and institutional theory. *Stewart The Journal of Theoretical Accounting*, *10*(1), 149–178. https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0361368217300491https://www.journals.elsevier.com/accounting-organizations-and-societyViewproject

Flammer, C. (2015). Does Corporate Social Responsibility Lead to Superior Financial Performance? A Regression Discontinuity Approach. *Management Science*, *61*(11), 2549–2824. https://doi.org/10.1287/mnsc.2014.2038

FN Sambandet. (2021a). *FNs Global Compact*. https://www.fn.no/om-fn/fns-organisasjoner-fond-og-programmer/fns-global-compact

FN Sambandet. (2021b). *FNs historie*. https://www.fn.no/om-fn/fns-historie

FN Sambandet. (2021c). *Hva er FN?* https://www.fn.no/om-fn/hva-er-fn

Forestier, O., & Kim, R. E. (2020). Cherry-picking the Sustainable Development Goals: Goal prioritization by national governments and implications for global governance. *Sustainable Development*, *28*(5), 1269–1278. https://doi.org/10.1002/SD.2082

Fortin, C., & Jolly, R. (2015). The United Nations and Business: Towards New Modes of Global Governance? *IDS Bulletin*, *46*(3), 45–58. https://doi.org/10.1111/1759-5436.12143

Freeman, R. E. (1984). Strategic Management: A Stakeholder Approach. In *Boston Pitman*. Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139192675.003

Freeman, R. E., & Dmytriyev, S. (2017). Corporate Social Responsibility and Stakeholder Theory: Learning From Each Other. *Symphonya. Emerging Issues in Management*, *0*(1), 7–15. https://doi.org/10.4468/2017.1.02FREEMAN.DMYTRIYEV

Friedman, M. (2007). The Social Responsibility of Business Is to Increase Its Profits. *Corporate Social Responsibility*, 173–178. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-540-70818-6_14

Fukuda-Parr, S. (2016). From the Millennium Development Goals to the Sustainable Development Goals: shifts in purpose, concept, and politics of global goal setting for development. *Gender and Development*, *24*(1), 43–52. https://doi.org/10.1080/13552074.2016.1145895

Garay, L., & Font, X. (2012). Doing good to do well? Corporate social responsibility reasons, practices and impacts in small and medium accommodation enterprises. *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, *31*(2), 329–337. https://doi.org/10.1016/J.IJHM.2011.04.013

García-Meca, E., & Martínez-Ferrero, J. (2021). Is SDG reporting substantial or symbolic? An examination of controversial and environmentally sensitive industries. *Journal of Cleaner Production*, *298*. https://doi.org/10.1016/J.JCLEPRO.2021.126781

Hansmann, R., Mieg, H. A., & Frischknecht, P. (2012). Principal sustainability components: empirical analysis of synergies between the three pillars of sustainability. *International Journal of Sustainable Development & World Ecology*, *19*(5), 451–459. https://doi.org/10.1080/13504509.2012.696220

Heras-Saizarbitoria, I., Urbieta, L., & Boiral, O. (2021). Organizations' engagement with sustainable development goals: From cherry-picking to SDG-washing? *Corporate Social Responsibility and Environmental Management*, 1–13. https://doi.org/10.1002/CSR.2202

Hörisch, J., Freeman, R. E., & Schaltegger, S. (2014). Applying Stakeholder Theory in Sustainability Management: Links, Similarities, Dissimilarities, and a Conceptual Framework. *Organization and Environment*, *27*(4), 328–346. https://doi.org/10.1177/1086026614535786

Iarossi, J., Miller, J. K., O'Connor, J., & Keil, M. (2011). Addressing the Sustainability Challenge: Insights from Institutional Theory and Organizational Learning. *SSRN Electronic Journal*. https://doi.org/10.2139/SSRN.1839802

Ike, M., Donovan, J. D., Topple, C., & Masli, E. K. (2019). The process of selecting and prioritising corporate sustainability issues: Insights for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. *Journal of Cleaner Production*, *236*, 117661. https://doi.org/10.1016/J.JCLEPRO.2019.117661

Jakhar, S. K., Bhattacharya, A., Rathore, H., & Mangla, S. K. (2020). Stakeholder pressure for sustainability: Can 'innovative capabilities' explain the idiosyncratic response in the manufacturing firms? *Business Strategy and the Environment*, *29*(6), 2635–2653. https://doi.org/10.1002/BSE.2526

Jones, A. W., & Phillips, A. (2016). Voluntary business engagement in climate change: A study of the ClimateWise principles. *Journal of Cleaner Production*, *137*, 131–143. https://doi.org/10.1016/J.JCLEPRO.2016.07.064

Jones, P., Hillier, D., & Comfort, D. (2016). Materiality and external assurance in corporate sustainability reporting: an exploratory study of Europe's leading commercial property companies. *Journal of European Real Estate Research*, *9*(2), 147–170. https://doi.org/10.1108/JERER-07-2015-0027

Jordan OBE, A., & Tuffrey, M. (2015). *From My World to Our World What the Sustainable Development Goals Mean for Business*. https://corporate-citizenship.com/wp-content/uploads/From-My-World-to-Our-World-What-the-SDGs-Mean-For-Business2.pdf

Kaffashi, S., & Grayson, D. (2021). Exploring the Prioritisation Process of the Sustainable Development Goals by Business. *World Journal of Entrepreneurship, Management and Sustainable Development*, *18*(1), 63–85. https://doi.org/10.47556/J.WJEMSD.18.1.2022.4

Kotler, P., & Lee, N. (2005). *Corporate Social Responsibility: Doing the Most Good for Your Company and Your Cause*. Wiley.

Kourula, A., Pisani, N., & Kolk, A. (2017). Corporate sustainability and inclusive development: highlights from international business and management research. *Current Opinion in Environmental Sustainability*, *24*, 14–18. https://doi.org/10.1016/J.COSUST.2017.01.003

Kraaijenbrink, J. (2019). What The 3Ps Of The Triple Bottom Line Really Mean. *Forbes* . https://www.forbes.com/sites/jeroenkraaijenbrink/2019/12/10/what-the-3ps-of-the-triple-

bottom-line-really-mean/?sh=3033c4685143

Kumar, S., Kumar, N., & Vivekadhish, S. (2016). Millennium development goals (MDGS) to sustainable development goals (SDGS): Addressing unfinished agenda and strengthening sustainable development and partnership. *Indian Journal of Community Medicine*, *41*(1), 1–4. https://doi.org/10.4103/0970-0218.170955

Lacy, P., Cooper, T., Hayward, R., & Neuberger, L. (2010). *A New Era of Sustainability: UN Global Compact-Accenture CEO Study 2010*. https://www.compromisorse.com/upload/estudios/000/53/AccentureUNGCStudy10.pdf

Latif, B., Mahmood, Z., San, O. T., Said, R. M., & Bakhsh, A. (2020). Coercive, normative and mimetic pressures as drivers of environmental management accounting adoption. *Sustainability (Switzerland)*, *12*(11). https://doi.org/10.3390/SU12114506

Lester, S. (1999). An introduction to phenomenological research. *Stan Lester Developments*. https://www.rgs.org/CMSPages/GetFile.aspx?nodeguid=7ad9b8d4-6a93-4269-94d2-585983364b51&lang=en-GB

Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic Inquiry* (Vol. 75). Sage. https://books.google.no/books?hl=sv&lr=&id=2oA9aWlNeooC&oi=fnd&pg=PA7&dq=Naturalistic+inquiry+1985&ots=0umxY8Reyr&sig=kXx_7xYUCRaFpyiXPyAgWG5aO_o&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q=credibility&f=false

Lomazzi, M., Borisch, B., & Laaser, U. (2014). The Millennium Development Goals: experiences, achievements and what's next. *Global Health Action*, *7*(1). https://doi.org/10.3402/GHA.V7.23695

Matten, D., & Moon, J. (2007). "Implicit" and "explicit" CSR: A conceptual framework for a comparative understanding of corporate social responsibility. *Academy of Management Review*, *33*(2), 404–424. https://doi.org/10.5465/AMR.2008.31193458

Mhlanga, R., Gneiting, U., & Agarwal, N. (2018). Walking the Talk: Assessing companies' progress from SDG rhetoric to action. *Oxfam Discussion Papers*. www.oxfam.org

Miotto, G., & Youn, S. (2020). The impact of fast fashion retailers' sustainable collections on corporate legitimacy: Examining the mediating role of altruistic attributions. *Journal of Consumer Behaviour*, *19*(6), 618–631. https://doi.org/10.1002/CB.1852

Muhmad, S. N., & Muhamad, R. (2020). Sustainable business practices and financial performance during pre- and post-SDG adoption periods: a systematic review. *Journal of

Sustainable Finance & Investment, *11*(4), 291–309.
https://doi.org/10.1080/20430795.2020.1727724

Naidoo, M., & Gasparatos, A. (2018). Corporate environmental sustainability in the retail sector: Drivers, strategies and performance measurement. *Journal of Cleaner Production*, *203*, 125–142. https://doi.org/10.1016/J.JCLEPRO.2018.08.253

Nidumolu, R., Prahalad, C. K., & Rangaswami, M. R. (2009, September). Why Sustainability Is Now the Key Driver of Innovation. *Harvard Business Review* .
https://hbr.org/2009/09/why-sustainability-is-now-the-key-driver-of-innovation

Orzes, G., Moretto, A. M., Ebrahimpour, M., Sartor, M., Moro, M., & Rossi, M. (2018). United Nations Global Compact: Literature review and theory-based research agenda. *Journal of Cleaner Production*, *177*, 633–654.
https://doi.org/10.1016/J.JCLEPRO.2017.12.230

Pedersen, C. S. (2018). The UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are a Great Gift to Business! *Procedia Cirp*, *69*, 21–24. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.procir.2018.01.003

Phillips, R., Freeman, R. E., & Wicks, A. C. (2003). What Stakeholder Theory is Not. *Business Ethics Quarterly*, *13*(4), 479–502. https://doi.org/10.5840/BEQ200313434

Pingeot, L. (2015). In Whose Interest? The UN's Strategic Rapprochement with Business in the Sustainable Development Agenda. *Globalizations*, *13*(2), 188–202.
https://doi.org/10.1080/14747731.2015.1085211

Porter, M. E., & Kramer, M. R. (2002). The Competitive Advantage of Corporate Philanthropy. *Harward Business Review*. www.hbr.org

Porter, M. E., & Kramer, M. R. (2006). Strategy and Society: The Link Between Competitive Advantage and Corporate Social Responsibility. *Harward Business Review*.
www.hbrreprints.org

Porter, M. E., & Kramer, M. R. (2011). The Big Idea: Creating Shared Value. How to reinvent capitalism — and unleash a wave of innovation and growth. *Harward Business Review*, *89*(1–2).

Preston, M., & Scott, L. (2015). *Make it your business: Engaging with the Sustainable Development Goals*. https://www.pwc.com/gx/en/sustainability/SDG/SDG Research_FINAL.pdf

PwC. (2017). *SDG Reporting Challenge 2017*.
https://www.pwc.com/gx/en/sustainability/SDG/pwc-sdg-reporting-challenge-2017-final.pdf

Ranängen, H., Cöster, M., Isaksson, R., & Garvare, R. (2018). From Global Goals and Planetary Boundaries to Public Governance — A Framework for Prioritizing Organizational Sustainability Activities. *Sustainability*, *10*(8), 2741. https://doi.org/10.3390/SU10082741

Regjeringen. (2021, June 23). *Meld. St. 40 (2020–2021)*. Regjeringen. https://www.regjeringen.no/no/dokumenter/meld.-st.-40-20202021/id2862554/?ch=1

Rendtorff, J. D. (2019). Sustainable Development Goals and progressive business models for economic transformation: *Local Economy*, *34*(6), 510–524. https://doi.org/10.1177/0269094219882270

Sachs, J. D., & McArthur, J. W. (2005). The Millennium Project: A plan for meeting the Millennium Development Goals. *Lancet*, *365*(9456), 347–353. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(05)70201-4

Sachs, Jeffrey D. (2012). From Millennium Development Goals to Sustainable Development Goals. *The Lancet*, *379*(9832), 2206–2211. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(12)60685-0

Sachs, Jeffrey D, Kroll, C., Lafortune, G., Fuller, G., & Woelm, F. (2021). *Sustainable Development Report 2021*. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108992411

Santos, M. (2011). CSR in SMEs: strategies, practices, motivations and obstacles. *Social Responsibility Journal*, *7*(3), 490–508. https://doi.org/10.1108/17471111111154581

Santos, M. J., & Bastos, C. S. (2020). The adoption of sustainable development goals by large Portuguese companies. *Social Responsibility Journal*. https://doi.org/10.1108/SRJ-07-2018-0184

Sarkis, J., Gonzalez-Torre, P., & Adenso-Diaz, B. (2010). Stakeholder pressure and the adoption of environmental practices: The mediating effect of training. *Journal of Operations Management*, *28*(2), 163–176. https://doi.org/10.1016/J.JOM.2009.10.001

Saunders, M., Lewis, P., & Thornhill, A. (2019). *Research Methods for Business Students* (8th ed.). Pearson.

Scheyvens, R., Banks, G., & Hughes, E. (2016). The Private Sector and the SDGs: The Need to Move Beyond 'Business as Usual.' *Sustainable Development*, *24*(6), 371–382. https://doi.org/10.1002/SD.1623

Schiavi, P., & Solomon, F. (2007). Voluntary Initiatives in the Mining Industry. *Greener Management International*, *2006*(53), 26–41. https://doi.org/10.9774/GLEAF.3062.2006.SP.00004

Schönherr, N., Findler, F., & Martinuzzi, A. (2017). Exploring the interface of CSR and the sustainable development goals. *Transnational Corporations*, *24*(3), 33–47. https://doi.org/10.18356/CFB5B8B6-EN

Schramade, W. (2017). Investing in the UN Sustainable Development Goals: Opportunities for Companies and Investors. *Journal of Applied Corporate Finance*, *29*(2), 87–99. https://doi.org/10.1111/JACF.12236

Scott, L., & McGill, A. (2018). *From promise to reality: Does business really care about the SDGs?* www.pwc.com/sdgreportingchallenge

Scott, W. R. (2013). *Institutions and Organizations* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications Inc.

SDG. (2020). *Sustainable Development Goals : Guidelines for the use of the SDG Logo Including the Colour Wheel, and 17 Icons*. https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/SDG_Guidelines_AUG_2019_Final.pdf

SDG Compass. (2021). *The guide for business action on the SDGs*. www.sdgcompass.org

Sharma, S., & Henriques, I. (2005). Stakeholder influences on sustainability practices in the Canadian forest products industry. *Strategic Management Journal*, *26*(2), 159–180. https://doi.org/10.1002/SMJ.439

Silva, S. (2021). Corporate contributions to the Sustainable Development Goals: An empirical analysis informed by legitimacy theory. *Journal of Cleaner Production*, *292*, 125962. https://doi.org/10.1016/J.JCLEPRO.2021.125962

Stockholm Resilience Centre. (2016, June 14). *The SDGs wedding cake*. https://www.stockholmresilience.org/research/research-news/2016-06-14-how-food-connects-all-the-sdgs.html

Stuart, E., Gelb, S., Lucci, P., Scott, A., & Williams, C. (2016). *Business and the SDGs - a*

baseline. http://s3.amazonaws.com/aws-bsdc/Paper-Business-and-the-SDGs-a-
baseline.pdf

Symon, G., & Cassell, C. (2012). Qualitative Organizational Research: Core Methods and
Current Challenges. In *Qualitative Organizational Research: Core Methods and Current
Challenges*. SAGE Publications, Inc.

Tang, Z., & Tang, J. (2018). Stakeholder Corporate Social Responsibility Orientation
Congruence, Entrepreneurial Orientation and Environmental Performance of Chinese
Small and Medium-sized Enterprises. *British Journal of Management*, *29*(4), 634–651.
https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8551.12255

Thomas, T. E., & Lamm, E. (2012). Legitimacy and Organizational Sustainability. *Journal of
Business Ethics*, *110*(2), 191–203. https://doi.org/10.1007/S10551-012-1421-4

Ugarte, S., D'Hollander, D., Tregurtha, N., & Haase, N. (2017). SDGs mean Business. How
credible standards can help companies deliver the 2030 agenda. In *World Wildlife Fund
(WWF)*. https://www.evidensia.eco/resources/100/sdgs-mean-business-how-credible-
standards-can-help-companies-deliver-the-2030-agenda/

UN. (2015). *The Millennium Development Goals Report 2015*.
https://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/2015_MDG_Report/pdf/MDG 2015 rev (July
1).pdf

UN. (2021). *United Nations Millennium Development Goals*. United Nations.
https://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/bkgd.shtml

UNGC. (2021). *Our Integrity Measures*. https://www.unglobalcompact.org/about/integrity-
measures

United Nations. (2021a). *THE 17 GOALS*. https://sdgs.un.org/goals

United Nations. (2021b). *Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable
Development*. Department of Economic and Social Affairs.
https://sdgs.un.org/2030agenda

van der Waal, J. W. H., & Thijssens, T. (2020). Corporate involvement in Sustainable
Development Goals: Exploring the territory. *Journal of Cleaner Production*, *252*,
119625. https://doi.org/10.1016/J.JCLEPRO.2019.119625

van Tulder, R. (2018). *A Framework for Effective Corporate Involvement* (Vol. 2). Rotterdam

School of Management, Erasmus University.

van Zanten, J. A., & van Tulder, R. (2018). Multinational enterprises and the Sustainable Development Goals: An institutional approach to corporate engagement. *Journal of International Business Policy 2018 1:3*, *1*(3), 208–233. https://doi.org/10.1057/S42214-018-0008-X

Wæraas, A. (2007). The re-enchantment of social institutions: Max Weber and public relations. *Public Relations Review*, *33*(3), 281–286. https://doi.org/10.1016/J.PUBREV.2007.05.007

WCED. (1987). *Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development: Our Common Future*. https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/5987our-common-future.pdf

Williams, C. (2007). Research Methods. *Journal of Business & Economics Research (JBER)*, *5*(3), 65. https://doi.org/10.19030/JBER.V5I3.2532

Young, M., Knudsen, K. J., & Bergland, B. (2021). *Bærekraft 100*. https://www.pwc.no/no/publikasjoner/pwc-baerekraft-100.pdf

Young, S. T., & Dhana, K. K. (2013). *Sustainability: Essentials for Business*. SAGE Publications Inc.

Yu, J., Lo, C. W. H., & Li, P. H. Y. (2017). Organizational Visibility, Stakeholder Environmental Pressure and Corporate Environmental Responsiveness in China. *Business Strategy and the Environment*, *26*(3), 371–384. https://doi.org/10.1002/BSE.1923

Zadek, S. (2001). *The civil corporation: The new economy of corporate citizenship*. Earthscan Ltd.

APPENDIX

Appendix A: Consent Form in Norwegian

This consent form was sent to and approved by all participants in the study. It follows the structure suggested by Norsk senter for forskningsdata (NSD).

Samtykkeerklæring – Vil du delta i forskningsprosjektet vårt?

Bakgrunn og formål

Denne studien gjøres i forbindelse med en masteroppgave som skrives av Ana Radic og Patricia Hackman som er masterstudenter ved NHH. Veilederen vår er professor ved NHH Ivar Kolstad. Formålet med studien er å undersøke hvordan norske selskaper velger og prioriterer FN sine bærekraftsmål. For å undersøke dette spørsmålet ønsker vi derfor din deltagelse i dette forskningsprosjektet. Denne samtykkeerklæringen brukes for å informere deg om prosjektet og hva deltakelse i dette prosjektet innebærer.

Deltakelse

Deltakelse i denne studien innebærer et intervju som vil vare fra cirka 30 minutter til 1 time. Intervjuet vil enten foregå fysisk eller over Zoom/Teams. Med din godkjenning vil det være ønskelig at vi får ta opptak av intervjuet slik at vi kan transkribere det i etterkant. Lydfilen vil umiddelbart etter transkribering bli slettet og den transkriberte versjonen av intervjuet vil bli anonymisert.

Informasjonsoppbevaring

Alle personopplysninger vil bli behandlet konfidensielt av prosjektgruppen på NHH. Det er kun vi som kommer til å ha tilgang til lydfilen. Du som person og selskapet du arbeider for vil bli anonymisert og derav vil det transkriberte intervjuet ikke inneholde navn, men en kode. Navn og andre kontaktopplysninger vil dermed bli oppbevart adskilt fra intervjudataene. Med ditt samtykke ønsker vi å beholde informasjon om hvilken stilling du har. Intervjuet vil bli lagret i passord-beskyttede mapper på passord-beskyttede datamaskiner og slettes etter studiens slutt som er planlagt til februar 2022.

Frivillig deltakelse

Det er helt frivillig å delta i prosjektet og du har muligheten til å trekke samtykket ditt når

som helst uten å måtte oppgi noen grunn til dette. Dersom du velger å trekke deg vil alle personopplysninger knyttet til deg samt intervjuet bli slettet med en gang.

Dersom du har spørsmål knyttet til denne studien kan du kontakte Ana Radic på mobil: 95199597, e-post: ana.radic@student.nhh.no eller Patricia Hackman på mobil: +358 442018349, e-post: patricia.hackman@student.nhh.no.

Om du har flere spørsmål kan du også kontakte vårt personvernombud på personvernombud@nhh.no.

På oppdrag fra NHH har NSD – Norsk senter for forskningsdata AS vurdert at behandlingen av personopplysninger i dette prosjektet er i samsvar med personvernregelverket.

Hvis du har spørsmål knyttet til NSD sin vurdering av prosjektet, kan du ta kontakt med NSD – Norsk senter for forskningsdata AS på epost personverntjenester@nsd.no eller på telefon: 55 58 21 17.

Dine rettigheter

Så lenge du kan identifiseres i datamaterialet, har du rett til:

- innsyn i hvilke personopplysninger som er registrert om deg, og å få utlevert en kopi av opplysningene,
- å få rettet personopplysninger om deg,
- å få slettet personopplysninger om deg,
- få utlevert en kopi av dine personopplysninger, og
- å sende klage til personvernombudet Datatilsynet om behandlingen av dine personopplysninger.

Hva gir oss rett til å behandle personopplysninger om deg?

Vi behandler opplysninger om deg basert på ditt samtykke.

Samtykke til deltakelse i studien

Jeg samtykker til at informasjon om min stillingstittel kan publiseres

[ ] Ja [ ] Nei

Ettersom informasjon rundt bærekraftsmålene er offentlig gjøres informanten klar over de selv ved komplett anonymisering eventuelt vil kunne bli indirekte identifisert med tanke på

allerede offentlig publisert informasjon relatert til ting som stillingstittel eller rolle i organisasjonen. Det samme gjelder for selskapet de arbeider for.

Jeg har lest og forstått innholdet i samtykkeerklæringen og samtykker til at mine opplysninger behandles frem til prosjektet er avsluttet samt at jeg er villig til å delta i intervju:

(Signert av informant, dato)

Appendix B: English interview guide with company representative

This is the original interview guide. As discussed in the methodology chapter, the interview guide was developed and expanded throughout the interviewing process. The questions were mostly open-ended which allowed for follow-up questions, which are not included in this guide.

A: Introductory questions

1. Could you tell us about your role and your responsibilities in the company?
2. How long has the organisation worked with the SDGs?

B: Motivation

3. What motivated your organisation to adopt the SDGs?
4. Were there any expectations of your organisation to adopt the SDGs?
5. Did you expect the adoption of the SDGs to be beneficial or result in new business opportunities for the organisation?

C: Prioritisation

6. Could you describe what the process looks like when the goals are selected?
7. Why did you decide to prioritise X out of the 17 SDGs?
8. Which criteria was followed when deciding on which goals to select?
9. Why did your organisation select these particular SDGs?
10. How do you think the core business activities of the organisation is reflected in the chosen SDGs?
11. How do you think your business would be different if the UN SDGs had not been adopted?

D: Concluding questions:

12. Do you have any other thoughts you would like to share with us?

Appendix C: Norwegian interview guide with company representative

This is the original interview guide. As discussed in the methodology chapter, the interview guide was developed and expanded throughout the interviewing process. The questions were mostly open-ended which allowed for follow-up questions, which are not included in this guide.

A: Introduksjonsspørsmål

1. Kunne du ha fortalt oss om din rolle og dine ansvarsområder i selskapet?
2. Hvor lenge har selskapet arbeidet med FN sine bærekraftsmål?

B: Motivasjon

3. Hva motiverte selskapet til å ta i bruk FN sine bærekraftsmål?
4. Var det noen forventinger knyttet til at organisasjonen skulle vedta FN sine bærekraftsmål?
5. Forventet dere at bærekraftsmålene kom til å være fordelaktige eller resultere i nye forretningsmuligheter for organisasjonen?

C: Prioritering

6. Kunne du ha beskrevet utvelgelsesprosessen relatert til bærekraftsmålene?
7. Hvorfor valgte dere å prioritere X antall mål av de 17 bærekraftsmålene?
8. Hva slags kriterier ble brukt når det skulle bestemmes hvilke mål som skulle velges?
9. Hvorfor valgte organisasjonen deres disse spesifikke bærekraftsmålene?
10. Hvordan synes du at kjernevirksomheten til selskapet reflekteres gjennom de utvalgte bærekraftsmålene?
11. Hvordan tror du at virksomheten til selskapet hadde vært annerledes hvis bærekraftsmålene ikke hadde blitt vedtatt?

D: Avslutningsspørsmål:

12. Har du noen andre tanker du har lyst til å dele med oss?

Appendix D: English interview guide with an expert

A: Introductory questions

1. Could you tell us about your position and your work connected to the SDGs? and your responsibilities in the company?

B: The SDGs in Norway

2. These goals are set at a state level, which role does the private sector have in achieving the SDGs?
3. In what way can the private sector contribute towards the SDGs?
4. What can be challenging for companies in the process of bringing the SDGs down to a company level?
5. Do any of the goals have limited relevance for companies operating in Norway?

C: The SDGs in Norwegian companies

6. What kind of incentives do private companies in Norway have to implement the SDGs?
7. Are there other incentives that could contribute to more private companies engaging with the SDGs?
8. What do you think the benefits could be if companies operating in the same sector have the same SDGs?
9. How do you think the work with the UN SDGs will look like in the future in the private sector?
10. Why do you think some large companies elect not to adopt the SDGs?
11. Most companies select a certain amount of goals, do you have any thoughts on how companies should select goals and how many goals they should choose?

D: Concluding questions:

12. Do you have any other thoughts you would like to share with us?

Appendix E: Norwegian interview guide with an expert

A: Introduksjonsspørsmål

1. Kunne du ha fortalt oss litt om hvilken stilling du har og arbeidet ditt knyttet til bærekraftsmålene?

B: Bærekraftsmålene i Norge

2. Disse målene er satt på et statlig nivå, hvilken rolle har den private sektoren i å oppnå bærekraftsmålene?
3. På hvilken måte kan den private sektoren bidra til bærekraftsmålene?
4. Hva kan være utfordrende for selskaper i prosessen med å få bærekraftsmålene ned på et bedriftsnivå?
5. Har noen av målene begrenset relevans for selskaper som opererer i Norge?

C: Bærekraftsmål i norske selskaper

6. Hva slags incentiver har private selskaper i Norge for å ta i bruk FNs bærekraftsmål?
7. Finnes det andre incentiver som kunne ha bidratt til at flere private selskaper skal ville engasjere seg i bærekraftsmålene?
8. Hva tenker du kan være fordelene ved at selskaper som opererer i samme sektor knytter seg til de samme målene?
9. Hvordan tror du arbeidet med FNs bærekraftsmål vil se ut i fremtiden i privat sektor?
10. Hvorfor tror du at en del store selskaper ikke har valgt å ta de inn?
11. De fleste selskaper velger seg et utpekt antall mål, har du noen tanker om hvordan selskap bør velge seg mål og hvor mange de bør velge seg?

D: Avslutningsspørsmål:

12. Har du noen andre tanker du har lyst til å dele med oss?