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The UK's largest volume house builders and the sustainable development goals

Abstract

Purpose: 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. This paper offers an exploratory review of how some of the UK's largest volume housebuilders publicly claim to be committed to addressing the SDGs.

Methodology/Approach: The paper provides an outline of the characteristics of sustainable development, of the SDGs and of the frame of reference and method of enquiry employed in the study, prior to reviewing the findings from the largest UK housebuilders

Findings: The findings revealed that seven of the largest housebuilding companies claimed to be committed to contributing to the SDGs, though the scale and the extent of their claimed commitments varied. In reviewing the housebuilders approach to the SDGs, the authors drew attention to three challenges the housebuilders may face in pursuing their claimed commitment to the SDGs, namely, concentrating on specific goals, measurement, and reporting.

Originality: The paper offers an accessible review of how seven of the UK's largest housebuilders claimed to be committed to addressing the SDGs.

Keywords: Sustainable Development Goals, Housebuilding Companies, UK, Reporting, SDG Wash.

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 the *'2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development'*, which is designed to *'shift the world on to a sustainable and resilient path'* (United Nations 2015a, webpage). The SDGs are ambitious and embrace a wide range of environmental, social, and economic issues including climate change, access to energy supplies, 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, webpage) in addressing these goals, and many companies within the private sector have begun to take up this challenge (e. g. Wynn and Jones 2020).

There have been mixed messages about the relationship between the building and property industry and the SDGs. On the one hand, MIRIS (2019, webpage), an international property consultancy based in Norway, suggested that *'given that the real estate sector accounts for half of global wealth, the building industry should be playing a key role towards achieving the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.'* On the other hand, Goubran and Cucuzzella (2019, webpage) argued *'with the rise of the 2030 Agenda as a unifying framework for sustainability, the building sector has been struggling to fully incorporate its goals and targets.'* Sue Riddlestone, Chief Executive Officer of Bioregional, an entrepreneurial charity which aims to invent, and deliver, practical solutions for sustainability, claimed *'the construction and property sector can lead the way on the Sustainable Development Goals'* (Bioregional 2018a, webpage). In the very same month, her own organisation suggested *'built environment companies are struggling to get to grips with the Sustainable Development Goals'* (Bioregional 2019b, webpage).

The Royal Institution for Chartered Surveyors (2020, webpage) argued *'real estate is an often-overlooked element of a company's responsible business agenda, but with our sector impacting – either directly or indirectly - most of the SDGs, and with its cross-sectoral reach, it can be a powerful driver for making the SDGs a reality'*, and *'for companies in the sector, successful implementation of the SDGs will strengthen the enabling environment for doing business and building markets.'* That said, the SDGs are best seen as a very complex work in progress and their implementation may prove a long and potentially elusive process. In sharing Appau and Mabefam's (2020, p.243) belief that *'it is too early to evaluate whether the SDGs live up to their potential and promise'*, the authors take the view that it would be premature to undertake a detailed evaluation of how the UK housebuilding industry was contributing to the SDGs. Rather, the aim of this short paper is much more modest, in that it offers an exploratory review of how some of the UK's largest housebuilders publicly claim to be committed to addressing the SDGs, and of some of the challenges they may face in looking to fulfil these commitments.

Literature Review

The ideas underpinning sustainable development have long historical roots. Du Pisani (2006, p. 87), for example argued *'the roots of the concept of sustainability can be traced back to ancient times, but population growth, increases in consumption after the Industrial Revolution, and the danger that crucial resources such as wood, coal and oil could be depleted boosted awareness of the need to use resources in a sustainable way.'* The initial formal definition of sustainable development, namely, *'development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs'* (World Commission on Environment and Development 1987, p. 43), is still widely used three decades after it was initially framed. However, defining sustainable development is not straightforward, and it is a contested concept which *'means different things to different people'* (Aras and Crowther 2008, p. 20).

There are sets of definitions that are based in, and around, ecological principles which focus on conserving natural resources and protecting fragile ecosystems on which ultimately all human life depends. Goodland (1995, p.3), for example, defined environmental sustainability as *'the maintenance of natural capital'* and argued that it *'seeks to improve human welfare by preserving the sources of raw materials used for human needs and ensuring that the sinks for human waste are not exceeded in order to prevent harm to humans.'* Porritt (2007, p.33), defined *'ecological sustainability'* as *'the capacity for continuance into the long-term future, living within the constraints and limits of the biophysical world.'* On the other hand, there are wider definitions, which look to include social, and economic, as well as environmental, goals, and which look to embrace equity in meeting human needs. For the United States Environment Protection Agency (2014, webpage), for example, *'sustainability creates and maintains the conditions under which humans and nature can exist in productive harmony, that permits fulfilling the social, economic and other requirements of present and future generations.'*

As interest in sustainability has grown there have been attempts to theorise the concept. As a general conceptual characterisation, many authors make the distinction between weak and strong sustainability. Roper (2012, p. 72), for example, suggested that *'weak sustainability prioritizes economic development, while strong sustainability subordinates economies to the natural environment and society, acknowledging ecological limits to growth.'* Hudson (2005, p.241) argued that conceptualisations of sustainability range from *'pallid blue green to dark deep green.'* The former, Hudson (2005, p.241) suggested centre on *'technological fixes within current relations of production, essentially trading off economic against environmental objectives, with the market as the prime resource allocation mechanism'*, while for the latter *'prioritizing the preservation of nature is pre-eminent.'*

More substantially, there are three theoretical positions relevant to the current review, namely stakeholder theory, critical theories embedded in political economy, and neoliberalism. The first two are directly related to sustainability, while the third has implications for sustainable development policies. Stakeholder theory, for example, assumes that satisfying the interests of different stakeholders, namely, all the parties that are directly or indirectly involved in the business activities, will ultimately determine the success of products and services. Raub and Rice (2019), for example, emphasised the importance of companies forming active partnerships with its stakeholders to tackle the challenges of sustainability. Secondly, there have also been attempts to develop theoretical approaches which are embedded within political economy. Castro (2004) for example, looked to develop a critical theory of sustainability, arguing that economic growth relied upon the continuing and inevitable exploitation of both natural and social capital. More recently, in looking to develop a deeper critical understanding of sustainability, Amsler (2009, p.125) emphasised the need to *'explore the complex processes through which competing visions of just futures are produced, resisted and realized.'* Thirdly some social scientists (e.g. Springer 2010), see neoliberalism as shaping contemporary political, economic, and social policy processes, by emphasising free market mechanisms, deregulation, a minimal role for the state, and individual responsibility.

During the past three decades, the term sustainability has become increasingly commonly used across a wide range of human endeavours and is generally seen as a force for good. As investors, consumers, governments, and the media have become more aware of, and concerned about, the environmental, social, and economic impacts of business activities, so a growing number of companies have developed corporate sustainability strategies. However, some critics see the growing corporate interest in sustainability as little more than a thinly veiled and cynical ploy, popularly defined as Green Wash, and typically described as *'communication that misleads people into forming overly positive beliefs about an organization's environmental practices or products'* (Lyon and Montgomery 2015, p.223). So seen, corporate commitments to sustainability might be characterised by what Hamilton (2009, p.573-574) described as *'shifting consciousness'* towards *'what is best described as green consumerism.'* This he saw as *'an approach that threatens to entrench the very attitudes and behaviours that are antithetical to sustainability'* and argued that *'green consumerism has failed to induce significant inroads into the unsustainable nature of consumption and production'* (Hamilton 2009, p.574). Perhaps more radically, Kahn (2010, p.48) argued that *'green consumerism'* is *'an opportunity for corporations to turn the very crisis that they generate through their accumulation of capital, via the exploitation of nature, into myriad streams of emergent profit and investment revenue.'*

The Sustainable Development Goals

The SDGs, described as ‘*a plan of action for people, planet and prosperity*’ (United Nations 2015a, webpage) 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, webpage) following the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment held in Stockholm in 1972. More recently, the SDGs have looked to build on the United Nations’ 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, p.3), but other assessments of the achievements of the MDGs have been more balanced. Fehling et al. (2013, p.1110), for example, acknowledged that ‘*remarkable progress has been made*’, but argued that ‘*progress across all MDGs has been limited and uneven across countries.*’

There are 17 SDGs (Table 1) 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 from peaceful societies to productive employment*’ (Institute of Human Rights and Business 2015, p.12). 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, webpage). At the same time, 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, p.1), 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, p.11), 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.*’

TABLE 1: UNITED NATIONS SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS	
SDG 1:	Eliminate Poverty
SDG 2:	Zero Hunger
SDG 3:	Good Health and Well-being
SDG 4:	Quality Education
SDG 5:	Gender Equality
SDG 6:	Clean Water and Sanitation
SDG 7:	Access to Affordable, Sustainable and Modern Energy
SDG 8:	Decent Work and Sustainable Economic Growth
SDG 9:	Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure
SDG 10:	Reduced Inequality
SDG 11:	Sustainable Cities and Communities
SDG 12:	Sustainable Consumption and Production
SDG 13:	Climate Action
SDG 14:	Life Below Water
SDG 15:	Life on Land
SDG 16:	Peaceful and Inclusive Societies
SDG 17:	Global Partnerships for Sustainable Development

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, p. 5). The targets for SDG 1, 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; substantially reducing waste generation through prevention, reduction, recycling, and reuse by 2030; and encouraging companies to adopt sustainable practices and sustainability reporting.

Lambert (2020), argued that the public sector has traditionally been seen to have the major role in promoting global development agendas but that within the last 25 years, the private sector has become an increasingly important

player in the development process. The launch of the SDGs epitomises this more balanced emphasis, and private businesses are seen to have a key role to play in the successful achievement of the SDGs. Scheyvens et al. (2016) claimed that the private sector had several assets including innovation, responsiveness, efficiency, specific skills and a range of resources, which would be invaluable in helping to deliver the SDGs. That said, the Institute for Human Rights and Business (2015, p.5) 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.'* More critically, the Institute for Human Rights and Business (2015, p.5) 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.'*

Frame of Reference and Method of Enquiry

In an attempt to undertake an exploratory review of how the largest UK housebuilders publicly claimed to be committed to addressing the SDGs, the largest ten housebuilding companies in the UK, as reported by Stone Real Estate (pbc 2020, webpage), and as measured by the number of houses built in 2019, were selected for investigation. The number of completions is just one way to select the largest housebuilding companies, and others might include profitability and turnover, but it is also a measure of public visibility, which might be seen to mirror the desire to publicise claims to be committed to contributing to the SDGs. Companies have employed a range of methods to report their sustainable development commitments and achievements, but publication on corporate websites is now the most popular and accessible reporting mechanism (Morhardt 2009). To discover if, and how, the largest housebuilding companies were claiming to be looking to contribute to the SDGs, the authors employed two search procedures. Firstly, they undertook an Internet search in May 2020, using the key phrases Sustainable Development Goals and the name of each of the largest housebuilding companies, employing Google as the search engine. This search revealed that seven of the largest ten UK housebuilders namely, Barratt, Persimmon, Taylor Wimpey, Redrow, Countryside, Berkeley, and Crest Nicholson, referred to the SDG's on their corporate websites. Secondly, the authors searched the corporate websites of these seven housebuilders to ascertain how each of them claimed to be addressing the SDGs. The information from this simple content analysis provided the empirical material for this paper.

While some of the findings of the paper are presented in tabular form, the paper also draws heavily on specific examples and selected quotations drawn from the housebuilders' websites. The aim here was to demonstrate how the housebuilders publicly expressed their commitment to the SDGs, and the authors took the view that this was often best captured in their own corporate words, not least in that quotations could strengthen the corporate authenticity of the findings and offer greater depth of understanding (Corden and Sainsbury 2006). 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 housebuilding companies to obtain formal permission to use this information prior to conducting their research. When outlining the issues of reliability and validity in relation to information drawn from the Internet, Saunders et al. (2009), emphasised the importance of the authority and reputation of the source and the citation of a specific contact individual who can be approached for additional information. In reviewing the housebuilders' material on their corporate websites, the authors felt that the two conditions were met. While the authors recognise that their approach has a number of limitations, not least that it draws exclusively on corporate information posted on the Internet by just seven house building companies, they believe it is an appropriate approach in a paper which looks to offer an exploratory review of how some of the UK's largest housebuilders claimed to be committed to addressing the SDGs.

Barratt is one of the UK's largest residential property development companies, it was established in 1958, and it has been listed on the London Stock Exchange since 1968. Persimmon was founded in 1972 and it is made up of a nationwide network of regional operating businesses. Taylor Wimpey was formed by the merger of George Wimpey and Taylor Woodrow in 2007, but it can trace its origins back to the late nineteenth century, and its operations cover most of the UK. Redrow, originally a civil engineering company established in 1974, moved into housebuilding in 1982 and has a network of 15 operating divisions across the UK. Countryside is a housebuilding and urban regeneration company, founded in 1958, which operates principally in London and the South East, and North West, of England. Berkeley was established in 1976 and while it initially concentrated on the construction of executive housing in Southern England, since 2000, it has concentrated on large scale urban redevelopment in London. Crest Nicholson was founded in 1963 and it has 6 operating division in the South and Midlands of England.

Findings

The seven largest UK housebuilders included in the present study claimed to be committed to addressing the SDGs, though the strength of their commitment varied. Berkeley (2020, webpage), for example, reported *'being committed to helping to achieve the United Nations Sustainable Goals.'* In his *'Chief Executive Statement'* to Countryside's 2019 Sustainability Report, Ian McPherson emphasised *'our commitment to uphold, monitor and*

report against the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals’ (Countryside (2020, p.5). Other housebuilders’ commitments were arguably less forthright. Taylor Wimpey (2019, p.15), for example, reported *‘the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals provide a common definition for what a sustainable future looks like’* and *‘we support the Goals.’* In his *‘Chairman’s Statement’* to Barratt’s Annual Report, John Alton, emphasised *‘our social and environmental impact is an important concern for the Board’* and that the company had *‘embraced the UN SDGs’* (Barratt 2019, p.11). Persimmon (2019, p.8) reported *‘the UN Sustainable Development Goals provide a common sustainability framework for countries and businesses’* and *‘as a responsible business, we continue to recognise the importance of contributing to wider society.’*

Within these general commitments to the SDGs, six of the largest housebuilders claimed to be prioritising their commitments to several of the specific goals, and there was some commonality in the prioritisation process (Table 2). In prioritising specific SDGs, the housebuilders generally claimed to have looked to those goals that reflected their business strategies, offered the greatest business opportunities, and enabled them to make the most significant contribution. Here, Taylor Wimpey (2019, p.15), for example, explained *‘we aim to contribute to progress against these Goals through our work in areas such as environmental management, skills, diversity, responsible sourcing, placemaking and innovation and our investments in community infrastructure, affordable housing and charity partnerships.’* In a similar vein, Berkeley (2020, webpage), claimed *‘we recognise that although all the SDGs, and the targets that underpin these, are important and interconnected, it is imperative to focus our efforts on those that are most material to our business, where we have the greatest ability to deliver meaningful positive impact.’* Crest Nicholson (2019, p.41) simply reported *‘we carried out a review of the SDGs to determine the goals that are most material to our business. and those to which we can make the most significant contribution.’*

TABLE 2: SDG’s PRIORITISED BY THE LARGEST HOUSEBUILDERS	
HOUSEBUILDER	PRIORITISED SDGs
Barratt	3 5 7 8 12 13 15
Persimmon	8 9 11 12 13 15
Taylor Wimpey	1 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 11 12 13 15
Redrow	8 11 15
Berkeley	8 11 12 13
Crest Nicholson	3 5 8 9 11 12 13 15

Barratt prioritised seven of the SDGs, and outlined how, and why, these goals were selected. Here, the company reported *‘rather than simply adopting some or all of the goals that sound appropriate, we have researched each one, and carefully considered what the SDGs really mean to the housebuilding sector, wider society and, in particular, to what we do. Most importantly, we focus on the underlying indicators, to discover where we can make the biggest contribution, and which have the biggest impact upon us’* (Barratt 2019, p.30). More specifically, Barratt reported commissioning external consultants to analyse the meaning and relevance of the SDGs for the company. This analysis included an initial check to discount those SDGs that were outside the company’s primary business focus; a review of the remaining SDGs to determine their relevance to the company’s business operations, principles and priorities, which led to the shortlisting of eight SDGs; and the final selection by the company’s senior management.

Taylor Wimpey provided a rationale and targets for the SDGs it prioritised. In addressing SDG 1, Eliminating Poverty, for example, the company suggested that the lack of skills, housing costs, low wages and insecure employment all contributed towards poverty in the UK, and that the company could play a part in addressing these issues, particularly through its support for homelessness charities, by building affordable housing on its sites and through investing in skills and education. Further, Taylor Wimpey (2019, p.65) claimed that by 2030 its target was to *‘reduce at least by half the proportion of men, women and children of all ages living in poverty in all its dimensions, according to national definitions, and implement nationally appropriate social protection systems.’* In addressing SDG 13, climate change, Taylor Wimpey emphasised its commitment to *‘strengthen resilience and adaptive capacity to climate-related hazards and natural disasters in all countries’* and to work to *‘integrate climate change measures into national policies, strategies and planning’* (Taylor Wimpey 2019, p.70).

Berkeley (2020, webpage) also provided a rationale for the SDGs it prioritised, namely, *‘we recognise that although all the SDGs and the targets that underpin these are important and interconnected, it is imperative to focus our efforts on those that are most material to our business, where we have the greatest ability to deliver meaningful positive impact.’* In outlining the *‘relevance’* of SDG 11, Sustainable Cities and Communities, the company argued that *‘the nature of our business provides the opportunity to have a positive impact on the places where we operate’* and

claimed *'we recognise the importance of creating homes and places with reduced environmental impact'* (Berkeley,2020, webpage). The company claimed that its contribution to SDG 11 included the development of high risk brownfield sites, which many other house building companies were not willing to take on; creating well designed, high quality, safe and sustainable homes that are resilient to climate change; and understanding the social value generated by new developments

Some of the largest house building companies reported on how they planned to address specific SDGs. In addressing SDG 8, which it described as *'Good Work and Economic Growth'*, Redrow (2020, webpage), for example, claimed *'spending in our supply chain supports a large number of UK businesses predominantly in the construction industry.'* Here, the company emphasised *'our industry-leading work to help address the skills shortage'* and *'our commitments to providing safe working environments and our investing in training and development for our workforce'* Redrow (2020, webpage). In addressing SDG 15, namely *'Life on Land'*, Redrow (2020, webpage), emphasised that the company's biodiversity strategy *'seeks to put the natural environment at the heart of our developments and the lives of the people who live there'* and claimed to be pursuing *'a net gain approach to biodiversity'*, namely *'ensuring nature is enhanced as a result of our activities, and people can access and enjoy nature in their daily lives.'*

Challenges

If the largest UK housebuilders are to successfully pursue their claims to address the SDGs, they may face three sets of challenges. Firstly, there are challenges about focusing on specific SDGs. There was clear commonality, though not complete uniformity, in the SDGs prioritised by the largest housebuilders, and their decisions to prioritise specific SDGs resonates with the World Business Council for Sustainable Development's (2018, p.14) 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, webpage) 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, webpage) argued that prioritisation *'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.'*

Secondly, there are 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 to monitor progress. The dominant approach to the measurement and monitoring of the SDGs has been to use the designated indicators for each SDG. That said, Bali Swain (2018, webpage) 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, p.198) 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, p.198).

Such critiques present a dilemma for housebuilding companies, in that they can be seen to call into question the measures the housebuilders have used in the past to monitor their sustainability achievements in their annual sustainability reports. This is not to suggest that the data that has been used in the past is inaccurate per se, but that it may not necessarily measure what needs to be measured if the housebuilding industry's contribution to the SDGs is to be captured accurately. At the same time, where the housebuilders have used their own measures to claim how they will be contributing to the SDGs, this does not generate any comparable results, which would allow the housebuilders to benchmark their performance, one with another, or to assess their overall contribution, against that of the wider business community.

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 housebuilding companies claimed to be committed to addressing the SDGs in a variety of ways. Some reported on their approach to the SDGs in their annual report, some in a dedicated sustainability report and some on a dedicated corporate website. More critically, Dentsu Aegis Network (2018, p.12) 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'* (Dentsu Aegis Network 2018, p.12). The largest building companies will need to avoid their SDGs commitments and achievements being so labelled, not least because as Dentsu Aegis Network (2018, p.13) argued 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 housebuilding companies' contributions to the SDGs increasingly become fully integrated into their corporate sustainability strategies, then those contributions will be reported in their annual

sustainability reports. The housebuilders 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. However, in the past there has often been little, or no, independent external assurance of most of the data in these sustainability reports. In investigating the external assurance of data in the annual sustainability reports published by major UK house builders, Jones et al. (2015, p.430), for example, found that *'only a minority of the leading house building companies reported that they had commissioned independent external assurance'* and that at best, *'the accent was upon limited, rather than reasonable. assurance, and there are some concerns about management control of the assurance process.'* This can be seen to reduce the credibility, integrity, and reliability of the sustainability reporting process and of the housebuilders' achievements in contributing to the SDGs. However, the UK's largest house builders are complex and dynamic organisations, and this makes comprehensive assurance a difficult, time consuming and costly process. Nevertheless, growing stakeholder pressure may force the UK's house builders to commission more rigorous and wider ranging independent external assurance as a systematic element in the reporting process.

Conclusions and Discussion

The United Nations' SDG programme is ambitious and wide ranging, and a number of the UK's largest housebuilding companies have claimed a general commitment to address the SDGs. While Barratt (2020, webpage), for example, recognised *'many of the issues that drive sustainability in our business are global, with implications for every nation and industry sector'*, the overwhelming focus of the housebuilders claims to be committed to address the SDGs, is based on activities and initiatives within the UK. Within this general commitment, many of the housebuilders prioritised several specific SDGs, that reflected their business strategy and their opportunity to make a meaningful contribution. As such, the largest housebuilders can be seen to be responding positively, albeit in varying measure, to the United Nations' rallying cry for private sector engagement with the SDGs. More parochially, but arguably more importantly, for many local and national politicians, the largest housebuilders can be seen to be looking to contribute to UK Government policy on supporting the SDGs (GOV.UK 2019). Here, contributions to SDG 1, for example, might be seen in enhancing social mobility and supporting families, contributions to SDG 11 might include looking to ensure that the housing market is fairer, and contributions to SDG 12 would reflect steps to improve the energy efficiency of owner occupied, and social, housing.

At the same time, many of the corporate quotations, which accompanied the housebuilders' claims to be committed to addressing the SDGs, were fulsome in their commitment to sustainability. Here, for example, the focus was on several themes including integrating actions on climate change into national policies, strengthening resilience, enhancing the natural environment, improving people's access to nature, reducing the number of people living in poverty, tackling homelessness amongst economically disadvantaged groups, and investing in the training and development of employees. In many ways, this reads like a sustainability wish list, and critical commentators might suggest that it raises the spectre of SDG Wash mentioned earlier in this paper. More importantly, it certainly emphasises the need for the largest housebuilders to commission independent external assurance to verify their reporting on their achievements in contributing to the SDGs.

The findings of this exploratory review of the largest housebuilders' claimed commitments to the SDGs, raises some theoretical and research issues. At a general conceptual level, the approach adopted by the UK's largest housebuilders would seem largely, if not wholly, consistent with Roper's (2012) conceptualisation of weak sustainability, which privileges economic growth over environmental concerns. More substantively, stakeholder theory is important in informing the largest housebuilders' approach to the SDGs. Rosati and Faria (2019, p.1313), for example, suggested the ways companies look to contribute to, and report on, the SDGs, might be important not just to shareholders, but also to such a wider range of stakeholders, including *'citizens, societal leaders, educators, scholars, environmental authorities, non-profit organizations and international organizations committed to the achievement of the SDGs.'* It remains to be seen if, and to what extent, the largest housebuilders will wish to engage with such a wider range of stakeholders, how they might elicit the views of such a wide constituency, and what impact such wider perspectives might have on their business strategies.

More critical theoretical approaches also highlight the tensions between sustainability 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. These 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 Academic Impact (undated, webpage) 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.'* However, there was no attempt to specify how this balance was to be achieved or to define sustainable economic growth. More generally, Sultana's (2018, p.187) 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.'

Amsler's (2019, p. 125) belief that sustainable development is not possible under global capitalism, and her argument that mainstream thinking and policy effectively helps societies to '*become resilient within harmful environments that are conceived as inevitable*', rather than to '*generate possibilities for fundamentally other ways of organizing life*', would have radical implications for the housebuilders' business models. Rather, mainstream attempts to reconcile continuing economic growth and sustainable development are conventionally 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. 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 reflect, in part at least, the building companies' approaches to the SDGs, others have taken a more critical view. Schor (2005, p.310) for example, 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.*' In addressing the SDGs, Fletcher and Rammelt (2017, p.450) described decoupling '*as a fantasy that functions to obfuscate fundamental tensions among the goals of poverty alleviation, environmental sustainability, and profitable enterprise that it is intended to reconcile.*' Further, Fletcher and Rammelt (2018, p.450) argued that '*decoupling serves to sustain faith in the possibility of attaining sustainable development within the context of a neoliberal capitalist economy that necessitates continual growth to confront inherent contradictions.*'

In many ways the largest housebuilders' business strategies epitomise neoliberalism, with its emphasis on free market mechanisms, deregulation, a minimal role for the state, and individual responsibility, to increase the role of the private sector. However, Kumi et al. (2014, p.539) questioned whether the SDGs can survive neoliberalism. More specifically, Kumi et al. (2014, p.539) argued '*relying solely on the mechanisms of the market in governing and allocating environmental resources is necessarily insufficient and problematic.*' Looking to the future, Kumi et al. (2014, p. 539) called for a new approach which '*places issues of equity and addressing unfavourable power relations at the centre of interventions aimed at achieving the ideals of sustainable development.*' More generally, Scheyvens et al. (2016, p. 376) suggested that '*carving out of a space and role for the private sector in addressing the SDGs does not sufficiently challenge the neoliberal mechanisms that have created many inequalities and poor development results in the first place.*'

This exploratory paper has its limitations, as outlined earlier, but the authors believe it provides a platform for future research. A first step for researchers, or more probably for research teams, might be to establish a formal collaborative research project with one, or possibly more, of the largest house building companies, designed to investigate how companies are looking to engage with the SDG's. Ideally such partnerships might enable researchers not only to explore how the largest housebuilders have developed their policy commitments to the SDG, but also allow them to monitor the ongoing achievements of the housebuilders in contributing to the SDGs. That said, the negotiation of agreements between researchers and companies for such collaborative research ventures would be complicated, not least in that researchers might well want access to sensitive commercial data and housebuilding companies might demand the right to control, or veto, the researchers' findings.

More practically, academic research might profitably be undertaken at the strategic and the operational level. At the strategic level, for example, primary research amongst senior housebuilding companies' executives, might profitably explore several issues. Such issues might include corporate thinking and policy development on the SDG's; the forces driving the companies' pursuit of the SDGs; the potential tensions between shareholders and stakeholders in pursuing commitments to the SDGs; if, and how, stakeholders' concerns are incorporated into housebuilders commitments to the SDGs; the challenges of, and opportunities for, integrating the SDGs within corporate strategies; how, and why, certain SDGs have been prioritised; housebuilders relationships with suppliers and customers in the pursuit of SDG agendas and perceptions of the locus of power within such relationships; and the mechanisms developed by housebuilders to enable different groups of stakeholders to influence their approach to the SDGs. At the operational level, specific research investigations might focus, for example, on how corporate policy towards the SDG's is communicated both to employees and contractors, as well as to customers and potential customers; on how data on environmental, social and economic impacts is collected, and on how such data is independently verified; and on the success of practical schemes designed to reduce waste and encourage, and facilitate, recycling. Such research endeavours could include comparative investigations across housebuilding companies and detailed case studies of individual housebuilders.

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