The Sustainable Development Goals and Leading European Retailers

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) agreed at a United Nations General Assembly in 2015 embrace an ambitious and wide-ranging set of global environmental, social, and economic issues designed to effect a transition to a more sustainable future. The United Nations called on all governments to pursue these ambitious goals but also acknowledged the important role of the private sector in addressing the SDGs. The majority of Europe’s leading retailers have been pursuing sustainability strategies, and reporting on their achievements against their strategies, for some time and within the European retail community there is a recognition that retailers have a vital role to play in contributing to the achievement of the SDGs. This exploratory paper reviews and reflects on how seven of Europe’s leading retailers are addressing the SDGs. The findings revealed that all seven retailers reported on their commitment to contributing to the achievement of the SDGs, though the scale and the extent of their commitment varied. In reviewing the retailers’ approach to the SDGs, the authors drew attention to a number of issues namely, concentration on specific SDGs, issues of measurement and reporting and tensions between sustainability and economic growth.

Keywords: Sustainable Development Goals, Retailing, Europe, Economic Growth, Reporting

Introduction

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), agreed at a United Nations General Assembly in September 2015, were described as demonstrating “the scale and ambition” of its “2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development” which is designed to “shift the world on to a sustainable and resilient path” (United Nations 2015a). The SDGs are ambitious and embrace a wide range of environmental, social, and economic issues including climate change, energy, water stewardship, marine conservation, biodiversity, poverty, food security, sustainable production and consumption, gender equality and economic growth. The United Nations called on all governments to develop national strategies to pursue the SDGs but also acknowledged “the role of the diverse private sector ranging from micro-enterprises to cooperatives to multinationals” (United Nations 2015a) in addressing these goals.

Many business organisations across the private sector are addressing the SDGs (Wynn and Jones 2020) and many leading retailers have taken up the challenge. The majority of Europe’s leading retailers have been pursuing sustainability strategies, and reporting on their achievements against these strategies, for some time (Jones et al. 2012), and within the European retail community there is a recognition that retailers have a vital role to play in
contributing to the achievement of the SDGs. Stefan Gent, Secretary General of the German Retail Federation, for example, recognised that the 'the SDGs are a milestone for sustainability’ and that ‘the retail sector feeds into this UN Agenda 2030 and its goal with a large number of measures and initiatives’ (German Retail Federation 2018). Leading retailers are certainly in a singularly powerful position to drive sustainable development in four ways, namely through their own actions, through their relationships with suppliers, through their daily interactions with consumers and through their wider role in society as opinion leaders. With these thoughts in mind, this paper offers an exploratory review, and some reflections, on how seven of Europe’s leading retailers are addressing the SDGs.

THE SDGs

The SDGs, described as ‘a plan of action for people, planet and prosperity’ (United Nations 2015a) came into effect in January 2016 and they will guide the United Nations’ development thinking and policy up to 2030. The SDGs are the latest in a line of global sustainable development initiatives which can be traced back to the declaration designed ‘to inspire and guide the peoples of the world in the preservation and enhancement of the human environment’ (United Nations Environment Programme 2019) following the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment held in Stockholm in 1972. More recently, the SDGs look to build on the United Nation’s Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) established in 2001. The MDGs were described as having ‘produced the most successful anti-poverty movement in history’ (United Nations 2015b) but other assessments of the achievements of the MDGs have been more balanced. While Fehling et al. (2013), for example, acknowledged that ‘remarkable progress has been made’ they argued that ‘progress across all MDGs has been limited and uneven across countries.’

There are 17 SDGs and they encompass a wide range of global challenges from ‘the wellbeing of every individual to the health of the planet, from infrastructure to institutions, from governance to green energy and peaceful societies to productive employment’ (Institute of Human Rights and Business 2015). In some ways, SDG 13 namely, to take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts, ‘is more than just one of the 17 SDGs’ in that ‘it is a threat multiplier with the potential to worsen some of humanity’s greatest challenges, including health, poverty and hunger’ (United Nations Climate Change 2019). However, SDG 12, namely to ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns, might also be seen to be fundamental to the transition to a sustainable future. Pantzar et al. (2018), for example, argued that ‘consumption of goods and services is at the very heart of the challenge of achieving a more environmentally, socially and economically sustainable Europe.’ In a similar vein, the Nordic Council of Ministers (2018), claimed that ‘SDG 12 is the goal most interlinked to other goals, being coupled to no less than 14 out of the 16 remaining goals.’ More specifically, SDG 12 seems
particularly relevant to retailers who are in a powerful position to drive both production and consumption processes within their supply chains.

However, there is little consensus in defining sustainable consumption and it is widely recognized to be a contested concept, which embraces ‘competing discourses’ (Hobson 2006). In looking to put some flesh on the concept, the International Institute for Sustainable Development (2017) suggested that sustainable consumption can be seen as ‘an umbrella term that brings together a number of key issues, such as meeting needs, enhancing the quality of life, improving resource efficiency, increasing the use of renewable energy sources, minimising waste, taking a life cycle perspective and taking into account the equity dimension.’ Jackson (2006) summarised a variety of definitions but noted that these adopt different positions, on whether sustainable consumption implies ‘consuming more efficiently, consuming more responsibly or quite simply consuming less.’ Jackson (2006) further argued that ‘the dominant institutional consensus’ is that sustainable consumption ‘is to be achieved primarily through improvements in the efficiency with which resources are converted into economic goods.’ Definitions aside, Hinton and Redclift (2009) argued that sustainable consumption ‘could be considered an ambivalent term: the discourse comprises many different parts, mobilised at different times and in different ways.’

In addition to the SDGs themselves, there are 169 associated targets, in ‘a genuinely comprehensive vision of the future’ in which ‘little is left unaddressed’ (Institute of Human Rights and Business 2015). The targets for SDG1, for example, include eradicating extreme poverty: ensuring that all men and women, and particularly the poor and vulnerable, have equal rights to economic resources, access to basic services and ownership and control over land and property; and building the resilience of the poor and vulnerable to reduce their exposure to climate change related extreme events. The targets for SDG 12, include achieving the sustainable management and efficient use of natural resources by 2030; halving per capita global food waste at the retail and consumer levels; and encouraging companies to adopt sustainable practices and sustainability reporting.

The European Commission (2017) argued that ‘the scale, ambition and approach of the Agenda are unprecedented. One key feature is that the SDGs are global in nature and universally applicable, taking into account national realities, capacities and levels of development and specific challenges.’ All countries were seen to have a shared responsibility to achieve the SDGs, and to have a meaningful role to play locally and nationally as well as on the global scale. Further, the European Commission (2017) argued that ‘the 2030 Agenda integrates in a balanced manner the three dimensions of sustainable development - economic, social and environmental’ and that it is ‘indivisible, in a sense that it must be implemented as a whole, in an integrated rather than a fragmented manner, recognising that the different goals and targets are closely interlinked.’

At the same time, private businesses were seen to have a key role to play in the successful achievement of the SDGs. At the time of the launch of the
SDG’s PWC (2015), for example, argued ‘business will play a critical role in the achievement of the goals, and there are tremendous opportunities for companies that engage - opening up new opportunities and efficiency gains, driving innovation and enhancing reputations.’ The World Economic Forum (2018) claimed ‘the annual funding gap for the Sustainable Development Goals is many trillions of dollars. The only way to close that gap is with the help of the private sector – in particular, by impelling companies to account in their decision-making for environmental, social, and governance issues relevant to the SDGs.’ That said, the Institute for Human Rights and Business (2015) suggested that ‘the SDGs seem to have quietly re-imagined a new model of business, relapsed as an agent of development, harnessed and channelled by governments and set to work on alleviating poverty and fostering sustainable economic growth for all.’ Further, the Institute for Human Rights and Business (2015) argued that ‘business is not an adjunct of aid’ and that ‘economic activity cannot easily be directed to where the need is greatest’ but rather ‘it prospers when provided with the right conditions and the right opportunities.’

Method of Enquiry and Frame of Reference

In an attempt to undertake an exploratory review of how the leading European retailers were publicly addressing the SDGs, the leading ten retailers in Europe (Retail Index 2020), as measured by turnover, were selected for investigation. Retailers have employed a range of methods to report their sustainability commitments and achievements, but publication on corporate websites is now the most popular and accessible reporting mechanism. With this in mind, an internet search, using the key phrase ‘Sustainable Development Goals’ and the name of each of the selected retailers, was conducted using Google as the search engine in February 2020. This search revealed that seven of the leading ten European retailers namely, Schwarz, Aldi, Carrefour, Rewe, Tesco, Auchan, and J. Sainsbury, of the top ten European retailers, reported on addressing the SDGs on their corporate websites. The information from this search provided the empirical information for this paper. The specific examples and selected quotations drawn from the retailers’ corporate websites are used for illustrative purposes with a view to reviewing the ways the leading European retailers addressed the SDG’s, rather than offering a systematic comparative analysis of the retailers’ approaches to the SDGs. The paper is based on information that is in the public realm and the authors took the view that they did not need to contact the selected retailers to obtain formal permission to use this information prior to conducting their research.

Schwarz, a private, family owned retail group, is Europe’s largest retailer and it trades under the Kaufland and Lidl brands. Kaufland is a full-range retailer with over 1,300 stores in Germany and Eastern Europe, while Lidl is a discount operation with a limited average range of c. 3,800 products and it operates some 10,000 stores in over 30 countries. Aldi, is the common brand of two German discount supermarkets, and it trades from over 11,000 stores.
Some 37% of its stores are in Germany, and while the majority of its other stores are in Europe, including in Austria, Belgium, France, Netherlands, Spain and the UK, it also has stores in Australia, New Zealand, China and the US. Carrefour is a French multinational retailer and it operates a range of retail formats including hypermarkets, warehouse clubs, superstores, supermarkets and convenience stores. In total it has over 12,300 stores in over 30 countries in Europe, Asia, Africa and Latin America, including in France, Italy, Spain, Poland, China, Indonesia, Taiwan, Tunisia, Morocco, Argentina and Brazil.

Rewe operates a diversified retail portfolio, which includes department stores, hypermarkets, home improvement stores, supermarkets and convenience stores and it has over 12,000 stores in 14 countries, principally in Germany, but also in a number of other European countries including Austria, Italy, Hungary and the Czech Republic. Tesco is the UK’s largest retailer, with some 3,400 stores, and it trades from hypermarket, superstore, and convenience store formats and while its stores are almost exclusively concentrated in the UK, it has a presence in 11 other countries. Auchan is a French multinational retailer and it operates hypermarkets, supermarkets and convenience stores and it has over 3,800 stores in 12 countries including France, Austria, Italy, Poland, Hungary, Russia and China. J. Sainsbury initially founded in 1869, trades from over 600 supermarkets, some 800 convenience stores and 800 stores operating under the banner of Argos, throughout the UK.

Findings

All seven of the selected leading European retailers reported their commitment to contributing to the achievement of the SDGs, though the scale and the extent of their commitment varied. In outlining its commitment to the SDGs, Schwarz (2018), for example, claimed ‘we are taking bold action to support the goals of the global agenda for 2030’ and claimed ‘in pursuit of these goals we will set new industry standards.’ Further, Schwarz (2018) also formally recognised its pivotal role in pursuing such policies in that the company reported, ‘as one of the world’s leading retailers, we shape the change necessary in those places we can actively make an impact in production, in consumption and in the recycling of products.’

Carrefour (2019) formally reported that the company ‘supports the 17 Sustainable Development Goals’ that ‘these common goals help with the implementation of sustainable development programmes entered into jointly with other partners.’ In addressing the SDGs, Aldi South (2018) claimed ‘we promote the achievement of these global goals by participating in initiatives and implementing a range of sustainability practices.’ In his Chairman’s ‘Introduction’ to Auchan’s (2018) 2017 section of its Corporate Social Responsibility Report, Regis Degelcke, noted that the company was ‘mindful’ of ‘the 17 sustainable development goals set by the United Nations’ but the report provided no details on how they were addressing the SDGs.
Within these general commitments to the SDGs, some of the selected retailers reported on their contribution to all 17 SDGs while others concentrated their energies on specific goals. J. Sainsbury, for example, provided some simple examples of its contribution to all the SDG’s. In illustrating its commitment to SDG 3, J. Sainsbury (2018) affirmed its belief that ‘more sustainable agricultural practices can provide nutritious food for our growing population and support rural development while protecting the environment.’ J. Sainsbury’s (2018) commitment to SDG 6 is grounded in the belief that ‘protecting water resources and maintaining water quality and availability enables us to better manage our production of food in supply chains.’

In contrast, Tesco (2018) claimed to contribute ‘in different ways and to different degrees to all the SDGs’ but ‘identified which goals are particularly relevant to us: where expectations, risks, and other opportunities for Tesco are greatest and where we can make the most significant contribution.’ Here Tesco identified eight SDGs namely SDG’s 2, 3, 7, 8, 12, 13, 14 and 15. Tesco’s target for SDG 2, for example, is to facilitate surplus food donation programmes in all its stores. Tesco looked to work closely with food banks and charities and it has provided support for homeless shelters, domestic violence hostels and after-school clubs. Tesco’s target for SDG 14, is to sustainably source all the wild fish on sale in its stores and here the company has emphasised its commitment to support sustainable fisheries and to work to protect the marine environment.

In a similar vein, Aldi South (2018) emphasised its focus on nine of the SDGs namely, SDG’s 2, 3, 5, 6, 8, 12, 13, 14 and 17. In focusing on SDG 8, which looks to promote inclusive and sustainable economic growth and to productive and decent employment, for example, the company emphasised its commitment to human rights and fair labour standards and reported that it expected all its suppliers and business partners to adhere to these standards as an integral part of all contractual relationships. The company reported monitoring working conditions and social standards at production facilities throughout its supply chain and looking to improve the health and wellbeing of its employees. Carrefour reported that it is particularly focused on seven of the SDGs namely, SDGs 2, 3, 5, 12, 13, 14 and 15 and Rewe prioritised a smaller number of the SDGs, namely SDGs 2, 7, 8, 12, 14 and 15.

In many ways, as outlined earlier, SDG 12 Sustainable Consumption and Production, is fundamental to the transition to a more sustainable future, and it is addressed, albeit in different measure, by six of the selected retailers. In providing a rationale for why it ‘focuses its sustainability efforts on SDG 12’, Schwarz (2018) argued ‘transitioning to a sustainable economy and lifestyle can only work if we change our consumption habits and production methods.’ In looking to effect such a change, Schwarz (2018) set a number of milestones, focused upon sustainable raw materials, zero waste, food waste, chemicals and empowerment. Here Schwarz reported undertaking a systematic analysis to set sustainable goals for its most relevant raw materials, and looking to reuse, recycle or recover a ‘significant proportion’ of waste generated by the
company by 2025. At the same time Schwarz claimed to be empowering and
supporting all employees in sustainably performing their jobs and to be
providing customers with greater transparency on the social, environmental and
health related impacts of its product range.

Tesco’s (2018) targets for SDG 12 was to ‘help halve global food waste
farm to fork’ and ‘making all packaging recyclable.’ In reporting on its actions
to meet these targets in the UK and Central Europe, Tesco claimed to have sold
some 28,000 tonnes of “perfectly imperfect” fruit and vegetables that
previously would not have met the company’s specifications. At the same time
Tesco committed to remove all hard to recycle materials from its own brand
packaging. Aldi North (2017) reported on 27 initiatives to illustrate how the
company as contributing to SDG 12 including the company’s baby body suit,
animal welfare, labelling for fruit and vegetables, packaging and recycling,
food losses and genetic engineering. In illustrating the sustainable consumption
and production of the company’s baby body suit, Aldi North told the story of
the suit’s lifecycle from cotton cultivation in India, through the production of
yarn and fabric and assembly in Bangladesh, to its sale, use and recycling in
Europe.

In addressing the SDGs, the majority of the selected retailers have focused
upon their own operations but some of them also reported on the contribution
to achieving the SDGs within their supply chains. Aldi North, for example,
reported on the company’s sustainability requirements for suppliers and
production facilities across a range of the SDGs. In addressing SDG 2, for
example, Aldi North (2017) reported that its ‘purchasing policies and other
programmes allow us to exert influence indirectly on upstream processes with
sub-suppliers and producers’ and ‘we are switching our range to more
sustainable raw materials, where it makes sense and it is possible to do so.’
Further, Aldi North (2017) reported ‘in countries of our products’ origins, we
are making efforts to improve the living conditions of small holder farmers and
their families’ and ‘we provide training and workshops for small holders for
this purpose.’ Aldi North (2017) also reported that its suppliers must comply
with strict regulations for the cultivation of fruit and vegetables and that since
2016 the company had banned the use of eight active ingredients previously
used in fruit, vegetable and potato production in Germany.

At the other end of the supply chain, Schwarz (2018) reported on
‘Bringing Sustainable Consumption to the Society at large.’ Mindful that the
conventional processes for the manufacture of its textiles and shoes relies on
the use of chemicals, Lidl and Kaufland have joined the Greenpeace Detox
campaign, which aims to keep potential hazards to humans and the
environment to a minimum. Schwarz (2018) also looked to respond to what it
describes as ‘consumers’ growing demands for products manufactured in a
responsible and environmentally friendly manner.’ Such environmentally
friendly products are available to customers in Lidl and Kaufland stores in a
number of European countries. Schwarz (2018) also reported on its activities in
‘raising consumer awareness’ by ensuring that products produced in line with
environmental and social standards are clearly labelled and include brochures
and packaging with information on product sustainability, in an attempt to 
make customers more aware of the benefits.

Some of the selected leading European retailers have looked to integrate 
their approach to the SDGs within their wider corporate sustainability 
strategies in a variety of ways. J. Sainsbury (2018) for example, mapped a 
number of the SDGs onto the five core values, namely, ‘living healthier lives, 
making a positive difference to our community, respect for our environment, 
sourcing with integrity’ and ‘a great place to work’ that provide the structure 
for its sustainability reporting. SDGs 2, 3, 5, 12, 13, 14, 15 and 17 were, for 
example mapped onto its outline report on living healthier lives and SDG’s 6, 
7, 9, 12 13 and 17 were linked to respect for the environment. Rewe reported 
comparing its corporate sustainability goals and business processes with the 
SDGs. As such, Rewe (2017) looked to address its priority SDGs as part of its 
focus on its four ‘pillars of sustainability’, namely Green Products; Energy, 
Climate and Environment; Employees; and Social Involvement. Here the focus 
on Green Products, for example, was linked to SDGs 12, 14 and 15, while 
SDGs 7, 11 and 13 applied to the Energy, Climate and Environment pillar.

In ‘Working towards the Sustainable Development Goals’ Carrefour 
(2019) integrated SDGs 2, 5, 12, 13, 14 and 15 within its Corporate Social 
Responsibility strategy criteria, namely, combatting waste; protecting 
biodiversity; supporting partners; and social dynamics and diversity. Further 
Carrefour (2019) grade the contribution of each of the four criteria to the six 
SDS. Thus, combatting waste, protecting biodiversity and supporting partners 
were all classed as making a ‘very strong contribution’ to SDG2, protecting 
biodiversity and supporting partners were classes as making a ‘strong 
contribution’ to SDG13, and while social dynamics and diversity made a ‘very 
strong contribution’ to SDG 5, it was classed as making a ‘contribution’ to the 
other five. SDGs. In addressing SDG 13 as part of combatting waste, Carrefour 
reported that by introducing an internal carbon price and rolling out its waste 
reduction policy and its energy and climate plan, the company had incorporated 
a key climate change goal into its investment strategy. In a similar vein, as part 
of its strategic commitment to protect biodiversity, Carrefour reported it was 
promoting agroecology and encouraging the use of resilient farming practices 
that will boost productivity and output, contribute to the conservation of 
ecosystems and gradually improve the quality of land and soil.

Discussion

A number of Europe’s leading retailers have emphasised their general 
commitment to the SDGs and some of them have looked to integrate their 
approach to the SDGs with their corporate sustainability strategies. Within 
these general commitments, some of these retailers reported on their 
contribution to all 17 SDGs while others concentrated on a more limited 
number of specific SDGs that reflected their business strategy and their 
opportunity to make a meaningful contribution. At the same time, it is
important to recognise Ruiz-Real et al.’s (2018) claim that ‘sustainability is a key element for retailers, who have seen that sustainable development could become an important source of competitive advantage.’ In contributing to the achievement of the SDGs, the retailers can also be seen to be driving business efficiencies, which can, in turn, offer them a source of competitive advantage. In pursuing actions to combat climate change and its impacts, by reducing carbon emissions, energy and water consumption and waste generation, for example, the retailers are also reducing costs. In a similar vein, retailers’ SDG commitments to decent work, gender equality and good health and wellbeing all help to promote stability, security, loyalty and efficiency within their workforce. More generally, the leading European retailers can be seen to be responding positively to the United Nations’ rallying cry for private sector engagement with the SDGs. However, four sets of issues merit reflection and discussion

Firstly, there is an issue about retailers focusing upon specific SDGs. The retailers would argue that in pursuing this approach they are concentrating on where they can make their most meaningful contribution to the SDGs. This certainly resonates with the World Business Council for Sustainable Development’s (2018) suggestion that a number of ‘companies are clearly seeing value in narrowing down the broad SDG agenda with a view to focusing their efforts on a specific sub-set of goals.’ However, PWC (2018) claimed that ‘many companies are engaging at a more superficial level’ and ‘are failing to prioritise goals that need corporate support the most or to address those that could cause the biggest problems in the future if left unchecked.’ At the same time, PWC (2018) argued that prioritisation ‘also requires a longer-term vision of, and approach to, business growth strategy and planning than some companies are used to employing’ and that such a ‘longer term perspective requires an understanding of the risks that a company could face if the underlying issues that the SDGs represent are not solved.’

While there was clear commonality, though not complete uniformity, in the specific SDGs prioritised by the selected European retailers, they all prioritised SDGs 12 and 13, but here their approach to both these SDGs has its problems. On the one hand, all the selected retailers effectively redefined SDG 12 as responsible, rather than sustainable, consumption. However, none of the retailers offers a definition of responsible retailing, though their approach can perhaps best be seen to put customers, rather than retailers, in the driving seat. As such, retailers might be seen to have an important role to play in promoting sustainable or responsible consumption at store level. However, a study by Jones Wynn and Comfort (2020) of leading UK retailers, which included two of the retailers in the current study, found little or no attempt to promote sustainable or responsible consumption at the point of sale.

On the other hand, SDG 13, action to combat climate change and its impacts, presents a daunting challenge for retailers. Not least in that ‘climate change presents the single biggest threat to sustainable development’ (United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change 2018) and in that Liverman (2018) claimed ‘climate change has been identified as the one stress
that could undermine the other environmental goals, as well as those on poverty or health.' The selected European retailers typically reported on their actions to reduce carbon emissions in their own operations. Here, in theory at least, they have direct control, but cutting carbon emissions throughout their supply chains is a much more difficult task. Encouraging suppliers spread throughout the world to reduce carbon emissions and independently monitor their emissions data is both costly and time consuming and an operationally difficult exercise. At the same time, the majority of the leading retailers’ stores are located in out of town centre locations and customers effectively rely on car transport to do their shopping at such stores, so reducing carbon emissions from their vehicles presents significant problems and challenges to well established patterns of shopping behaviour.

Secondly, there are both general, and specifically retail, issues about measurement and metrics. Generally, there are issues about the data that is required to measure progress, about the collection of such data and the mechanisms and procedures that will need to be established in order to monitor progress. The dominant approach to the measurement and monitoring of the SDGs is to identify indicators for each SDG but Bali Swain (2018) argued that ‘this approach if not flawed is inadequate’ not least, in that it ignores the complex interrelationships between some of the SDGs. At the same time, Nightingale (2018) insisted that some of the SDGs (e.g. poverty, justice and gender equality) are ‘not a state of being and, as such.... not conducive to static measurement.’ Rather, she argued, poverty is a ‘punctuated experience for the individuals and populations in question’ and ‘if counting does not reflect the reality of being in poverty, it is not an adequate guide for understanding how to alleviate poverty’ (Nightingale 2018).

Such critiques present dilemma for retailers in that they can be seen to call into question the measures the leading European retailers have used to monitor their sustainability achievements in their annual sustainability reports, and which some retailers are already using to celebrate their contribution to the SDGs. This is not to suggest that the data currently being used is inaccurate per se, but that it may not necessarily measure what needs to be measured if the retail industry’s contribution to the SDGs is to be captured accurately. A number of the leading European retailers have used cameo case studies in an attempt to depict the real life, everyday experiences of individuals and communities in their sustainability reports. As such, the retailers might be seen to looking to capture the experiences of those individuals and communities, the SDGs look to address. Here however there are issues surrounding the relationship between the ‘particular’ and the ‘general’, in that the cameo case studies employed in the sustainability reporting process have been specially chosen and choreographed by the selected retailers. Such cameo case studies may well have a strong human interest, and some of them have a powerful emotive appeal, which may well resonate with audiences on corporate websites and social media, but they cannot necessarily be seen to be wholly representative of the leading European retailers’ contributions to the SDGs.
Thirdly, there are issues about reporting and communication. There is no official or generally agreed framework for companies to report on the SDGs, and so it is not surprising that the selected European retailers report on their contribution to the SDGs in a variety of ways. While J. Sainsbury, for example, included information on how they are contributing to the SDGs within their sustainability report, Schwarz and Tesco produced a dedicated short report on their contribution to the SDGs, and Carrefour included how it was working towards the SDGs in the Corporate Social Responsibility section of the company’s Annual Financial Report. The lack of a common reporting framework effectively makes it impossible to make any meaningful comparison of the contribution of retailers, or to assess the overall contribution of the retail sector to that of wider business community.

At the same time, Dentsu Aegis Network (2018), warned of the danger of ‘SDG Wash.’ Here, ‘companies use the SDGs in their communication to expand the corporate value and sales of their own company.’ Clear parallels are drawn with Greenwash, the environmentally pejorative term used when green communication messages are deceptively used to promote the perception that a company’s products, aims or policies are environmentally friendly. As such, Dentsu Aegis Network (2018) argued that SDG Wash damages both ‘the relationship of trust between consumers and individual companies’ as well as ‘the appeal of the company as an investment and loan destination.’

Looking to the future if the retailers’ contribution to the SDGs increasingly becomes fully integrated into the retailers’ corporate sustainability strategies, then that contribution will be reported in their annual sustainability/corporate social responsibility reports. However, while European retailers have been reporting on their sustainability strategies and their achievements against those strategies across a wide range of environmental, social and economic issues for some time, in the past there has often been little or no independent external assurance of the majority of the data in these sustainability reports (Jones et al. 2012). This can be seen to reduce the credibility, integrity and reliability of the sustainability reporting process and of the retailers’ achievements in contributing to the SDGs.

Finally, there are potentially fundamental, tensions between sustainability narratives and economic growth. The one seemingly dependent on the continuing exploitation of scarce natural resources and the other looking to promote development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the needs of the future. Such tensions are thrown into sharp relief in the case of the SDGs in that SDG 8 specifically looks to promote sustainable economic growth. The United Nations (undated) argued that ‘sustainable economic growth will require societies to create the conditions that allow people to have quality jobs that stimulate the economy while not harming the environment’, though they made no attempt to specify how this balance was to be achieved or to define sustainable economic growth. More pointedly, the German Retail Federation (2018) claimed ‘steady and inclusive economic growth is a precondition for sustainable development’ and all the leading European retailers are committed to continuing growth. More
generally, Sultana’s (2018) expressed surprise at choice of the term ‘sustainable development’, which she described as being ‘at the heart of this new framework of titled SDGs’, because she argued that ‘sustainable development has been very contested, conflictual and contradictory in definition and reality since its uptake in the 1980’s’ and that ‘sustainable development can mean anything to anybody’ (Sultana 2018). As such, retailers may be able to justify their commitment to sustainability, while continuing to pursue growth policies, which are dependent on the depletion of the earth’s finite resource base.

Attempts to reconcile continuing economic growth and sustainable development are often couched in terms of decoupling and of the role of technological innovation. The former refers to economic growth, which does not lead to increases in the pressure on environmental resources, while the latter looks to innovative technologies to increase energy efficiency, cut greenhouse gas emissions, reduce waste and to facilitate the development of a more circular economy. While both approaches are close to the heart of the European retailers’ approach to the SDGs, others have taken a more critical view. In examining the decoupling thesis Alexander et al. (2017), for example, concluded ‘the decoupling strategy cannot lead to a growing global economy that is just and sustainable.’ In addressing the role of technological development in promoting sustainability, Huesemann (2003) argued that ‘improvements in technological eco-efficiency alone will be insufficient to bring about the transition to sustainability.’ Schor (2005) argued that ‘the popularity of technological solutions is also attributable to the fact that they are apolitical and do not challenge the macrostructures of production and consumption.’ This in turn, reflects Liverman’s (2018) concerns that ‘growth goals cannot be met without sacrificing many environmental ones or that sustainability cannot be achieved under the current economic model of capitalism.’

Conclusion

The United Nations’ SDG programme is ambitious and wide ranging and a number of the leading European retailers have emphasised their general commitment to the SDGs. Within this general commitment, some of the selected retailers prioritised a number of specific SDGs, that reflected their business strategy and their opportunity to make a meaningful contribution, while others looked to contribute to all 17 SDGs. As such, the leading retailers can be seen to be responding positively, albeit in varying measure, to the United Nations’ rallying cry for private sector engagement with the SDGs. That said, given the Sustainable Development Solutions Network/Institute for European Environmental Policy’s (2019) report which concluded that none of the countries within the European Union were on track to meet their SDG targets, the leading European retailers may need to step up their contribution if these targets are to be achieved. However, the authors suggested that the
retailers will face a number of major challenges if they are to make a significant and a lasting contribution to the achievement of the SDGs. These challenges include, the strategic prioritisation of SDGs, issues about measurement, reporting and communication and fundamental tensions between sustainability and economic growth.

This paper has a number of limitations, not least that it draws exclusively on corporate information posted on the Internet rather than on discussions with company executives responsible for drawing up corporate policy. However, the authors believe their approach is appropriate in what is an exploratory study and that provides a platform for future research into how Europe’s leading retailers are addressing the SDGs. Looking to the future, academic research might, for example, look to investigate strategic thinking about the SDGs amongst leading European retailers and elsewhere within advanced capitalist economies. Such investigations might, profitably include specific detailed case studies of individual retailers, focusing for example, on both the forces driving the pursuit of the SDGs and on the opportunities and challenges of integrating the SDGs within their corporate sustainability strategies, as well as more comparative investigations with a larger number of retailers. Here negotiating access to key decision makers may prove to be a thorny issue, in part because pursuing the SDGs can raise deep and sensitive issue for conventional retail business models, and in part because of the more general issue of commercial confidentiality.

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