



## Sustainability superheroes? For-profit narratives of “doing good” in the era of the SDGs



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### ABSTRACT

As a consequence of the UN's promulgation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the concept of development is being redefined and revitalized. Development is being turned into “doing good” by anyone and anywhere, and relevant for everyone and everywhere. Furthermore, business has been bestowed with a significant role in this process. What are the consequences for imagining and practicing development when development has been reconceptualized, operationalized and marketed by businesses? Drawing on text analysis and event ethnography at business conferences on sustainability held in a frontrunner SDG country, Denmark, this article identifies three key trends as for-profit narratives of doing good gain prominence. First, doing good is increasingly defined in terms of the SDGs, but businesses strategically emphasize specific goals, thereby compromising a more integrated substantive approach to sustainability grounded in the needs of those affected. Second, profit-making and doing good are often presented as symbiotic, and doing good as part of core business. The idea of transformational partnerships between for-profit and non-profit actors, resulting in organizational changes by all involved, is also part of this trend. This leads to a problematic blurring between the categories of for-profit and non-profit. Third, for-profit narratives of doing good are marketing business endeavors by invoking “nearby sustainability superheroes” (individuals, e.g., consumers or employees, performing heroically nearby). In contrast, non-profit narratives of doing good have traditionally justified interventions by evoking a “distant other in need” (a suffering, socially and geographically distant, individual or social group). The implication that the distant other is passively waiting to be saved is problematic, but so is encouraging individuals to put themselves into the picture as what can be termed “selfie-humanitarians.” By foregrounding their own reflection, these (apolitical) heroes can easily lose sight of the historical-geographical structural issues that perpetuate inequality.

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### 1. Introduction

Development has long been a contested notion within development studies. In the 1990s, for example, the academic critique of development as promoting Western hegemony and ideology led to a post-development school (e.g., Escobar, 1995). Nevertheless, the concept is still used and with the 2015 adoption of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 193 member states the notion of development is being revitalized and reconceptualized. Development frameworks, such as the SDGs, tell an overarching story that structures the work of the overall development sector in relation to which NGOs and other relevant actors must position themselves. The introduction of a new official UN sanctioned development framework, and the narratives it represents, configures and further promotes, thus has important repercussions

(Fukuda-Parr, 2016; Fukuda-Parr & McNeill, 2019). It is therefore essential to analyze the SDGs to understand how problems and solutions are narratively constructed and to grasp both the positive and negative implications this has for engagement with the concept of development (Fukuda-Parr, 2016; Liverman, 2018; Mawdsley, 2018; Fukuda-Parr & McNeill, 2019). One key aspect of the SDGs (also known as the Global Goals) is that development is defined as pertaining to *universal* challenges related to social, economic and environmental sustainability and thereby relevant for everyone and everywhere (Horner & Hulme, 2019; Chimhowu, Hulme, & Munro, 2019; Horner, 2020). This greatly expands what actions, by whom, and where on the globe are considered to constitute development. Another key element is that after a long and complex relationship between development and for-profits, the SDG framework has institutionalized a central role for businesses in development, and business has played a key role in formulating the SDGs (Mawdsley, 2018; Scheyvens et al., 2016).

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This enables businesses to use the SDGs to validate their business activities as falling within the realm of “doing good,” a vague concept that is hard to measure. It has thus been defined rather broadly in the business literature as, for example, “to serve some larger social purpose besides making profits” (Karnani, 2011) or to “make the world a better place” (Faick & Heblich, 2007). This article thus asks, what are the consequences for imagining and practicing development when it has been re-conceptualized, operationalized and marketed by for-profit corporations as part of a new universal development framework?

By broadening the analysis to the SDGs as a whole, this study contributes to vital interdisciplinary discussions and debates concerning business, development and environmentalism. These include works examining the processes by which profit-seeking is made compatible with doing good, e.g., nature protection and climate change mitigation through safari parks, ecosystem services and carbon offsets (e.g., Prudham, 2009; MacDonald, 2010; MacDonald & Corson, 2012; Dempsey, 2016; Igoe, 2017), and sustainability is marketized through the promotion of green and ethical consumption coupled with various certification schemes (e.g., Goodman, 2010; Adams & Raisborough, 2010; Richey & Ponte, 2011; Lekakis, 2012; Igoe, 2017; Pye, 2019). As these studies have shown, these processes entail turning challenges – in relation to issues such as conservation, climate change or humanitarian crisis – into apolitical problems that can be quantified and solved via market mechanisms. Additionally, they often divert the focus away from societal factors to an emphasis on the individual, such as the innovative entrepreneur, the famous celebrity or the affluent consumer, as a powerful actor (Prudham, 2009; Goodman, 2010; Lekakis, 2012; Kapoor, 2013; Igoe, 2017; Richey & Brockington, 2019). Adding to this body of work, this article examines how these processes impact apparatuses, discourses, and practices pertaining to sustainability and development within the context of the SDGs.

Based on text analysis and event ethnography this study examines the specific for-profit incentives and rationalities – here referred to as for-profit narratives of doing good – that emerge from presentations and conversations at conferences and workshops targeting businesses concerned with sustainability and development in the frontrunner SDG country, Denmark (Sachs et al., 2019). Three key trends are identified and analyzed. *First*, businesses increasingly define doing good as working with the SDGs. Yet, only certain goals and targets are strategically selected, or cherry-picked, with an eye to high impact, measurability, liability and commodifiable humanitarian sentiments. *Second*, profit-making and doing good are now often presented as symbiotic rather than as competing rationalities, and non-profits and for-profits as associates – rather than as adversaries – who should be involved in “transformational partnerships” expected to result in common values and goals, and organizational changes by all involved. *Third*, for-profit narratives of doing good are marketing business endeavors by invoking “nearby sustainability superheroes” (individuals, such as employees or consumers, performing heroically nearby). In contrast, narratives promoted by the non-profit sector – here referred to as non-profit narratives of doing good – have traditionally justified interventions by evoking a “distant other in need” (a suffering, socially and geographically distant, individual or social group).

These trends all have broader consequences for the conceptualization and operationalization of development. Because businesses can choose to operationalize and market those SDGs that best serve their interests, a more integrated approach to sustainable development may be compromised, especially with regard to addressing historic and systemic inequalities, of which businesses themselves may be a part. Furthermore, because actors, such as civil society organizations (CSOs), that strive to keep these businesses in check are increasingly engaging in transformational part-

nerships with businesses, their role as watchdog may be compromised. Finally, while the “needy victim” category in traditional non-profit narratives is problematic because it tends to remove agency from potential beneficiaries who, it is implied, can only alleviate their suffering by being “saved” (e.g., Ferguson, 1994; Maren, 1997; Kothari, 2014; Pruce, 2016; Olwig & Rasmussen, 2016), the “hero” category in emerging for-profit narratives is equally questionable. These heroes are celebrated for doing good by supporting commercial initiatives through investments, employment or consumption anywhere. Framing the SDGs as relevant for everyone and everywhere appears to redress the problem of development being perceived and presented as the “superior” West saving the “needy” Rest – now everyday sustainability superheroes can save the world through local acts. Yet, this approach to doing good and development risks obscuring the political and economic interests and unequal power relations inherent in development, making it difficult to situate issues within a larger historical and geographical context (Büscher, 2019). The hero category can thus be described as consisting of “selfie-humanitarians” who foreground their own reflection rather than the substantive needs of those who are affected by historical–geographical structures leading to inequality.

The goal of this article is not to advocate a return to an understanding of development as the Global North saving the distant other in need in the Global South. It is rather to make the point that doing good and development are not apolitical, ahistorical or placeless endeavors. To do good, actors, including consumers, NGOs and businesses, must therefore engage with development as a politicized practice with a colonial geopolitical history. The historically and geographically grounded expertise and knowledge generated in fields such as critical development studies, is vital in this context. The following section will discuss the significance of development frameworks and narratives, and in particular the SDG framework, in relation to development policy and practice. This will be followed by a section providing an overview of the event ethnography, including text analysis and fieldwork, that was carried out at business conferences on sustainability in order to identify and analyze for-profit narratives linked to development and doing good. The article will then discuss the findings by focusing on each of the three trends outlined above pertaining to these narratives: 1) Defining doing good in terms of the SDGs; 2) Transformational partnerships and the blurring between the categories of for-profits and non-profits, and, finally, 3) The rise of the “nearby sustainability superhero” and how this narrative trope relates to, and differs from, that of the “distant other in need.”

## 2. Frameworks and narratives: Reconceptualizing development

Narratives include a storyline and a cast of actors, and they can be analyzed as phenomena that convey and shape incentives and rationalities by presenting stories that help people simplify and give coherence to a complicated world (Adger et al., 2001). They have played an important role in the development sector. As explained by Roe (1991), “development is a genuinely uncertain activity, and one of the principal ways practitioners, bureaucrats and policy makers articulate and make sense of this uncertainty is to tell stories or scenarios that simplify the ambiguity” (p. 288). Narratives are used when NGOs communicate with for example the public, recipients, donors and each other. However, development scholars have criticized traditional development narratives for downplaying political, structural and power dynamics and for telling a story that basically serves the purpose of justifying technocratic interventions by foreign NGOs (e.g., Ferguson, 1994). Thus, while the NGOs may use such narratives to tell an apparently apolitical story, they engage in fact in a very political

act. Even though narratives used in public communication and branding are part of a deliberate exercise, actors may themselves be so immersed in the narratives' rationalities that they may not be conscious of the fact that they are perpetuating politically loaded narratives (Olwig, 2013; Olwig & Rasmussen, 2016).

Development frameworks play a key role in structuring development narratives. The SDG framework arose after a period when the type, variety and alliances of development actors have multiplied to include industrializing countries, post-socialist states and new global powers and development banks. Furthermore, partly as a result of cutbacks in overseas development assistance (ODA), a plethora of actor categories have grown in importance, for example businesses, local elites, consumers, voluntourists, diaspora groups, philanthropists and celebrities (Kragelund, 2019; Richey, 2014; Kapoor, 2013). The SDG framework is lauded for addressing some of the critique of earlier state-centered development frameworks, such as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). These goals were seen to contribute to a narrative of a North-South hierarchical binary and furthermore ignore that processes of development no longer are confined to particular countries; that hybrid transnational actors and alliances cross state boundaries, and that in-country inequality is growing (Richey, 2014; Horner & Hulme, 2019). van Zanten and van Tulder (2018), for example, argue that the SDG framework instigates "a shift from a state-centred, duty-based, and negatively framed agreement aimed at 'developing countries,' to a partnering-centred, opportunity-based, and more positively framed ambition aimed at developed as well as developing countries" (p. 209).

An important reason why business has attained a key role in relation to the SDGs is that the goals cannot be reached using traditional measures of development financing, such as ODA (Mawdsley, 2018). It is, however, not a new phenomenon for businesses to contribute to, and benefit from, development and humanitarian aid. There is for example a long history of business "expertise, know-how and resources [being used] to improve the conditions for private sector growth" in the Global South while businesses "have received financial subsidies and guidance as to how to handle and gain access to ... [new and hence] difficult markets" (Brogaard & Petersen, 2018, p. 736). The SDGs, however, facilitate the active marketing by businesses of their overall enterprise as doing good. This further develops existing practices aimed at creating a positive brand through e.g., corporate social responsibility initiatives (CSR), Brand Aid, cause-related marketing, value chain development interventions and the use of fair trade certified ingredients and products (Jamali & Keshishian, 2009; Richey & Ponte, 2011, 2021; Lekakis, 2012; Hawkins, 2012; Goodman, 2010). These practices have often been add-ons, but today, as will be shown, doing good is becoming part of core business. Additionally, the SDGs enable a greater variety of businesses to become involved in development by redefining development so that it is no longer only concerned with development and inequality in the Global South but more diffusely with *sustainable* development in the world in general. Sustainable development in this interpretation includes for example environmental issues in the Global North.

Fukuda-Par and McNeill point out that the SDGs' focus on seemingly universalist goals and objectively measurable numbers obscures the politics, theories and values of the framework and the choice of particular measurement tools and goals (2019, p. 7). In this way the SDGs mask political, structural and power dynamics (see also Liverman, 2018; Mawdsley, 2018; Fukuda-Parr, 2016). Several actors have actively played a key role in formulating the SDG framework so that it caters to business. As explained by Fukuda-Parr and McNeill (2019):

framing is used by powerful states and organizations to exert power to influence policy agendas of other stakeholders; by cre-

ating a narrative about a social problem in a particular way that points to certain types of response as obvious, and others as irrelevant or unthinkable (p. 8).

The SDGs are part of a much longer process of engaging business in sustainable development that arguably began with the 1987 Brundtland Report on sustainable development (Scheyvens et al. 2016, p. 372). Writing in the context of conservation, MacDonald (2010) argues that the growing role of the private sector in this period is "in many ways, a reflection of the coordinating action of global capitalism, its affiliated transnational capitalist class, and the need to redefine conservation in ways that accommodate, rather than challenge, the dominant ideological and material interests that underlie these broad political projects" (p. 257). Dempsey (2016) adds that other actors are promoting such business involvement "as a political-scientific strategy to create new interests in nature" and to "manage the excesses of capitalism that are degrading life on this planet" by making nature protection the profitable thing to do (pp. 10–11). While these various actors are motivated by different ideologies and rationalities to create "a visible and economically legible biodiversity that can be seen and invested in by liberal institutions and within capitalist social relations," the end result is that they give hegemonic power to the idea that profit-making and doing good are compatible, if not mutually dependent (Dempsey, 2016, p. 12). The private sector, therefore, both ideologically and in practice, increasingly shapes, and is being shaped by, development institutions (Scheyvens et al., 2016; Mawdsley, 2018; van Zanten & van Tulder, 2018). Thus, while the relationship between business and development is deep-rooted and complex, the SDGs much more directly promote, rationalize, legitimize and institutionalize this relationship.

As central development actors, businesses are constructing for-profit narratives of doing good that play an important role in how development is imagined, practiced and operationalized in the era of the SDGs. The next section describes the types of events attended and the methods employed in this study to identify and analyze these narratives.

### 3. Event ethnography at business conferences

This article is based on text analysis and fieldwork undertaken at conferences and seminars on topics of relevance to combining profit-making with doing good and promoting sustainability and development, using a method which has been called "event ethnography" (MacDonald, 2010; MacDonald & Corson, 2012; Campbell et al., 2014; Duffy, 2014; Büscher, 2014; Olwig & Christiansen, 2015). The events, eight in total, took place in Copenhagen, Denmark, between October 2017 and September 2019. At this point I began to see similar (or even identical) presentations and hear the same arguments. The events, which were advertised via newsletters and websites, were selected with a view to capturing the emerging for-profit narratives of doing good that are formulated by sustainability frontrunners within the business sector.<sup>1</sup>

Most of the events were framed as taking place because of new developments and opportunities in light of the SDGs, and all were very much concerned with presenting emerging trends, challenges and solutions in relation to sustainability. Most of the conferences and seminars targeted for-profits and featured presentations by for-profits, and some entailed rather substantial participation fees. A few took other forms, such as a small workshop for development-oriented CSOs wishing to partner with for-profits, which included presentations by for-profits or consultants. Each event ran over one to three days and ranged from large confer-

<sup>1</sup> It is thus not the ambition of this research project to capture the perception of doing good in the business sector in general.

ences, with several tracks and hundreds of international presenters and attendees meeting in expensive conference venues with fancy lunches and lots of giveaways, to smaller events targeting a Danish audience and serving a few cookies and coffee, with the smallest event having around 25 participants. Regardless of the size of the events, they almost all had the same general conference format in the sense that someone, typically a consultant or a representative from a business, would give a presentation followed by questions. A few had more of a workshop format where consultants would engage and teach the audience.

Timeslots were usually set aside for networking, and I would often have interesting conversations during these slots, or during the breaks. Businesspeople are generally very oriented towards networking, which made it easy for me as a researcher to engage in conversation with them.<sup>2</sup> In addition to conducting participant observation I did online ethnographic research and text analysis of conference, seminar and workshop programs, conference websites and other documents related to the events (e.g., pamphlets and advertisements distributed during the events). Quotes in this article derive from my field notes based on participation in the events and from my online ethnographic research.<sup>3</sup>

While the events took place in Denmark, large multinational companies of Danish and international origin predominated at most of the events. This is not surprising since they have dominated private sector engagement in global development governance and policy (Mawdsley, 2018, p. 192). Large international NGOs have similarly been most prominent in the non-profit sector in terms of partnering with the private sector, and the small and membership-based organizations I encountered seemed to have a hard time finding a foothold, unsure of what they could and should bring to the table (Field notes, September 18, 2018).<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, some multinationals that were clearly considered important trend-setters were invited to speak at several of the events I attended. While most of the businesses were multinationals, the type of businesses represented varied immensely with products ranging from enzymes, to pumps, cocoa, insulation, credit cards, hair products and beer. In addition to business actors most of the events also included a few representatives from other types of organizations such as NGOs, research institutions, consultancies and investors.

Even though large multinational corporations operate all over the world, the specific countries in which they operate will likely influence their engagement with sustainability due to varying national regulations and local norms. It is, for example, important whether the company is based in a liberal or coordinated market economy. As noted by van Zanten and van Tulder (2018), “North American companies, influenced by the liability orientation of American institutions [...], tend to have a defensive/reactive sustainability approach [...] whereas] European companies are argued to apply ‘precautionary principles’ that prevail in the European context” (p. 215). European companies therefore engage with a broader number of SDG targets than North American companies while the latter engage more specifically with SDG targets that are associated with philanthropy (van Zanten & van Tulder, 2018).

<sup>2</sup> The research project was funded by the Independent Research Fund of the Danish state, which ensures human research ethics protocols are adhered to before funding is granted. I would always identify myself as a researcher, both when registering for events, and in conversation, and I would also explain the topic of my research. I was received very positively and was even invited to attend several events. Furthermore, some organizers reduced or removed the attendance fee because I was a researcher.

<sup>3</sup> I have chosen to anonymize quotes, primarily because the goal of this article is not to single out companies, but rather to identify more overarching narratives.

<sup>4</sup> The barriers faced by small and medium-sized enterprises, as well as by small CSOs, with regard to engaging in the SDGs, and in particular being involved in partnerships for sustainability as called for in SDG 17, is an important topic of research, though beyond the scope of this article.

The SDG Index 2019, which tracks country performance on the SDGs, places Denmark as the world’s highest-ranking country with a score of 85, being “on average 85% of the way to the best possible outcome across the 17 SDGs” (Sachs et al., 2019, p. 19). The number of events being organized in Denmark pertaining to the SDGs, partnerships and business, has exploded in the past few years and even at events that were not specifically about the SDGs, it was common for presenters to include at least one slide with the SDG logos. The findings from this study therefore provide an opportunity for examining how emerging for-profit narratives of doing good are taking shape and influencing development within the context of the SDGs. Furthermore, as many of the companies were not based in Denmark, the trends examined here are part of a broader international phenomenon. The following section looks at why the SDGs are attractive for businesses involved in sustainability and doing good, how the SDG framework has enabled businesses to cherry-pick particular SDGs, and the consequences thereof.

#### 4. The Sustainable Development Goals: An internationally sanctioned definition of “doing good”

Different types of actors push businesses to engage in sustainable development. Government policies worldwide increasingly require companies to provide environmental and social protection, as well as to conform to a growing number of international agreements on human rights and labor conditions. Furthermore, CSOs and social movements have responded to changing norms and values by placing greater emphasis on ethics and sustainability in production (van Zanten & van Tulder, 2018; Ponte, 2019). Businesses, however, are not only pressured by society and governments, they have themselves become more and more active in promoting private sector solutions by “positively shaping sustainability discourses and practices, first by becoming engaged in self-regulatory and market-based initiatives aimed at improving the environmental impact of their operations, and then by identifying ways in which value could be created and captured through sustainability management” (Ponte, 2019, pp. 13–14). One reason why the SDGs are attractive to businesses is thus that business had “a strong role in influencing development of the SDGs” (Scheyvens et al., 2016, p. 371).<sup>5</sup> It was apparent at the events I attended that the business sector felt they were being taken seriously as important partners in the promotion of sustainable development. Corporate presenters clearly expressed a sense of pride in having been called to action by former UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon and an appreciation of having been included from the beginning of the negotiations. While the SDGs in general were considered to have consulted relevant actors, the previous UN goals, the MDGs, were criticized for excluding several actors, including business. As one presenter exclaimed: “MDGs was a closed club for certain people, certain government officials, the private sector was not invited in!” (Field notes, March 23, 2018).

Another key element in the attraction of the SDGs to businesses was their provision of a useful, internationally sanctioned definition of “doing good.” This is exemplified by a workshop held by a British communications agency that focused on promoting [doing] “good ideas.” In their presentation they narrated the company’s “founders’ journey” and the different challenges they had faced, one being that people would ask them:

“How do you know the stories you are telling are for a *good* idea? What makes something a good idea?” Our answer at the time was, “well if you’re asking that question... [members of

<sup>5</sup> See Scheyvens et al., 2016, pp. 374–5 for a discussion of private sector involvement in the SDG processes.

the audience giggle] it is probably not a good idea that you are working on [general laughter]!” And then we thought. . . it’s a bit of a copout, there’s gotta be a better answer to that. And we were founded in 2015 [. . .], well it is a bit of a no-brainer, there’s a pretty good list of what makes something a good idea. So that’s now what we do as a business, we work on ideas that essentially further one of these goals. . . [I look up just long enough to see the SDGs flash across the screen before the speaker moves on to the next challenge] (Field notes, October 30, 2017).

The SDGs have provided a convenient and visible narrative framework for explaining and marketing sustainability efforts. The framework is easy to use, in the sense that by referring to a particular goal, not much else justification is needed (Engberg-Pedersen & Fejerskov, 2018). The goals include definitions, descriptions and targets on the UN website, and therefore all a company has to do is refer to the arguments put forward by the UN as to why their work is good. A presenter at a different event illustrated the importance of having a common narrative with a common parlance: “The companies have used the SDGs as a shared language that can be used across sectors, industries, and borders when talking about sustainability and accountability” (Field notes, May 14, 2019). The significance of this shared SDG language was also emphasized by an NGO representative at another event, who stated that the SDG language “is immensely important” for “finding collaboration across sectors,” and that it is imperative “to be able to speak and to describe our activities within the SDG framework” (Field notes, February 5, 2019).

The SDGs with their colorful and recognizable logos were also seen to offer a useful branding tool that could increase business opportunities. One presenter who identified his company as a frontrunner in relation to the SDGs explained, tongue in cheek, that the UN had even become a marketing agent for them:

So, our very early move on the SDGs made us famous, you can say. We got on the front page of all kind of media [. . .] Fortune Magazine, which rates companies on their potential to change the world, discovered [company name] because of our SDG alignment and we ended up on this list. Harvard Business School found it extremely interesting that we had made these commitments and through this process they made a case on us that they are now teaching at Harvard Business School. [. . .] And suddenly we got a new marketing agent called the UN. The UN started to talk about [company name] and our technology in their media. So. . . fantastic. A lot of fame and glory and it is great to be famous, and our employees love it, of course. (Field notes, November 29, 2018).

At a different event, a consultant for a large confederation of Danish private sector employers exclaimed that one of the reasons the confederation cares about the SDGs is that delivering the SDGs could generate business opportunities valued at 12 trillion dollars. While he was a bit critical towards the exact number, he joked that “a lot of the money [. . .] is going to be paid to sustainability consultants, like myself,” making the audience laugh (Field notes, May 14, 2019). A focus on sustainability thus presents opportunities to make money while helping businesses to “mitigate reputational risk, add to the bottom line, create new product lines, enhance brand loyalty, and increase their power” (Ponte, 2019, p. 14).

Finally, investors and shareholders also play a role in driving businesses’ increasing attraction to the SDGs. During one session a presenter described how one way to get around initial business management skepticism in relation to focusing on sustainability

is to involve investors and big customers. The presenter pointed out that such pressure could be much more effective than regulatory mechanisms (Field notes, October 30, 2017). As another presenter explained, “We’ve mapped 3,000 products against these Sustainable Development Goals. And the reason we’ve done that is because. . . It actually started with a question from one of our investors, [. . .] they wanted to know how much of our revenue contributed to sustainability” (Field notes, November 1, 2017). This push from investors and shareholders has led companies to look into different methods for measuring impact in order to translate the SDGs into an investable framework. One presenter, discussing the research her company had conducted, stated that they had found “a half dozen of the best practice criteria that we all need to be working on to make these SDGs investable.” She summarized that the data needs to be quantifiable and explained that even though “things are in early days, early stages of maturity, we saw some consistency. Investors love taxonomies, and so they are very much trying to harmonize the way that we speak about SDGs” (Field notes, October 30, 2017). It is thus still an ongoing process for many companies to decide on how best to measure sustainability impact and specifically how to develop SDG target and indicator metrics (cf. van Zanten & van Tulder, 2018).

The SDG framework includes 17 separate goals with separate targets. A common denominator for all the companies that brought up the SDGs at the events I attended was that they only addressed certain goals and targets. This was considered a commonsense approach. The argument was usually that the business was concentrating on the goals where it could have the biggest impact; as one company put it, “we have scanned our innovation pipeline to identify Global Goal high impact opportunities” (Field notes, October 30, 2017). Other companies examined their entire value chain from cradle to cradle (not grave) to minimize all potential negative impacts on sustainability. One presenter from the fashion industry explained:

the best energy is the energy that we don’t use. So, we need to take leadership in energy efficiency. All the way from the cotton fields to our stores, to helping our suppliers being energy efficient, and as well as supporting our customers to use our clothes in an energy efficient way. And the materials are really important here as well. Recycled materials, less energy. Second, the energy that we actually use should be renewable all throughout the value chain. (Field notes, October 31, 2017).

These examples of businesses focusing on targets relevant to their value chain are in line with van Zanten and van Tulder’s (2018) findings that “MNEs [multinational enterprises] primarily engage with internally actionable SDG targets” (p. 227). Furthermore, there is an emphasis on “pre-empting negative impacts on communities and the environment” as opposed to “making additional contributions to the well-being of society” (van Zanten & van Tulder, 2018, p. 214). At one presentation a consultant even exclaimed: “we do think it is absolutely crucial that you know your positive and your negative impacts. And there is actually gold in the negative impacts, and knowing your negative impacts can really help the company identify where they can have wins!” (Field notes, May 14, 2019). As Ponte explains, focusing on avoiding negative impacts can lead to profits (gold) through cost-cutting measures because “processes such as decreasing energy and water use, optimizing packaging, and improving recycling often lead to net cost reductions in operations, and thus allow a focus on the bottom line” (2019, 14).

By being selective businesses can focus on goals that improve their profit. This inhibits an integrated approach to sustainable development that also includes goals and targets, such as SDG 10 on inequality and SDG 12 on consumption, that highlight structural and environmental issues the businesses may be unable to address without negatively impacting brand value and company profits.<sup>6</sup> This selectivity, however, was not challenged at the events because, as noted, it was taken for granted. Indeed, two consultants presenting at the same event, who were part of two different projects helping business incorporate the SDGs, both independently emphasized that not all the goals are relevant for business. In fact, both consultants contended that only a third of the targets and indicators were applicable for business, the rest being for other actors to act on. The SDGs themselves, in other words, reflect certain implicit presumptions concerning the province of the public sector versus the private sector. One of the consultants had the following recommendation on his presentation slide entitled “Integrating SDGs for Business Impact”: “Focus on specific SDGs and integrate with financial and business targets” (Field notes, May 14, 2019). The other consultant, who was from the UN, explained during his presentation that the types of SDG targets relevant for business could be divided into three categories: 1. Legislation and standards, which includes environmental standards, working conditions and rights; 2. Operational and supply chain practices, which include employee conditions and energy efficiency; and 3. Market opportunities and innovation, which include the need for access to safe drinking water, adequate food and medicine (Field notes, May 14, 2019). At the events I attended companies indeed usually focused on goals related to climate change and the environment, as opposed to social issues, except for some addressing employee conditions and other issues that could either become a liability or turn into market opportunities. This leads to a fundamental paradox in that the SDGs tailor to businesses in order to encourage their contribution to reaching the goals, yet by doing so, give the businesses the power to avoid addressing certain goals. This points to a perhaps inherent tension in combining profit-making with other agendas. As Dempsey (2016) has pointed out in relation to “enterprising nature” and ecosystem services, this catering to business rationalities often leads to “instrumentalized knowledge-power frameworks and practices” that in the end counter doing good, in the case of enterprising nature by increasing “human domination over the nonhuman” (p. 5). Following the argument of the SDGs, it is important to understand these mechanisms so that strategies can be put in place for how to ensure that all needs reflected in the goals will be addressed, either by businesses, or by other actors, especially as the proportion of SDG funding that derives from businesses is expected to rise.

Some of the sustainability leading companies claimed that they were moving beyond risk management and were not just using the SDGs to do business as usual. Rather they were looking to transform as a company and to do good, not just avoid doing harm. “Transformational partnerships” are part of this trend.

## 5. Transformational partnerships: From peripheral donations to core business

The SDGs, in particular SDG 17, specifically identify partnerships as key to reaching the targets. Partnerships between NGOs

<sup>6</sup> The SDGs have been lauded for emphasizing the problems of inequality by making them the specific focus of a separate goal. However, this also allows actors to ignore inequality altogether when they cherry-pick the goals they wish to address. This is the case for not just business actors but also government actors. The Danish strategy for development cooperation and humanitarian action that was passed in 2017 was thus supported by all the parties in the Danish parliament but one, the left-wing party Enhedslisten (Gormsen, 2017) that specifically criticized the strategy for excluding an overall concern with inequality (Juhl, 2016).

and businesses are not new, but increasingly these partnerships are referred to as “transformational,” and as an opportunity to reimagine actors and relations between actors.

The change in collaboration between businesses and NGOs was presented as follows at an event on “Impact Projects” by the General-Secretary of a large Danish humanitarian organization: “And I can see how the debate is now moving ahead, it’s moving from the classical CSR, which you could say belongs to the lower part of this diagram here.” He went on to show a graph under the heading “Shared Value Partnerships” which plotted “Benefit to business” against “Benefit to society.” “Pet projects” were listed at the lower part of the diagram, “propaganda” and “philanthropy” at the next level up, and “partnering” at the highest level signifying the greatest value of benefit to both business and society. Continuing with his presentation the General-Secretary stated that in this new phase, “we create value together. To do this we need new partnership models and we need new financing models.” He went on to explain that “this stereotype thinking in humanitarian settings where you have one-year grants focused on short-term solutions” is one of the key challenges in the traditional humanitarian sector, “we need long-term thinking and long-term financing in the humanitarian setting” (Field notes, March 23, 2018). At the same event, businesses partnering with the humanitarian organization also presented and emphasized their move from CSR to core business. As one presenter stated, the partnership began with: “donations and CSR, but now we are moving to core business. All our engagements with the NGOs are based on business not CSR. [...] [D]onations are short-term. We are believing now much more in business-driven partnerships” (Field notes, March 23, 2018).

As indicated by the quotes above, these partnerships are not regarded as just transactional partnerships involving one-way transfers as has been typical for corporate social responsibility initiatives involving donations and capacity building (Jamali & Keshishian, 2009), and for cause-marketed products, e.g., so-called Brand Aid initiatives (Hawkins, 2012; Richey & Ponte, 2011). Rather, the narrative behind these partnerships is that they are “transformational,” meaning that they are expected to lead to organizational changes on the part of all the actors involved in the partnership based on their agreeing on common goals and values. In the words of one presenter: “We actually moved from transaction to transformation. In the past we had a lot of partnerships with NGOs, but much more transactional: ‘How many [of the company’s products] do you want? 200? Ok, I ship it.’ But now we are on the journey together” (Field notes, March 23, 2018). Linked to the idea of transactional partnerships, making a profit and doing good were perceived to be increasingly aligned. At an investor pitch, for example, a Danish “angel investor”<sup>7</sup> explained:

Sustainability! I like the word. To be sustainable – what is it then? [...] It is the right thing to do, it is the smart thing to do, but the good thing now is that, it has actually, it has become legal [legitimate] to say that it’s the profitable thing to do. It is actually ok to talk about investing in companies that have an agenda which is sustainability or impact and then expect a return on investments. That’s a new thing! It’s a great thing! Because now we are opening up for the big bucks

She added that her company today has an impact agenda and clarified, while drawing a heart on the whiteboard behind her:

When we five years ago talked about impact investing, we talked about doing it solely from the heart. As a private investor, you invest in an impact business because you like the cause [...] And you do it, and you do it heart and soul [...] We still do that,

<sup>7</sup> A person who, usually in return for equity, gives advice to, and infuses capital in, start-ups.

but the great thing is, it's ok to talk about the cash [she draws "+ \$" next to the heart]. And that development is fine, it's good (Field notes, December 13, 2018).

The ability of businesses to make a profit, of course, is one of the reasons they are highlighted as powerful partners (cf. Prudham, 2009). This accords with SDG 17, that encourages partnerships between governments, the private sector and civil society, urging that action is "needed to mobilize, redirect and unlock the transformative power of trillions of dollars of private resources to deliver on sustainable development objectives" (United Nations, n.d.). A consultant for the UN explained at a different event that, as part of a program to assist small and medium-sized industrial Danish companies to develop new products, they helped businesses translate SDGs into profitable opportunities: "that is very new rhetoric, that's a new way of presenting things in the UN. You couldn't say that just five, ten years ago; that it is actually ok to earn money on sustainability, that it is ok to earn money on the poor" (Field notes, May 14, 2019).

The growing alignment between doing good and making a profit was seen to make it easier to get more businesses involved in sustainability initiatives. There was ongoing joking among business participants at many of these events concerning the difficulties of getting management and the CEO on board because they were stereotypically preoccupied with profit. This insider joking indicated that it was a relief for them to finally be among fellow businesspeople who were also concerned with sustainability. Yet, they also kept stressing that things were changing – that management is increasingly on board and that doing good and sustainability are becoming part of core business, or even becoming *the business*. One presenter described three steps constituting different phases and changes in how they use the concept of sustainability. The first step only focused on "managing reputation:" "In the beginning sustainability was about the background, keeping order in the background, not strategic." The second step went further to "support current business:"

How can we use sustainability to support the business process, to reduce the risk or increase the arguments for buying more [of our product]? How can we help sales and marketing, how can we inspire investors, how can we optimize our supply chain and so forth? But it was about... It was business first and then sustainability.

Finally, the third step aimed to "develop new business:"

What we are trying to do now is to turn it around. [...] the SDGs tell us about the real needs of people [...] where there is need there is a business opportunity. Business has always made a profit from meeting people's needs. And here we have the biggest needs of mankind. This is where to go with our business. So, we tried to turn it around, tried to use sustainability to understand, where should we target innovation, what is it we shall prioritize and innovate for [in order] to be successful also in five, ten, fifteen years from now? That is how we try to connect the dots and that is not easy, but we are definitely working on it (Field notes, November 29, 2018).

As a result of these trends, the distinction between for-profits and non-profits is arguably becoming increasingly blurred (cf. Humphery, 2017, p. 99). It is no longer so clear-cut which type of actor is primarily oriented toward profit and which type of actor is mainly interested in doing good and boundaries between different actor categories are being actively reworked and reconceptualized (cf. Berndt & Wirth, 2018, p. 27). This was captured in a comment by a presenter:

A common narrative at the moment was that business was the enemy and that NGOs and governments were gonna save us. And I just really passionately felt that there were as many good people working inside business as there are in governments and NGOs (Field notes, October 30, 2017).

While it is easy to become misled at events where one is surrounded by professional salespeople who know how to stay on their narrative message, certain companies appeared to be transforming and not doing business as usual. A few businesses thus seemed to be as concerned with sustainability as with profit. They encouraged other businesses to learn from them and even made their key research findings or other outputs open source. When this became apparent during presentations the audience would applaud enthusiastically. There were even presenters indicating the possibility of a new capitalist system with one exclaiming that since the economy "is being designed, then it can be redesigned!" (Field notes, November 1, 2017). It is hence important to note that while the for-profit narratives recounted here have central characteristics in common, the combination of doing good and profit-making is not only being pursued as part of "capital's never-ending search to accumulate, a process driven by shadowy, unspecified capitalist elites with singular interests," but involves "a different and diverse set of actors, institutions, and driving rationalities" (Dempsey, 2016, p. 15). Indeed, had this study focused on smaller-scale enterprises, a somewhat different, perhaps less corporate approach may have emerged.

Advocates of partnerships between for-profits and non-profits often contend that each actor category has its respective strategies, strengths and know-how, which when combined will lead to positive results (Ashman, 2001; Carbonnier & Lightfoot, 2016; Voillat, 2012). Yet, while repositioning businesses as allies instead of as enemies is in many ways positive and may lead to new possibilities and opportunities, the blurring of the categories of for-profits and non-profits can obfuscate critical engagement with, and accountability mechanisms for, these sustainable development initiatives. As Ponte explains (2019) "[c]orporate involvement in sustainability partnerships with governments, NGOs and civil society groups has softened the latter's regulatory and political demands, deflecting more radical solutions and policy options" while at the same time legitimizing these initiatives (p. 15). Such partnerships can thereby operate at the expense of the broader public interest (MacDonald, 2010, p. 263). Similarly, Fukuda-Parr and McNeill (2019) argue in relation to the construction of knowledge for development that: "[p]rivileging new sources and methods from private actors bypasses the complex structures of voice and accountability that have built up official systems" (p. 14). Such critique, of course, does not mean that the traditional ways of conducting, and systems of monitoring, development were unproblematic. Indeed, as the critical literature on development has extensively shown, these systems are flawed in their own way (see e.g., Ferguson, 1994; Escobar, 1995 for iconic examples of critique). Yet, the emerging for-profit narratives of doing good and the overall storyline that structures the narratives have consequences, good and bad, for how we conceptualize and operationalize development. This will be explored in the following section.

## 6. Distant others in need and nearby sustainability superheroes

Money and consumption are important to both emerging for-profit narratives of doing good and traditional non-profit narratives. Non-profit narratives are usually part of fundraising strategies and may furthermore include explicit approaches linking consumption and development, or doing good, through for example fair trade or Brand Aid, which emphasize the moral responsibil-

ity of the consumer (Adams & Raisborough, 2010; Richey & Ponte, 2011). However, as the analysis below will show, the narratives differ significantly in their structure and storyline. One of the defining features of traditional non-profit narratives of doing good is that the “distant other in need” plays a vital role in justifying interventions and encouraging donations. In the emerging for-profit narratives of doing good, however, the distant other in need tends to play a less visible role as an important victim category. Instead, a “nearby sustainability superhero,” for example a consumer, employee, shareholder or company founder, becomes the key actor in the story, especially when marketing these initiatives. This has consequences for how challenges pertaining to sustainability and development are conceptualized and solutions operationalized.

The traditional NGO-focused development story typically includes a villain, a victim and a hero. The villain takes the form of, for example, corrupt governments or problematic local practices, such as homophobia, gender discrimination or destructive land use. The victim is usually the local population, who can be described as the “distant other,” i.e., “somebody the spectator does not experientially or culturally identify with and cannot, in principle, share the misfortune of” (Chouliaraki, 2006, p. 22). The traditional victim category is problematic in that it disempowers and takes away agency from potential beneficiaries. In the words of a frustrated Save the Children staffer quoted by Maren (1997): “The message of all our advertising at Save was that Africans are too stupid to take care of themselves. And if we don’t do it, their parents and their governments aren’t responsible enough to do it” (p. 157).<sup>8</sup> The hero is the NGO, who in relation to the spectator, the potential consumer or donor, also functions as what Igoe (2017) calls the expert-interlocutor,<sup>9</sup> “one to whom the viewer can relate, but who still possesses sufficient authority to instill meaning and order on what might otherwise appear frighteningly chaotic” (p. 27). To encourage the spectator to spend or donate money, an “educational” component on the specific humanitarian or development project could be included, although in a way that emphasizes the distant others’ inabilities while instilling notions of superiority in the spectator (Kothari, 2014). As Maren explains “it is in their helplessness that they become a marketable commodity” (1997, p. 3). These are consequently all very effective political and fundraising strategies that include just the right amount of misery without highlighting the role of the spectator in causing the misery in the first place (Igoe, 2017, p. 23).

The traditional storyline often starts off with a local population suffering, the turning point in the story occurs when an NGO comes to the rescue and the story concludes with the local population now happy because they have received new material resources or been enlightened. This is of course a generalization of traditional NGO-focused narratives. NGOs differ in how they tell stories, as exemplified by Pruce (2016):

[A]dvocacy organizations would want to personify strength, resistance, and solidarity, while humanitarian NGOs would desire a less antagonistic frame by evoking empathy and compassion. Drawing on emotional narratives of helplessness, the needy subject requires charitable assistance from affluent viewers. Human rights advocacy presents a different posture marked by a rougher edge and a confrontational attitude appealing directly to notions of (in)justice (p. 65).

<sup>8</sup> As this quote also indicates, the staff at an NGO does not necessarily agree, and may even be horrified, with the use of such tropes as “the passive victim.”

<sup>9</sup> Sometimes these expert-interlocutors are replaced by celebrity-heroes who work as NGO “ambassadors” in order to draw attention to a cause, bear witness to a difficult-to-access situation and thereby mediate (and thus also control) the distant viewer’s experience and understanding of the issues at stake (Kapoor, 2013; Mostafanezhad, 2013; Igoe, 2017; Richey & Brockington, 2019).

The for-profit narratives that I encountered also included heroes and villains, but generally focused less on the victims and had a different structure and storyline. At a workshop on “How to Create Stories that Win Support, Commitment and Resources” the presenters for example explained, inspired by the work of Professor of Literature Joseph Campbell (1949), that a good story has eight components:

1. “Everyday hero”
2. “Ordinary world”
3. “Compelling villain”
4. “Call to adventure”
5. “Crossing the threshold”
6. “Three challenges”
7. “Mentors, allies and gifts”
8. “Return with the elixir”

The compelling villain must be tangible, they clarified. They gave the example that climate change is too vague a category, instead someone burning plastic to keep warm is a better villain. As indicated earlier, it is common in traditional non-profit narratives to blame local practices for causing the problems the local people are experiencing (Leach & Mearns, 1996), thereby having the distant other in need play the role of both victim and villain (Olwig & Rasmussen, 2016). Blaming local practices for causing environmental destruction, such as “someone burning plastic,” is hence in line with traditional narratives of doing good, however the distant other in need as *victim* does not appear to play a central role. Rather than saving a distant victim, a “nearby sustainability superhero,” such as a consumer, employee, shareholder or company founder, is concerned with changes to our “ordinary world.”<sup>10</sup> As a result of the global nature of the SDGs, making development relevant nearby, and the expanded definition of development, which now also encompasses purely environmental concerns, there is no need for distant victims, victimizers or wider sociopolitical causal factors. Other studies focused on conservation and climate change mitigation have similarly shown that fusing profit-making and nature protection often goes hand-in-hand with a focus on the individual – such as the innovative entrepreneur, the famous celebrity or the affluent consumer – as opposed to societal factors (Prudham, 2009; Lekakis, 2012; Dempsey, 2016; Igoe, 2017). According to “liberal rationales of improvement,” economic incentives will lead the individual via the market to do good (Dempsey, 2016, p. 7). For example, paying someone to not cut down a tree is perceived as preventing deforestation without paying heed to (and thereby indirectly obscuring) “messy politics and social relations” (Dempsey, 2016, p. 8).

The consultants hosting the workshop on how to tell a good story encouraged the audience to include themselves as a hero in a convincing for-profit narrative of doing good, explaining that sometimes it feels a bit awkward to present yourself as the hero, but:

it is really hard for someone to care about the success of someone or something if they know nothing about them [...] It is one of the elements that sometimes people forget, and this works for an organization as well. Why are you trying to make this change, why are you going on this journey? (Field notes, October 30, 2017).

At the events, I heard several presenters begin their presentation by recounting their hero’s journey. It would usually start with the presenter discovering a problem and then heroically working out a solution for that problem – a solution that then would form the

<sup>10</sup> This is of course not the case in all the stories of doing good that I heard at the various events. There were still some presentations that referred to the distant other in need, but compared to traditional non-profit communication, the distant other in need was noticeably less visible.



basis for the business endeavor. Prudham (2009), writing on green capitalism, argues that the heroic entrepreneur may also serve a greater purpose than merely engaging the spectator. Green capitalism is an example of the merging of profit-making and doing good, in this case environmentalism and capitalism, which could easily be perceived as oppositions. In capitalism, the key actor is the capitalist entrepreneur, whose innovative dynamism is driven by a desire for capital accumulation (Prudham, 2009, p. 1603). In order to fuse environmentalism and capitalism, Prudham points out, this actor, “must be seen – in political and cultural terms – to be an architect of, rather than an obstacle to, a greener future” (2009, p. 1605). He explains that this is achieved by entrepreneurial elites “performing” (Butler, 1990) green capitalism “as a sort of ‘drama’” in which the entrepreneur takes on the role of environmental crusader “harnessing capital investment, individual choice, and entrepreneurial innovation to the green cause” (Prudham, 2009, pp. 1595–1596; see also Christiansen and Olwig, 2019).

If the consumer is the hero in the “good story,” the role of the business is to be an inspiring motivator. In other words, the consumer is no longer a distant viewer who can only relate to the situation portrayed through a distant heroic NGO. Now it is the consumer who performs the heroic acts nearby. As the executive director of a certification label explained in a presentation, 40% of consumers fall into the category that she referred to as the aspirational consumer, or “aspirational,” a category that cuts across class, race and social position. According to this presenter, “It’s no longer about asking consumers to buy something. It’s about inspiring them to be something by helping them reveal their best selves and realize a better world” (Field notes, October 31, 2017). This appears to be the latest version of what Igoe describes as a mass-marketing culture in which commodities “seem to possess impossible powers, for example, a luxury watch can enhance our passion and love [...] [T]hese claims now extend to the possibilities of making a better world” (2017, p. 93). This leads to more consumption instead of the consumer doing good by for example boycotting certain products (Igoe, 2017, p. 33). Combined with social media, consumers can become “mini-celebrities,” using their heroic acts of consumption in order to “brand and market” their “virtual personas” (Igoe, 2017, p. 96; see also Olwig & Christiansen, 2016).

Another important potential hero category is the employee and this version of the “good story” is very much linked to internal communication within the business. While the presenters at the events I attended were proud of their achievements in doing and promoting good, they also, as noted, discussed the difficulties of convincing other colleagues in their respective businesses of the “value of values,” and presenters would swap tips on how best to persuade colleagues that doing good is good for branding and business. One argument used for such persuasion was that a purpose-led company would get better employees who would be more likely to stay. Businesses were therefore finding ways to instill a “culture of heroiness” (cf. Ho, 2009) among their staff. Thus, on the first day of a three-day conference, the following showed up on my conference app: “Are you ready to release your inner superhero? [...] join us [Oct 31st at 8am](#) to explore the 5 Powers of a Sustainability Superhero” (Field notes, October 30, 2017). This turned out to be an advertisement for an event teaching participants how to make employees feel like superheroes. During this event we were first asked to pose as our favorite superhero because “people learn best through games.” I happened to be sitting next to a woman who showed me an app she was working on for a different company that was doing exactly the same thing. She was attending this event to get inspiration for how to improve their app.

Other presenters discussed how working for a better cause made them feel happier and heroic, and at one of the events there

was also a book for sale entitled “The Happy Hero.” The book inspired presenters to use this phrase, as exemplified by the presenter from a sustainable hair care line who explained that he joined the beauty industry: “for beautiful models, glamorous shots, traveling around the world. And... It’s funny, and it’s really real, because today talking about Cradle-to-Cradle certifications, being able to say my whole production is 100% PCR [post-consumer resin], or 100% solar energy, I’m happier, I’m prouder, I’m more fulfilled. So... I’m a very happy, happy hero” (Field notes, October 31, 2017). In fact, “feeling good,” whether as a consumer, CEO or employee, emanated from the whole event, which had as its overarching theme “redefining the good life.” This is apparent in my field notes describing the lively atmosphere I encountered upon entering an enormous, festively lit plenary room:

There is a DJ playing music and I feel like I am going clubbing. There are several round tables and some rows of chairs. People are chit chatting happily. I guess this conference is focused on the good life [...] We’re all asked to answer an online survey on our phones regarding what defines the good life for us. Our answers appear on the screen as we write. “Happiness” wins (Field notes, October 30, 2017).

Through such spectacle the organizers design and structure the spaces of the conferences in such a way that they can promote certain kinds of interaction and legitimize and transmit specific forms of knowledge (MacDonald, 2010, p. 262).

Finally, “the purpose” can be the hero. As the presenter from the hair care line said: “we started making that purpose more of the hero than the product itself.” The sustainable hair care line, only one of the company’s many lines of hair care, experienced challenges because they only use natural ingredients that, as opposed to synthetic ingredients, are not consistent, and the bottles made from PCR have a grey color. The presenter explained, “I have to admit, when we started this, we had absolutely no idea of exactly what we were doing, where we were going, how far we were going to go on this project,” but added that they found solutions, such as “choosing beautiful grey colors.” The presenter called for the audience to “join the [name of hair care line] movement” and explained that this movement is why he works for the company today:

So, today, all hundreds of you here, when you go back to your hotel, tonight, tomorrow morning, when you step in that shower, promise to help [...] Stop your shower maybe 10–20 seconds shorter than the one you did yesterday and try doing that every day. Do shower though! [Laughter ...] Look, there isn’t a lot of us here, but each one of us can have an impact (Field notes, October 31, 2017).

In this way, the product is no longer part of, or only supporting, an environmental or social movement, but becomes the movement itself (cf. Humphery, 2017, p.96).

In relation to the storyline the key change from the traditional NGO-focused narratives of doing good is that for-profit narratives often have a stronger focus on the journey itself than on the end of the story. Having an end (in the sense of reaching a clearly defined object) is important within the development sector in order to monitor and evaluate projects, and to prove to donors that the NGOs deserve future funding. The for-profit narrative, however, seems to be an endless journey. It is furthermore even good for the story to include failure. As explained by the consultants from the workshop on how to tell a good story: “we love jeopardy, we love struggle [...], if it was easy for them [the hero] we kinda lose interest [...] we love building up a hero, we love knocking them down again.” Later they elaborated: “hopefully, by taking someone on this journey, you make the challenges seem big, and

pretty hard to tackle, so it is understandable that you cannot solve them overnight" (Field notes, October 30, 2017).

While for-profits of course also have to monitor and evaluate for the sake of their investors, their timeline is different from that of NGOs that have to work from project to project. The for-profits need to show ongoing progress and improvement in relation to their products and this fits into the idea of a journey. The journey concept was used often in the presentations and many also referred to various hardships and difficulties such as the need to learn, make mistakes, not be perfect and be selective in relation to the SDGs, as illustrated in the following quotes: "The partnerships for us have been a journey, we have learned a lot from the partnerships, and I think there is a lot of room for improvement in the future" (Field notes, March 23, 2018); "One thing is for sure, we don't have all the answers quite yet." (Field notes, October 31, 2017); "we are not perfect, but we are trying to get better" (Field notes, October 31, 2017); "you won't see all 17 goals in our strategy, but you will see some key goals" (Field notes, October 31, 2017).

On the one hand a focus on the journey and the difficulties it may entail could lead to more transparency and honesty. On the other hand, it could also provide an easy way to avoid taking responsibility and being held accountable for the impact and result of the journey, giving businesses an excuse for only addressing certain goals and ignoring others, and giving consumers an excuse to only focus on everyday acts – such as shampooing. The storyline of the hero on an endless journey thus encourages actors to put themselves, as mentioned earlier, into the picture as selfie-humanitarians. By foregrounding their own reflection, however, these (apolitical) heroes simultaneously lose sight of the broader historical–geographical structural issues.

## 7. Conclusion

For-profit storylines of "doing good" are gaining prominence as the SDGs strengthen the role of for-profits as development actors. This article has explored how these emerging narratives convey and shape incentives, rationalities and ideologies in relation to how development is imagined, practiced and legitimated. Based on text analysis and event ethnography at conferences and workshops featuring sustainability frontrunners within the private sector, three key trends that constitute these narratives have been identified: 1) The SDGs increasingly define what "doing good" means, 2) Profit and doing good are represented as symbiotic rather than competing rationalities, 3) A "nearby sustainability superhero" is evoked and plays a more prominent role as compared to the "distant other in need" in marketing initiatives related to doing good. These trends, the article argues, have several consequences of general relevance for how development is conceptualized and practiced. With the SDGs, development has been redefined as sustainable development and broadened to include for example environmental challenges in the Global North. With business investments growing in importance as a funding mechanism for the SDGs, businesses increasingly determine what aspects of this expanded definition of development will be addressed. Businesses are able to focus on goals and targets that maximize market opportunities while avoiding goals, such as the reduction of inequalities, that may draw attention to problematic practices and systemic power relations that it is not in their interest to change. This impedes an integrated and grounded approach to sustainability, where the synergies, trade-offs and links between goals are addressed.

Another consequence of these trends is that the distinction between for-profits and non-profits is blurred when profit-making and doing good become redefined as being two sides of

the same coin, and partnerships aim to transform both the businesses and the NGOs involved so that they can agree on the same values and goals. This blurring has implications for accountability and regulatory mechanisms, and for voice and legitimacy. Finally, in the emerging for-profit narratives of doing good, a key actor category is the sustainability superhero – released from within oneself – who does not need any victims or victimizers (or politics) in order to perform heroic acts. Instead, the sustainability superheroes perform heroic acts nearby – such as investing in, selling or purchasing a product packaged in recycled plastic. This narrative trope has no need for the problematic actor category of the helpless distant other that has been so important for the traditional non-profit narratives.

By presenting the SDGs as of global relevance, and by including topics not traditionally associated with development, development is made relevant for everyone and everywhere. The reconceptualization of development appears to have had the effect that it is experiencing a new heyday, thus counteracting years of "development fatigue" – a reaction against the development sector due to the widespread perception that aid has not solved any problems and that all the money is misspent. Furthermore, many new actors are feeling empowered to, "do good." Yet by broadening and universalizing the scope of development and strengthening the role of new actors, "development" becomes increasingly disassociated from existent historically and geographically grounded work on international development. This scholarship has contributed to the illuminating and better understanding of problematic development practices as well as the role of "doing good" in perpetuating inequality.<sup>11</sup> However, the new actors engaging in "sustainable development" through the SDGs, such as businesses and the scholars who study them, may not even be aware that this expertise exists.<sup>12</sup>

The emerging for-profit narratives of doing good in the era of the SDGs are thus changing, rejuvenating, yet also obscuring the context of the notion and practice of "development," and its inherent power relations. This trend is problematic, but returning to the traditional non-profit narrative of development as the Global North saving the distant other in need in the Global South is not a solution. Rather, actors – whether NGOs or businesses – must stop branding development as apolitical doing good and instead engage substantively with development as an emplaced politicized practice with a largely colonial geopolitical history.

## Declaration of Competing Interest

The author declares that she has no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this article.

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<sup>11</sup> Influential scholars include Arturo Escobar, James Ferguson, Vandana Shiva, Arun Agrawal, Uma Kothari, Tania M. Li, Norman Long, David Mosse, Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan and Thandika Mkandawire, just to mention a few.

<sup>12</sup> For example, in Denmark many new institutional actors that have little knowledge of the field of international development, including schools, cities and municipalities, are incorporating the SDGs into their profile.

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