Call for papers: Special Issue of *Journal of Business Ethics*

Multistakeholder engagement for the Sustainable Development Goals:

Ethical and organisational challenges

**Guest Editors**
Guénola Abord-Hugon Nonet*, Jönköping International Business School: guenola.nonet@ju.se
Tobias Goessling, Kedge Business School, goessling@gmail.com
Rob van Tulder, Rotterdam School of Management Erasmus University, rtulder@rsm.nl
John M. Bryson, Hubert Humphrey School of Public Affairs, University of Minnesota, jimbryson@umn.edu

* Corresponding editor

**Background and positioning**

Agenda 2030 and its 17 Sustainable Development goals (SDGs) have been widely adopted by businesses, governments and Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) since their introduction at the United Nations Sustainable Development Summit (September 25, 2015). The SDGs succeeded to the Millennium Development Goals. The SDGs are based on the five P framework (Van Tulder, 2018): people, planet, prosperity, peace and partnering, i.e. all SDGs are based on partnering and the whole preparation of the SDGs has been an exercise in multistakeholder engagement to help create a universal plan of action for all countries, for people, planet, peace and prosperity. The creation of the SDGs generated vivid discussions about the potential impact of the SDGs in relation to the role of businesses and how focuses can be created. However, the SDGs very explicitly highlight the importance of partnership (goal 17) to help progress towards Agenda 2030.

The notion of stakeholders (Freeman, 1984; Savage, Nix, Whitehead, Blair, 1991, Bryson, 2004) and the necessity to engage them towards common ethical and responsible actions to help achieve the SDGs has now been extensively discussed in literature. While most stakeholders seem to agree on the importance of the 17 sustainable Development Goals and on their 169 sub-targets, the way they are interrelated, their complexity, the difficulty to address what should be reinforced legally, what belongs to moral and/or ethical value in particular at the social level (rather than the technical levels) and the ability for related stakeholders to work together towards a common vision will determine the effectiveness of the chosen intervention (van Tulder, 2018). Due to their intertwined high level of complexity, SDGs are described as wicked processes requiring Cross-Sector Partnerships (CSPs), inclusion of multiple stakeholder perspectives, involving different partnerships to create systemic change (Van Tulder and Keen, 2018). Working with the SDGs reveals the importance of partnerships to help address wicked problems.

Our focus is that action for Agenda 2030 is partly impeded by its overall complexity and all issues related to it (Waddock, Meszoely, Waddell, Dentoni, 2015). Organizations are limited in the support they can offer to innovate towards accomplishing the SDGs. The intricacy of the 17 agendas and the diversity of stakeholders related to issues addressed by organizations can be seen as a force as well as a threat. The diversity of stakeholders affected forces organizations to pursue multistakeholders engagement and collaboration in order to achieve the SDGs (Rotheroe, Keenlyside, Coates, 2003).

The United Nations acknowledges that progress on the SDGs agenda is too slow, asking how we can accelerate the pace for change. The voluntary nature of the SDGs, the need to clarify organizational and individual moral and ethical obligations, the absence of legal reinforcement and sanctions, and the lack of formal processes to ensure the accomplishment of the goals (Biermann, Kanie & Kim, 2017; Bowen et al., 2017) means the SDGs are at best a kind of “soft” international law (Persson, Weitz & Nilsson, 2016, Van Tulder & Keen, 2018). How can we increase multiple engagement and enforce collaboration towards making progresses for Agenda 2030?
Another important challenge of the Agenda 2030 and the SDGs is the question if they eventually can contribute to solving major ethical issues of business life. A major critique on CSR initiatives is that they rather confer to business profitability than to avoiding harm to minorities or diminishing human rights abuses effectively (Banerjee, 2008; Frankental, 2001).

Prospective Themes

Challenges of multistakeholder engagement for the SDGs: We encourage scholars to investigate collaborations and cross-sector partnerships in relation to overall sustainability for People, Planet, Prosperity, Peace and Partnering (Van Tulder, 2018). The following topics could be explored: The relationship between partnership and multistakeholder engagement, the willingness to engage in sustainability and the importance of dialogue and communication amongst diverse groups of stakeholders to maintain transparency and successful outcomes for all.

The complexity of defining stakeholders: Stakeholders is a socially constructed phenomenon (Fineman and Clarke, 1996; Winn, 2001). Individuals cannot be assumed to be part of one single group; they often belong to more than one group (Crane and Livesey, 2003; Winn, 2001; Gao and Zhang, 2001). Defining stakeholders (salience: power, urgency and legitimacy; Mitchell, Agle & Wood, 1997) and the nature of their relationships could be explored.

Complexity of the Agenda 2030: Sustainability and the Agenda 2030 are complex and dynamic (Waddock et al, 2015; Van Tulder, 2018; Lu, Nakicenovic, Visbeck, Stevance, 2015). We encourage authors to look at: wicked problems and how multistakeholder engagement contributes to dealing with wicked problems; systems theory, wicked problems and partnership necessity; and how can we learn from partnering practice to increase its effectiveness (van Tulder, 2017).

The role of ethics to help achieve the SDGs in our current economic system: We ask for an ethical reflection of the SDGs. We invite business philosophers to discuss, amongst others, the importance of moral values and ethical duties as a motivation for stakeholders to engage for the SDGs (Payne, Raiborn, 2001; Maon, Lindgreen, Swaen, 2010), the moral quality of the goals of the SDGs, the definition of our responsibility and ethical duties to help support collaboration towards the SDGs (Maon et Al, 2010) and the possible contribution of applied business ethics to the goals of the SDGs.

Results of collaboration for the SDGs: We invite researchers to explore how private organizations support the operationalization and implementation of the SDGs by studying initiatives that support collaboration between stakeholders, new monitoring and evaluation approaches to enhancing transformation change through multistakeholder engagement, setting up the right partnership portfolio for the SDGs (Austin and Seitanidi, 2014; Crane et al, 2018).

Submission process and deadline

Authors are strongly encouraged to refer to the Journal of Business Ethics website for instructions on submitting a paper and for more information about the journal. Submission to the special issue, by March 31, 2020, is required through Editorial Manager at: http://www.editorialmanager.com/busi. A paper submitted to a Special Issue cannot be resubmitted to a regular issue. Upon submission, please indicate that your submission is to this Special Issue. Please contact the Guest Editors in case of questions related to the special issue.

References


