Annual Trend Report 2020

Sustainable Development Goals
The 2020 Dröge & van Drimmelen trend report explores how public affairs can contribute to the application of the SDGs by governments, civil societies and companies.
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Preface

Dröge & van Drimmelen is a strategic consultancy firm that operates at the intersection of corporate communication and public affairs, with offices in The Hague, Brussels, Copenhagen, New York and Shanghai. We consider it important to contribute to the professionalisation of the field of public affairs.

Our employees are (active) members of the Professional Association for Public Affairs (BVPA), our founder and director Frans van Drimmelen wrote the Handbook on Public Affairs, and the office in The Hague has organised the annual Ben Pauw Lezing between 2011 and 2016. Since 2017, we publish an annual trend report in which we research trends and developments in the field of public affairs.

This year’s trend report contains thirteen interviews with experts on the theme for this year: Public Affairs and the Sustainable Development Goals. The Dröge & van Drimmelen 2020 Trend Report looks at how public affairs can contribute to the application of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by governments, civil societies and companies.

The contribution of the Dr2 network to the SDGs

All Dr2 firms have embraced the SDGs as leading business principles. When it comes to the SDGs, our agency DR2 Consultants New York has the biggest network. Operating in line with the agenda of the United Nations, we closely monitor the development of the SDGs. DR2 Consultants New York offers businesses, governments and NGOs all around the world the opportunity to get information first-hand, organise meetings and side-events during UN sessions or discuss certain issues with UN officials. With regard to the SDGs, Dr2 New Economy has researched and mapped out the impact of the Dr2 business network on the SDGs. Creating an internal annual report helps us gain insight in our positive impact and focuses our attention on where we can do more. Dr2 Consultants Brussels has developed a European Green Deal tool, which is in line with the SDGs as well. This tool gives a comprehensive overview of how the European Green Deal will affect your business, identifying the opportunities and challenges and highlighting moments to positively influence policies and legislation. Dr2 Events & Campaigns has researched how to incorporate the SDGs in the events industry.

https://sdgresources.relx.com/bsdc
Introduction

“The 2020 Dröge & van Drimmelen trend report explores how the SDGs contribute to the effectiveness of public affairs of civil societies and companies.”

The main strength of public affairs is to bring organisational policies as well as their views and actions on certain issues into the public debate, thus engaging stakeholders and improving policy and legislation.

Every government, civil society and business has its economic, social and sustainable objectives; the latter two are often referred to as ‘purpose’. This purpose can be positively or negatively affected by policy and the public debate, leading to questions as; How do we keep on track? How do we communicate and report on our progress? How do we engage stakeholders? How do we involve the government? In these matters, the SDGs offer guidance. They give words and meaning to the purpose of the private sector and help to formulate policy goals. They also offer common ground for the debate on the social and sustainable objectives of the private sector, which — as the interviews make clear — gets more and more interwoven with the economic objective.

Public affairs may therefore contribute to bringing the SDGs to life in the private and public sector. Public affairs strategies enhance awareness of the goals, targets and their communicative value, using its core strength of communication and stakeholder engagement between governments, civil societies and businesses. This is a two-way process; Public affairs is needed to bring the SDGs higher on the government’s agenda, moving towards national strategies and policies. On the other hand, the SDGs help businesses and civil societies to report on their social and sustainable progress with stakeholders and government. Therefore, this year’s trend report analyses how public affairs can contribute to the uptake of the SDGs by governments, civil societies and businesses.

This trend report reflects the expertise and international coverage of our offices in The Hague, Brussels, Copenhagen, New York and Shanghai. It comprises thirteen interviews with experts on this topic, all highlighting the role of public affairs with regard to the SDGs.

Towards a better world with the SDGs

Civil society strives for wellbeing, development, social equality and preservation of the natural environment. In a time when the world is facing huge global challenges, including poverty, inequality, climate change, environmental degradation, and numerous threats to peace and justice, the SDGs are formulated as a global compass expressing the ambition to create a society where no one is left behind and where everyone is given the opportunity to build a better future for themselves. The SDGs are a worldwide project. Initiated by a UN taskforce, a public survey was launched asking people to contribute to and vote for topics that are important to them. The final list of seventeen goals was a collaboration of 193 countries and the aim is to achieve the goals by 2030.

The SDGs comprise 17 goals and defines 169 targets. The goals are interconnected, focusing on the intertwining character of the global economic system. They transcend borders and apply across societies and economies. Progress on one goal can have a positive impact on other goals as well. Even though progress is being made towards achieving the SDGs, it is not at the speed or scale that is necessary. At the SDG Summit in September 2019, world leaders called for a Decade of Action. With just under ten years left to achieve the SDGs, global action, local action and people action is needed. This requires more institutions and regulatory frameworks of governments, cities and local authorities, and action by the public and private sector.

COVID 19: an opportunity or a threat for SDGs?

However, a lot has changed since 2019, within a short period of time. The COVID-19 pandemic presents Europe with a historic challenge, requiring unprecedented measures to prevent economic collapse and an innovative approach to ensure a sustainable recovery. During a special meeting, the European Council stated that the European Union’s support programmes and instruments should be in line with the Union’s commitments to the Paris Agreement and the SDGs. Therefore, this crisis also presents a great opportunity to transform the EU through major policies such as the European Green Deal and the digital revolution, creating a more resilient European economy. Spending EU recovery funds on companies that operate in line with its sustainability ambitions and goals provides the EU with a window of opportunity for a sustainable and resilient recovery trajectory.

Business value creation and a sustainable post-COVID recovery go hand in hand with business opportunities that support human rights, global health & wellbeing, and protection of our planet. They play a vital role in the achievement of the SDGs with pillars as human rights, health, equality, environment, working con-
ditions and corruption reduction as a set of business values. Poverty, inequality and unrest are conditions in which businesses do not flourish, therefore it is of vital interest to ensure the 2030 SDG agenda is implemented. Implementation of the SDGs is estimated to be worth US$12 trillion in terms of revenue and savings by 2030.

**More than ever, the SDGs require public affairs**

In last year’s trend report, ‘Global Public Affairs’, Dröge & van Drimmelen looked at how public affairs is related to diplomacy and how lessons can be learnt from each other. Professionals and experts with experience in public affairs, science and diplomacy saw a shift in the role of public affairs. In the classic sense, public affairs focuses mainly on legislation and contact with politicians. However, various interviewees experienced that global public affairs is shifting to what signals the company sends out and how it contributes to society. Therefore, the role of public affairs should be brought in line with and contribute to these social values, which are clearly set out and defined in the SDGs.
Michiel Dijkman is the Head of Communication & Corporate Affairs at Samsung. Next to his main job, he also is supervisor at the public broadcasting company NTR and at the Limburgs Museum. Furthermore, Dijkman is advisor for educational institutions, such as Fontys School of Business and Communication and Nuffic, that deals primarily with the internationalization of education. He is also engaged in several boards in the cultural sector, as well as in the political party CDA.

He studied International Business Administration (2008) at the University of Maastricht, where he also studied in Canada for a semester at the University of Calgary (2005). In 2016, he successfully completed an executive management programme at the University of Harvard on “Strategies to Create Business & Social Value”.

What responsibility do you see for companies with regard to the SDGs?

When the SDG-story started a couple of years a go, it wasn’t a very known term for many companies. I notice now that step by step – at least at the C-level – it becomes clearer what the SDGs are exactly. Furthermore, I think that the SDGs are a good example of a situation where not only the government has to take action, but also where responsibility is expected from corporations, NGOs and citizens – the triple helix-construction. This construction is something that is reflected well in the SDGs.

I think that companies can execute things and put them into practice. Nonetheless, it is true that the 16+1 SDGs truly encompass everything. A company has to make certain decisions at some point. Because Samsung takes into account only three SDGs as a company, we have chosen not to put the SDG-logo on our website. Additionally, there are many sub-SDGs under the 16+1 SDGs. It’s still relatively unclear what the real key performance indicators (KPIs) – something that companies love – are. In my experience it is unclear for companies what exactly the ‘combatting of poverty’ and ‘quality education’ precisely entail.

From my perspective, I think that it is better to incorporate the SDGs into the core business of a company, and from there contribute to them. For example, you could put aside a special fund dedicated to SDGs, say 1% of the profit, and use it for fun projects related to the SDGs.

What responsibility do you see for civil societies and NGOs with regard to the SDGs?

It’s good that NGOs and societal organizations exist, and that they keep triggering companies in relation to societally relevant interests and the SDGs. I do think that these successes should be celebrated. In my opinion, this currently happens too little. An example of a situation where this happened was when Samsung said that we will provide all buildings with green electricity, but that it will take two years longer than for other buildings. The attention from societal organizations was vested on the second part of our announcement; the timespan being two years longer than for other buildings. The first part of our announcement was lost. I think it would incentivize companies to do more if these organizations would be a bit more positive every now and then.

It also is important that societal organizations and NGOs put pressure on companies. Currently, there are only a handful of companies who take action out of intrinsic motivation. That which drives many companies are profits and the expansion of market shares, so you’ll need to have someone inside of a company who feels intrinsically motivated or who feels the external pressure, hence becomes motivated as a result. NGOs and societal organizations are highly functional in that regard.
What responsibility do you see for the government with regard to the SDGs?

In my opinion, the government should take on the role as frontrunner in the triple helix construction in regard to the SDGs, maybe even be a guarantor in case things don’t go well. The results are more significant then. Samsung wanted to start pilots, for example in healthcare, but ran into certain hurdles. When this occurred it was the government who stated that the market should solve these hurdles. That didn’t work out well. I don’t think that the government should entirely take the reigns over the market, but they can be more of a frontrunner. Here I mean that the government shouldn’t just draft or adjust regulations, which is primarily facilitating, but do more than that: formulate pilots and execute them in collaboration with companies and societal organizations. I think that Frans Timmermans and his Green Deal is a good example of a government, in this case the EU, who takes on the role of frontrunner.

How do you think that public affairs contributes to the SDGs?

‘Achieving the SDGs’ is a difficult term, because what exactly is the goal and its key performance indicator (KPI)? Nonetheless, there are certainly examples where collaboration, through public affairs, has realized that new ideas and initiatives related to the SDGs have manifested themselves (see appendix 1). Here it also applies that well-considered and co-ordinated local initiatives – so-called best practices – can be copied and reused in other countries. It is not just about talking, but also to try out new initiatives, for example through pilots.

I think public affairs also contributes as facilitator in the triple helix, which also is necessary for achieving the SDGs. This has little to do with regulations and much more with other parts of public affairs: for example collaborating with stakeholders and having campaigns. Public affairs should also be seen as a broad term in the international context.

How do you think that the SDGs contribute to the effectivity of public affairs?

I think that activities within the framework of the SDGs certainly contribute to the effectivity of public affairs. There are some activities that Samsung had already incorporated which later were linked to the SDGs.

There are examples of some education-oriented pilots conducted by Samsung in the Netherlands, the so-called “smart education hubs.” These pilots delivered good results: the Minister of Education visited, as well as representatives of the Primary Education Council, and so on. That was very much appreciated internally at Samsung as well. With these activities we don’t explicitly say that ‘we are now working on SDG number four (quality education).’ That is primarily because we try to attract a broad audience. Samsung is a consumer corporation and wants to communicate and clarify what it does and why. This educational project was connected to Samsung’s intent to prepare the youth for skills that are required in the 21st century. This in turn leads to higher sales of tablets in classrooms, but at the same time contributes to diminishing the gap between those who are digitally proficient and those who are not. If this gap becomes bigger, it will become more difficult to actively participate on the labour market and society at large.

How do you think that activities regarding to the SDGs contribute to the public affairs goals?

Certainly. But many of our societal activities already existed prior the introduction of the SDGs. In 2013, Samsung conducted research into world problems. This resulted in several themes: educational innovation, (damage control of) youth unemployment, healthcare costs and sustainability. Based on these results Samsung took action. Such an inquiry is often necessary for a company to demonstrate necessity or relevance.

Samsung doesn’t have a key performance indicator (KPI) specifically related to the SDGs, but they do around corporate responsibility (CSR). This is subsequently translated into (local) public affairs strategies. That is desirable because implementations of societally relevant goals differ per country. Reputation is of importance for Samsung, but it is not a marketing-goal. The activities require to be significant and have an impact. Sadly it is likely that crises result in budget cuts related to corporate responsibility.

From my perspective, I think that it is better to incorporate the SDGs into the core business of a company, and from there contribute to them. For example, you could put aside a special fund dedicated to SDGs, say 1% of the profit, and use it for fun projects related to the SDGs.
Do you experience a difference with how the SDGs are now implement-
ed by governments, civil societies and companies in relation to five
years ago?

From my perspective, there is a difference in the role that the SDGs play in
comparison to five years ago. It currently is a lot more known among govern-
ments, companies, societal organizations and the broader public. The growing
renown contributes to the fact that companies and organizations who pick up
on the SDGs will communicate about them. One such example is how the Dutch
SDG-ambassador has helped in creating more renown for the SDGs. As a result,
I notice in my work that SDGs are involved in different fora. For example in talks
on the labour market with politicians and other members of government. These
people know what the SDGs are, what they entail and use them in these conver-
sations.

Do you expect a change regarding regulatory frameworks according to
the SDG for you civil society or company in the upcoming years?

I think that our initiatives on, for example, packaging materials and green energy
certainly are related to the ratification of the 2015 Climate Agreement in Paris.
Additionally, I think that the structural approach to child labour, that started ap-
proximately seven years ago, has ignited by former Minister of Foreign Trade and
Development Cooperation, Lilian Ploumen. The attention for child labour has put
pressure on big international firms to address this. A whole network consisting of
a plethora of NGOs responsible for checking them, was set up.

I also see that companies proactively try to act on upcoming laws and regu-
lations in order to implement them as soon as possible, for example in terms of
packaging material. There frequently are preparatory activities the moment a
societal discussion takes place surrounding certain subjects, including the SDGs.

How do you envisage the development of the importance of SDGs in
the future, (how) will your organization respond to this and what do you
/ does your organization need for this?

I expect that the SDGs will get even more concrete goals, formulated and ap-
proved by governments and the United Nations (UN). This would make the SDGs
more clear and practically more feasible for a lot of societal organizations and
companies, including Samsung. Important here is that social key performance
indicators (KPIs) are formulated with deadlines, so you can monitor, trace and
take action accordingly. This will enable societal organizations and companies to
set targets internally as well. Samsung already sets certain KPIs, such as making
all its packaging circular within 1.5 years.

Does the corona crisis and the political desire to emerge from this
crisis more sustainably, affect the attention and / or resources avail-
able from your company or organization for the implementation of the
SDGs?

I think that corona, and the upcoming economic crisis, won’t have a positive
impact on obtaining the SDGs. There is less money available within NGOs as well
as companies that allow investments into the goals. The SDGs have gotten lower
on the list of priorities of societal organizations, governments and companies.
What I did notice is that people are a lot more careful when it comes to investing
money. However, at the peak of the corona-crisis in the past months, Samsung
has made sure that tablets were available in the healthcare sector and for the
elderly. But I notice that the less immediate problems, such as educational
innovation, have slowed down. This is primarily due to the fear for the upcoming
economic crisis.

Which SDGs do you consider the most relevant for your organization?
Is it good to focus or should governments, companies and civil socie-
ties deploy broadly?

I think it it’s good for businesses that operate worldwide to focus on specific SDGs.
The focus on specific SDGs can be done in a centralized fashion, just like some
companies already do. It can also be feasible if a specific branch of an organiza-
tion, e.g. the African department, focuses on a different SDG than its European
counterpart. As such, ‘innovative healthcare’ means something very different than
in, say, Brabant; customization is necessary within the organization. The disadvan-
tage is that it can cause for a lot of fragmentation within a company, though.

Appendix 1: Example public affairs and societal goals

A couple of years ago, approximately 60,000 smartphones a year were stolen
in The Netherlands. This did not only occur in The Netherlands; in Belgium
an estimated 80,000 smartphones were stolen a year. In The Netherlands,
various stakeholders have discussed the issue for a long time (within public
affairs). The decision was that a public-private collaboration needed to
be established. The Dutch government sent a formal letter to Samsung’s
headquarters in South-Korea with the request to make Samsung’s software
available in order to address this issue. Consequently, Samsung accelerated
the development of the find my mobile-software and made it available for
use. This initiated a Dutch public-private pilot to combat the theft of smart-
phones: Samsung made its software available to find smartphones easier
and quicker; the government started a campaign in four big cities and the
national police would monitor the results. After a year 30% less smart-
phones were stolen in The Netherlands. The pilot was later presented to the
EU as other countries, such as Germany and Belgium, were also interested.
Onny Jalink has been Deputy Consul General and Head of Economy of the Netherlands Consulate General in Shanghai since November 2016. Before that, she was the head of the Dutch Regional Rule of Law Network in the Western Balkans. She has over 17 years of international experience at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Economic Affairs, including in the fields of security, economic and European affairs.

What responsibility do you see for businesses with regard to the SDGs?

Businesses play a crucial role in achieving the SDGs, for instance by means of CSR, but no less importantly through innovation. The innovative power of business and academia ensures that practical solutions are found to meet the objectives we have agreed on at the political level.

The Dutch business community is a global leader in the field of CSR. CSR relates to various SDGs; in the Netherlands, for instance, we are relatively strong in sustainability, health, and agri-food. Several large Dutch multinationals such as Philips and DSM have integrated CSR into their business models. And not for nothing – it’s becoming more and more commonplace that CSR contributes to the competitiveness and future resilience of businesses.

In order not to lose our leading position, Dutch businesses cannot rest on their laurels and must continue to invest in innovation. Innovation is needed to retain this position of worldwide competitiveness and profitability. Fortunately, this awareness is also growing in China. The business community here is open to Dutch parties that find and market innovative solutions that contribute to the SDGs.

What responsibilities with regard to SDGs do you see for civil societies and NGOs?

The position of NGOs in China is different from other parts of the world. An important general task of NGOs is to identify abuses, and to raise problems in policy or implementation. In this way, civil societies are part of the checks & balances in dealings with the government. This is different in the Chinese context; there is less room for NGOs to operate in certain areas. There is legislation that strictly regulates NGOs, especially when it comes to politically sensitive issues.

Nevertheless, civil societies in China are very active on certain issues: for example, there are many NGOs that work on sustainability issues. However, their role is mainly focused on implementation. Policy objectives set by the central government at a high level of abstraction are fleshed out at a lower level, with or without implementing legislation or policies, often in cooperation with civil societies.

What responsibilities with regard to SDGs do you see for governments?

The SDGs are primarily agreements drawn up and underwritten by the UN Member States. The starting point is that countries and governments are committed to these goals. Of course, this comes with responsibilities. As Consulate-General (CG) in Shanghai, we represent the Dutch government in our region, and the SDGs are an important component of our work, as they are for our colleagues at the other diplomatic missions in the China network. The Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation (BHOS) memorandum — the government’s policy framework with the SDGs at its heart — forms the framework for our work.

The SDGs are also important to the Chinese government. While it is not easy to find a reference to SDGs in their policy documents, the underlying goals of many SDGs are reflected in some of the key priorities of the Chinese government. Whether or not they bear the SDG label is irrelevant in my opinion: they are still the same goals and the Dutch network of diplomatic missions in China can make a contribution here.

At government-to-government level, we are also active in China on various SDGs. This takes place partly at a centralized level, but also often at a decentralized level. A good example of cooperation at a centralized level was the establishment
last year of a branch office in China of the Global Centre for Adaptation, in the presence of Prime Minister Li Keqiang and Prime Minister Rutte, that works on climate adaptation together with Chinese stakeholders (SDG 13).

One of the examples of how we as CG Shanghai work together with local authorities is in the field of zero-waste: we entered into extensive discussions with three pilot cities in our region about their role in the national zero-waste pilot. What are their concrete objectives and KPIs? Is there interest in and room for Dutch input in this two-year pilot that can form the basis for the national zero-waste policy? It is also striking that one of the three pilot cities in our region was extremely focused on the SDGs and explicitly mentioned them during our meetings.

In addition to cooperation at government level, the network of diplomatic missions also collaborates with the business community and NGOs to implement the SDGs. Last year, for example, our colleagues in Guangzhou and a number of other countries organised an international sustainability conference in Shenzhen for the third time. The agenda of this conference revolved around the SDGs.

To what extent does public affairs contribute to achieving the SDGs?

At the Consulate, we are very aware of the fact that we are working towards achieving the SDGs. In addition to the bilateral cooperation between governments already mentioned, we primarily focus on related trade facilitation. We find and identify opportunities for Dutch businesses, and try to link Dutch to Chinese stakeholders and remove some of the annoying red tape. Since much of the implementation of top-down policy is laid down in government contracts, we as a network of diplomatic missions can, for instance, help Dutch companies by introducing them to the Chinese and local authorities and by bringing Dutch expertise to the attention of all sorts of bodies that can contribute to the achievement of SDGs. This opens doors that would otherwise remain closed.

The Dutch covenants on international responsible business conduct regarding human rights — for example the textile sector covenant — are good examples of how businesses, civil societies and the government can work together to achieve SDG goals worldwide. In China, a great deal of attention is being paid to these Dutch covenants, in essence self-regulating agreements signed by various sectors, certainly in the field of zero-waste and circularity. The Dutch government has initiated a large-scale, multi-year CSR project in China, for instance, to make textile dyers more sustainable. Many Dutch companies have their textiles dyed in China. With Arcadis as executing partner, we contribute to both CSR in the Netherlands and to achieving the SDGs. The local authorities are an important stakeholder in this process, and we hope that this project can act as a stepping-stone and catalyst, and will be implemented elsewhere in China.

To what extent do SDG activities contribute to the public affairs objectives?

In the Netherlands, the SDGs are embedded in the political structure, the business community, and civil societies, both top-down and bottom-up. On the one hand, the SDGs are an important part of policy, on the other hand, they are also supported by the business community because consumers increasingly demand that they behave responsibly and because it offers economic opportunities.

Things are different in the Chinese business world, where CSR is more about charity and ‘doing good’, and also because many of the goals are imposed top-down by the central government. The danger of a top-down system is that it can create a ‘ticking the boxes’ mentality, where the goal is subordinate to what you are trying to achieve. This of course entails a danger of greenwashing, especially when there is less room for civil parties. While the tight control of businesses in this structure mitigates this risk to some extent, a structural embedding of CSR in business models in China would be a positive development.

Are the SDGs part of the strategy of your business/organisation? If so, is this reflected in your public affairs strategy?

The SDGs are central to the BHOS memorandum, the framework within which we work as a mission network. While the fact that we are working on the SDGs is very clear to us, this is not always explicitly reflected in our projects or events — especially as it does not directly resonate in the Chinese context. However, many SDGs are reflected in the Chinese policy objectives without being explicitly mentioned as such, for example in the fields of sustainable agriculture, water, health, smart cities/circular economy, CSR, and sustainability in general.

Sustainability is not only one of the key pillars in government-to-government and trade facilitation projects, but also in our public diplomacy activities. We try to build social awareness about the importance of sustainability, and as sponsor of the European Chamber of Commerce Sustainable Business Awards, for instance, have used our role to draw attention to the contribution of SMEs to sustainability. It is not only the multinationals that have a role to play here.
Another example of social outreach and awareness building is the bicycle tour we organized last year with Chinese bike-sharing giant HelloBike: we brought sustainability to the attention of the public together with the Chongming authorities and a number of plastic-recycling NGOs. By joining forces, you can reach a much wider audience: the message is not just picked up by the participants of the cycling tour. With the help of Chinese social media, the sustainability message reached over 18 million Chinese people.

Do you see a difference in the way governments, businesses and civil societies are implementing SDGs now compared to five years ago?

Since I arrived in China 4 years ago, I have seen that sustainability has gained momentum. The importance of and commitment to waste management, circular economy, sustainability and, for example, energy-SDGs has increased in many ways. I also see this confirmed by Chinese administrative reform and in the current 5-year plan (China’s leading policy framework, ed.) you see that it really is a policy priority of the Chinese government to become more sustainable. This has also created more room for us as a mission network to make a positive contribution.

I also see increased attention for the implementation of the SDGs in the Netherlands. CSR and the SDGs in general are high on the political agenda, something that has been noticeable across the board over the past five years. Examples are the national climate agreement, but also measures in the field of international business. For example, Dutch companies nowadays have to complete a CSR test before they can take part in trade missions; a small but important measure.

Do you expect a change in legislation and regulations in the near future as a result of the SDGs that will affect your business or organisation?

I do not expect any major changes in the sense of a radical shift in policy or priorities in China in the next 5 years. However, I do expect that the focus on objectives such as sustainability will only increase. We’ll probably see this reflected in the next 5-year plan.

What I hope is that there will be a breakthrough in consumer awareness in the next 5 years. Consumers are often the driving force behind certain changes; look at the dolphin-friendly tuna label from the 1990s, for instance, the coffee brand Max Havelaar, or Nike, who, pressured by its customers, decided to eradicate child labour from its supply chain.

I hope that when you call me again in 5 years’ time, the social awareness of Chinese citizens/consumers will have increased. Currently, they are not yet at the same level as in Europe, for instance. I am convinced that an increased consumer awareness on these issues can be a positive driver for further progress in compliance with SDGs in China. This makes businesses realize even more that CSR pays off in the end. Corporate social responsibility should not just be an obligation, but something businesses want to do themselves; this can make greenwashing a thing from the past.

How do you expect the SDGs to develop in the future, (how) will your organisation respond to developments, and what do you/does the organisation need to make this happen?

Even before the coronacrisis, our mission network was already extremely committed to the SDGs. I cannot make any predictions on whether the policy in The Hague will change. What you can already see now is that there are automatic shifts in emphasis as a result of the crisis. ‘Alleviating poverty’ has always been high on the political agenda in China, but the consequences of the crisis — the recession in various parts of the world and rising unemployment in China — have increased the urgency to work on this SDG.

As a result of the coronacrisis, there is a lot more attention for healthcare worldwide. I expect there will be much more focus on health and wellbeing; this pandemic has shown how important a well-organized healthcare system is and that you are only as strong as your weakest link. In the Netherlands, we cannot only count on Philips as a big high-tech company in the LSH sector, but also on a large number of start-ups working in various niche areas of healthcare. China will certainly have a lot more to offer to this type of innovative companies, partly because of an increased focus on SDG3.

Which SDGs are most relevant for your organisation? Is it a good idea to focus on a few or should governments, businesses and civil societies have a broader view?

China is, of course, a huge country, with different starting points for Dutch top sectors. As a network of diplomatic missions, we collaborate closely on a whole collection of SDGs. In both policy and implementation, the Chinese government pays a lot of attention to ‘eradicating extreme poverty’, ‘building an ecological civilization’, and ‘climate and sustainability’. From an economic point of view, our main focus is on energy transition and sustainability, i.e. SDGs 6, 7, 11, 12 and 13. Sustainability is one of our most important pillars. As we know, we also have a large agri-food sector in the Netherlands, which are SDGs 2 and 12. Health & Care, SDGs 2 and 3, have, of course, moved up the list of priorities in the COVID era. And lastly, our priority is infrastructure and logistics, embedded in SDGs 7, 9, and 11.
David Kuijper has been taking on the role of Manager Public Investment and Blended Finance at FMO – Dutch Development Bank since January 2018.

Previously, Kuijper worked at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs as Deputy Director Climate and Deputy Ambassador to Pakistan. He also worked at the Netherlands Embassy in Accra, Ghana and served as Advisor the Dutch Executive Director at the World Bank in Washington. From 2013 to 2017, Kuijper worked as manager and advisor at the World Bank, in particular on the design of the international SDG- and Financing for Development agenda. Kuijper started his career as a staff assistant at the Dutch Lower House of Representatives.

What responsibility do you see for businesses with regard to the SDGs?

First of all, we need to help companies understand the SDGs. In addition, measures are needed that encourage companies to focus on the SDGs in all aspects of their business operations. This also means that the investors in those companies will see the value of their company in an SDG context. The most complex but urgent task we face is changing the concepts we use to measure success and failure. Breaking open our definitions of GDP or how a company’s profits are set off, for instance, is part of the SDG transformation. To make really big strides, we also need to look at how a company adds value in other areas: environmental gains, positive contributions to poverty reduction, or increasing biodiversity.

We must set ourselves the goal of taking (negative) externalities into account in the price of products, such as environmental pollution, health risks and the loss of biodiversity. We need to start talking in a fundamentally different approach to how businesses present their commitment: prosperity and well-being must go hand in hand, including when measuring a company’s success and shareholder value.

Contributing to the SDG is also a survival strategy. A company that has the SDGs as a long-term compass is likely to have better endurance and resilience to withstand crises. It is the only way a company can continue to participate in the long term. Many companies already understand this. It was even a fundamental course of Paul Polman when he led Unilever.

What responsibilities with regard to SDGs do you see for civil societies and NGOs?

Civil societies and NGOs must keep the public and private sectors on their toes. This also means exposing abuses and companies that talk sustainably but do not act sustainably. FMO also works with NGOs to develop projects that both deliver impact and are profitable for the investor. We want to show that this combination is possible and that it can also be done on a larger scale, for example in sustainable agriculture or ‘off-grid energy’.

What responsibilities with regard to SDGs do you see for governments?

Internationally, governments are facing a major challenge. Lack of leadership by the United States is causing international governance to crumble. Other countries will try fill that gap and form blocks. Continued US isolationism, for example after Trump’s possible re-election, will undermine the implementation of the SDGs, as well as slow down the transformation of the private sector. Governments will have to take the lead in preventing this, but if you want to achieve the SDGs,
this cannot be done with public money alone. Private financing must be added to this and governments and private investors have a great interest in good cooperation to mobilize private financing.

To what extent does public affairs contribute to achieving the SDGs?

Public affairs can help create support for this collaboration. Good projects need to be developed at both companies and at NGOs. We notice that there are a large number of parties that want to invest in sustainable projects. Pension funds, for example. But these investments only become interesting for them when it is about large sums of money and when there is scale. The big question for us is how we can make the leap from small-scale, pioneering projects to a large “asset class”, in which investors can invest with ease because they understand the risks and returns at a glance.

This is a long-term agenda that requires patience and a good focus on what we ultimately want to achieve. Public affairs can help to keep all those involved ‘on the ball’ and to have them coordinate with each other. At FMO, we set up investment facilities to help take projects from the pioneer phase to the upscaling phase, such as the successful Climate Investor One. These types of facilities can benefit from public affairs, to create support for the timeline and the patience that is required and to bring opportunities and new partners and investors together. These are unique facilities, and it is not without reason that Prime Minister Rutte is required and to bring opportunities and new partners and investors together.

These kinds of facilities ensure that the 160 million euro that Minister Kaag has released for the Dutch Fund for Climate and Development can attract no less than 1 billion euro in private investment in climate projects.

We can show that it can work. This gives us an operational role in the lobby. There is a lot of talk about achieving the SDGs, but we work on concrete actions that actually bring the realisation of the goals within reaching distance. We share our knowledge. This also strengthens our position as a knowledge partner, as a result of which international parties are looking to us and want to learn from us, and so that the Dutch private sector can also participate at a high level. In this way, the Netherlands can leave its mark on the international playing field.

Are the SDGs part of the strategy of your business/organisation? If so, is this reflected in your public affairs strategy?

The SDGs have become our foundation, even more than just an objective. We have put seventeen images of the SDGs in a large format on our building on the side of the railroad track so that everyone passing by can see what we are working on from inside the train. You cannot ignore it, which makes the SDGs a very visible part of our mission. FMO uses the SDGs to add even more value to its own organization, just as we want to be an example for the companies we finance.

FMO is a large bilateral development bank, we are one of the largest in Europe and can also compete with the private branch of the World Bank, IFC, for example. In fact, of all development banks, we do the most “blended finance”, mixing public and private money in order to attract more private money for pioneering investments in developing countries. We are also increasingly building up specific knowledge about how all these projects contribute to achieving the SDGs. And especially how you measure that properly. We estimate the opportunities and risks for parties that want to invest. At the same time, we help NGOs to make their projects “bankable”. Smaller projects in particular are very important and can make a lot of impact locally. Our goal is to ultimately make these projects “bankable” on a large scale for large investors. We are building this bridge.

How do you expect the SDGs to develop in the future, (how) will your organisation respond to developments, and what do you/does the organisation need to make this happen?

I hope the SDGs will become a mindset and that they will be used as a guideline and organisational principle for how organisations can organise themselves and their goals. The SDGs as an essential part of the DNA of all private and public organisations, and of society as a whole.

A tricky point in whether or not the SDGs are achieved is making results measurable. The collection of relevant data is essential in this, because it enables us to make adjustments where necessary and to understand what works and what does not work. And data is essential to gain the confidence of private investors. Investing now in a child’s education yields huge results over a number of generations, but that takes time. What we can measure now, for example, is the percentage of children that survive hospitalisation, the number of wells dug in specific areas, or the number of girls that were not circumcised. But beyond this kind of facts that are relatively easy to measure, it is very difficult to make the SDGs – and the efforts made to achieve the goals – objective and measurable.
We need data for impact measurement. Not just because we can report and account for a project at the end, but so that we can make targeted investments. This increases the attraction of our investments. Better data lead to more knowledge, more “deals” and a growth in projects that bring the SDGs closer.

**Does the corona crisis and the political desire to emerge from the crisis in a more sustainable manner affect the attention and/or resources available from your company or organisation for the implementation of the SDGs?**

Never waste a good crisis. The coronacrisis also offers many new opportunities. The current crisis shows the urgency of public investment. The SDGs are ideally suited to serve as a guide in this respect. The coronacrisis exposes the vulnerabilities of the current system. Internationally, we already see that public funds are not drying up; on the contrary, they are even increasing. But this will not be enough. The international call for investment is loud and the European Union and the World Bank are working hard to meet that demand, but also indicate that things will be tight. It is highly probably that private financing will play a major role in ‘building back better’ after the COVID-19 crisis.

**Which SDGs are most relevant for your organisation? Is it a good idea to focus on a few or should governments, businesses and civil societies have a broader view?**

All the SDGs are important to us. FMO does focus on SDGs 8 (decent work and economic growth), SDG 10 (reduced inequalities) and SDG 13 (climate action). For my work SDG 17 is essential: partnerships to achieve all other objectives. This is what my colleagues and I do are doing every day.

*Civil societies and NGOs must keep the public and private sectors on their toes. This also means exposing abuses and companies that talk sustainably but do not act sustainably.*
What responsibility do you see for businesses with regard to the SDGs?

I would argue in favour of the government playing a more directing role with regard to SDGs, on the important condition that the government is committed to inclusive policy development (SDG 17). For years, we in the business community and the financial sector have found that the government first comes up with plans and only then involves the business community. This was clearly visible in the case of the investment fund that was announced last year on Prinsjesdag (the day of the state opening of parliament) – and then put on hold. The plan for this fund comes from the ministries of Finance and of Economic Affairs and Climate, but the banks and insurers were not involved. There is still a long way to go before the government realises that if you do not involve the business community and civil societies in your plans, it will create frustration and waste time. This is prevented by inclusive policy development. I think that Brussels is already operating on a much more inclusive basis, but it still has steps to take. All those plans are financed by public debt. As a former banker, I can only say: what a pity that the knowledge, creativity, entrepreneurial spirit and social responsibility of the business community are not being utilised.

Is the business community willing enough to invest in the SDGs?

The business community is absolutely willing to invest in SDGs. This was again confirmed when we set up SDG Nederland in 2014/2015. The problem is not so much a lack of willingness. I think that the Better Business Better World report published by the UN in 2017 very emphatically indicates the direction we are going in and the possibilities for the business community to use the SDG agenda as part of your purpose, your mission and your strategy. What is lacking is a coherent, national SDG Implementation Plan, partly based on this report and the many other existing initiatives.

The ecosystem in which we operate as a business community is – in negative terms – counter-productive, inconsistent or even perverse when it comes to achieving the SDG goals. On the contrary – in positive terms – the ecosystem creates many opportunities, but there are too few incentives in the area of taxation and financing instruments to use the agenda as a common guideline and to speed things up. What now needs to be done is, on the one hand, carefully redefine the conditionality of rehabilitation funding. On the other hand, transitional funding is needed to help the grey and brown industries, which have had their day for a long time, to reinvent themselves in a positive way. The government can provide much more guidance there. This guidance must be inclusive. Light, inclusive government guidance is a prerequisite for good cooperation with the business community.
What should governments do to promote more organisations to start implementing the SDGs?

I am very concerned about the way in which households, governments and businesses are financed. We finance a great deal with debt – with borrowing capacity – and too little with equity. This has a major impact on society’s resilience. I would not be surprised if there were to be another financial crisis in the future, but society as a whole is not aware of that danger.

The government must create a stimulating climate, making it more attractive to invest with equity rather than using subsidies and loans. There are plenty of other creative solutions. In this context, one can look at export credit insurance via the government: an extremely effective and cost-effective instrument for all involved (business and government) (in the 1980s and 1990s, the sum of the claims paid out by the government was certainly not higher than the premiums paid by the business). If you translate that model into the social agenda of the SDGs, you could imagine that the government covers certain financial risks through a partial risk insurance system if certain social outcomes are realised, of course against payment of a premium. If you translate this model to the SDG social agenda, you could suggest that the government is going to secure specific social risks in return for a premium. This totally revamps an old model. In sum, it is not a question of how much a society can pay to achieve the SDGs, but of which smart tools can the government develop to cover the risks for the business community to invest in the SDGs. In this way, governments increase the chance that the business community will implement the social effects that relate to the SDGs.

Do you expect a change in legislation and regulations in the near future as a result of the SDGs?

We hope that the Dutch government will invite us to come up with ideas on how legislation and regulations can be more facilitating towards the business community in order to speed up and scale up the implementation of the SDGs. By involving us – by which I mean SDG Nederland, the business community and knowledge institutions – the government creates inclusive policy-making. It must be an invitation. It means reviewing legislation, regulations, policies and quality. A relevant question is: how can legislation and regulations better support the long-term agenda? Take, for example, competition legislation. The consumer’s interests are now at the heart of this, not the public interest. This makes cooperation with the business community more difficult and is at odds with the policy of sustainability. You can see that things are changing, but important steps still need to be taken.

Does the corona crisis and the political desire to emerge from the crisis in a more sustainable manner affect the attention and/or resources available from your company or organisation for the implementation of the SDGs?

We are working to activate the Dutch government, in particular, within the framework of COVID-19, in order to enforce a much more guiding role. This is a wonderful opportunity for civil societies and businesses, but there needs to be much more guidance than the lighter control that has been exercised by the government so far. The DSGC, Global Compact MVO-NL, NVB, with the support of SDG Netherlands, have presented a Green Recovery Statement for the holiday period as a manifesto for a green recovery agenda. We are now looking at how the letter sent before the holiday period, the manifesto of the rehabilitation agenda, can be given more substance. We are also looking at how the growth agenda and the investment fund can pay more attention to SDGs.

In your view, does politics feel the urgency to make the change to more inclusive policy development, with a view to the SDGs?

As far as I am concerned, there is never enough concern or ambition to implement a number of changes. We need to exert more pressure on all political parties. In doing so, we must draw on the lessons of COVID-19 and capitalise on what is happening in Brussels in order to really implement that agenda. Hopefully, the SDGs will remain part of these agendas for the next ten years. Then it is no longer a question of whether we are going to implement the SDGs, but of how and when. Politics must also give the parties that are still in the old economy the opportunity to adapt. The combination of rehabilitation funding, rehabilitation policy and transition policy is hugely important. As well as inclusive policy-making.

There is still a long way to go before the government realises that if you do not involve the business community and civil societies in your plans, it will create frustration and waste time. This is prevented by inclusive policy development.
Sandra Pellegrom (1966) has been the government’s National SDG Coordinator since 1 October 2019. Her task is to enthuse and engage actors to get closer to achieving the SDGs, mainly focusing on achieving the goals in the Netherlands.

Before she was appointed as SDG Coordinator, Sandra worked for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs at the Dutch mission to the UN in New York. She has been in the service of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs since 1996 and has worked at the Dutch embassies in Pretoria and Bangkok, working on human rights and relations between the Netherlands and various African countries. After finishing her degree in journalism and international relations, she also worked for the Dutch Lower House, the UN and Leiden University.

What responsibility do you see for businesses and governments with regard to the SDGs?

The strength of the SDG agenda is that it recognises that the 17 goals can never be achieved by one party alone. A government cannot do this on its own. Every sector and every party in society has an important role to play in meeting these goals. But they all have their own core activity and it is important to approach the SDGs from the perspective of that core activity as well. Businesses have a major influence in society. Every business has a footprint and can ensure that this footprint has a positive impact on society. I hope that the SDGs will be an inspiration for businesses and provide them with a compass for questioning the different areas in which the business has an impact. The SDGs offer a way of looking at whether there are areas that a business has not immediately thought of, but where it can exert a positive influence. For example, offering an opportunity to train young people or disadvantaged youths. Hopefully, more businesses will work with the agenda in this manner.

I notice that business leaders see that their long-term interests are not simply financial and economic and that, to ensure their long-term right to exist, they need to invest in environmental sustainability and in our social foundations. This is becoming more and more widely supported and also helps to ensure that we take these goals more firmly as a basis together.

What responsibilities with regard to SDGs do you see for civil societies and NGOs?

NGOs often work on a particular theme of the SDGs. But I think it is also interesting for NGOs to look at the agenda and the other goals. Perhaps there are links where synergies can be sought. The pursuit of sustainability is a good example. Can we contribute to this in such a way that it also creates new jobs, provides a start for young people, and makes sustainability more accessible to everyone? It is important, even as an NGO, to continue to look at the goals across the board. Of course, an NGO then focuses on a particular goal, because that is where its strength lies. But look for the links with other goals and look for synergy. This synergy must also be sought between businesses and NGOs, because the fact that these organisations have very different core activities means that they can enter into a complementary partnership.

To what extent does public affairs contribute to achieving the SDGs?

What I like about public affairs is that you can make the voices of different organisations heard and translated. What do these organisations need and what can they bring to the table? I think it is important that this is made as specific as pos-
The connection and the link you are making, how clear is that for the parties involved? If you look at governments, faced with huge challenges and a huge workload, then ‘also’ have to deal with the SDGs. Is it really something that is always taken into account, or is it something that is only looked at at a later stage of the process?

It varies. I know many governments that are very proactive when it comes to SDGs. I can imagine that businesses often want to cooperate with governments at a municipal level as well. More than a quarter of Dutch municipalities — perhaps even a third by now — call themselves a ‘global goals’ municipality and are very actively involved in the SDGs, precisely because the challenges come together much more directly at municipal level than at national level. I see many opportunities for collaboration with different parties for the SDGs. However, it is still useful if businesses can specify what they want to do and what they need cooperation for. The more concrete it becomes, the more attractive it becomes to work together. In doing so, it is necessary to dig deep and analyse what is being contributed to what goal. Ask yourself the question: what can I do myself and what do I need other partners for? What obstacles do I encounter along the way? Submit this to a government. This way, you can make concrete what you need from other authorities/governments in order to make that positive contribution.

Do you see a difference in the way governments, businesses and civil societies are implementing SDGs now compared to five years ago?

For me, that is difficult to say. I think that, over the last five years, SDGs have come more clearly rooted into the mindsets of different governments. I notice that there is a great deal of knowledge and interest. Not only at various ministries and municipalities, but also at all kinds of semi-public institutions and advisory councils. Many government bodies are working on the SDGs and are themselves looking for ways to make the goals specific.
That is why this is a good time for a business or organisation to undertake outreach and to get in touch with other organisations to enter into a cooperation. I notice that people are now thinking: “the SDG goals are actually values we have in common with society and are therefore important goals. How can we translate these into specific actions, into specific initiatives, and whom can we cooperate with in this regard?”

**How do you expect the SDGs to develop in the future?**

I think that society has come to realise that we are facing a great deal of change and that this offers many opportunities as well as challenges. It is useful to have a dot on the horizon; a compass for the future. That is what the SGDs offer. The SDGs are, in fact, common values, and they are going to become increasingly important in the years to come. As a result, it is increasingly becoming a joint project between different parties in society.

**Does the corona crisis and the political desire to emerge from the crisis in a more sustainable manner affect the attention and/or resources available from your company or organisation for the implementation of the SDGs?**

The Netherlands has invested a great deal in achieving the goals, and because we were in good shape at the start of the crisis, we can cope with it reasonably well. We had a solid economy, good reserves, a good social foundation, a great deal of confidence in institutions and a great deal of knowledge and innovation. That creates resilience. The crisis teaches us that it is necessary to continue investing in resilience post-corona. And the SDGs will help. The global situation is worrying, though. Many countries are not as resilient as The Netherlands, they are suffering a lot worse from the crisis and are likely to continue to suffer for longer. It is important to remember that we are globally interdependent; we must continue to invest in our relationships with other countries and ensure that we strengthen our resilience to future crises. It is not without reason that SDGs apply to all countries. As a country you cannot achieve your climate goals if other countries also invest in achieving those climate goals because we all influence each other. This also applies to businesses, almost all of which have a link with foreign countries.

Many government bodies are working on the SDGs and are themselves looking for ways to make the goals specific.
Which SDGs are most relevant for the Netherlands, or get the most attention?

The Netherlands is very close to achieving goals when it comes to social services, the eradication of poverty, social equality, trust in institutions, and knowledge and innovation. The Netherlands still has work to do, however, in the areas of climate action, energy transition and biodiversity. The Netherlands is not at the forefront of gender equality either.

What I like is that, in the CBS monitor report of May, we can see that the trends on climate, energy and gender are once again heading in the right direction thanks to the policies of recent years. At the same time, there is still a lot to do.

Clearly, The Netherlands is facing more challenges in some areas than in others, but focus is essential in all areas, including those where things are going well. One example is the goal of ‘ending poverty’. The Netherlands is doing very well there — we are number one at a European level — but we still have a small percentage of people living in persistent poverty and the gap between this group and the rest is widening.

The goals are interconnected. But they can also get in the way of each other. Achieving one goal might hinder another goal. Have you seen this in practice or is this talked about?

To ensure that the goals do not compete with each other, it is important to look at the goals in relation to each other. Certainly, at a municipal level, where these problems come together much more directly, there is an interest in and a need to look for solutions together. Given time, certain problems can be solved in different ways. The best thing, of course, is to find a way together, a way that has the most positive effects on the other goals and the least negative effects. Can public affairs professionals also play a role in encouraging clients to take a broad view and seek synergy? I think we all have to help each other here, because it is quite a complicated process. Seeking that synergy would be a very worthwhile challenge for public affairs.

Are there any other points you want to raise?

What I like is that more and more people are saying that the challenges we are all facing are complex, but also offer a lot of opportunities, and that we should be looking for cooperation rather than competition. I also think it is good that the SDGs are an agenda of cooperation and that we can find innovations that will enable us to try to solve the complex problems in a positive way for everyone.
Prof. Dr. Mirjam van Praag is president of the Vrije Universiteit (VU) Amsterdam. Next to her position, she is member of the Royal Dutch Academy of Sciences. As of October 1st 2020, she will be appointed member of the supervisory board of the Dutch Central Bank.

Van Praag graduated in econometrics (1991) at the University of Amsterdam. During her doctoral research at the University of Amsterdam she lived in Israël for half a year and worked at the University of Tel Aviv. She received her PhD with her dissertation ‘Determinants of Successful Entrepreneurship’ (1996).

Van Praag has worked on the intersection between the entrepreneurial and academic field for years. In 2005, she was professor at the University of Amsterdam and founded the Amsterdam Centre for Entrepreneurship (ACE). Within that context, the University of Amsterdam, VU, University of Applied Sciences Amsterdam and the Amsterdam Medical Centre (UMC) collaborated on the field of research on entrepreneurship.

What responsibility do you see for companies with regard to the SDGs?

Without the efforts of companies, the SDGs cannot be realized. Additionally, there is a greater need and expectation from society to see what corporations contribute to the SDGs. The SDGs are founded in order to achieve a sustainable future, and the 17 goals offer concrete ways to take action in that regard. For companies this means that they should look within their own discipline for ways that would contribute to achieving these goals. That goes beyond the notion of climate sustainability. For example, it also includes questions related to how companies contribute to the education of students and that everyone gets an equal opportunity.

What responsibility do you see for civil societies and NGOs with regard to the SDGs?

For the VU it is not just about telling society how to do things, but also to look at ourselves at what we can do. Within our research we therefore ask ourselves how inquiries fit within the framework of the SDGs and how it contributes to a better world. We do so by first reviewing which academic articles can be linked to the SDGs and how the findings are subsequently used (for example in government policies). Furthermore, we also see it as our responsibility to educate students in such a way that they are aware of how their choices contribute (or contravene) to a sustainable world. We do so by making clear how certain lectures relate to specific SDGs.

What responsibility do you see for the government with regard to the SDGs?

The government is able to offer guidance and formulate policies in order to achieve the SDGs. Simultaneously, it can contribute as organization to the SDGs. For example, our university library collaborates with the municipality of Amstelveen in developing an SDG-monitor for companies. This would enable companies to measure the degree in which they contribute to the different SDGs.

The VU is the most sustainable university of the Netherlands and globally holds a high score in regards to research into climate change. These top rankings are the result of structural efforts of the VU in the field of sustainability. It is up to public affairs to subsequently bring this to the attention of politicians and society at large, so that the influence of the VU increases vis-à-vis the government and politics when it comes to sustainability.
How do you think that public affairs contributes to the SDGs?

Within the field of public affairs you see that corporate social responsibility (CSR) becomes more important and visible for companies. In a broader sense you also see that it is essential to ‘get out of the crisis sustainably’. Although the SDGs are not always mentioned specifically, you do see that the importance of sustainability, CSR and ‘to give back to society’ remains. In our contact with MPs or other politicians we always focus on the SDGs and the way in which we contribute to them.

How do you think that the SDGs contribute to the effectiveness of public affairs?

Our activities are aimed at research, education, impact and business operations. All these elements relate back to the SDGs and public affairs can play a supportive role on all these elements. It may not be the activities themselves that inherently contribute to the PA-goals. As much as the results do. The VU is the most sustainable university of the Netherlands and globally holds a high score in regards to research into climate change. These top rankings are the result of structural efforts of the VU in the field of sustainability. It is up to public affairs to subsequently bring this to the attention of politicians and society at large, so that the influence of the VU increases vis-à-vis the government and politics when it comes to sustainability.

How do you think that activities regarding to the SDGs contribute to the public affairs goals?

We find it very important to positively impact society based on education, research and valorisation. It is good that the SDGs exist as they allow us to measure our mission. Currently, the VU, together with the international Aurora-network of other universities, are developing a measurement tool. This enables us to measure every output, such as a policy document, in light of how they contribute to specific SDGs; every researcher, research group or even the whole university. Additionally, we started the Broader Mind-programme in 2019. Its purpose is that students deliver a meaningful contribution to society and develop themselves both academically and personally. Through Community Service Learning, a group of students work together with scientists to find solutions for societal issues such as loneliness or the plastic soup. The wonderful thing about the project is that it is both scalable as well as multi-disciplinary. By ensuring the continuity of these projects we want to make sure that the societal impact is permanent. Currently we are discussing the Broader Mind-programme with the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science and how they can participate in it, particularly because it fits the ministry’s Higher Education Strategy very well.

Do you experience a difference with how the SDGs are now implemented by governments, social societies and companies in relation to five years ago?

It remains to be seen, but I think that the SDGs will become more important over time. The flag and the colors that characterize the SDGs are still seen as something fashionable every now and then, but their content is a trend that continues to grow in importance. We currently see more social enterprises and I think that companies will only be able to survive if they incorporate the SDGs in their business model. Perhaps indirectly, but sticking to a profit-reliant model only, such as the production on unhealthy food, becomes a decreasingly profitable model. The importance of reciprocity towards society has already been visible for a while.

Do you expect a change regarding regulatory frameworks according to the SDG for you civil society or company in the upcoming years?

Based on the SDG-measurement tool, we hope that it will ignite more acknowledgement and appreciation for the efforts of organizations on the SDGs. That is something that currently occurs too little, but we aim to develop a measurement tool that allows for a similar benchmarking as we currently have for education and research. The more specific these things can be measured, the more they will be taken seriously.

How do you envisage the development of the importance of SDGs in the future, (how) will your organization respond to this and what do you / does your organization need for this?

You do notice that it becomes more important for businesses to ‘give back to society’. That reciprocity is something that is also visible in the rise of social enterprises. In terms of valorisation we are still working on becoming entrepreneurial in a responsible sustainable fashion and to contribute to societal goals. Furthermore, we notice that the sense of responsibility is growing in our collaborations with companies. For example, we developed the programme ‘Color at the top’ in which organizations such as the Rabobank and the police participated. It was intended to give leaders more instruments, to use the diversity that exists in
top positions and to raise awareness on possible biases. Another example is the Sapiens-project; together with Naturalis we are setting up a sustainable building that will function as a museum, educational space and as laboratory. The goal is to facilitate collaboration between our students and businesses and to work on creative, sustainable solutions. Here, participatory education meets research and awareness of the human impact on our environment.

Does the corona crisis and the political desire to emerge from this crisis more sustainably, affect the attention and/or resources available from your company or organization for the implementation of the SDGs?

This crisis demonstrates the desire and necessity. The SDGs are not explicitly mentioned, but the corporate social responsibility is.

Which SDGs do you consider the most relevant for your organization? Is it good to focus or should governments, companies and civil societies deploy broadly?

Quality education is our core business. In the rankings the VU ranks highest in the fields of climate action, gender equality and industry, innovation and infrastructure. For climate action we hold 2nd place in the world. Together with the VU Medical Centre we work on the SDG Good Health & Wellbeing.
Dr. Alexander Rinnooy Kan is the chairman of the 17 SDG Alliances. He is also Professor of Economics and Business Administration at the University of Amsterdam. Rinnooy Kan began his career in 1980 as a professor at the Erasmus University in Rotterdam, where he became rector six years later. From 1991 to 1996, he was chairman of the Confederation of Dutch Entrepreneurs (VNO), renamed VNO-NCW after a merger. Rinnooy Kan then held a position on the Executive Board of ING for ten years, after which he became Chairman of the Dutch Social and Economic Council (SER). From 9 June 2015 to 11 June 2019, Rinnooy Kan was a member of the Dutch Senate.

Dr. Alexander Rinnooy Kan
SDG Nederland

What responsibility do you see for businesses with regard to the SDGs?

I see a real interest and willingness among the business community and umbrella organisations to contribute to the SDGs. These organisations recognise the value of SDGs and see them as an opportunity to serve the public interest, as an extension of their own business activities. This commitment can go very far, as in the case of Unilever, for example, which is working on sustainability and nutrition on a large scale. However, parties can also contribute to achieving the SDGs on a smaller scale; a small business, for example, can contribute to its local community. An SDG screening can help businesses define how they can contribute to the SDGs. Based on the vision, interests and specialty of the business, this screening identifies one or two SDGs they can contribute to, either on a very large or very small scale. That is also the charm of this formula: it has something for everyone.

What responsibilities with regard to SDGs do you see for civil societies and NGOs?

I would like to call on universities and colleges to encourage students to contribute to the SDGs. Educational institutions can provide a crash course on what the SDGs are and why they are important, for instance. As part of their thesis, internship or an elective course, students can then support businesses and organisations in an SDG screening. This is one of the plans that is still in the pipeline, and I hope will be followed up on in the next few years; of course we really need the support of colleges and universities to make this possible.

What responsibilities with regard to SDGs do you see for governments? What do they need?

We lack a national strategy—which surprises me as we, as a country, have a tradition of public-private partnerships. By identifying a number of issues that are important to The Netherlands, a national strategy can define how public and private parties can work together to achieve the SDGs. Nothing needs to be excluded, but some elements can be underlined. SDGs lend themselves well to such a strategy, as they offer a wide range of opportunities and each SDG has its own indicators that make progress measurable.

It would also be great if ministers promoted the value of the SDGs: they can show that they are important for the future of the country and that public-private partnerships represent the added value of the SDGs. In this way, the government can play a connecting role between the business world and civil societies when it comes to SDGs. For example, the State Secretary for Infrastructure and Water Management, Stientje van Veldhoven, recently brought together financiers and charities, to brainstorm about how they can remove barriers to achieving the SDGs. Van Veldhoven used the ministry’s weight to get people thinking and inspiring them to great ideas. I would love to see the government showing more of this kind of leadership and ownership in the context of the SDGs. Something is already happening, but not enough, more needs to be done.
To what extent does public affairs contribute to achieving the SDGs?

There is no uniformity; all the SDG coordinators now define their own activities, depending on the opportunities offered. Public affairs can play a role in emphasising the importance of a national strategy in dealings with the government. In addition, governments, businesses and civil societies can make their activities more visible through their public affairs, which can inspire others to contribute to the SDGs as well.

To what extent do SDG activities contribute to the public affairs objectives?

While contributing to the SDGs, businesses and civil societies can make very surprising contacts and profit from a positive visibility. For example, by expanding SDG activities and contacting the relevant SDG coordinator. The SDG coordinator can put them in contact with businesses and organisations that are also involved with this SDG. This can then result in possible collaborations or alliances.

The contribution to the SDGs also contributes to the public affairs objectives through employee satisfaction: many employees enjoy contributing and appreciate it when their employer contributes to the SDGs. The SDGs offer businesses the opportunity to contribute to a social cause without it affecting their profit margin; even better, they can benefit from it.

Do you see a difference in the way governments, businesses and civil societies are implementing SDGs now compared to five years ago?

I would like to go back a bit more, to the forerunners of the SDGs — the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The MDGs were mainly political objectives that were viewed with scepticism until a number of goals were achieved. It is debatable whether achieving these goals was partly the result of the MDGs themselves, or simply a lucky coincidence. The results however did make people optimistic about possible next steps. At the time, the business community fought hard to be allowed at the table to discuss the interpretation of the SDGs. Once these were formulated, I, as chairman of the Worldconnectors Association, together with the other members, ensured that Dutch political and civil partners committed themselves to an SDG covenant. SDG Netherlands became the coordination point and was responsible for starting up an infrastructure for the seventeen SDGs. This infrastructure is now in place and can be further built on.

How do you expect the SDGs to develop in the future, (how) will your organisation respond to developments, and what do you/does the organisation need to make this happen?

The SDGs have to be realised in 2030, and although we probably won’t make it, that doesn’t really matter. Something will have to replace the SDGs in due course. For the time being, we need to focus on what we want to achieve with respect to the SDGs. So far, we have made real progress on a number of SDGs, and not really any progress on others. In my opinion, the most pressing thing now is to continue working on fostering broad commitment in the private sector, and to get the ministries to make another step forward. A national strategy would be a great help towards achieving SDGs. I think that is exactly what we need: The Netherlands needs to develop a national strategy and set an example with regard to SDGs at an international level.

An SDG screening can help businesses define how they can contribute to the SDGs. Based on the vision, interests and specialty of the business, this screening identifies one or two SDGs they can contribute to, either on a very large or very small scale. That is also the charm of this formula: it has something for everyone.
Do the coronacrisis and the political desire to get out of this crisis in a more sustainable manner have an impact on the attention and/or available resources in your business or organisation for the implementation of the SDGs?

The coronacrisis does not help, but fortunately it doesn’t hurt very much either. At least, not everywhere. It remains to be seen what the net result will be or whether we will see real damage. The SDGs could contribute to economic growth after the coronacrisis. A national SDG strategy would therefore be a good approach. This strategy can motivate businesses and civil societies to join forces and come out of the crisis in a more sustainable manner. This requires, for example, a re-evaluation of how the attention for the SDGs can be strengthened within the markets that are important for us. Let’s get back to work, carry out repairs and make things new again.

Which SDGs are most relevant for you/your organisation? Is it a good idea to focus on a few or should governments, businesses and civil societies have a broader view?

You can’t reasonably expect everyone to pick up all seventeen goals at the same time. I don’t think it’s wrong to focus on one or a few SDGs that parties are already good at, and put extra effort into those. In a way, they can make a biggest contribution that way. I myself am particularly interested in the SDG on knowledge, because it is relevant to each country and requires attention. Recently, Brussels halved the budget for Horizon 2020, earmarked for research in line with the SDGs. This shows that this SDG is in no way safe and cannot be threatened.
Jan-Willem Scheijgrond currently is the Head of Government- and Public Affairs at Philips, as well as chairman of the UN Global Compact Network in the Netherlands. Scheijgrond witnessed the creation of some of the Millennium Development Goals before working in the industrial sector.

The Global Compact Network Netherlands is one of over 70 national networks of the UN Global Compact. It is the national network of businesses and stakeholders that support the ten Universal Principles in the fields of human rights, labour, environment and anti-corruption as formulated by the United Nations (UN) and report on them on an annual basis. Additionally, the network encourages that companies and organizations actively contribute to the realization of the 17 SDGs, and provide opportunities for businesses from the perspective of sustainable entrepreneurship.

Scheijgrond’s arrival at Philips contributed to the embedding of the SDGs in the company’s chains. Currently, Philips is praised for her sustainability policies, which has consequently resulted in many awards. Philips was awarded the Crystal Prize for her role as front-runner in making corporate chains more sustainable and is placed 2nd globally in the Dow Jones Sustainability Index.

**What responsibility do you see for companies with regard to the SDGs?**

The responsibility of companies is to do no harm and to do good. In the past the former was the general rule in regards to sustainability and the environment. The do good was only added after the publication of the SDGs in 2015, when it was realized that companies can also contribute in a positive sense. The SDGs are a good guidance, but you cannot give companies the responsibility to decide what is “good” and what is “no harm” by themselves. That requires a public debate. Consequently, companies can act on what is decided.

The SDGs help with the objectification of the goals, but it is only a spot on the horizon. The 16+1 SDGs and their subtargets must be implemented both nationally and locally. For example, the topic of climate change has science-based targets that are very useful to companies. We all agree that climate change is bad and now we have independent benchmarks and targets to work with. As a company you retain discretion on the extent in which you will adhere to the SDGs, but at the very least you will have a reference point on which we all agree. As Philips we will be carbon-free by the end of this year, while you hear from other companies that they will only be able to achieve that by 2030. Let the public debate and politics decide whether or not to act on that!

Similarly, you see the responsibilities of companies reflected at UN Global Compact. I believe that 90% of our members understand and embrace the SDGs. You see that SDG 8 (decent work), SDG 13 (climate action) and SDG 17 (partnerships for the goals) are considered important and concrete implementation thereof follows, but solely focusing on them is still insufficient. In the end, the SDGs require to be part of your core competences and corporate strategy and that is a lot more difficult to achieve. Nevertheless, it is good that companies are now considered as part of the solution rather than the problem because of the SDGs.
What responsibility do you see for civil societies with regard to the SDGs?

Knowledge institutes and NGOs are essential in distinguishing between the do no harm and the do good. As aforementioned, companies cannot decide that distinction by themselves. An example of this are the blood diamonds. At the time, Philips was asked by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to visit Congo. The rule of thumb minerals such as gold or tantalum should be bought by good mines and not the ones held by the rebels. As a company you can decide that, but the moment a child or a rebel passes the mine where you indirectly buy your minerals, your company will be on the frontpage of the news. Thus, companies cannot draw the line between the doing no harm or good, but knowledge institutes and NGOs can. Nonetheless, it is still up to the company to adhere to the applicable norms and agree on what to do when the norm is violated.

The same principle applies to the Netherlands. When I hear investors say that they are ‘10% aligned with the SDGs’, then that implies that 90% is not. It then is up to knowledge institutes and NGOs to point this out and to provide objective and scientific insights on what a better target would be, thus contributing to the transformation.

What responsibility do you see for the government with regard to the SDGs?

As UN Global Compact we see it as the government’s responsibility to further develop the SDG-agenda and the ‘SDG-compass’ locally. Based on the standards provided for by NGOs and knowledge institutes, it is up to the government to provide instruments that facilitate good behaviour of companies and discourage bad behaviour.

The government should also take action themselves to implement the SDGs. As a government, you should set an ambition and assess your current position. Next is that you identify low-hanging fruit, formulate a long-term plan and develop a roadmap towards those goals. It really is standard management practice. This is something that the Netherlands should do, based on the two roles that the government has: nationally, it represents its citizens and the other role is that you are responsible for placing Dutch policy decisions in an international context. For example, the Netherlands has trade relations with virtually every country on the planet and the interpretation of the SDGs vary between them. Through your trade relations you can exert influence and as a government you can formulate an SDG-agenda on how to exert it. This is also possible as a member of the EU. After all, the EU is the largest economy in the world and has enormous power, but barely uses her extraterritorial influence.

How do you think that public affairs contributes to the SDGs?

Public affairs is certainly important. As UN Global Compact, together with the Dutch Sustainable Growth Coalition and others presented a Green Recovery-statement to Minister Kaag. Our message is that economic recovery in the Netherlands should be climate neutral and that it should be enforced. The government has legislation as tool to discourage bad behaviour and money to reward good behaviour. Concretely you see this in measures such as the CO2-levy and adjustments in the legislative framework in order to facilitate circular economy models.

From a public affairs-perspective we stated that the EU Green Deal should be approved. Currently, its core is that recovery should be resilient, green and digital. Those key points now form the triple helix in terms of sustainability and provides an opportunity that should be used. Fortunately, the European Commission is convinced, but the Member States should follow. We do notice that there is support, although it is less than we hoped for.

How do you think that the SDGs contribute to the effectivity of public affairs?

Within Philips I notice that it helps that we have a good reputation on a global scale when it comes to sustainability. The way in which you report what you do is very important. Businesses have an interest in being held accountable via accountants, the government and other reports from (independent) NGOs. This prevents greenwashing for example. It is also vital as a company to understand the interests of all your stakeholders and respond adequately to them. If you do not, it can cost you your business continuity.

Are the SDGs part of your organization/companies strategy? If so, is this used in the public affairs?

As UN Global Compact we created a toolkit on how to embed the SDGs in your company. On 14 December we will present our new vision as Philips and it incorporates other SDGs as well as ESG (Environment, Social and Governance Criteria) criteria. We attempted to embed the SDGs in all our activities and to report them integrally in our annual report.

As UN Global Compact we now try to convince companies to do more with the SDGs and to check out what others do. You often hear about companies that ‘produced less waste’ or ‘decreased its CO2-emissions’, but that is not a high level of ambition. It is more valuable to incorporate the SDGs in your company’s core competences, e.g. by aiming for breakthroughs in the field of AI, education,
and so on. That is where both your innovation and your motivation from your employees comes from. Ultimately it is a lot more motivating for an employee to contribute to a societal goal instead of solely financial goals.

Of course not every company has the same possibilities as Philips. Within UN Global Compact we also hear calls from SMEs, such as florists and cleaners, asking whether they should apply the SDGs in some way. In order to provide SMEs with guidance we organise workshops and facilitate support where smaller companies can learn from the bigger ones. In the end, we will have to do it together.

**Do you experience a difference with how the SDGs are implemented now in relation to five years ago?**

Compared to five years ago I have become more optimistic, mainly because of the corona crisis. Recently there was an online, three-day UNGC-conference in New York. An activity like that normally attracts approximately 2,000 people. Now there were 30,000 people in the call. It demonstrates how accessibility and knowledge-sharing has increased enormously because more and more is being digitalized.

**Do you expect a difference in the position of the government regarding regulatory frameworks according to the SDG in the upcoming years?**

I think that we now move from awareness towards implementation. The first couple of years you would often hear the question what an SDG was and now there is a widespread belief that it is a good idea. Now the question is more often ‘what are we going to do?’ Currently, you often see that smaller companies are having a difficult time because of their size. But if SMEs really focus on their priorities and formulate impactful actions with them, it does not need to be all too complicated. We see that in certain sectors, such as the (renewable) energy sector, that the SDGs serve as guidance and are a key component in their corporate strategies. In sectors where it is less straightforward it is more difficult to do that, especially when it regards SDGs like SDG 16 (peace, justice and strong institutions) or SDG 12 (responsible consumption and production). What you need here is a cycle that enables continuous improvement. As UN Global Compact we published a report that mapped out how the Netherlands is doing in these fields. Other than that it serves as reference point, the report also creates a debate on how we can improve ourselves.

**Does the corona crisis affect the attention and/or resources available from your company or civil societies for the implementation of the SDGs?**

Certainly. I would like to refer to the six principles that the World Economic Forum (WEF) formulated on how we should get through the crisis. These are formulated much clearer, but are still comparable to the SDGs; be understanding, motivate each other, reflect on your work-life balance. It also emphasizes that it must be sustainable and green. The experience of the corona crisis made everything a lot clearer and more concrete. That means that we should use the momentum and stay committed, for example through the Green Deal. If the feeling of urgency dissipates, the risk of falling back into old patterns increases. The Green Deal would be able to maintain our heightened standards.

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> **The government should also take action themselves to implement the SDGs. As a government, you should set an ambition and assess your current position.**
Interview

Arendo Schreurs & Pooja Peters
NOGEPA

Arendo Schreurs
Arendo Schreurs has been the general director of NOGEPA, the trade association for natural gas operators in The Netherlands, since 2019. NOGEPA represents the interests of the oil and gas industry in The Netherlands and wants to make an open and transparent contribution to the transition to a fully sustainable energy supply in 2050. Arendo has experience in public affairs, communication and lobbying at DELTA, VNCI, MSL and at various ministries.

Pooja Peters
Pooja Peters became a Communication and Public Affairs advisor for NOGEPA in 2016 after she explored the communication side of the organisation as a trainee at NOGEPA. Pooja obtained her master’s degree in Media & Business at Erasmus University Rotterdam in 2016.

What responsibility do you see for businesses with regard to the SDGs?

NOGEPA has taken a leading role in working more explicitly with the SDGs. This is currently the subject of dialogue with our members: What activities do they perform and how do they relate these activities to the various SDGs? This shows that not all SDGs are identified as well as others, but a number of them are highly relevant to our sector.

The natural gas sector is an important and relevant part of the Dutch energy value chain. The energy transition is therefore very relevant for our sector. On the one hand, we have to supply gas as long as there is demand for it and as long as we have the supply in the Netherlands. On the other hand, production decreases in favour of renewable energy and we can use more of our infrastructure for e.g. the storage of CO2, green gas or hydrogen. In all these developments the corporate, moral and societal tasks of our sector come together. It the combination of those three that you see reflected in the SDGs.

Implementation of the SDGs is therefore a moral obligation on the one hand, in which the gas sector takes the responsibility to contribute to the energy transition and the maintenance and development of prosperity. On the other hand, the SDGs also act as a mirror for the industry on its societal role, and test its impact of an organization on the environment, society and, for example, the energy transition in the broadest sense. The SDGs can thus be used to demonstrate what the organization does for its environment. Affiliated companies already do surprisingly much to achieve the SDGs, but do not always place their efforts within the contexts of them. That is a shame, because it makes their activities less visible to the outside world. The industry is still being perceived as if the companies solely focus on profits. However, that is only a part of the story. Entrepreneurs in our contemporary society can only continue to exist if they are accepted in the environment in which it is active.

What responsibility do you see for civil society organizations and NGOs with regard to the SDGs?

NGOs have their own specific role and often a valuable one. The SDGs provide a broad framework for the development of businesses and society at large. It is up to the NGOs to fulfil their traditional role and to point out to companies, government and politicians the abuses and the opportunities for improvement. It would be good if they look carefully at whether their actions contribute to the realization of the SDGs or not. Could it be that the attention to and actions on one topic harm another topic? In that respect, NGOs act as any other organization with its own interests.
What responsibility do you see for the governments with regard to the SDGs?

The Katowice Climate Conference which we attended, COP24, was a trigger for us to work more explicitly with the SDGs. The industrial sector plays a role in society that is broader than just the production of products (oil and/or natural gas). The SDGs provide insights into the role companies play in areas such as sustainability and the environment. Indeed, there is also more to natural gas production than just the production thereof. Our activities are related to the climate, space and the environment. We are aware of this and take it into account. Because companies put in efforts that contribute to the SDGs, their added value is not just economic but also societal.

To what extent does public affairs contribute to achieving the SDGs?

Public affairs contributes to the SDGs by translating the transition that is taking place to the level of the individual company and vice versa. So to explain internally why it is relevant to explicitly mention where you stand in regards to the SDGs, and to subsequently communicate this externally. The government can take on the role of “launching customer” setting a good example and disseminate knowledge and experience. There is a trend in the business community to increasingly adopt a social position, because society expects more and more from the company and they are increasingly substantiating this.

We see a trend that the contemporary CEO is increasingly speaking out about societal issues. From an economic and social point of view, we seem to be shifting back to the ‘Rhineland model’ where the shareholder is one of the stakeholders and the social functions of the organization has an added value that exceeds the shareholder’s value alone.

Another question is to what extent the government should regulate. Our experience is that in an environment with predominantly international companies, national rules do not contribute much. Organizational policies related to corporate social responsibility, for example, is often made abroad at a corporate level. This has to be acknowledged as government. International agreements such as the SDGs then perform better. However, national transposition of such rules can nullify its effectivity. Public affairs also play an important role in that conversation between business and government.

To what extent do activities within the framework of the SDGs contribute to public affairs objectives?

We started by asking our companies what they can contribute to the SDGs. The formulation of the SDGs can be perceived as somewhat far away from the direct activities of the companies and therefore require translation: What can the company do now to contribute to the SDGs? It is striking to see the amount of activities of the companies in the oil and gas sector that can be traced back to a particular SDG. And it is good to communicate that to the outside world. In the Netherlands, people are not always enthusiastic about our industry, and that is precisely why it is necessary to obtain an objectifiable framework in e.g. making the gas sector more sustainable. The SDGs play a nice role in this and as a trade association we try to assist members to further develop this insight and convert it into actions.

Are the SDGs part of the strategy of your company / organization? If so, will this be translated into the public affairs strategy?

Not quite yet, but this will happen more in the future. We have actually only just started. By finding out which SDGs are of interest to the sector and setting sub-goals for them, the trade association makes it clear which steps must be taken to contribute to the goals. To achieve this, the trade association and the sector must jointly determine which objectives must be achieved. From a climate, societal and economic perspective the sector already demonstrate its contributions. Now it is key to link them more explicitly to the SDGs.

Do you experience a difference with how governments, companies and civil society organizations are now implementing the SDGs as compared to five years ago?

Using and implementing SDGs has become a way of telling a story over the past five years. A story in which a company not only looks at the realization of profits and shareholder value, but also acknowledges its position in society. On the one hand, part of the story is that the industry is responsible for the past and in some way has been part of the climate challenges we now face. But in the same past, the sector has made a major contribution to the development of our prosperity and wellbeing. For example, there was the Economic Structure Enhancement Fund, filled with income from gas production, was used to invest in infrastructure and in the Dutch Knowledge Economy. Gas extraction was and is a national activity, as a country you choose to fill part of your demand for gas with your own production. The vast majority of the income goes to the state. Here, money is used for society in a general sense. Gas extraction also contributes to goals of the SDGs, such as prosperity and education. It is important to be aware of this.
Do you expect a change in laws and regulations concerning your company or organization in the near future as a result of the SDGs?

Yes. The SDGs will increasingly take in a more societal position. An example are the measures surrounding the nitrogen problem, or the importance of support in the realization of energy projects. Companies themselves will have to tag along in the changing circumstances. Society demands more social awareness and more social activities by companies. The relevance of the SDGs will thus increase in that regard. The expectation is not that we see an increase of regulations surrounding the SDGs, but its basic principles will be reflected within various legislation. This is probably good for the climate but can simultaneously lead to negative effects in other fields. For example, imagine that it is decided not to extract gas on land anymore (e.g. because regional support is lacking) while the demand for natural gas is maintained, then it causes a decrease of state revenue due to increasing expenses as gas will have to be imported. This will consequently have a higher climate impact on the countries from which we import the gas. The SDGs help in such integral considerations.

How do you expect the SDGs to develop in the near future, (how) will your organization respond to this and what do you/organization need for this?

By mapping out what is accessible to the sector and what is within its sphere of influence, the sector can contribute to the development of SDGs. What we also see is that companies are ‘cherry picking’ where on the one hand they are doing something that contributes to the SDGs but simultaneously do things that counteract them. Companies are prohibited from greenwashing, and have to live up to what they argue or aim to do. It is a good thing if a company or organization supports a number of the objectives and contributes to them. Ideally, a company should also move in this direction itself. The SDGs are becoming increasingly important, and this is also reflected in the activities we undertake as an industry. For example, participating in the North Sea Agreement shows that we are actively seeking cooperation with other stakeholders in order to jointly achieve the goals of the Paris Agreement and the SDGs.

Does the corona crisis and the political desire to emerge from this crisis more sustainably affect the attention and / or resources available from your company or organization for the implementation of the SDGs?

In the first couple of months of the corona crisis, our focus was on maintaining a stable energy supply and keeping the gas production going. That does not mean that we have paid less attention to producing natural gas as clean as possible. After the first ‘learning curve’ of corona, there has been room again to continue with, for example, the offshore methane reduction program. There are ambitious plans for our sector that touch on the SDGs. The question at the moment is whether we can free up the resources to actually invest in this, given the difficult economic times. We are certain that we will refer more explicitly to the SDGs in the coming period in order to, among other things, provide insight into the social role we play.
Thor Tummers has been working at the Issues & External Affairs department at Unilever since 2011.

Previously, he worked as a strategic reputation adviser for Unilever. In the past, he studied in Rotterdam at the Rotterdam School of Management of the Erasmus University. He also studied in Shanghai where he researched different outcomes of sustainable partnerships as a competitive advantage. He completed his graduation internship at Philips.

Unilever is a global leader in fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) with 400 brands active in more than 190 countries. Every day, 2.5 billion people use an Unilever-product. Unilever is convinced that sustainable growth in favour of all parties concerned is the only acceptable business model. Aligned with the sustainable growth model, Unilever has contributed to the development of the UN’s SDGs and its corporate teams put in a daily effort to realize the SDGs.

What responsibility do companies have regarding the SDGs?

The report “Better Business, Better World” by the Business & Sustainable Development Commission (BSDC) - and supported by McKinsey & Company - shows that realising the SDGs offers enormous market opportunities for the business community in fields of e.g. Food & Agriculture and Health & Welfare. Nowadays, it is essential that companies also show social added value, otherwise their existence and presence is questioned. It is a complete belief that the only way forward is through sustainable growth. Companies must therefore make sustainability part of their growth strategy. It is precisely the economic component that creates innovation and employment. Social responsibility and transparency also play a major role in this, so it is important that companies report on the contributions they make to the SDGs, ideally the annual progress on various goals as well. For example, Unilever has a list on the website with all the SDGs along with the activities that Unilever carries out to contribute to them. Companies are seizing this opportunity and this trend clearly shows that the global agenda that the SDGs offer, is being acted upon.

What responsibility do you see for civil society organisations and NGOs with regard to the SDGs?

During the elaboration of the previous coalition agreement, the Dutch Sustainable Growth Coalition called for the SDGs to be central in the coalition agreement. This is primarily a role for governments; creating a legal framework in which companies are able to grow sustainably and contribute to the SDGs. In addition, the government should also create incentive measures to direct and accelerate desired investments and developments. The legal framework must be accompanied by incentives to not only punish bad behaviour, but also reward companies that show good behaviour, which is both from the traditional carrot and stick-idea.

What responsibility do you see for governments with regard to the SDGs?

Paul Polman, former CEO of Unilever, was a member of the UN Secretary General’s High-Level Panel, who developed the SDGs. It was unique at the time that the business community directly participated in the SDGs. Now Unilever is often taken seriously and consulted about the realisation of structural sustainability and the SDGs. As Unilever, we like to make time to think along on various topics by sharing knowledge with governments and providing information about the impact and possible effects. This can be further improved at EU level, especially in complex cases such as making the palm oil sector more sustainable. For example, it was initially intended by some countries (such as France) to partially ban palm oil, resulting in its substitution. Subsequently, we looked extensively at various interventions that are necessary to transform the sector in consultation.
One such example is that we designed Global Forest Watch, a tool to combat deforestation. We believe that the collaboration contributed to more effective policies. There are still many topics on which more intensive discussion is worthwhile, such as the transition to a circular economy for plastic and plant food.

**Are the SDGs part of your company’s strategy? If so, will this be translated into the public affairs strategy?**

At Unilever, we separate economic growth from the impact on the environment. When the growth curve of a company rises, the environmental impact curve should actually decrease. This way, growth and sustainability can go hand-in-hand. An example of how this can be done is by making ingredients, logistics and packaging more sustainable so that the sustainable message becomes part of the brand. This also justifies a premium for consumers. At the same time, there is a profit model in sustainability for Unilever because, for example, an increase in sanitation in Africa increases the sales of toilet cleaners. Since Unilever is a company with major premium brands, the impact of a relatively small improvement can quickly have major effects. This makes it possible to create a substantial impact as a company with major brands, especially by working within the context of specific sectors.

**Do you expect a change in laws and regulations around your company or organisation in the near future as a result of the SDGs?**

Since the SDGs offer a solution to various risks in the world, we expect these to only become more important. We believe that it is a logical step for the next coalition agreement to promote international cooperation between governments and companies with a point of view on the SDGs. One example of this is aid and trade, in which companies work with governments to help underdeveloped countries to grow, thereby developing new trading partners. In addition to self-regulation and sector agreements, effective legislation is required, and it is important that legislation for international issues is also set up at an international level, such as the EU. The process may require more time than national legislation, but may have a much greater impact.

**Does the corona crisis and the political desire to emerge from this crisis more sustainably affect the attention and/or resources available from your company or organisation for the implementation of the SDG?**

COVID-19 also affects Unilever and like many companies, we experience all kinds of challenges. This especially the case in the supply chain and sales to the hospitality industry. By investing in a more sustainable ‘Green Recovery’ and focusing on knowledge and innovation, we can rise from the crisis stronger as a company and as a country, all whilst making the SDGs more relevant too.

**Which SDGs are most relevant to your organisation? Is it good to focus or should governments, companies and civil society organisations deploy widely?**

Unilever has a broad portfolio, so food-, personal- and household products contribute to SDG 2 “Zero Hunger” and SDG 6 “Clean Water & Sanitation”. Additionally, Unilever uses approximately sixty thousand suppliers around the world (€ 33.7 billion), which means that there are links to various SDGs such as SDG 10 “Reduced inequalities”. It makes sense to focus in order to make an impact, while at the same time it is important to recognise the integrality of different SDGs and to consider the effects in our decisions. Not only to prevent adverse effects, but also to reuse an effective approach as a ‘repeatable model’ for other SDGs. A broad commitment is required from governments to encourage various departments to work together and to take the international context as the starting point, in order not only to realise SDGs in the Netherlands, but also globally.
Interview
Drs. Corien Wortmann
ABP

Corien Wortmann-Kool is chair of the board of the pension fund ABP. As it is one of the largest pension funds worldwide, ABP is an influential player within the Dutch financial system.

Mrs. Wortmann-Kool is also vice-chair of the Supervisory Boards of Aegon, the national land registry and Save the Children. Between 2004 and 2014 she was Member of the European Parliament on behalf of the Christian-Democratic CDA and vice-chair of the EPP-Group on financial, monetary and sustainability matters. Prior to this position, she worked as a senior civil servant. Thanks to her unique background and in-depth knowledge of the Dutch and the European political-financial landscape, her perspective on the interplay between public strategy development and the SDGs is one that greatly contributes to this trend report.

What responsibility do companies have regarding the SDGs?

If we want to create a better world for all people, all parties in our society have a significant role. The ABP as pension fund and investor, but also the government, civil organisations and without a doubt the business sector all are key actors in this transition.

The SDGs function as a common language for governments, investors and NGOs. It enables us to make joint agreements on different targets and directions. It is essential for companies to not only identify which SDGs are relevant, but that they are held accountable for their actual contributions. Transparent reporting on the SDGs in annual reports is important for this, since the data can be used by other parties to determine whether or not a company is sustainable.

A trend of integrated reporting has been set in motion. There are several frontrunners, which are the companies that have integrated their contributions towards the SDGs in their annual report. We mainly want companies to be transparent about how they actually contribute to sustainability. The past years have shown how non-financial reporting is becoming increasingly important. There has been more attention around this theme within the EU, e.g. in the context of debates on the future of the integrated capital market and the sustainable finance action plan.

What responsibility do you see for civil society organisations and NGOs with regard to the SDGs?

NGOs are also key players in realising the SDGs, for example Amnesty International when it comes to researching child labour, and Greenpeace when it comes to climate (change). These organisations challenge companies and us as a pension fund simultaneously. These companies ensure an active and contemporary dialogue on specific questions regarding circular entrepreneurship. As a pension fund, you are not always perceived positively through the eyes of NGOs. But by having an effective dialogue, objectives regarding sustainable and responsible investments can be realised.

As ABP, it is our ambition to be transparent about our investments. We publish a detailed report on our website on our sustainable and responsible investments in the form of fact sheets. This way, we show our accountability on how we design our investments.

What responsibility do you see for the government with regard to the SDGs?

I believe that companies must take the initiative themselves and be spurred by investors or public opinions. Therefore, the role of the government should be to...
provide incentives to increase sustainability. The government can also promote transparency in accountability. For example, more and more calls are made for requirements on non-financial reporting. Within the European Union there is attention for this, with the Netherlands as a pioneer.

The government can help in other ways as well, such as in the CO2-pricing mechanism in the energy transition and making the tax system more sustainable. This gives companies an incentive to make their business operations more sustainable too. It is difficult for a government to force a company to be more ambitious. However, the government can use the right incentives to steer companies and also ask (listed) companies what their objectives are and oblige them to be responsible.

To what extent does public affairs contribute to achieve the SDGs?

The interaction between government, companies and social institutions, each contributing in their own role based on a shared language, is the most effective way to advance the sustainability goals. Public affairs and its instruments are an integral part of that interaction.

To what extent do activities within the framework of the SDGs contribute to the public affairs objectives?

They contribute to a good conversation. However, there are still companies that want to show the pictograms of the SDGs in order to convey a message regarding sustainability, while in reality their efforts can be disappointing instead. At the same time parties such as the public opinion, but also shareholders and investors, are becoming increasingly critical. For example towards companies with activities in the fossil fuel industry. If they have a climate ambition, there should be indicators that allow for an evaluation of their actions. SDGs are in this case quite helpful and supportive.

Are the SDGs part of your company’s strategy? If so, will this be translated into the public affairs strategy?

With 3 million Dutch pension participants and 450 billion invested assets, we as ABP are not only a financial institution but also a social organisation. We are increasingly noticing that our participants consider it important that their pension money is invested sustainably and that we also contribute to sustainable economic development. Based on research, we believe that sustainable investments ultimately yield at least an equal or higher returns in portfolios.

It is true that you cannot make our portfolio more sustainable overnight, but we have taken a major step with our sustainable and responsible investment policy and have formulated a new ambition for the coming years. We focus our contribution on three main transitions; the energy transition, the transition to a circular economy (and biodiversity) and digitisation. Human rights are always an important and necessary precondition. For 2020, the ABP has set the goal of having €58 billion investments that contribute to the SDGs.

Do you experience a difference in how governments, companies and civil society organisations are now implementing the SDGs compared to five years ago?

Five years ago, it mainly revolved around implementing policy, but in the end it was ultimately decided that something needed to be done to improve sustainability. In recent years this has really changed for a significant group of companies. Themes such as the SDGs and sustainability are to an extent more integrated into core business operations. As a result the SDGs are no longer only linked to the communications department, but became a part of corporate strategies. At ABP, the SDGs are reflected in all phases of our business operations; from formulating our vision on sustainable and responsible investments to our annual reporting.

Do you expect a change in laws and regulations around your company or organisation in the near future as a result of the SDGs?

The most important changes in legislation and regulations in the near future will have to take place in the field of climate change, such as CO2-pricing. Pricing in external effects enables to quickly find investable propositions that have a positive influence on sustainability or in achieving other SDGs. There also exist necessary initiatives in the EU, such as the Sustainable Finance Action Plan and corporate reporting.
How do you expect the SDGs to develop in the future, (how) will you organisation respond to this and what do you/the organisation need for this?

The trend is that SDGs are becoming increasingly important to us, to the business community and to society as a whole. When I read the recently published report by the Ottow Committee on the future of accountancy, I found it very conservative. The report argues that accountancy should focus primarily on financial reporting, and that non-financial reporting is not part of their expertise. It is precisely this non-financial reporting that is becoming increasingly important, because non-financial indicators and risks have an increasing influence on the (future) financial performance of a company.

Does the corona crisis and the political desire to emerge from this crisis more sustainably affect the attention and/or resources available from your company or organisation for the implementation of the SDGs?

Corona or not, the trend of the growing importance of the SDGs continues. The importance of further sustainability, as well as the innovation opportunities that it offers, creates new businesses. Take for example what is happening in the world of start-ups and scale-ups. At the European level, we see that we want to get out of this corona crisis in a sustainable way with the Green Deal and the funds that become available as a result of the corona crisis. I also think it is very important that both national and European efforts are made to focus on innovation.

As ABP we are a long-term investor, so our strategic investment policy has largely remained the same. On the short-term, we have noticed the impact of the corona measures in our real estate investments and reduced dividend payments from a number of listed companies. But it has not changed our overall policy. I do not see the ambition to innovate decrease for us or among other parties either, so the trend will continue.

Which SDGs are most relevant to your organisation? Is it good to focus or should governments, companies and civil society organisations deploy widely?

As indicated, the energy transition to circularity and the digital transformation have our special attention. In our annual report on sustainable and responsible investment, we also elaborate on which SDGs we have invested the most. A large part of this is sustainable real estate, which contributes to SDG 11 (Sustainable cities and communities). ABP also invests a lot in green, sustainable and social bonds. But in total ABP contributes to 13 of the 17 SDGs.
Anders Würtzen, VP Head of Global Public Affairs Mærsk

Anders Würtzen is the Head of Global Public Affairs at Mærsk. He started his career at the Danish Energy Agency. In 1988 he joined Mærsk since has then held different positions within the A.P. Møller - Mærsk concern.

What do the SDGs mean for Mærsk and how do you contribute to the realisation of the SDGs?

You can relate many of the SDGs to Mærsk’s global business operations. We contribute to the SDGs through our overall business strategy. We have been a signatory of the UN Global Compact since 2009 and are committed to responsible business conduct. In the day-to-day world we are likely to focus on those SDGs where our business can have the greatest impact and that also support the development of our business, such as helping to decarbonize logistics, leading change in the ship recycling industry and reducing complexity in value chains.

Do you see different responsibilities for businesses to realise the SDGs than for governments and civil society organisations?

The SDGs commit everybody. They are meant to involve and engage all relevant stakeholders. It is about setting the right framework conditions as the government and for companies to make their business decisions accordingly. So, the responsibility and effort should apply to everyone, but of course with slightly different perspectives. It has to go both ways. Mærsk also has intensive dialogues with civil society organizations on a global scale. The most successful NGOs are actively engaging in the discussion with the market. For instance, we are engaging with NGOs on tax topics and on how to report on our sustainability results. NGOs follow different paths in their advocacy efforts, but the most effective ones are those that seek a constructive dialogue with business.

How can public affairs efforts contribute to realising the SDGs?

The SDGs offer a well-recognized common purpose and our business interests are aligned with the SDGs. So, wherever we can include them in conversations with decision makers we are likely to do so. Aligning ambitions in terms of business objectives that contribute to the SDGs is always a strong argument, as it shows that there is common ground. In that sense the SDGs are also not unique. In public affairs efforts you always need to address many important political drivers, such as employment or inclusivity. But we also need to remember that the main focus in public affairs is not necessarily to promote the SDG viewpoints or their progress. Since I am working to support our business objectives I would therefore be careful to say that public affairs drive the SDGs forward. It is the business strategy and subsequent business decisions that really support the realisation of the SDGs.

How can the SDGs help to make public affairs more effective?

In order to instigate real change you have to start somewhere. That also means that we need to be willing and able to talk about all the goals, even if we cannot yet deliver on all of them at this stage. A big part of corporate social responsibility and reporting on those efforts is to address what you are not yet able to do. Through the reporting standards you are really introducing a common language that allows you to address exactly those points. And companies that are willing to embrace this language and share this information are also better able to control the narrative and, therefore, the political agendas. In fact, if all stakeholders are rational, genuine and fair in using that common language, then you can really do something constructive.
Does the corona crisis and the political desire to emerge from this crisis more sustainably affect the attention for the SDGs and sustainability in your company?

If companies do not restructure and transition to a green business model they will be out of business on the longer term. If you do not set out a path towards making your business more sustainable with concrete and tangible goals along the way, then it is hard for me to see your business having a future. So, even though the ambitions and goals might differ across industries, it is really all about the long-term strategy. An important part of that is that your business also needs to be competitive today. So, the challenge is to combine all these big ambitions and goals with the everyday reality of doing business. If you go too fast, you may run out of business because your competitors eat you up. If you go too slow, you will be vulnerable and lose important stakeholder support. Public affairs-wise you just need to make sure that what is in between those two extremes is as wide as possible.

In the day-to-day world we are likely to focus on those SDGs where our business can have the greatest impact and that also support the development of our business, such as helping to decarbonize logistics, leading change in the ship recycling industry and reducing complexity in value chains.
Kirsten Zondervan & Remco Neumann
Port of Rotterdam

Kirsten Zondervan
Kirsten Zondervan (European Affairs Manager, HbR) has been working at the department of External Affairs of the Port of Rotterdam since 2016. She is responsible for the representing the interests of the Port of Rotterdam in Europe and in dealings with European institutions, and for maintenance of the Brussels network. Prior to that, she held various public affairs positions in e.g. the pension sector, energy sector and consultancy.

Remco Neumann (CSR Manager)
Remco Neumann has been working on corporate social responsibility at the port of Rotterdam since 2016. He is committed to ensuring that safety, sustainability and integrity remain high on the agenda at all levels within the company. Remco is a business economist and in recent years has gone through the transition from thinking in terms of economic value to thinking in terms of social value.

What responsibility do you see for businesses with regard to the SDGs?

Businesses can do a lot to contribute to achieving the SDGs. In its vision and mission, the Port of Rotterdam has included the intention to increase both the economic value and social value. The SDGs provide a universal framework that shows organisations how they can increase their social value. The business community, too, is increasingly realising that it is not just about realising turnover, but also about realising social added value, for example in the areas of poverty reduction, health, food supply and sustainability. As an organisation, you have to see how you can contribute to these goals based on your own strengths.

What responsibilities with regard to SDGs do you see for civil societies and NGOs?

Every organisation plays a different role with regard to the SDGs; you have to look at what you are good at and where you can offer added value. Companies such as IKEA and Unilever deliver products, while governments play a more facilitating role and create the conditions. Still, the parties are moving towards each other.

To what extent does public affairs contribute to achieving the SDGs?

When working on public affairs, you often have to justify why you make certain choices or your views on certain affairs, and explain how your organisation can make a positive contribution or offer a solution to a social problem. It also helps if you can help policy makers achieve social objectives, rather than working against them. By including the SDGs in your PA policy, the two can strengthen each other. In addition, as a port we have to deal with the living environment of residents, companies in the port, ships and industry in our daily business operations. We have to weigh up all these different interests very carefully and include them in our strategic environmental management, which is also an important part of the PA strategy.

What the Port decides, often has an immediate effect on the lives of hundreds of people and therefore we want to be in a constant dialogue with local residents and companies. Public Affairs and strategic environmental management play an important role in this respect.

The SDGs were considered to be abstract, not very urgent and not self-evident. You can now see that the SDGs are becoming increasingly accepted.
To what extent do SDG activities contribute to the public affairs objectives?

We regularly get critical questions about our responsibility in the chain, even when the responsibility — formally — does not lie with us. Examples are the transit of polluting fuels or whale meat through the Port of Rotterdam. We get questioned about these issues by policy makers and politicians. Take, for instance, the fight against drug-related crime in the port, something that used to be the formal responsibility of the customs authority, the police and the public prosecution service. A few years ago, our role was quite small, but today the situation is different. We now feel much more responsible for combating drug-related crime in the port due to the increasing social impact and affecting our core activities. It has an impact on the image of our business climate and on safety in the workplace, but also more broadly on crime in the city.

Are the SDGs part of the strategy of your business/organisation? If so, is this reflected in your public affairs strategy?

SDGs are now an integral part of our business strategy and we test our public affairs policy against the goals. We work with annual plans per department. These also have to reflect the business objectives and indicate how you are going to contribute to these objectives from within your discipline, such as public affairs. Because the port vision affects all departments, everyone has a good idea of what the port stands for and what our objectives are (e.g. with regard to climate, employment, biodiversity).

The port vision is about the development of the port complex. Practice what you preach. We want to become a circular hotspot and also want to reduce our CO2 footprint. This means that we have to take action on this ourselves where possible. For example, our own fleet now runs on biofuels, we encourage colleagues to come to work by bike and we use green electricity for our assets. It then helps to have a vision, a reference point such as our vision, which embeds the SDGs.

Do you see a difference in the way governments, businesses and civil societies are implementing SDGs now compared to five years ago?

We certainly see a difference compared to the situation five years ago. Organisations really had to get used to it at the time. The SDGs were considered to be abstract, not very urgent and not self-evident. You can now see that the SDGs are becoming increasingly accepted. The current social debate plays a role here, of course. When you read the newspaper, a lot of articles are on climate, diversity, nitrogen, etc. In short, social issues. As an organisation, we are a reflection of society and therefore take these issues seriously.

In addition, the climate targets in the Paris Agreement and the European Green Deal significantly contributed to the acceptance of SDGs. These objectives go beyond climate action, they also deal with inclusiveness, a fair transition and the circular economy.

Do you expect a change in legislation and regulations in the near future as a result of the SDGs that will affect your business or organisation?

The port vision is a long-term vision, until 2030, and embeds the wishes of the City of Rotterdam, the Dutch State, NGOs and other stakeholders. It is a translation of the civil goals set by the government and our shareholders. The port vision is a definitive document and serves as a framework, but of course the accents can shift. In view of the hydrogen economy, the energy transition is currently one of our most important pillars.

How do you expect the SDGs to develop in the future, (how) will your organisation respond to developments, and what do you/does the organisation need to make this happen?

The Port of Rotterdam is already well on the way. However, at the same time, you can see that the really significant transition takes time. Take, for example, the development of the hydrogen economy. Everyone thinks it’s logical that we are working on it, but practice can sometimes be stubborn. It is very important that governments, the business community and we as a company stand side by side and work together to achieve the SDG goals. This sometimes means we have to make unpopular decisions that can affect some people negatively in the short term. Commitment and the willingness to make these choices are necessary to break through patterns.

We also sometimes face political opposition from parties who, for instance, want us to start using zero-emission ships and production methods. They are of the opinion that we need to move faster and that there’s no time for a transition.

It is very important that governments, the business community and we as a company stand side by side and work together to achieve the SDG goals. This sometimes means we have to make unpopular decisions that can affect some people negatively in the short term.
Public affairs allows us to bring realism back into the debate. We have the SDGs as objectives, but also give us time to take the necessary steps. We should not only simply impose the objectives, but also help each other achieve them. Public affairs plays a crucial role here.

**Do the coronacrisis and the political desire to get out of this crisis in a more sustainable manner have an impact on the attention and/or available resources in your business or organisation for the implementation of the SDG?**

The aftermath of the COVID-19 crisis has indeed accelerated the discussion. We should not go back to business as usual, but try to come out of the crisis stronger than before. 6.2% of Dutch GNP is generated at the Port of Rotterdam. The COVID-19 crisis has an impact on the 385,000 jobs in and around our port complex. And we feel responsible.

As port authority we try to encourage our customers to invest in the new economy. Despite the cutbacks, we see that companies are still investing in new technologies such as hydrogen and still believe in the power of the Port of Rotterdam. We try to convince our customers to join us in making the change in support of the SDGs. As a port authority we can play a facilitating role in this change, for example by co-investing in projects.

**Which SDGs are most relevant for your organisation? Is it a good idea to focus on a few or should governments, businesses and civil societies have a broader view?**

Five of the SDGs are directly relevant to the port, and these also form the starting point for the port vision: Good wealth and well-being (3), affordable and clean energy (7), decent work and economic growth (8), industry, innovation and infrastructure (9) and climate action (13). The energy transition (7) is currently our biggest contribution to the SDGs.
Conclusions and Trends

At the beginning of the summer 2020, the consultants of the DR2 network set out to interview leading figures in government, business, science and NGOs on their commitment to the SDGs. The response was very positive: everyone we asked to meet us was enthusiastic and agreed to co-operate. It looks like we touched on a topic that is both interesting and complex, attractive and a struggle, embraced and overlooked. One of the first conclusions we came to is that, although a lot has been said about it, the last word on the SDGs has not yet been spoken!

When we prepared the questions for the participants, we started from the idea that the relationship between public affairs and the SDGs is twofold: one, SDGs can support the relationship between the government and stakeholders and organisations, and two, public affairs is necessary to put the SDGs higher on the agenda of politics, science and the business world. This ‘hypothesis’ was confirmed, albeit through a bit of a ‘chicken and egg’ construction. The government and NGOs on the one hand ask businesses and knowledge institutes to make the SDGs work, whereas the latter state that their performances on the SDGs could be improved if the government and NGOs would offer a clear vision and agenda. From the lively conversations we had, we were able to derive four trends. Before we present them to you, the DR2 network would like to thank all the respondents who were willing to talk to us — and to you, the reader — about the not always easy path towards strategic implementation of the SDGs. Selecting only one, maybe two, three or all 16+1 goals is not considered to be the big issue. The main thing is that we work towards a better world together. Our agency, which has a number of companies around the world, hopes that this report and the detected trends will give the reader the strength and enthusiasm to make an effort in realising the SDGs.

Trend 1: SDGs: for a better world and stronger organisations

Mirjam van Praag (VU): “Within the field of public affairs, you see that corporate social responsibility (CSR) is becoming more important and visible for businesses. Although the SDGs are not always specifically mentioned, you do see that sustainability, CSR and ‘giving something back to society’ remains important.”

The business world, governments, knowledge institutions and NGOs show a huge willingness to invest in the SDGs. Not only governments and NGOs feel the responsibility to contribute to a better world; commercial organisations also consider it their moral duty to contribute socially and ecologically.

Thor Tummers (Unilever): “When the growth curve of a company goes up, the environmental impact curve should go down. The ideal situation is to grow as well as become more sustainable.”

Arendo Schreurs (NOGEPA): “Economically and socially, we seem to be moving back to the Rhineland model, where the shareholder is one of the stakeholders and the social functioning of the organisation has added value over shareholder value alone.”

These businesses realise the importance of a ‘license to operate’ and maintaining social and political support in times of transition in various areas. Others also experience the added value in their business case: focusing the core business on achieving the SDGs is a development that will strengthen businesses.

Corien Wortmann (ABP): “To an extent, themes such as the SDGs and sustainability are more integrated into the core business operations. This way, the SDGs are no longer just linked to the communications department, but are becoming a part of the company strategy as a whole.”

If there is a link with the company’s interests, this has the greatest impact, and there is a bigger chance of a return on investment. Organisations that incorporate the SDGs in their mission or strategy generally generate an impact with regard to both the SDGs and other goals: image, employee involvement, being an interlocutor for governments, appreciation and ultimately continuity and profit.

Jan Willem Scheijgrond (Philips): “Including the SDGs in your core competences results in a bigger impact, e.g. striving for breakthroughs in the field of AI, education, etc., which does not only generate innovation but motivates your employees at the same time. Ultimately, it is more fun and fulfilling when an employee can contribute to a social cause instead of to the quarterly figures.”
**Trend 2: Agenda setting by the government is crucial**

*Herman Mulder (SDG Nederland): “The government must create a stimulating climate, making it more attractive to invest with equity rather than using subsidies and loans.”*

Respondents agree: the government needs to play a more guiding role to ensure the SDGs are embedded into the DNA of society. With respect to the initiatives that are already underway here: the signal can be more powerful and insistent. This is necessary to prevent the SDGs from slipping into the background and slowly disappearing from the agenda.

*Thor Tummers (Unilever): “The main role of governments is to create a legal framework to enable companies to grow in a sustainable manner and contribute to the SDGs. In addition, the government should also take the initiative to measure habitual behaviour of companies.”*

This is certainly true in times of crisis, such as now with the COVID-19 pandemic. A traditional reflex is to prioritise economic recovery. A national SDG agenda stimulates governments, businesses and civil institutions to come out of the crisis more sustainably. The desired ‘Green Recovery’ takes shape as governments treat SDGs more seriously. A national strategy would also allow more smart financial instruments to be developed to implement the SDGs.

*David Kuijper (FMO): “If you really want to make an impact, you need huge investments, and much more than private money alone. You need public money. Governments have a responsibility to make this type of investment possible.”*

*Corien Wortmann (ABP): “I believe that companies must take the initiative themselves, spurred on by investors or public opinion. Therefore, the role of the government should be to provide incentives to increase sustainability.”*

It is striking that a country like the Netherlands, in contrast to the surrounding countries, does not have such a strategy. An important precondition for a national strategy and set of instruments is that they are developed in public-private partnerships.

*Alexander Rinooy Kan (SDG Alliances): “SDGs lend themselves well to such a strategy, as they offer a wide range of opportunities and each SDG has its own indicators that make progress measurable.”*

That government interference can also go too far is explained by Onny Jalink (Dutch Consul Shanghai):

*Onny Jalink: “Things are different in the Chinese business world, where CSR is more about charity and ‘doing good,’ and also because many of the goals are imposed top-down by the central government. The danger of a top-down system is that it can create a ‘ticking the boxes’ mentality, where the goal is subordinate to what you are trying to achieve.”*

Public affairs could help both businesses as well as NGOs and knowledge institutions to put SDGs higher on the political agenda. Joint action is needed to ensure that SDGs are firmly embedded in policy, with the UN and with national and local governments.
Trend 3: The SDGs strengthen a public affairs strategy

Anders Würtzen (Maersk): “A big part of corporate social responsibility and reporting on those efforts is to address what you are not yet able to do. Companies that are willing to embrace this language and share this information are also better able to control the narrative and, therefore, the political agendas.”

Public affairs is two-way traffic. In successful lobbying processes, organisations not only demand something from the government; they also start by indicating how they themselves can be part of the solution to a social problem. The method of communicating is a challenge: how do you talk about how well you are doing? The SDGs contribute to an objective way of reporting. There are also numerous measuring instruments (CO2 reduction, recycling, clean air, etc.) and reporting systems for this purpose, but the SDGs bring focus, commitment and therefore credibility to the way in which a company expresses its own social performance.

Arendo Schreurs (NOGEPA): “The SDGs hold up a mirror to our industry about our social role and test the impact of an organisation in a broader sense, for instance regarding the environment, society and energy transition. Therefore, the SDGs can be used to show what the organisation is doing for its environment.”

Mirjam van Praag (VU): “Our activities are aimed at research, education, impact and business operations. All these elements relate to the SDGs and public affairs can play a supportive role on all these elements.”

David Kuijper (FMO): “The seventeen SDG visuals are displayed on our premises in large format. You can’t miss them. The SDGs are a visible part of our mission. FMO uses the SDGs to add even more value to its own organisation.”

In the conversations, two models for the relationship between SDGs and lobby came to the fore. On the one hand, there are organisations that incorporate all the SDGs in their lobby. On the other hand, there are organisations that use specific elements for their lobby that can be directly linked to one SDG. There is a risk of ‘cherry picking’, an organisation only picks those SDGs that can be easily achieved. However, this risk is not recognised by the respondents.

Alexander Rinnooy Kan (SDG Alliances): “You can’t reasonably expect everyone to pick up all seventeen goals at the same time. I don’t think it’s wrong to focus on one or a few SDGs that parties are already good at, and put extra effort into those.”

Kirsten Zondervan (Port of Rotterdam): “The business community, too, is increasingly realising that it is not just about achieving turnover, but also about realising social added value, for example in the areas of poverty reduction, health, food supply and sustainability. As an organisation, you have to see how you can contribute to these goals based on your own strengths.”

Trend 4: We are making steps forward!

It’s undeniable: the SDGs are gaining ground. Huge progress has been made since the end of the last century. This is evidenced by the fact that we were allowed to talk so extensively about SDGs with financial, technological and fossil companies. This report concludes a few trends in this area as well:

1. The SDGs have a long history. Compared to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which were still seen as somewhat abstract and more the responsibility of the government, the SDGs are seen as more practical goals that businesses, knowledge institutions, NGOs and citizens can work on.

   Alexander Rinnooy Kan (SDG Alliances): “The MDGs were mainly political objectives that were viewed with scepticism until a number of goals were achieved. At the time, the business community fought hard to be allowed at the table to discuss the interpretation of the SDGs.”

   This is what you see happening. The growing awareness of the SDGs is now translated into action. Implementation is the next step.

   Jan Willem Scheijgrond (Philips): “I think we are moving from awareness to implementation. The first few years revolved around explaining the SDGs whilst the question is now rather: How are we going to implement them?”

2. The next step is to use the SDGs strategically. As a licence to operate or as an instrument for public affairs and sometimes even linked to the core business.

   Sandra Pellegrin (SDG coordinator Ministry of Foreign Affairs): “I notice that the business leaders really see that their long-term interests are not just financial and economic, and that it is also important for their long-term survival to invest in environmental sustainability and in our social foundations.”
Thor Tummers (Unilever): “It is the complete belief that the only way forward is through sustainable growth. Businesses must therefore make sustainability part of their growth strategy.”

Michiel Dijkman (Samsung): “From my perspective, I think that it is better to incorporate the SDGs into the core business of a company, and contribute to them from there. For example, you could put aside a special fund dedicated to SDGs, say 1% of the profit, and use it for fun projects related to the SDGs.”

3. We see growing international dynamics. Of course, SDGs do not stop at national borders. Global companies and international partnerships between governments are working on achieving the SDGs, because unlike national sustainability targets, they form an international ‘language’.

Corien Wortmann (ABP): “The SDGs function as the common language of governments, investors and NGOs. We can use it to make joint agreements on the targets and to decide which direction to go.”

Sandra Pellegrom (SDG coordinator Ministry of Foreign Affairs): “The SDGs are actually common values, and they are going to become increasingly important in the years to come. This ensures that it also increasingly becomes a joint project that various parties in society are a part of.”

Arendo Schreurs (NOGEPA): “Participating in the North Sea Agreement shows that we are actively seeking cooperation with other stakeholders in order to jointly achieve the goals of the Paris Agreement and the SDGs.”

The SDGs as a common language, as a common set of values, translated into international agreements and investments. That is what we are going to see in the years to come!

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