



The sustainable development goals: A case study



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ABSTRACT

The Sustainable Development Goals or SDGs [44] are an ambitious step towards sustainable development, taking a much broader view of sustainability than ever achieved previously, yet practical challenges remain, including how to implement change. The aims of this research were to determine how an influential aquaculture company in Australia - Tassal, Tasmania's largest salmon aquaculture company - perceived the SDGs, and to ascertain the motivations and barriers for Tassal to work towards implementing the goals. Interviews were conducted with leaders, employees and external business partners. Tassal was not aware of the SDGs prior to this project, but were open to considering implementing them in their current sustainability practices. The survey responses were analysed using the Values-Rules-Knowledge (vrk) framework of decision making. Key findings were: 1) corporate and personal values were the key component driving Tassal's positive responses to the SDGs; 2) awareness of the SDGs resulted in Tassal recognising the potential gains from engaging with some of the seemingly less aquaculture-related goals (such as health and wellbeing). These findings demonstrate that businesses can fruitfully engage with the SDGs, even without government requirements or societal expectations, if they are prepared to broaden their interpretation of business sustainability and be reflective about their values. The vrk model is a potentially useful addition to current SDG and sustainability tools, such as those of the UN Global Compact, as a way to diagnose organisational barriers to adopting practices aligned with the SDGs. An emerging area of importance to social, economic and environmental sustainability – social license – was also identified as implicit in many, but not explicit in any of the SDGs.

1. Introduction

In 2015 the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were released and ratified by the United Nations as part of Agenda 2030, an agreement by the United Nations to improve global sustainability by 2030 [42]. The SDGs are made up of 17 goals covering all aspects of sustainability and are an ambitious step toward actionable targets for sustainable development covering all aspects of sustainability and all sectors of society (Fig. 1). Yet there remain a number of key challenges relating to implementation of the strategies and action plans required to achieve the goals. The main challenges include: coordinating local, national and global responses [22,4], avoiding negative consequences from responses to goals (or parts thereof) in isolation [12,36–38], accessing information and resources to understand the goals and how to respond [21,42], and monitoring, evaluating and assessments of progress at all scales in particular sectors (e.g. [3,17,39]).

Challenges to implementing the SDGs are particularly acute in Australia where the awareness of the SDGs amongst the government,

the private sector and the public is generally low [41]. This may be because the Australian government and media generally focus on socio-economic and political issues over environmental or sustainability concerns [9]. For example, the last election saw 'jobs and growth' and 'health and schools' as the competing major policy areas for the two major parties. This is despite overwhelming evidence that social and economic outcomes depend on healthy environments [47,8] especially in situations experienced in Australia where large-scale rapid climate changes are threatening the sustainability of existing cultural and economic activities based on natural ecosystems (e.g., tourism, fisheries, coastal development) causing damage and economic costs [24,7]. Additionally, Australian businesses seem to be less engaged with the SDGs than other countries in Europe, Africa and Asia, with only about half of businesses in Australia stating it was important for businesses to 'sign up' to the SDGs, compared to 90% in developing countries (PwC 2016). This is reflected in Australia being ranked only 20th on achievement of the SDGs overall [34], needing to reduce carbon emissions per capita, obesity rates, nitrogen use and fisheries

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 <p>1. End poverty in all its forms everywhere.</p>	 <p>7. Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all.</p>	 <p>13. Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts.</p>
 <p>2. End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture.</p>	 <p>8. Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all.</p>	 <p>14. Conserve and sustainable use of the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development.</p>
 <p>3. Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages.</p>	 <p>9. Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation.</p>	 <p>15. Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification and halt and reverse land degradation and biodiversity loss.</p>
 <p>4. Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote life-long learning opportunities for all.</p>	 <p>10. Reduce inequality within and among countries.</p>	 <p>16. Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels.</p>
 <p>5. Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls.</p>	 <p>11. Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable.</p>	 <p>17. Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalise the global partnership for sustainable development.</p>
 <p>6. Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all.</p>	 <p>12. Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns.</p>	

Fig. 1. The 17 SDGs.

management of some industries to improve its status. The efforts in Australia relating to the SDGs are not all bad, however, with: (i) members of the Australian research community deeply engaged and increasingly calling on businesses to do the same (e.g. [4,12,38,37,3,17]); (ii) Australia participating in international efforts to maintain the spotlight on the SDGs (e.g. Future Earth [11], ICSU, ISSC 2015 [20]); and (iii) some private industry and non-government groups beginning to mobilise in this area (see for example Sustainable Business Australia [27], United Nations Business Action Hub [43], WBCSD [45], World Ocean Council and WWF) due to recognition of the opportunities created by the SDGs and growing pressures from global markets to support and align with the SDGs (e.g. SDG compass <http://sdgcompass.org/>).

Case studies that demonstrate the successes, benefits, and lessons learned from businesses' attempts to adopt new and adapt existing practices to achieve the SDGs, are a potentially influential way of promoting greater and more widespread awareness and proactive

efforts across businesses and Governments in Australia (while also potentially supporting efforts more widely) in engaging with and contributing to the SDGs. This paper discusses the outcomes of introducing the SDGs to an Australian company and describing their responses, particularly from the perspective of the employees who will be tasked with integrating the SDGs into the everyday company processes. In so doing, the analysis focuses on an aquaculture company which aims to be highly progressive and truly sustainable, Tassal Pty Ltd (see below for details). Although lessons are derived from the experiences of a single firm in the aquaculture sector, their transferability to other firms, sectors and geographies is possible because of the wide ranging and systemic implications of the SDGs. In particular because the SDGs offer an integrated and systems approach to sustainability and so to viably achieve sustainability requires that any company will need to first reflect on and invest time and effort in understanding:

- 1) the fundamental values (ethics) of their decision making and how

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