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Review

Leading European Retailers and the Sustainable Development Goals

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ABSTRACT

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 aim of this paper is to offer an exploratory review of if, and how, Europe's leading retailers publicly claim to be committed to addressing the SDGs. The paper reveals that seven of Europe's top ten retailers reported their commitment to contribute to the SDGs, though the scale and the extent of their commitment varied. The paper also suggests that if the leading European retailers are to make a substantial contribution towards the achievement of the SDG's then they may have to face up to four sets of challenges, namely the prioritisation of SDGs, issues about measurement and metrics, reporting and communication, and fundamental tensions between sustainability and economic growth. The paper concludes by outlining a number of avenues for future research.

KEYWORDS: Sustainable Development Goals; retailing; Europe; measurement; reporting; economic growth

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*" [1]. The SDGs are ambitious and embrace a wide range of environmental, social and economic issues including climate change, energy supply, 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*

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multinationals" [1] in addressing these goals and many companies within the private sector have begun to take up this challenge [2].

The majority of Europe's leading retailers have been pursuing sustainability strategies, and reporting on their achievements against these strategies, for some time [3] 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"* [4]. 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 though their wider role in society as opinion leaders. That said, the SDGs are best seen as a very complex work in progress and their implementation may prove a long, and potentially an elusive, process. While Allen et al. [5] reviewed *"initial progress in implementing the SDGs"*, the current authors share Appau and Mabefam's [6] belief that *"it is too early to evaluate whether the SDGs live up to their potential and promise"*, Rather the aim of this short paper is much more modest, in that it offers an exploratory review of if, and how, Europe's leading retailers publicly claim to be committed to addressing the SDGs.

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AND THE SDGS

The ideas underpinning sustainable development have long historical roots. Du Pisani [7], for example argued that *"the roots of the concept of sustainability can be traced back to ancient times, but that 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 modern 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"* [8] is still widely used three decades after it was initially framed. However, defining sustainable development is not straightforward and it is seen as a contested concept which *"means different things to different people"* [9]. By way of a summary, on the one hand, there is a family of definitions of sustainable development based in, and around, ecological principles and on the other hand there are broader definitions, which look to embrace social and economic, as well as environmental, goals, and which look to embrace equity in meeting human needs.

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. However, a number of critics see the growing business interest in sustainability as little more than a thinly

veiled and cynical ploy, popularly described as "Green Wash", designed to attract socially and environmentally conscious consumers while sweeping pressing environmental and social concerns under the carpet. So seen, corporate commitments to sustainability might be characterised by what Hamilton [10] described as *"shifting consciousness"* towards *"what is best described as green consumerism"*. This he sees as *"an approach that threatens to entrench the very attitudes and behaviours that are antithetical to sustainability"* and argues that *"green consumerism has failed to induce significant inroads into the unsustainable nature of consumption and production"* [10]. Perhaps more radically Kahn [11] 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"*.

There have been a number of attempts to theorise sustainability. As a general conceptual characterisation Hudson [12] argued that definitions range from *"pallid blue green to dark deep green"*. The former, Hudson [12] 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"*. A distinction is also often made between weak and strong sustainability and Roper [13] suggested that *"weak sustainability prioritizes economic development, while strong sustainability subordinates economies to the natural environment and society, acknowledging ecological limits to growth"*. More substantially, there two theoretical positions relevant to the current review. Stakeholder theory, for example, assumes that satisfying the interests of different stakeholders, who are all parties that are directly or indirectly involved in the business activities, will ultimately determine the success of products and services. There have also been attempts to develop theoretical approaches which are embedded within political economy. Castro [14] 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 [15] emphasised the need to *"explore the complex processes through which competing visions of just futures are produced, resisted and realized"*.

The SDGs, described as *"a plan of action for people, planet and prosperity"* [1] 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"* [16] 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 by the United Nations [17] as having *"produced the most successful anti-poverty movement in history"* [6,16] but other assessments of the achievements of the MDGs have been more balanced. While Fehling et al. [18], 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 for the Institute of Human Rights and Business [19] 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"*. The European Commission [20] 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"*. However, in some ways two of the SDGs stand out from the others, namely SDGs 12 and 13. United Nations Climate Change [21] argued that, 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"*. 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. [22] 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 [23] 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.

In addition to the SDGs themselves, there are 169 associated targets, and the Institute for Human Rights and Business [19] claimed that in *"a genuinely comprehensive vision of the future"* and that *"little is left unaddressed"*. 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 [20] 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.

Lambert [24] 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 approach and private businesses are seen to have a key role to play in the successful achievement of the SDGs. Scheyvens [25] claimed that the private sector had a number of assets including innovation, responsiveness, efficiency, specific skills and a range of resources, which would be invaluable in helping to deliver the SDGs.

A number of authors have welcomed the SDGs'. Morton et al. [26], for example, claimed that SDGs provide a valuable framework for addressing dangerous climate change and achieving wider public health benefits. Kumar et al. [27] described the SDGs as *"a new people centred agenda"*, which would *"benefit from the valuable lessons learnt from the MDGs"* and would also *"carry forward the unfinished agenda of MDGs for continuity, and sustain the momentum generated while addressing the additional challenges of inclusiveness, equity, and urbanization and further strengthening global partnership by including civil society organisations and private sector".*

While Allen et al. [28] suggested that some initial progress had been made in the initial planning stages of the SDGs, they argued that *"key gaps remain in terms of the assessment of interlinkages, trade-off and synergies between targets"*, that *"gaps are also clearly evident in the adoption of systems thinking and integrated analytical approaches and models"* and that *"this is problematic as it may undermine effective implementation and the transformative potential of the SDGs".* The Institute for Human Rights and Business [19] 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 [19] 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

Given the exploratory nature of this paper, the authors focused on a simple research question, namely if, and how, how Europe's leading retailers are publicly claiming to be addressing the SDGs and adopted a simple Internet based methodological approach. To these ends, the leading

ten retailers in Europe as measured by turnover and as listed by Retail Index [29], were selected as the frame of reference for the 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, 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 were claiming to address 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 1300 stores in Germany and Eastern Europe, while Lidl is a discount operation with a limited average range of c. 3800 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 3400 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 3800 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 contribute to the SDGs, though the scale and the extent of their commitment varied. In outlining its commitment to the SDGs, Schwarz [30] 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 [30] 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 [31] 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 [32] 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 [33] 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 plans to contribute to all 17 SDGs, while others concentrated their energies on specific goals. J. Sainsbury [34], for example, provided some simple examples of its contribution to all the SDG's. In illustrating its commitment to SDG 3, J. Sainsbury [34] 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 [34] claimed its 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 [35] 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 [35] identified eight SDGs namely SDG's 2, 3, 7, 8, 12, 13, 14 and 15. Tesco's [35] 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 [35]

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 [32] 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 claimed to be 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 [31] reported that it is particularly focused on seven of the SDGs namely, SDGs 2, 3, 5, 12, 13, 14 and 15 and Rewe [37] 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 [30] 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 [30] set a number of milestones, focused upon sustainable raw materials, zero waste, food waste, chemicals and empowerment. Here Schwarz [30] 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 [30] 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 [35] 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 [35] 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 [35] committed to remove all hard to recycle materials from its own brand packaging. Aldi North [36] reported on 27 initiatives to illustrate how the company was committed to 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 [36] 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 focused upon their own operations but some of them also reported on the looking to achieve the SDGs within their supply chains. Aldi North [36], 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 [36] 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 [36] 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 [36] 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 [30] reported their commitment to *"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 [30] 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 [30] also reported on its commitment to *"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 claimed to be looking to integrate their approach to the SDGs within their wider corporate sustainability strategies in a variety of ways. J. Sainsbury [34], 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 [37] reported its commitment to comparing its corporate sustainability goals and business processes with the SDGs. As such, Rewe [37] 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 [31] 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 [31] grade the contribution of each of the four criteria to the six SDS. Thus, for Carrefour [31] 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 SDG 13, 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 [31] 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 [31] 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 claimed to be looking 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. More generally, if the leading European retailers are to make a substantial contribution towards the achievement of the SDG's then they may have to face up to four sets of challenges. The first revolves around the retailers' claims to be prioritising specific SDGs. Here the retailers argue that in claiming to pursue such an approach they are concentrating their energies and resources, on those SDGs, which offer the greatest business opportunities and where they feel they can make the most significant contribution. This approach certainly strikes a positive chord with the World Business Council for Sustainable Development's [38] 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 [39] 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 [39] 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".*

Apart from Auchan who made no claims about prioritisation, there was clear commonality, though not complete uniformity, in the specific SDGs prioritised by the selected European retailers. All six retailers all prioritised SDG 2 and 12 and five of them prioritised SDG 13. That said in prioritising SDG13, action to combat climate change and its impacts, presents a daunting challenge for retailers. Not least in that United Nations Climate Change [21] argued that *"climate change presents the single biggest threat to sustainable development"*, and in that Liverman [40] 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 outlined their plans 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, who may be 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. SDG 13, promoting sustainable consumption and production, also has its problems. Here a number of the retailers effectively redefined SDG12 as responsible, rather than sustainable, consumption. However, none of the retailers offered a definition of responsible retailing, though their approach to 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 [41] 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.

A second set of challenges concern 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 [42] 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 [43] 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"* [43].

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 achievements in their annual sustainability reports, and which some retailers are already using to publicise their commitment 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' commitments to the SDGs.

Thirdly, there are challenges 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 looking to contribute to the SDGs within their sustainability report, Schwarz and Tesco produced a dedicated short report on their commitment, and initial 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 [44] 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 [44] 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' commitments and contributions 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 Jones et al. [3] have claimed that there has often been little or no independent external assurance of the majority of the data in these sustainability reports. This will surely 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, the fundamental, tensions between sustainable development and economic growth present a wider, but potentially more intractable, set of challenges. The one looking to promote development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the needs of the future and the other, seemingly dependent on the continuing exploitation of scarce natural resources. 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 [45] 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 [4] claimed *"steady and inclusive economic growth is a precondition for sustainable development"* and all the leading European retailers are committed to continuing growth.

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. [46] 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

[47] argued that *"improvements in technological eco-efficiency alone will be insufficient to bring about the transition to sustainability"*. Schor [48] 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 [40] 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"*.

The retailers' commitment to growth certainly poses a challenge for those who believe that SDG13 should be concerned with *"consuming less"* as suggested by Jackson [49]. In the concluding their examination of how private sector was addressing the SDGs, Wynn and Jones [2] suggested *"it may require a truly cataclysmic event to trigger collective, rather than individual self interest to precipitate widespread corporate engagement with the SDGs"*. At that time, a catastrophic climate event perhaps seemed the most likely cause of such a response, but at the time of writing the Corona Virus, Covid-19, seems to be providing a check on unsustainable consumption and production. In acknowledging that *"we are now struggling to anticipate the impacts of COVID-19"* as *"major financial markets are gyrating and international supply chains are in* turmoil', Cohen [50] asked *"does the COVID-19 outbreak mark the onset of transition of a sustainable consumption transition?"* More pointedly, Cohen [50] claimed *"while the present situation is being treated as an emergent economic crisis, it merits acknowledging that sustainability scientists and policy makers have implicitly been seeking to achieve over the past decade broadly similar objectives…… in the form of a sustainable consumption transition"*.

CONCLUSIONS

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 [51] 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, in concluding this paper, the authors suggest 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 focuses on the European retailers' public claims about their commitments to the SDGs, and it draws exclusively on corporate information posted on the Internet. However, the authors believe their simple exploratory approach provides some initial insight into the leading European retailers' claimed commitments to the SDGs, and that it is appropriate in what is an exploratory study and that provides a platform for future research. Looking to the future, a first step might be for researchers, or more probably for research teams or institutes, to establish a formal collaborative research project with one, or possibly more, of the large European retailers, designed to investigate how companies are contributing to the achievement of the SDG's. The negotiation of agreements between researchers and companies for such a collaborative research venture would be complicated, not least in that researchers might well want access to sensitive commercial data and retailers might demand the right to control, or veto, the researchers' findings. A number of theoretical and empirical research issues merit attention.

On the theoretical side, how leading retailers go about addressing the SDGs, can be seen to pose a challenge for stakeholder theory. The complexity of both the SDG's and of large retailers' supply chains, calls into question how well the interests of all stakeholders can be incorporated into decision making, and to what extent the potentially conflicting claims of stakeholders might be reconciled. At the same time, the extent to which leading retailers' contribute to the SDGs may also have important implications for the development of more critical approaches to sustainability. Here, for example, there are opportunities to explore how the retailers' commitments to continuing economic growth, and the competition between retailers, expose and potentially exacerbate environmental and social problems in many developing countries where many products are sourced. Further, Amsler's (2019) [15] argument about the need to focus on different ways of organising life, perhaps offers one valuable starting point for exploring alternative visions for retail contributions to the SDGs.

More practically, academic research might, for example, be profitably undertaken at the strategic and the operational level. At the strategic level, for example, primary research amongst European retailers' executives, might explore a number of issues. Such issues might include corporate thinking and policy development on the SDG's; the forces driving the retailers' pursuit of the SDGs; the challenges of, and opportunities for, integrating the SDGs within corporate strategies; how and why certain SDGs have been prioritised; the retailers' relationships with suppliers and customers in the pursuit of SDG agendas and perceptions of the locus of power within such realtionships; and the mechanisms developed by retailers 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 customers and employees; 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 the European retail industry and detailed case studies of individual retailers.

DATA AVAILABILITY

All the information presented in the paper is available on the cited corporate websites.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Both authors contributed to all sections of this paper.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors declare there is no conflict of interest

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