

# Editorial: The research impact in management through the UN's sustainable development goals

“Who are we, if not measured by our impact on others?”

Carl Sagan (American scientist 1934–1996)

As the reader has noticed, in our last three editorials, we have emphasised the discussion on research impact in a broader sense. In brief, we discussed the main concepts on research impact in the first one (Sandes-Guimarães & Hourneaux Junior, 2020). The second editorial aimed at presenting the most important models and frameworks for assessing research impact (Hourneaux Junior & Sandes-Guimarães, 2020). Finally, this series' third and last piece dealt with problems and criticism on research impact (Sandes-Guimarães & Hourneaux Junior, 2021).

Thus, the discussion on defining, identifying and measuring Research impact in management has intensely increased lately. We see that significant room has been given to this debate in the most relevant journals through different perspectives, for instance, focusing on the scholarly impact (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Podsakoff, & Bachrach, 2008; Aguinis, Suárez-González, Lannelongue, & Joo, 2012) and the impact on the management practices (Haley, Page, Pitsis, Rivas, & Yu, 2017; Simsek, Bansal, Shaw, Heugens, & Smith, 2018), to mention some distinguished publications in the recent years.

Despite their obvious importance, both scholarly and practical impacts are only two of the possible types of research impact, as we have presented before (Sandes-Guimarães & Hourneaux Junior, 2020). The point here is to emphasise the need for broadening the scope of the research impact. As a complement to the previous editorials, in this issue, we aim at discussing a framework that can work as a reference to some intended impacts of research in management. We refer to the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). We reinforce the argument of George, Howard-Grenville, Joshi and Tihanyi (2016) that a considerable effort in research should be addressed to tackling the “grand challenges” (GC). The authors define GC as “specific critical barrier(s) that, if removed, would help solve an important societal problem with a high likelihood of global impact through widespread implementation” (George *et al.*, 2016). The authors also emphasise that the SDGs should be faced as one of the most relevant GCs the world has met and, therefore, be vigorously targeted by researchers' energies.

In the sequence, we briefly present the SDGs, and later, some reflection on the SDGs role as a driver for research impact in management.



## The Sustainable Development Goals –overview

In 2015, after a vast effort and a long time, the UN launched the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, signed by almost 200 countries. The 2030 Agenda comprises the so-called SDGs, a framework that replaced the previous Millennium Development Goals, in a more extensive and deeper perspective (Sachs, 2012), and “it also integrates social, economic and environmental dimensions and provides guidance for humanity to prosper in the long term” (Griggs, Stafford-Smith, Gaffney, *et al.*, 2013, p. 307).

The 2030 Agenda and the SDGs are based on a collaborative effort by people, businesses, governments and civil society to achieve these goals (UN – United Nations, 2017). This agenda has at its basis the SDGs, which has been seen as a driver for promoting sustainable development (SD) among different stakeholders both locally and globally (Sachs, 2012; Griggs *et al.*, 2013). The SDGs were built on the former Millennium Development Goals and are grounded on five principles: people, planet, prosperity, peace and partnership (UN – United Nations, 2015). Table 1 presents the 17 goals.

In short, SDGs are considered “a major achievement in the development of shared goals for all of humanity” (Costanza *et al.*, 2016). On the other hand, they are also one of the biggest challenges the world has faced (George *et al.*, 2016). This paradoxical situation can be seen as an optimal opportunity for increasing one’s research impact, especially in management, as we discuss next.

## The sustainable development goals as a reference for research impact in management

It has been five years since George *et al.* (2016) published their article. According to Macht, Chapman and Fitzgerald (2020), the number of publications about the SDGs in management

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

Source: UN (2015)

**Table 1.**  
UN’s 17 SDGs

journals has been multiplying since their launch the year before, which we can consider positive from this editorial's perspective. The authors also claim that management research on topics such as the SDGs would bring scholars back to "reality", i.e. putting the traditional focus on scholarly impact aside and making an actual contribution to addressing global problems. Recently, [Chapman, Cully, Kosiol, Macht, Chapman, Fitzgerald and Gertsen \(2020\)](#), p. 1030) also emphasised the use of SDGs to measure what they called "real-world Research Impact".

Therefore, we stress the main idea here: the SDGs can be used as a reference or even a proxy for addressing research impact in management. Moreover, conversely, management research can contribute to the SDGs, as well. *Firstly*, on how to deal with them from a management perspective. Besides their importance, the SDGs are quite extensive and complex, comprising not only the already mentioned 17 goals but also 169 targets and more than 300 indicators ([UN – United Nations, 2015](#)). To deal with this complexity, several authors emphasise the need for dealing with the SDG in an integrated perspective ([Griggs et al., 2013](#); [Nilsson, Griggs & Visbeck, 2016](#); [Biggeri, Clark, Ferrannini, & Mauro, 2019](#)). Management research can help in understanding how to manage these complexity and multidimensionality phenomena.

*Secondly*, previously SDGs assessments were more directly related to their original purpose, or how to evaluate to what extent countries have been performing concerning their assumed SD targets ([Sachs, 2013](#); [Fukuda-Parr, 2016](#); [Schmidt-Traub, Kroll, Teksoz, Durand-Delacre, & Sachs, 2017](#)). Nevertheless, the SDGs have also been used as a parameter for the introduction or evaluation of SD in different areas or levels of analysis. *Firstly*, regarding companies, the SDGs have been considered not only for implementing sustainable strategies in organisations ([Ike, Donovan, Topple, & Masli, 2019](#); [Claro & Esteves, 2021](#); [Neufeld, 2021](#)) but also for assessing their sustainable performance ([SDG Compass, 2016](#)). *Secondly*, regarding universities, they are present in the discussions on education at all levels and had been turned into the criteria for evaluating higher education institutions, as proposed by the Times Higher Education (THE) ranking ([THE University -IRs, 2019, 2020](#)). Given the nature of all these themes, management research can address how these assessments occur and analyse the degree of efficacy in the SDGs' implementation by those diverse institutions.

*Thirdly*, there has been an increasing movement on considering the SDGs as a critical criterion for funding research. For instance, in the last Global Forum of Funders, held in April 2021, whose one of its three strategic objectives was "To present a framework for global action on mission-oriented research that will help accelerate SDG implementation in the next decade" ([The Global Forum of Funders, 2021](#)). This is a clear message about the importance of the SDGs as a basis for defining the relevance of research projects to come, and possibly an exclusion criterion in the case of its absence. Research in management can also be affected by this trend.

*Fourthly*, despite its worldwide importance, the SDGs have also been the object of academic discussions, not always foreseeing a silver lining. The debate on the SDGs is not new, regarding how they were defined ([Sexsmith & McMichael, 2015](#); [Weber, 2017](#)), their efficacy or viability ([Diaz-Sarachaga, Jato-Espino, & Castro-Fresno, 2018](#)), the potential problems related to the role of companies in the SDG's implementation ([Scheyvens, Banks, & Hughes, 2016](#)), among other issues. Recently, two *Nature's* editorials, the first called "Time to revise the Sustainable Development Goals" (2020), followed by another called "Recalibrating the SDGs" (2021), highlight the need for fresh approaches for dealing with the SDGs ([Sachs, Schmidt-Traub, Mazzucato, Messner, Nakicenovic, & Rockström, 2019](#)). Management research can also strongly contribute to this debate.

As a final message, we emphasise the urgency of this theme. Considering the SDG's 15-year range, we have entered in its last two-thirds, i.e. to attain what the SDGs preconise; it is clear that the "clock is ticking". Or, in the words of Fontana and Oldekop (2020), we have a "bumpy road ahead". To underline this critical situation, the UN has recently launched a new SDG-related initiative, the Decade of Action (UN – United Nations, 2020). The purposes are to lay emphasis on that we would have 10 years to transform the world and to accelerate the solutions for the achievement of SDGs (Sachs, Schmidt-Traub, Mazzucato, Messner, Nakicenovic, & Rockström, 2019), especially considering the event of the COVID-19 pandemic and its adverse effects on the SDGs' development (Sachs, Schmidt-Traub, Kroll, Lafortune, Fuller, & Woelm, 2020). This scenario only reinforces the "central role of companies in achieving our global goals" (Sachs & Sachs, 2021, p. 22) and, consequently, the management research impact in addressing grand challenges such as the SDGs.

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