The Purpose Ecosystem and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals: Interactions Among Private Sector Actors and Stakeholders

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Abstract

In this paper we explore the nature of the emerging purpose ecosystem and its role in transforming and supporting business to help address the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). We argue that interactions among its ‘private actors’, who share efforts and belief in changing and redefining the purpose and nature of business by advocating broader non-financial performance outcomes, have the potential to contribute to a wider sustainability-oriented transformation of the business sector. Through interview data collected in the UK and Australia, we identify six main roles that characterise the activities and interactions among its actors and their stakeholders. Our research contributes to expanding knowledge on the emerging phenomenon of the purpose ecosystem and how its actors support the achievement of the UN SDGs by seeking to change the purpose of business and integrating the goals into their operations and engagements with stakeholders.

Keywords Purpose-driven business · Purpose ecosystem · Sustainable development goals · Sustainability · SDGs

Introduction

The role of business in enabling or driving significant negative global impacts remains part of a wide-ranging debate on how consumerism, capitalism, global value chains and other socio-economic factors are pushing the planet to the brink of environmental disaster (DesJardines, 2015; Folke et al., 2019; Van Zanten and Van Tulder, 2020); amongst others, biodiversity is being lost at mass-extinction rates, climate change and air and sea pollution has become an increasingly pressing threat to human health (WWF, 2020). Coupled with rising inequality and entrenched poverty, these interconnected sustainability issues—referred to as ‘wicked’ problems or grand societal challenges (Waddock & McIntosh, 2011)—are triggering profound social instability and conflict (WEF, 2018, 2020). Incremental approaches to pursuing sustainability by business are arguably insufficient for delivering change at the speed and scale necessary to solve the pressing risks identified by the World Economic Forum (WEF) (2018) and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Griggs et al., 2013). There is widespread recognition that for sustainable transformations to occur, businesses have a crucial role to play in addressing these time-critical issues, with experts calling for rapid and far-reaching transitions in industry (IPCC, 2018). However, most companies are ill-equipped to address these risks (WEF, 2020). In this context, the UN’s Agenda 2030 and SDGs hold significant potential towards shaping organisations’ responses to the social and environmental risks in a way that recognises the complex interdependencies between environmental, social and governance concerns (Nilsson et al., 2016).

Yet while much attention has focused on society and policy makers (Patterson et al., 2017), we know less about how businesses (should) contribute to the UN SDGs (Dahlmann and Bullock, 2020; Kolk et al., 2017; Mio et al., 2020;
Williams et al., 2020) given that achieving the aims of the Agenda 2030 requires systems-level shifts in collective and collaborative agency and action (Randers et al., 2019; Stafford-Smith et al., 2017; Valente, 2015). In this context, there are growing calls to review and adjust the overarching purpose of business as a means to addressing the social and environmental “externalities” produced by the for-profit sector (Freudenreich et al., 2020; Kim and Scheller-Wolf, 2019; Parmar et al., 2019). For example, increasing pressure from large institutional investors is forcing companies to examine their purpose and role in addressing societal challenges. In the first coordinated global effort by investors, more than 200 of the world’s biggest investors, responsible for $26 trillion in assets, are forcing corporate action on climate change (Hasham, 2017).

In this context, we examine how an emerging network of actors interact with each other and their stakeholders to help change the purpose of business and achieve the UN Sustainable Development Goals. We define these private sector organisations as purpose ecosystem actors. Beyond these core ecosystem actors, however, their networks naturally also include the businesses they engage with to become purpose-driven as well as other stakeholders, some of whom become advocates within this ecosystem themselves.¹

While a growing body of literature examines purpose-driven business models such as B Corps and social enterprises, and debates the different theoretical foundations of the firm (Alvarez et al., 2020; Carlos and Lewis, 2019; Donaldson and Walsh, 2015; Gehman and Grimes, 2017), far less is known about who these different actors are that increasingly demand and drive changes in business practices. Recent research has started to highlight and propose the concept of the ‘purpose ecosystem’ to characterise a range of new actors and their networks as an emerging private sector effort to address social and environmental challenges through the capacity of for-profit organisations (Dahlmann et al., 2019; 2020). There is increasing recognition that such ‘intermediaries’ play a crucial role in driving a sustainability transition (Kundurpi et al., 2020), not least given the scale, urgency and complexity involved in addressing global challenges such as the UN Sustainable Development Goals (Van Tulder, 2018; Van Zanten and van Tulder, 2020). Unlike traditional business networks, NGO activism, or self-governed multi-stakeholder initiatives (De Bakker et al., 2019; Scherer and Palazzo, 2011), however, the purpose ecosystem represents an emerging phenomenon that is primarily characterised by the absence of structure, governance or coordination. In fact, purpose ecosystem actors do not even seem to have recognised its existence. We also distinguish the purpose ecosystem from a goal-directed network, which is an intentionally formed entity of independent agencies to achieve a collective goal through collective action among multiple players (Lemaire, 2020). It is a “formal mechanism for achieving multi-organisational outcomes, especially in the public and non-profit sectors” (Provan & Kenis, 2008, p. 231). Goal-directed networks establish clear boundaries that differentiate between members and non-members (Kilduff & Tsai, 2011), unlike the informal nature of the emerging purpose ecosystem with ill-defined boundaries.

Beyond the identification of this purpose ecosystem, we know little about the different approaches used by its actors towards driving wider transformation of the business community. Specifically, we do not know whether and how these purpose ecosystem actors collaborate and share efforts to redefine the purpose and nature of business. Given their growing impact on businesses, there is therefore a gap in our understanding of the nature and methods of, as well as connections and interactions between, these new private sector actors and other stakeholders of the purpose ecosystem (Dellas et al., 2011).

Specifically, we are interested in how this ecosystem is concerned with achieving the SDGs, and in particular SDG17, which emphasises the importance of creating ‘multi-stakeholder partnerships’ for the goals and recognises the pivotal role of the private sector in achieving the Agenda 2030. By interviewing a subset of purpose ecosystem actors in the UK and Australia, we seek to examine and theorise the role(s) of these actors and their interactions with stakeholders of the emerging purpose ecosystem (what they do and how they do it) in transforming and supporting business to address the issues encapsulated in the SDGs. In doing so, we explore the potential and challenges of wider multi-stakeholder collaboration in contributing to the achievement of the SDGs. Thus, the main contributions of our paper are: expanding knowledge about the emerging phenomenon of the purpose ecosystem; uncovering the role of purpose ecosystem actors in contributing to the SDGs; and providing empirical insights into the impact and nature of the purpose ecosystem actors’ interactions with stakeholders to achieve sustainable development outcomes.

Our paper is structured as follows. We first provide background information on the purpose ecosystem before discussing our research methods. We then present our findings followed by a discussion of the implications of these findings for achieving the UN SDGs.

¹ We define the organisations that are driving purpose-driven businesses as purpose ecosystem (PE) actors (our research participants). We define the organisations the PE actors interact with and try to influence as the stakeholders.
Business and Purpose

Scholars have long argued over the purpose of business (see, for e.g. Friedman, 1970; Handy, 2002), the dominant view being that the purpose of business is to maximise profits, or shareholder value (Freeman & Ginena, 2015). This perspective is being challenged by the emergence of purpose-driven organisations that pursue a social and environmental purpose as well as a financial purpose, or the ‘common good’. Steingard and Gilbert (2016, p.77) argue that “the ability for traditionally structured shareholder and stakeholder companies to advance the common good is limited because of constraints placed by the form. These corporations are inherently incapable of moving beyond a basic level of social and environmental impact because they are not endemically purposed for it.”

While there are many definitions of organisational purpose in the literature, we draw upon Reyes and Kleiner’s (1990, p.51) definition: purpose is the “motivating force moving, guiding, and delivering the organisation to a perceived goal. It is the driving force, the fuel, the bond, the intangible link that pulls the organisation together to achieve success.” We also align with Enderle’s (2018, p.621) normative definition that considers purpose as ‘beyond self-interest’ which can take a large variety of forms “such as selfless engagement for entrepreneurial success.”

Hollensbe and colleagues (2014, p. 1228) propose that purpose defines the remit and scope of business activity, linking purpose to values that promote the well-being of society and individuals in order to positively transform society. The underlying premise of this argument is that business is part of society—not separate to society. As such, acceptable standards of business behaviour are drawn from society, rather than having opposing standards within business and society. By coupling purpose directly with positive societal outcomes, purpose-driven businesses derive profits from delivering products and services that intrinsically benefit society and promote the common good (George et al., 2016; Hollensbe et al., 2014; Steingard & Gilbert, 2016). Purpose-driven businesses proactively contribute to societal well-being (Stephan et al., 2016). While literature on purpose-driven business is emerging, empirical evidence is scarce (Gartenberg and Serafeim 2019) and scholars have highlighted the pressing need for more research on purpose-driven business (Freeman & Ginena, 2015; George et al., 2016; Hollensbe et al., 2014).

Ecosystems

The term ‘ecosystem’ has become pervasive in the management literature in the past 20 years with a multitude of definitions, reflecting an increasing interest in the inter-dependence of organisations, their activities and stakeholders (Adner, 2017). Adner (2017) summarises two broad types: ecosystem-as-affiliation, where ecosystems are communities of associated actors defined by their networks and affiliations; and, ecosystem-as-structure, where ecosystems are configurations of activity defined by a value proposition, such as innovation ecosystems that aim to create and capture value from collaborative innovation activities (Oskam et al., 2021). These two types are not mutually exclusive, and an ecosystem may embody features of both. In contrast, DeJordy et al., (2020, p.4) found three broad uses of ecosystem in the organisational literature: “an assemblage of differentiated and inter-related organisms together with their common habitat” (Hawley, 1982) used in human ecology; population ecology focuses on how resources, structures and competitive forces exert pressures that shape ecosystem actors; and, an architectural perspective on ecosystems looks at structures and mechanisms of interdependence that facilitate entrepreneurial activity or promotes growth.

Moore (2013a, 2013b) adapted ecosystem from biology to the business context (Aarikka-Stenroos & Ritala, 2017) describing a business ecosystem as: “a new form of organization… that shows promise in achieving shared purposes, sharing value among many contributors” (Moore, 2013b, p.3). A business ecosystem is an economic community of interdependent stakeholders organically conducting business activities with a shared purpose, accomplishing something more important than they can do on their own (Aarikka-Stenroos & Ritala, 2017; Moore, 2013b). They include self-organised social movements and communities (Moore, 2013b). Ecosystems can evolve through serendipity and self-organisation (Williamson & De Meyer, 2012) or be organised by large focal actors (Moore, 2013b).

Business ecosystem stakeholders include business, universities, non-profits, media, communities, customers, competitors, and institutional actors such as governments, regulators, policymakers, and interest groups, including the cultural and national contexts the institutions operate under (Aarikka-Stenroos & Ritala, 2017; de Vasconcelos Gomes et al., 2018; Oskam et al., 2021; Tsujimoto et al., 2018). Ecosystem stakeholders may have different plans, perspectives, perceptions, interests, attributes, decision-making principles, and purposes (Adner, 2017; Tsujimoto et al., 2018). The boundary of an ecosystem is defined by the stakeholders that contribute to its purpose and proposition (Adner, 2017; Oskam et al., 2021; Tsujimoto et al., 2018). We consider the purpose ecosystem as one specific manifestation of a business ecosystem.
Purpose Ecosystem

In recent years a range of private-actor networks and initiatives (Albareda & Waddock, 2018) have been emerging that seek to transform companies’ underlying business models to drive positive social and environmental sustainability outcomes. These private actors are founded on key philosophies, codes and principles, and offer concrete action frameworks, business templates and other practical guidance such as audit and certification for increased legitimacy and signalling of sustainability outcomes (Stubbs, 2017b, 2019). We draw on Dahlmann et al. (2020) and define some of these actors and networks as members of a ‘purpose ecosystem’ because of their common focus on changing the nature and purpose of business generally as a key shared characteristic.

We follow Hervieux and Voltan’s (2018) approach to conceptualising the purpose ecosystem, whereby actors create favourable systems to support their purpose-driven activities. The purpose ecosystem has a social entrepreneurial approach and provides an infrastructure to enable social and economic change. The ecosystem connects and brings together actors from multiple areas, and educates new and potential actors to be social innovators (Hervieux & Voltan, 2018). Hervieux and Voltan (2018) suggest there are two dominant tactics to cultivate a purpose ecosystem: 1) education that provides social entrepreneurs with the skills they need to solve social problems and become a ‘change-maker’; and 2) a collaborative and ‘favourable’ environment to support actors’ success to promote the common good. The purpose ecosystem is thus constituted by collaborative, interconnected and interdependent relationships (Mack & Mayer, 2016), to which other stakeholders are invited to participate. It is supported by discourses that favour system level change (Hervieux & Voltan, 2018), however, unlike traditional business networks or organised pressure from NGOs, this purpose ecosystem lacks central organisation and coordination (cf. Scherer and Palazzo, 2011).

Purpose ecosystem actors seek to address a wide range of social and environmental issues and concerns, primarily by engaging with and convincing (typically large and established) for-profit businesses to become ‘purpose-driven’. Many of the emerging purpose ecosystem actors tend to be small-medium sized enterprises (SMEs), such as B Corps and social enterprises (Stubbs, 2017a) that are already purpose-driven, but increasingly also include a wide range of impact investors and consulting firms; social movements such as Conscious Capitalism (Frémeaux & Michelson, 2017); NGOs; and, a variety of not-for-profits (NFPs) such as B Lab (Stubbs, 2017a), B-Team, Forum for the Future, Shared Value Project and Future-Fit (Dahlmann et al., 2020) that share a belief in changing the nature and purpose of business.

Yet apart from their shared focus, little is known about whether and how the different actors interact and collaborate to drive a wider transformation of the private sector, as well as whether there are challenges of pursuing ultimately similar or related goals (Hannah & Eisenhardt, 2018; Jacobides et al., 2018; Kapoor & Lee, 2013). Given urgent calls by the United Nations Global Compact (UNGC) and others to accelerate the speed at which governments and businesses unite and collaborate on contributing to the achievement of the UN SDGs in the ‘Decade to Deliver’ (UNGC, 2020a; UNGC, 2020b), there are questions whether the purpose ecosystem can indeed contribute to such efforts. Therefore, in this paper we ask, “how do purpose ecosystem (PE) actors interact with other PE actors and stakeholders to help achieve the UN SDGs?”.

Research Methods

As the purpose ecosystem is still an emerging concept and phenomenon, we used an exploratory research approach. Exploratory studies are useful where little prior knowledge exists in the literature (Blaikie, 2000). To examine how purpose ecosystem actors interact with each other with their stakeholders, and potentially contribute to achieving the UN SDGs, we employed an interpretivist mode of inquiry using a qualitative research design (Bansal and Corley, 2012). Interpretivism views the social world as the world interpreted and experienced by its members from the ‘inside’. Qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings that ‘insiders’ bring to them (Blaikie, 2000). A qualitative approach is more appropriate to emerging areas of research where little is known about a phenomenon (Belz & Binder, 2017; Blaikie, 2000; Marshall & Rossman, 1999). An interpretivist approach lends itself to engaging actors with qualitative research tools, such as interviews, to draw out the views and meanings actors ascribe to their social realities. This enables us to gain in-depth insight into the activities and interactions of the purpose ecosystem. An interpretivist approach, utilising qualitative data collection and analysis methods, is an appropriate methodological approach in exploratory research of this nature (Crane, 1999).

Our research study targeted organisations that promote and support purpose-driven businesses, with the aim of driving systemic change. As such, we were primarily interested

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2 B Corps are profit orientated businesses certified by the NFP B Lab to meet rigorous standards in relation to environmental and social performance, accountability, and transparency.

3 Impact investors explicitly and primarily target social and environmental outcomes through their investments.
in those (mostly non-profit, social movement or SME-sized) organisations that aim to change the nature and purpose of the private sector through their business models or engagement strategies, rather than the (typically larger) businesses they work with as clients or beneficiaries of their interactions. In other words, for this study we focused only on those ‘intermediary’ organisations in the purpose ecosystem that are driving the change in business generally, rather than on those businesses that had already adopted a purpose-driven philosophy (Dahlmann et al., 2020; Kundurpi et al., 2020). This decision to focus on the primary actors and drivers was designed to limit the scope of our analysis. It does, however, present a limitation that offers clear future research opportunities by extending our study to all those business organisations that are in the process of being “converted” to becoming purpose-driven or that have already embraced these principles.

Further, when approaching these actors, we started with the assumption that their focus on supporting the development of purpose (rather than profit-) driven businesses resulted in wanting to enable and accelerate action to address wider socio-ecological challenges. We therefore surmised that these private sector organisations, their networks and initiatives could have the potential for leading the transformation towards sustainable development by seeking to change how businesses operate and interact in general terms (Albareda & Waddock, 2018; Kivimaa et al., 2019). As such, our research explored the extent to which their purpose orientation was ultimately aligned with more specific efforts such as those captured by the UN SDGs.

Given the largely unstructured, informal (and even unrecognised) nature of this ecosystem, our sampling approach was therefore initially guided by the authors’ knowledge and familiarity with some of these actors. We started by compiling a list of potential organisations in an initial mapping exercise, further searching their websites, attending relevant sectoral events, and reading academic literature and grey literature. We also held informal discussions with some of these actors and participants from previous research on purpose-driven business (Dahlmann et al., 2019, 2020) (see Table 1). At every stage, a key inclusion criterion was whether there was evidence to suggest that an actor was (explicitly or implicitly) seeking to change the nature and purpose of business. Dahlmann et al. (2020) attempted a
preliminary classification of purpose ecosystem actors that included impact investors, sustainability target initiatives and business purpose change agents, as well as their respective methods of transformation and broader systemic purpose. We used this as further guide for our sampling approach. At this stage, therefore, we did not define the system boundaries of the purpose ecosystem, but rather identified them through the eyes of the actors by using the snowballing method. Hence the boundaries of the purpose ecosystem were not objectively fixed, but instead were defined by whether the concept was meaningful as measure of inclusion for us and our participants as key actors (Adner, 2017; Oskam et al., 2021; Tsujimoto et al., 2018).

Data Selection and Collection

We situated our research study in the UK and Australia because they have similar institutional contexts and due to ease of access to participants for the researchers. From the sample in Table 1, we used convenience sampling (Bryman, 2016) to identify organisations located in and near the cities where the researchers were located. A convenience sample is one that is available by virtue of its accessibility and is an appropriate data selection method for gaining in-depth insights in specific contexts and settings (Cresswell, 2013). We invited 41 organisations to participate in our study, but only 18 agreed to an interview at the time of the study in 2019: 12 organisations in Australia and six in the UK. The resulting sample is by no means representative but affords a small window into the emerging purpose ecosystem. As such, it is not possible to generalise the findings (Bryman, 2016).

For example, the Australian sample has a strong representation from the finance sector (e.g. social financing, impact investors), which represents one-third of the research participants. The UK sample has a strong representation of nonprofits. As such, we acknowledge the potential bias of the sample. To maintain anonymity of research participants, we use codes to identify participants (see Table 2). The participants were classified as: CONS = consulting organisations; FIN = finance or investment-related organisation; ED = education organisations; PB = peak bodies; and SM = social movements. Included in the social movements category are not-for-profit (NFP) organisations that offer consulting and advisory services but do not see themselves as ‘traditional’ consultants. They identify as part of a social movement.

### Table 2 Summary of research participants and secondary data

| Code | Country | Description | Secondary data |
|------|---------|-------------|----------------|
| CONS1 | Australia | Large ‘traditional’ consulting firm | Website; Research reports on purpose |
| CONS2 | Australia | Small consulting and education firm | Website |
| ED1 | Australia | Research and education centre | Website |
| ED2 | UK | Education centre | Website |
| FIN1 | Australia | Social impact financing | Website |
| FIN2 | Australia | Impact investor | Website |
| FIN3 | Australia | Social impact financing | Website |
| FIN4 | Australia | Impact investor | Website |
| PB1 | Australia | Representing businesses committed to sustainable development | Website |
| PB2 | Australia | Membership-based organisation committed to social impact | Website |
| SM1 | Australia | Global social movement | Website |
| SM2 | Australia | Global social movement and certification body | Website; Reports |
| SM3 | UK | NFP | Website; Framework documents; Reports |
| SM4 | UK | NFP | Website |
| SM5 | UK | Global social movement | Website |
| SM6 | UK | NFP | Website; Internal documents (e.g. theory of change) |
| SM7 | UK | NFP | Website |
| SM8 | Australia | Organisation that founded SM1 in Australia | Website; presentations; annual reports |

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4 Snowballing relies on a researcher’s knowledge of a social situation. “This approach involves using a group of informants with whom the researcher has made initial contact and asking them to put the researcher in touch with people in their networks, then asking those people to be informants and in turn asking them to put the researcher in touch with people in their networks and so on as long as they fit the criteria for the research project” (Minichiello et al, 1995, p.161).

5 A Peak Body is a term used in Australia to characterise advocacy groups, trade associations, an association of industries or groups with allied interests.
A potential danger in using interviews as the primary data collection tool is the bias of the interviewer who is seeking to have specific questions answered. We addressed this by asking open questions in the semi-structured interviews, and letting the participants speak until they had exhausted the topic, without interruption (therefore not leading them to a certain conclusion). We asked participants about their roles and initiatives in supporting purpose-driven business and the concept of the purpose ecosystem; whether, who and how they interact with others in the purpose ecosystem; and how the purpose ecosystem contributes to achieving the SDGs (a summary of the questions is included in Appendix A). We asked participants to provide examples to back up their statements, to mitigate issues with respondent recall errors, and to focus on ongoing efforts and activities. All interviews were transcribed. The transcript of the interview and a summary of the findings were emailed to each participant inviting them to provide comments and/or corrections. This process enhanced the reliability and validity of the research study (Minichiello et al., 1995; Yin, 2009).

To supplement the interview data, we accessed publicly available information and websites to source secondary data (see Table 2) for data triangulation. While we did not code the secondary data, we reviewed it before and after the interviews to help corroborate the interview data. We also ran two workshops. The aim of the workshops was to gain feedback from a selection of purpose ecosystem actors on our proposed research project (workshop 1) and preliminary findings (workshop 2). This included representatives from the groups in Table 1. The handwritten notes from these workshops were analysed alongside the interview data.

**Data Analysis**

A content analysis of each interview and the workshop notes was undertaken using qualitative coding techniques (Gioia et al., 2012; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Using the NVIVO software package, the transcribed interviews and notes were analysed separately by two of the authors and coded to draw out key themes. The process involved three types of coding—open coding, axial coding and selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). To address reliability issues, the two authors who conducted the interviews analysed the data separately to create first-order codes. Together, they reviewed and reconciled the first-order codes and developed the second and third order codes. Where they couldn’t agree, they referred to the third author for further review and reconciliation.

We started with a first-order empirical analysis, coding text segments and staying close to informant terms (open coding) (Oskam et al., 2021). Codes were derived from the actual words or terms used by the interviewees (in vivo codes) or by summarising the concepts discussed by the interviewees (constructed codes). The second stage of coding involved axial coding, “categories are related to their subcategories to form more precise and complete explanations about phenomena…. axial coding is the act of relating categories to subcategories along the lines of their properties and dimensions” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 124). Axial coding groups codes together into categories to form more complete explanations of the data. The third stage, selective coding, grouped the second order categories under common themes as patterns emerged (Patton, 2002; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Selective coding is “the process of integrating and refining the theory” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 143), resulting in the key themes discussed in the Findings section. Table 3 summarises the three levels of coding.

**Findings**

To examine whether and how the purpose ecosystem might have the potential to contribute towards addressing a wide range of interconnected social and environmental challenges, we first probed how its actors operationalise and implement the SDGs when driving purpose in their engagements with their stakeholders. We then explored the respective roles of the participants in supporting and contributing to the purpose ecosystem, as well as who they interact with and the nature of these interactions in the purpose ecosystem and with their stakeholders.

**The Role of Purpose-Driven Business in Contributing to Achieving the SDGs**

One of the central questions of our research was understanding how our participants linked their efforts of supporting the development of purpose-driven businesses with contributing to the achievement of the UN SDGs. Our data suggested four main themes: First, participants highlighted the benefits of adopting the SDGs as a ‘shared language’; second, they claimed to have integrated this framework directly into their own operations and modes of engagement with each other and businesses; third, they saw a clear opportunity to use the SDGs as means to provide structure and guidance when talking about purpose in business; but fourthly, they also stressed the importance of acknowledging key limitations of the SDGs. In that sense, participants’ views were overwhelmingly positive and largely guided by practical and instrumental considerations, but there was also a sense that while the SDGs were clearly helpful in supporting their work, they were just one aspect of their efforts to support a wider shift towards purpose-driven businesses.

Specifically, participants valued the fact that the SDGs provided them and their various different stakeholders with a clear and internationally recognised reference point that...
| Third level codes | Second level codes | Sample first level codes |
|------------------|--------------------|--------------------------|
| **UN SDGs**      | Shared language    | • High-level guidance, narrative, sign-posting, cross-referencing  |
|                  |                    | • Clarity in times of political turmoil  |
|                  | Integrated guiding framework | • Consistent communications with all stakeholders  |
|                  |                    | • Enhance communications between different sectors (for-profit, non-profit, public)  |
|                  | Integrated guiding framework | • Core framework or part of toolbox  |
|                  |                    | • Benchmarking  |
|                  |                    | • Impact mapping  |
|                  |                    | • Workshops  |
|                  |                    | • Strategy development  |
|                  |                    | • Integrated into own operations and business models  |
|                  | Limitations of SDGs | • Allows selective focus on human values, issues and concerns  |
|                  |                    | • Supporting other PE actors with the SDG implementation  |
| **SDG supporting purpose-driven business** |                    | • Place-based implementation  |
|                  |                    | • Used when designing solutions  |
|                  |                    | • SDGs help conceptualising societal destination  |
|                  |                    | • Directly linked to the role of purpose-driven businesses  |
|                  |                    | • Allow (re)defining organisational purpose  |
|                  |                    | • Provide a tangible manifestation of purpose  |
|                  |                    | • SDG17 allows PE actors to position their work within the wider framework  |
| **Limitations of SDGs** |                    | • Recognise complexity of multiple levels and layers  |
|                  |                    | • Recognise assumptions and limitations of the SDGs  |
|                  |                    | • Avoid losing nuances  |
|                  |                    | • Widespread adoption requires government commitment  |
| **Roles**        | Capacity builder   | • Concerns about companies retro-fitting their corporate sustainability efforts to the SDGs  |
|                  |                    | • Concerns about more general SDG- and rainbow washing  |
|                  |                    | • Jargon  |
|                  | Communicator       | • SDGs help conceptualising societal destination  |
|                  |                    | • Directly linked to the role of purpose-driven businesses  |
|                  |                    | • Allow (re)defining organisational purpose  |
|                  |                    | • Provide a tangible manifestation of purpose  |
|                  |                    | • SDG17 allows PE actors to position their work within the wider framework  |
|                  |                    | • SDGs help conceptualising societal destination  |
|                  |                    | • Directly linked to the role of purpose-driven businesses  |
|                  |                    | • Allow (re)defining organisational purpose  |
|                  |                    | • Provide a tangible manifestation of purpose  |
|                  |                    | • SDG17 allows PE actors to position their work within the wider framework  |
|                  | Change maker       | • Catalytic activity  |
|                  |                    | • Increase awareness/educate  |
|                  |                    | • Conferences-seminars-events  |
|                  |                    | • Educate leaders  |
|                  |                    | • Resources & tools  |
|                  |                    | • Workshops  |
| **Collaborator** |                    | • Engaging stakeholders in change  |
|                  |                    | • Movement of movements  |
| **Enabler**      |                    | • Transform  |
|                  |                    | • Consulting-consulting  |
|                  |                    | • Networking  |
|                  |                    | • Manage resource constraints  |
| **Influencer**   |                    | • Crowdfunding  |
|                  |                    | • Facilitate  |
|                  |                    | • Fund raising  |
|                  |                    | • Inspire  |
|                  |                    | • Sharing  |
|                  |                    | • Investing & financing  |
|                  |                    | • Moving capital  |
|                  |                    | • Impact investment  |
|                  |                    | • Policy makers  |
|                  |                    | • Advocacy  |
|                  |                    | • Lobbying  |
could be used as part of their guidance and narrative when
talking about how to drive a sustainability transition. As
such, the SDGs were a powerful communication tool used
by participants to help organisations and their boards under-
stand their ‘contribution to the future, what is sustainable
within environmental limits and meeting unmet needs’.

Beyond facilitating communications, participants had
also directly integrated the UN SDGs into their own opera-
tions, tools, business models and methods of engagement
with business. It is important to stress, perhaps, that while
the SDGs featured as one out of many frameworks they were
also seen as instrumental in developing specific place-based
solutions, evaluating businesses’ practices and performance
and when helping other stakeholders achieve their desired
impact. For example, ‘No, they [the UNSDGs] are the core
of what we do. They’ve been there ever since they were intro-
duced’; and, ‘Quite directly. We support it [the UN SDGs].
We’re just aligned, basically’.

One participant had engaged with financial sector stake-
holders to understand how such organisations could col-
collaborate to ‘work with the SDGs in a more meaningful way’. Others were integrating the SDGs into their own frame-
works and software tools to be used with partners, clients
and other stakeholders. For example, one was partnering
with the Global Compact Network to integrate the SDGS
into their impact assessment tool to ‘make it straightforward
for businesses to understand if they’re contributing
to SDGs, and help them to see what opportunities there
are to be contributing to the SDGs’. This organisation also
helped businesses to benchmark against other likeminded
businesses, other industries and other countries—’all those
different comparisons can help you work out where those
opportunities are for your business’.

Beyond the practical application participants also
reflected on the strong connections between having pur-
pose in business and implementing the SDGs. Specifically,
there was a sense that the SDGs provided a clear ‘desti-
nation for society’ as well as a ‘tangible manifestation of
purpose’. As a result, the SDGs offered a directly relevant
framework for redefining organisational purpose. For other
actors, SDG17 specifically allowed them to position their
own work as part of a wider partnership and collaborative
approach towards driving transformative change by helping
achieve the Agenda 2030.

Another angle of a higher purpose is can you connect it
to any of the 17 SDGs? Because if you are in some way
connecting your purpose to one of the 17 SDGs, that
may be a way of defining that you have a higher pur-
pose, or at least if you’re asking that question, you’re
asking the right question around your purpose (SM5).

However, participants were also cognisant that the SDGs
could be perceived as jargon or just ‘a new nomenclature

for another purpose statement’. There was concern that the
SDGs could be used for ‘rainbow washing, this idea that
you cherry pick the SDGs you want’. Others stressed the
need to acknowledge the complexity involved in translating
the SDGs across different levels and layers, as well as the
various assumptions and limitations inherent in such a high-
level framework.

I think the challenges I have got now, not challenge,
the criticism of SDGs, is because they are so high
level. And I have worked on a team where this has been - this happened, and you get one example of one
good piece of work, and it suddenly becomes the UK
representative project. It’s like one person doing one
project, rather than a consistent approach across an
entire country. So you lose a lot from nuance, but no,
we found it useful (SM7).

Overall, participants saw their role as helping businesses
understand what SDGs they most impact and can contribute
to, and how to link them with their organisational purpose or
strategy. In that sense, there was no emphasis on a specific
set of SDGs but rather participants viewed the goals as a
holistic agenda representative (even if not exhaustive) of the
aims of a wider sustainability transition.

Interactions in the Purpose Ecosystem

Beyond their general adoption of the SDGs as a means of
defining and operationalising purpose in business, next we
examine the different types of roles actors used to engage
with each other and wider stakeholders of the purpose eco-
system. We identified six key themes: capacity builder; com-
municator; collaborator; enabler; change maker; and influ-
encer which we discuss in detail further below. To some
extent, there is overlap between these roles. What is notable,
however, is that most actors we interviewed stressed the need
for communication as well as collaboration as part of their
activities; meanwhile the other types of roles were spread
across different participants suggesting they each adopted
more differentiated approaches as well, thus recognising the
self-organised ‘division of labour’ and ‘niche innovation’
occurring within the purpose ecosystem (Aarikka-Stenroos
& Ritala, 2017; Moore, 2013b) (Table 4).

Capacity Builder

One key role played by the participants was to build capa-
"
our role, we see, is to build the capacity within Australia and the Asia Pacific for companies to be able to do this sort of work… we provide some resources and how to tools and examples and case studies and champions and all of that (PB2).

Capacity in this context therefore included efforts to bundle and optimise existing resources, knowledge and expertise, developing shared commitments and a sense of community among actors and different stakeholders. For example, some were creating a ‘community of practice’ to share learning and experiences in order to expand the wider capacity for supporting change in the purpose ecosystem: So we’re trying to create, like, a group of CEOs that will, kind of, hold each other to account… to share experiences. And we’re hoping that that’s going to create a bit of a support network for them (SM6).

Communicator

All participants engaged in some form of communication activities to ‘inspire, enable and connect’. The aim was to raise awareness, promote, inform, and educate about the importance of changing purpose in business aligned with achieving the UN SDGs. This was a critical lever for ‘changing the way that people think’ in order ‘to get [businesses] in a mindset’ of thinking about a different way of doing business.

we’ve just gone through a re-clarification of our place in the ecosystem. We would position ourselves at early stage awareness, build the understanding and willingness and the inspiration of, ‘yes, I can go on this journey’ (SM1).

Participants achieved this by ‘sharing stories’: speaking at conferences and other events; hosting forums, webinars, public workshops, leadership and knowledge building workshops; and providing tools and resources. Such observations reinforce the importance of dialogue and communication amongst a diverse set of actors and stakeholders to help drive change. Most of the work that we do is about creating dialogue and creating spaces for dialogue that makes sense to people (SM7).

Participants talked about demonstrating, innovating, pioneering, and sharing knowledge and experiences about purpose-driven business. One participant described these various activities as ‘catalytic activity’—the use of tools, guides and other resources to drive change. For example, some believed that a wider transformation was only possible by sharing ‘best practice’ with business through an open-source model.

Others focused on exposing ‘cynical’ CEOs to a purpose-driven way of thinking, and training boards and their ‘C suite’ to equip leaders with the ‘right knowledge’. While
one participant developed an emerging leaders’ programme, another was trying different approaches to understand how people ‘really do learn and take on board content’. These activities were designed to build momentum for business to adopt a purpose-driven approach and help driving transformative change.

Collaborator

To further increase this momentum, participants actively sought to collaborate with each other and other stakeholders in a wide variety of ways, chiefly with the aim to ‘connect all businesses’ and to connect ‘people with people and people with resources.’ For one participant, this was achieved by connecting businesses to implementers, facilitators or consultants who would then help businesses ‘put [purpose-driven] tenets into practice’ and thus through such a community of practice further contribute to capacity-building in the purpose ecosystem. This was strengthened by ‘becoming involved in clients’ ecosystems and the subsequent ecosystems that they’re related in.’ Connectors engaged in significant levels of informal networking by introducing actors and stakeholders to others, to ‘get some lessons learned from each other.’

While we did not ask our participants to disclose the specific names of organisations they engaged with as part of their efforts to support purpose-driven businesses, they did provide information on a rich network of interactions within the purpose ecosystem, between participants and with other stakeholders such as industry associations, not-for-profits (NFPs), indigenous groups, philanthropic groups, government agencies, universities, consulting organisations, financial/investment institutions, and other established purpose-driven organisations such as social enterprises and B Corps. Figure 1 provides an illustration of the wider interactions identified in the Australian sample.

Much of the interaction in the purpose ecosystem was deemed to be of a collaborative nature: sharing, ‘infusing’ and learning from others. This could be a ‘loosely coordinated information flow and sharing of knowledge.’ One participant believed that through collaborative relationships, ‘we’re going to get the powerful change in the economy.’ While some of this collaboration occurs directly between individuals—‘fellow travellers’—collaboration at the organisational level helps participants to be more strategic in ‘scaling-up’ their impacts.

Purpose-driven organisations ‘rarely exist without partnerships and collaboration’ as different organisations ‘offer some piece of the puzzle’. However, participants also acknowledged, and respected, the differences between purpose ecosystem actors. They each may have different approaches and may use different tools and frameworks, but ‘most of them are not incompatible. There’s more than one way to skin a cat isn’t there?’.

Participants drew on the expertise of other actors in the purpose ecosystem and their stakeholders, such as social enterprises, NFPs, impact investors, government agencies and industry bodies. The participants convened ‘round tables’ to bring purpose-driven stakeholders together; coordinated events and supported each other’s event; provided referrals; and, partnered on initiatives. This required understanding ‘exactly how our initiative complements theirs’ and...
explaining ‘the fit for those different initiatives and helping our potential users to understand where we add value, and where those other things add value.’

This delegated approach appeared to facilitate and promote collaboration in the purpose ecosystem to drive sustainability outcomes and contribute to the SDGs. Within this collaborative environment, however, there was also an understanding that ultimately (financial) resources for their various projects and organisations were limited, leading to ‘perceptions of competition’ and occasional ‘overlap’ amongst actors and stakeholders. Consequently, a major barrier to deeper collaboration was being ‘strapped for resources’ as participants focused on ‘running our business’; there was also some level of holding back, or ‘not being fully cooperative’. But participants generally recognised the need to manage such resource constraints effectively and to ‘align a lot more closely together’.

Another suggested that while purpose ecosystem actors agreed that change was needed, the ecosystem required ‘resources at the centre to fund and do the execution because everybody owns their own piece.’ In one participant’s experience, ‘people are always happy to collaborate where it doesn’t require sharing funding’. One example cited was two significant foundations in the UK bringing together five or six organisations to fund collaborative initiatives and establishing a field office to coordinate the initiatives. However, this required resourcing from the organisations and thus ‘I think that’s turning out to be a little bit more difficult than the foundations thought’.

One participant pointed to signs of the emerging ‘movement of movements’, which aims to formalise collaborations between purpose ecosystem actors to address significant sustainability issues.

Enabler

Building on and leveraging the roles of capacity builder and communicator, enablers ‘amplify’ and share knowledge, tools and other resources to help businesses ‘think about their business through this purpose lens’. Enablers help businesses to shift their thinking and business strategy from ‘just looking at return to shareholders, to actually looking at how they can address social issues’. There was a strong focus on enabling ‘impact’. For one participant, this meant raising funds for businesses that make positive social and environmental impacts ‘beyond themselves’. For another, it was about assisting businesses and other actors and stakeholders to take steps that will ‘make them more purpose-driven or more impactful in what they do’.

Enablers also worked closely with business leaders, senior executives and others to facilitate businesses’ ‘purpose journey’. One participant used a ‘social contract arrangement’ to meet businesses on a regular basis and ‘be a constructive irritant’. Respondents argued that businesses ‘value those conversations’ and being challenged to change their view of the purpose of business. Another reinforced this type of approach:

What people actually need is hand holding and mentoring, a coaching approach, which is really time intensive and no big consultant would do it the way we do it (SM7).

Change Maker

In one respect, the change maker role is the glue that makes the other roles meaningful, as one participant argued:

But you could do all of these things, and no behaviour change, whereas for us the behaviour change is the key. It’s less about what you’re ticking off, but how you think about making the decisions (CONS1).

Participants saw themselves as catalysts, or agents, of ‘quality’ transformative change. One participant referred to creating a movement of actors and stakeholders to ‘create real change’, while another ‘has this idea that everyone is a change maker, which is this overarching mission’. One consultant’s ‘theory of change’ was to influence those people that have the biggest impact—senior people in large corporates ‘because we think they’ll have the biggest impact’ and can ‘lead the way.’ The argument was that larger companies touch the most employees, which affect the most customers and so on. Change makers wanted to define a ‘clear destination and how to step towards it’.

We stand for changing the narrative of business. We want business to be a force for good in the world and we want to elevate humanity. That’s our purpose. Make business a force for good in the world and elevate humanity through capitalism. (SM5)

Influencer

Finally, we also identified two types of Influencer roles: one aimed at influencing business and investor behaviour through financing mechanisms; the other designed to influence policy makers to support purpose-driven businesses. While direct lending to support social and environmental sustainability outcomes was one approach, one participant questioned ‘is this direct lending bucket still appropriate to where the market is?’ Another approach was to influence owners and managers of capital to ‘reorient’ their investment portfolios towards sustainability outcomes.

Most participants also engaged in some form of advocacy or communication with policy makers. For example, they would lobby government for ‘meaningful climate action’; to facilitate ‘business to come together to build solutions’;
to legislate a new form of purpose-driven business ‘benefit company status’; and, to create a ‘framework that enables purpose-driven type of behaviour.’ However, two participants explicitly rejected this role. For one, their ‘purpose is to work within the current system. And, for the same reason, we haven’t done anything on regulation.’ Another thought there was already enough people ‘lobbying for more regulation, lobbying for compliance.’

Discussion

In this paper we asked: How do purpose ecosystem actors interact with other PE actors and stakeholders to help achieve the UN SDGs? Through our exploratory qualitative research, we find that key actors within the purpose ecosystem variously take on multiple roles to engage with, and influence, other actors in the purpose ecosystem and stakeholders. They see themselves as ‘enablers’, ‘catalysts’, ‘pioneers’ and ‘critical friends’. Most importantly, there appears to be widespread agreement that the UN Sustainable Development Goals provide purpose ecosystem actors with a clear framework and a shared language with which to pitch their stakeholder engagement methods. The UN SDGs are widely recognised by all actors and thus facilitate the discussions around achieving purpose in business beyond profit. Thus, while purpose ecosystem actors typically pursue a variety of objectives linked to driving purpose-led businesses, the SDGs were widely perceived as being very useful for framing their tools, discussions and interactions as part of a global discourse on the challenges for humanity.

Many actors in the purpose ecosystem sought to address the UN SDGs indirectly or implicitly. There is an understanding that while the UN SDGs ultimately matter, achieving them requires changing the nature of business more generally, so that wider aims such as those covered by the Goals can be taken into consideration by business in the first instance. Moving beyond profit is therefore generally seen as essential to making business appreciate their wider systemic connections (Valente, 2015).

Specifically, through our interviews we identified the six key roles that the actors currently play in the purpose ecosystem: capacity builder; communicator; collaborator; enabler; change maker; and influencer. Taken together they represent a wide range of capabilities and tactics different purpose ecosystem actors possess and employ. Consistent with Hervieux and Voltan’s (2018) approach to conceptualising the purpose ecosystem, we find that actors are engaged in a variety of activities designed to create favourable systems to support purpose-driven activities. Moreover, actors appear deeply embedded in a network of interactions within the purpose ecosystem, between participants and with other stakeholders such as industry associations, not-for-profits (NFPs), indigenous groups, philanthropic groups, government agencies, universities, consulting organisations, financial/investment institutions, and other purpose-driven organisations such as social enterprises. In all cases purpose-driven businesses act as the central leitmotif/boundary-object that enables different actors and stakeholders to interact and collaborate by sharing the same motivation for action.

In fact, such multi-stakeholder interactions are largely characterised by a spirit of collaboration between the different purpose ecosystem actors based on the widespread recognition that everyone is doing their best to help make businesses become more purpose-driven. At the same time, there are concerns about resource and funding shortages, inefficiencies and an overall questioning of the effectiveness of all these different actors. There are therefore strong calls for more rigorous mapping of this purpose ecosystem to establish a better understanding of the different actors and their respective efforts; the creation of a community of practice or some other neutral forum where approaches and ideas can be discussed and coordinated; efforts to identify and evaluate the different theories of change implemented by different actors to strengthen the evidence base for impact; and, innovative mechanisms or platforms that bundle and advertise different funding sources and opportunities for actors within this purpose ecosystem.

Taken together, we argue that the purpose ecosystem thus potentially plays an important role in helping to achieve the UN SDGs by focusing attention chiefly on the importance of creating partnerships for goals (SDG17). This is not to say that some of these actors also do not directly target specific SDGs, but the ‘added value’ of the purpose ecosystem appears derived from using SDG17 as an orientation point within a wider framework designed to achieve transformative change towards sustainable development. Our findings suggest that unlike more established and self-governed multi-stakeholder initiatives on sustainability (De Bakker et al., 2019; Scherer and Palazzo, 2011), one of the potential strengths of this purpose ecosystem may be its lack of coordination. In fact, the shared focus on changing the purpose of business enables a wide variety of actors and their stakeholders to collaborate and contribute to these shared ambitions through their respective approaches and niche innovations, rather than perhaps being constrained by a tightly controlled agenda and coordination mechanisms (Kundurpi et al., 2020). Quite whether and how effective this is remains an open question at this stage.

We therefore hope that our research begins the scholarly process of recognising the purpose ecosystem as a potentially critical enabler of wider systemic changes, some of which have been subsumed under wider social sciences efforts such as the Earth System Governance research network (Burch et al., 2019). There is a dearth of empirical insights into how private actors are shaping the rules...
of global governance, and particularly with regard to concern- ing socio-ecological trends (Albareda & Waddock, 2018; Biermann, 2019). Yet interactions with public govern- ance will also be important in this context. The UNGC and Accenture recently called for the ‘Decade to Deliver’ highlighting business systemic change as key to influenc- ing the broader business community to deliver real progress against the Global Goals (Accenture, 2019; our emphasis). The purpose ecosystem may hence provide such a systemic lever worthy of further examination.

Limitations and Future Research

Our research is not without limitations, which provide opportunities for future research projects. First, the 18 organisations in our final sample represent only small pro- portion of the much wider purpose ecosystem. The number of entities dedicated towards changing the purpose of business is constantly growing and so our selection of organisations interviewed is biased by availability and researchers’ prior contacts. Future research should first seek to map the purpose ecosystem before reaching out more broadly to capture this growing field in a more representative manner.

Second, our sample focused in the first instance on those ‘intermediary’ private sector organisations and actors that shared a focus on driving purpose in business, rather than those that had already adopted a purpose-driven business philosophy. Future research efforts should also include all those (large) businesses that are being encouraged and working on becoming purpose-driven as well. Using longitudinal observations would provide insights into the direct relationships between these purpose ecosystem actors and uncover the extent to which they are actually effective in converting these businesses to become purpose-driven and thus successful in contributing to the UN SDGs, and leading to a wider transformation of the private sector.

Third, our research focused on two relatively similar country contexts. Future research should seek to under- stand the extent to which debates about the purpose of business are generally similar or different across other cultural, legal, and national contexts, or whether the emergence of the purpose ecosystem appears to be primarily restricted to similar Anglo-Saxon countries and market systems. This would allow interpreting this phenomenon more closely from the socio-cultural environments within which they thrive. For example, this study has assumed national boundaries to be a relevant scale for delineation, but in fact purpose ecosystems may be transnational in nature. Identifying the spatial scale (and potential interac- tions between multiple scales) is an interesting for future research. Together this would provide an indication as to whether purpose ecosystems are generally desirable or necessary in other contexts when it comes to helping businesses contribute to the achievement of the UN SDGs.

Conclusion

There is widespread agreement that achieving the UN Agenda 2030 will not be possible without the resources and creativity of the private sector. At the same time, there is also acknowledgement that business-as-usual will not result in meeting the UN Sustainable Development Goals. The emergence of the purpose ecosystem and its myriad of diverse actors and stakeholders potentially points towards a critical lever in helping to shift the way in which business operates. Aligning organisational purpose with the achievement of the SDGs may enable a transformation in how businesses are governed, why and for whom. But whether or not this is the case—and how—needs further research. While it is too early to judge the persistence and effectiveness of the purpose ecosystem, we call for fur- ther research to critically examine its actors and efforts, and to investigate whether and how the purpose ecosystem forms a suitable form of private sector governance to help address the UN SDGs (albeit in a highly informal and decentralised way). We hope our exploratory research has provided initial insights into the emerging phenomenon of the purpose ecosystem and we invite scholars to critically study its potential and effectiveness.

Appendix A: Summary of Interview Questions

1. Please can you provide some background on yourself and your organisation?
2. What is your organisation’s role in supporting purposeful businesses/networks?
3. How does your organisation seek to contribute to achieving sustainability outcomes such as the UN SDGs?
4. How are you trying to influence/change?
5. Who do you interact with (organisations and people), and how?

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