‘BETTER RETAIL BETTER WORLD’:

A COMMENTARY ON BRTISH RETAILERS AND THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

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Abstract

The British Retail Consortium’s Better Retail Better World initiative launched in 2018 looks to mobilise the retail industry to make a leading contribution to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. This short commentary paper outlines the features of this initiative and offers some reflections on some of the challenges British retailers seem likely to face in looking to contribute to the achievement of the SDGs. These challenges include the strategic prioritisation of SDGs, issues of measurement and metrics, communicating the retailers’ position on the SDGs to consumers and the stakeholders, the retailers’ financial commitment to the SDGs within a difficult trading environment and fundamental tensions between sustainability and economic growth.

Introduction

The high profile launch of *‘Common Ground’* in 2016 (Jones et al. 2018) saw six of the world’s leading marketing and advertising companies put their collective weight, and more specifically their creativity, strategic skills and global reach, behind the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). As such, the marketing and advertising industry could be seen to be responding to the UN’s call for businesses to rise to the challenges and opportunities generated by the SDGs. More recently, at the national level, the British Retail Consortium (BRC) launched its *‘Better Retail Better World’*, initiative to mobilise *‘the retail industry to meet some of the biggest global challenges of the coming decades highlighted by the UN, including modern slavery and decent work, sustainable economic growth, inequalities, climate change and responsible consumption and production’* (BRC 2018a). Further, the BRC (2018a) announced that it would use *‘the widely recognised SDGs as a framework, clear, transparent and measurable goals developed with businesses and campaigners are at the heart of the initiative.’*

In the past academic commentators (e.g. Jones et al. 2007; Jones, et al. 2013) and pressure groups (Friend of the Earth 2011) have questioned the genuine commitment of British retailers to sustainability. In advertising its 2012 Bi-Annual Conference on Business and the Environment, Globe, a not for profit organisation, posed the questions *‘is sustainable retailing an oxymoron?’* and *‘is the overarching need to reduce consumption simply at odds with the very foundation of retailing?’* (Globe 2012). However, Alice Ellison and Peter Andrews, both from the British Retail Consortium, described the new initiative under the banner headline *‘Why the retailing industry is taking a leading role in delivering the* SDGs’ (edie.net 2018). With these thoughts in mind, this commentary paper outlines the *‘Better Retail Better World’* initiative, offers some reflective thoughts on some of the challenges the British retail industry may face in looking to take a lead in contributing to the SDGs.

Leading Retailers and the SDGs.

In March 2018, the BRC (2018b) heralded the launch of *'Better Retail Better World'* under the headline *'the retail industry is taking action to build a better, more prosperous and sustainable world.'* More expansively the British Retail Consortium argued (2018b) *'put simply, this action will mean further safeguards against people falling into the modern slavery trap by paying to get a job, reductions in greenhouse gas emissions, deforestation and waste sent to landfill and more support for people from underrepresented demographics to progress in employment.'* 26 of Britain's leading retailers including, Aldi, Asda, Boots, IKEA, John Lewis Partnership, Kingfisher, Marks & Spencer, Morrisons, Next, Sainsbury's and Wilko, though not Tesco, Britain's largest retailer, signed up to the initiative. The British Retail Consortium (2018c) claimed *'retail is one of the first industries to take collective action in this way'* and reported *'as part of the project, retailers will share knowledge and best practice, and publicly disclose progress on these goals.'* In endorsing the launch Tanya Steele, Chief Executive of the World Wildlife Fund argued, *'retail businesses working with consumers are key to the success of the SDGs and key in the race to restore nature'* (British Retail Consortium 2018c).

The BRC targeted five of the SDGs, namely SDGs 8, 10, 11, 12 and 13. A brief outline of the BRC's focus on three of these SDGs provides an illustration of the scope and the ambition of the Better Retail Better World initiative. In addressing SDG 8, for example, the BRC (2018d) reported *'the retail industry is the largest private sector employer in the UK and its supply chains impact millions of people around the world. Committing to respecting human rights, supporting sustainable markets and developing skills are fundamental to all retail businesses.'* In illustrating this commitment, the BRC (2018d) reported that the aim was to *'promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all.'* Here the BRC set two sets of goals up to 2020, namely, collaborating to enhance employment and recruitment best practices, and establish a policy that no worker should pay for a job in the supply chain. The first, it was claimed, would have the benefit of improving workforce productivity and profitability and reducing pay gaps, thus increasing workforce motivation and enable employees to reach their potential. The second was designed to produce *'freer and safer working conditions for people working in supply chains'* and to *'reduce the risk of damage to brand reputation'* (BRC 2018d).

In addressing SDG 12, the BRC (2018e) acknowledged *'all products are dependent on the environment and communities where the materials are sourced'* and *'as populations grow the availability of these resources will become increasingly constrained.'* As such, *'production and consumption patterns need to be made more sustainable to enable for the regeneration of resources'* (BRC 2018e). A number of industry goals were set up to 2020, namely reducing the volume of waste sent to landfill, measuring water usage and pursuing responsible sourcing practices for key raw materials. Here potential benefits were seen to include financial savings generated by more efficient waste and water management, a reduction in greenhouse gas emissions, the development of greater resilience and security in supply chains, the preservation of environmental ecosystems and bio diversity and the development of a more circular economy.

The BRC's focus on SDG 13 is rooted in the belief that *'the world needs to anticipate, adapt and become more resilient to current and future impacts of climate change'* (BRC2018f) and here the BRC identified two industry goals by 2020. Firstly, to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and where applicable to increase the use of renewable sources of energy, and secondly to *'collaborate to reduce deforestation in order to have eliminated it by no later than 2030'* (BRC 2018f). The benefits said to be associated with these two industry goals included reducing energy costs and safeguarding the price and long term security supply of energy, reduced greenhouse gas emissions in supply chains and securing positive brand values.

All five of the BRC's targeted SDGs were illustrated with cameo case studies from the retailers who have signed up to Better Retail Better World. In illustrating its retailers' commitment to SDG5, for example, the BRC reported that in 2015 IKEA had committed to paying the Real Living Wage and the London Living Wage to all its co-workers and that the company's wider Global Employment Standards strategy looked to *'further enrich co-worker satisfaction, well-being and to provide fair and equal opportunities for all'* (BRC 2018d). Another cameo case study to illustrate SDG 13, outlined how Kingfisher was working, in partnership with two wildlife partners, to protect and restore the Harapan rainforest in Indonesia. This rainforest, which has experienced extensive deforestation, is home to a number of endangered species including the Sumatran tiger.

The individual retailers within the Better Retail Better World initiative have varied in their approach to the SDGs and in their public acknowledgement of them. Aldi (2018), for example, illustrated its commitment to 9 of the SDGs, namely SDGs 2, 3, 5, 6, 8, 12, 13, 14, and 17. In evidencing its commitment to SDG 2, for example, Aldi reported *'we offer our customers a select range of everyday, high-quality products at best-possible prices. As a discount retailer, we wish to enable all of our customers to afford high-quality products and maintain a healthy and varied diet with our food products'* and *'we support people in need of food donations by forwarding merchandise which was removed from sale but is still fit for consumption to charitable organisations'* (Aldi 2018). In addressing SDG 13, the company claimed *'our climate protection goal is to reduce our greenhouse gas emissions – measured in carbon equivalents per square metre of sales floor – by at least 30% by 2020'* (Aldi 2018).

John Lewis and Partners reported *'we welcome the UN Sustainable Development Goals and are committed to contribute to a prosperous and resilient society in which our Partners, customers and industry can thrive, within the means of our planet'* and identified SDG's 3, 6, 8, 10, 11, 12, 13, 15 and 16 as its priorities. Further, the company emphasised that these priorities are aligned with a number of its corporate goals, which look, for example, to *'source and sell with integrity'*, *'unlock partner potential'* and *'deliver more with less'* (John Lewis and Partners 2018). In its 2018 Corporate Responsibility Report, Next acknowledged that the company had a *'role to play in reaching these goals and communicating our performance against them through our own direct actions and through collaboration with others'* and identified 8 SDGs *'that are most material to our business operations and the products we sell. These are the goals where we have the greatest opportunity to contribute and to build upon the work we have been doing for some years'* (Next 2018). In addressing its contribution to the SDGs, Morrisons claimed *'it's important* *that we recognise and help to address these global challenges in a meaningful way that is relevant and aligned to our business strategy'* (Morrisons 2018).

Some of the retailers took a more wide-ranging approach. Kingfisher (2018), for example, targeted 13 of the SDGs, and suggested that SDGs 2, 5, 16 and 17 were *'outside the scope of our sustainability growth plan.'* In its 2018 *'Sustainability Update'* Sainsbury's reported on how the company were contributing to all 17 SDGs. In addressing SDG 10, the company reported *'we support our farmers, growers and communities in our supply chain so that they can have thriving businesses for years to come'* and that *'in 2017 we launched our Fairly Traded pilot scheme to help improve the livelihoods of large and small scale tea farmers in Eastern and Southern Africa'* (J. Sainsbury 2018). At the same time, some of the retailers, including Dixons Carphone, DFS, Greggs, Debenhams and Lidl, within the Better Retail Better World initiative made no public acknowledgement of the SDGs or of their commitment to them, on their corporate websites.

In an attempt to gauge if, and how, retailers were communicating with customers about the SDGs at store level, one of the authors undertook an observational visit to the largest stores of ten of the retailers in Better Retail Better World in Cheltenham in November 2018. The stores visited were Asda, B&Q (Kingfisher), Boots, J. Sainsbury, John Lewis Partners, Lidl, Marks and Spencer, Morrisons, WH Smith and Wilko and included stores in the town centre and in out of town centre locations. A number of the retailers displayed posters, banners and leaflets about their approach to sustainability. In the Marks and Spencer store, for example, posters and notices announced *'our best value sustainable sourced denim ever'*, *'we've been giving grocers a fair price for their tea and coffee since 2006'* and *'our goal is to make sure our key raw materials come from the most sustainable sources available to us.'* Wilko advertised a Water Filter with a sign which ran *'Saves on Water and Better for the Environment'* and B&Q advertised its *'Community Re-use'* scheme, which offers *'unsellable products and materials'* for re-use. Asda provided four page leaflets about its *'Fight Hunger: Create Change'* programme designed to *'help us to fight hunger in our local community'* and claimed to be giving *'500,000 people access to fresh food every week.'* However, the author found no specific reference to the SGDs in any of the ten stores visited. These findings might be seen to reflect Yeomans (2018) belief that the SDGs *'mean little to most employees and less to consumers and the general public.'* REVISE

Discussion

Within the UK, the BRC's Better Retail Better World initiative can be seen as a significant response to the UN's rallying cry for business engagement with the SDGs and it may attract increasing attention within the retail industry. However, five sets of issues merit reflection and discussion. Firstly, issues about priorities can be identified at two levels. As outlined above, some British retailers have chosen to target a number of specific SDGs that they feel are aligned with their corporate goals and business strategies and where they feel they can make the most valuable contribution to the SDGs. More generally, this approach has been called into question in that PWC (2018) surveyed some 470 companies *'to investigate how they were reflecting the SDGs'* and argued that *'many companies are engaging at a more superficial level.'* This survey revealed that many companies *'are failing to prioritise goals that need corporate support the most and to address those that could cause the biggest problems in the future if left unchecked'* and suggested the *'failure to* *consider the local context can also put companies at a disadvantage as they seek to do business around the world'* (PWC 2018). Further PWC (2018) suggestion that prioritising the SDGs *'requires an understanding of the particular issues at a country or local level, combined with an analysis of business operations and sourcing and supply chain'* would seem to resonate in the retail industry. 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. To have that 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, and also of the opportunities that adapting products and services towards the innovations and solutions could offer.'*

More generally, Moseley (2018) suggested that there is little evidence of the strategic prioritisation of the SDGs within the business community. In many ways, climate change is a cross cutting issue and its potentially damaging impacts may threaten the achievement of all the SDGs. The UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (2018), for example, claimed *'climate change presents the single biggest threat to sustainable development everywhere and its widespread, unprecedented impacts disproportionately burden the poorest and most vulnerable'* and argued *'urgent action to halt climate change and deal with its impacts is integral to the successful implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).'* In a similar vein, in identifying environmental goals in the SDGs, Liverman (2018a) reported that *'climate change has been identified as the one stress that could undermine the other environmental goals, as well as those on poverty or health'* but questioned *'how well do the SDGs address the climate change challenge?'*

Secondly, while the BRC (2018a) specifically described the SDGs as having *'measurable goals'*, there are issues about measurement and metrics. There are, for example, issues about the data that is required to measure progress, the collection of such data and the mechanisms and procedures that will need to be established in order to monitor progress. At the local level, for example, Sultana (2018) argued *'local data are often not collected, or are not collected properly, are frequently inaccurate and are expensive to collect.' More generally,* 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, the UN Division for Sustainable Development Goals (2018) acknowledged *'many important issues, such as gender equality, health, sustainable consumption and production, and nutrition, cut across goals and targets. The goals and targets are themselves interdependent, and must be pursued together, since progress in one area often depends on progress in other areas. '*

More critically, Liverman (2018a) claimed that *'the expansion in the number of goals and targets especially as indicators are developed for measuring progress towards targets , will add even more calculation, monitoring and quantification to the process of evaluating development'* and that *'this is evident in the many calls to take advantage of new technologies for creating social and environmental indicators.'* This in turn led her Liverman (2018a) to claim *'this can result in overly narrow assessments that direct policy towards quantifiable outcomes rather than broader but harder to measure social needs'* (Liverman 2018a). Under the banner, *'should we dance with development metrics?'* Moseley (2018) questioned the value of engaging with development metrics and argued that the SDGs *'represent what is wrong with development, both in their conception and in what they measure and do not measure.'*

Nightingale (2018) insisted that *'poverty (or justice, gender equality etc.) is not a state of being and, as such is 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). Further, Nightingale (2018) suggested that *'for the SDGs to be effective, they need to go beyond simple statistics to account for how situated, performative aspects of life evolve, rather than as they are.'* Perhaps more positively, Liverman (2018b) suggested that long term fieldwork may provide opportunities for development to be contextualised at the local level and elsewhere she argued that work by critical geographers *'sheds light on the everyday experiences of precarity and deprivation '*(Liverman 2018a).

Such critiques present dilemma for retailers in that they can be seen to call into question the measures the leading British 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. In the past there has often been little or no independent external assurance of the majority of the data in the sustainability reports published to date by the leading British retailers (Jones et al. 2013). Unless such external assurance is introduced into the SDG reporting process this will undermine the credibility of the BRC's claim that *'the retail industry is taking a leading role in delivering the SDG's* (edie.net 2018).

A number of the leading British retailers have used cameo case studies and stories in an attempt to capture the real life, everyday experiences of individuals and communities in their sustainability reports (Jones et al. 2018). Here however there are issues surrounding the relationship between the 'particular' and the 'general', in that the cameo case studies and stories employed in the sustainability reporting process have been chosen and choreographed by the selected retailers. Such stories 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. However, they cannot necessarily be seen to be wholly representative of the leading UK retailers' sustainability achievements.

Thirdly, there are issues about communication. On the one hand, the majority of British retailers have been reporting on their sustainability strategies and achievements for some time and there are indications that some of them are integrating the SDGs into their reporting processes. These reports generally have a range of audiences including investors, employees, governments, non-governmental organisations and pressure groups, but consumers are not their primary audience. As such, if retailers are to look to make a leading contribution to the achievement of the SDGs then they might explore how their sustainability reports can offer opportunities to connect the SDGs to stakeholders and consumers. Reaching a wider network of stakeholders and consumers will surely be essential if Better Retail Better World is to be successful in winning hearts and minds in achieving the SDGs. There is certainly scope for the retailers within the Better Retail Better World initiative to promote the SDGs within stores where there are obvious opportunities to connect regularly with customers at the point of sale, for it is here that retailers currently concentrate on looking to encourage customers to consume with a variety of enticing promotions.

More generally, Dentsu Aegis Network (2018), the multinational media and digital marketing company, developed a corporate *'Communications Guide'* for the SDGs. Here the focus is on *'gaining a good reputation from society and customers'* (Dentsu Aegis Network 2018) and the Guide offers a range of advice. Internally, within companies, the Guide suggested that *'SDGs become the common language of in house integration and centripetal force improves'* and that such an approach will *'accelerate promotion of the SDGs by gaining good corporate brand evaluation from society and customers and the SDGs become a common language that indicates the future of the company'* (Dentsu Aegis Network 2018). In focusing on a range of external stakeholders including other companies, not for profit organisations, and local governments, the Guide suggested that the SDGs could provide an important vehicle for commercial collaboration. At the same time the Guide identified a number of measures companies should consider incorporating into their corporate advertising, product advertising and promotion strategies. These measures included combining the company's future plans with the goals of the SDGs, making a detailed examination of whether the company's range of products and services match the SDGs throughout the supply chain, and formulating and implementing a range of promotions and advertising campaigns to encourage participation in, and cooperation with, the SDGs and developing SDG certification labels.

At the same time, in introducing *'SDG Wash'*, the Guide counsels caution that where *'companies use the SDGs in their communication to expand the corporate value and sales of their own company, there is a danger that the company will receive criticism and suggestions for improvement from each stakeholder due to mistaken methods of communication'* (Dentsu Aegis Network 2018). Here the Guide draws clear parallels 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, the Guide argues 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.'*

Fourthly, there are major financial issues, in that UN's call for the global business community to rise to the challenges of the SDGs has been described as *'a radical shift in development finance'* (Mawdsley 2018). More specifically, Mawdsley (2018) argued *'the energy lies with the private sector, and here the debates and initiatives around financing the SDGs are stimulating, deepening and consolidating existing trends that are centring the private sector within international development.'* As such, Better Retail Better World's headline commitment to the SDGs would seem to have major, and in some ways open ended, financial implications for the retail industry. If, as suggested earlier, British retailers look to commission comprehensive external assurance as an integral part of their SDG reporting process, for example, this will come at a cost. Capturing, collecting and aggregating data on a wide range of environmental, economic and social issues, across a wide range of activities within supply chains and across geographical space, for external assurance exercises will be a potentially costly venture.

However, at the time of writing, in late 2018, the trading environment for the British retail industry was very difficult. Traditional retailers were facing rising costs, for example, as they looked to finance the adaptation of their business models to meet the challenges of the increasing consumer demand to online shopping. At the same time rising costs attendant, for example, on the fall in the value of sterling, the implication of Brexit, the rise in the legal minimum wage, and the apprenticeship levy, and increases in business rates, have been reflected in a decline in retailers profits and in the widespread closure of shops and of retail chains. Within this difficult climate the appetite of retailers, and more importantly of their shareholders and investors, to finance a commitment to the SDGs remains very much to be seen.

Looking to the future, the retailers within the Better Retail Better World initiative might be seen to have made what is essentially an open ended financial commitment to the SDGs, in that the transition to a more sustainable future may face difficult, dynamic and potentially unknown challenges. While a variety of global future scenarios have been identified, the continuing uncertainties about the scale and the impacts of climate change, suggests that meeting the SDGs by 2030 may become a moveable feast. For the retail industry, changes and uncertainties in the security of sourcing from suppliers and in consumer behaviour and the associated financial implications, for example, may test the commitment of the industry to sustainability, and more particularly, to the SDGs. However, failing to continue to pursue current sustainability commitments may generate ultimately even greater costs and consequences for retailers, and more generally for the business community and consumers.

Finally, there are issues about the underlying commitment to economic growth in Better Retail Better World. On the one hand, for example, the BRC claimed that the retail industry was mobilising to achieve *'sustainable economic growth'*, which echoed the UN's belief that *'sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth is essential for prosperity.'* That said, neither the BRC nor the UN defined what the term 'sustainable economic growth' meant. More generally, this reflects Sultana's (2018) concerns about terminology. She expressed surprise at choice of the term *'sustainable development'*, which she described as being *'at the heart of this new framework of titled SDGs.'* Surprise, 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 and reduce waste and to facilitate the development of a more circular economy. While both approaches would seem to find favour with the BRC and the UN, 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 (2018a) 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 BRC's Better Retail better World initiative looks to mobilise the major British retailers in contributing to the UN's SDGs. The initiative is both ambitious and wide ranging in its scope. While some of the participating retailers reported looking to address all 17 of the DGSs, the majority of the retailers targeted a number of specific SDGs that reflect their business strategy and their opportunity to make a meaningful contribution. The retail industry is a powerful position to influence changes in production and consumption processes and thus to help to drive sustainable development, and the BRC's initiative must therefore be seen as potentially important contribution to the achievement of the SDGs. However, the authors suggest that the retailers will face a number of major challenges if they are to make a significant and a lasting contribution. These challenges include, the strategic prioritisation of SDGs, issues about measurement and metrics, successfully communicating the retailers' position on the SDGs to a wide range of stakeholders, the retailers' financial commitment to the SDGs and fundamental tensions between sustainability and economic growth.

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