Sustainable Development, Its Goals and Business – A Global Perspective

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ABSTRACT
This paper sought to determine the place of business in actualizing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The SDGs or 2030 Agenda or Global Goals which has as its ultimate vision “a healthy mankind, living in a peaceful, fair society and sound environment – everywhere in the world” and based on the five pillars (5Ps) of the people, the planet, prosperity and peace and a global partnership was adopted in 2015 by the entire 193 member states of the United Nations to guide world development policy for a period of 15 years i.e. 2015-2030. (The goals which are 17 in number with 169 targets replaced the 15 Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) which dictated world development policy for the period 2000 – 2015). Before its adoption, the onus for the accomplishment of international developmental issues have always been placed on the government and civil society with business playing peripheral roles bordering more on corporate social responsibility (CSR). The UN, realizing that the actualization of SDGs will require unprecedented effort by all sectors of the society have now, based on the ability of business to invest and innovate assigned important roles to it. The private sector is now being counted upon to drive success as the realization of the SDGs will not only improve the environment for doing business, but, will also build markets; creating huge opportunities for responsible companies to deliver solutions. The study found out that though in many cases, business solutions exist, there is the need for extensive collaborative efforts between the government, civil society and business to provide the enabling environment for business to play its role in accomplishing the SDGs at the scale required.

Keywords: Sustainable development, Sustainable development goals and Business (commercial enterprises)

1.0 INTRODUCTION
Central to the economic development and growth of nations is the performance of business activities, i.e. the production and consumption of goods and services. While it is true that over the past two decades such activities have resulted in lifting more than 660 million out of poverty worldwide and raised the income levels of millions, the growth patterns resulting from it have also left hundreds of millions of people behind: 1.2 billion still lack access to electricity, 870 million are malnourished and about 780 million people are still without access to clean, safe drinking water (World Bank, 2012).
A more disturbing scenario is however the fact that in a bid to meet human needs and wants, businesses have been using up the world’s natural resources (which are finite) in ways and manners that have not only degraded the environment but have also resulted to fears that without definitive actions at achieving a “steady state economy” i.e. environmental equilibrium or even environmental renewal, humanity may eventually be heading towards extinction (Wikipedia, 2017).
It is this current state of affairs where natural capital (sum total of nature’s resources) are being used up faster than they can be replenished that has raised concerns world over on the need to put in place measures that can result to maintaining processes of productivity indefinitely by replacing resources used
up with resources of equal or greater value without degrading or endangering the ecosystem. The measures would aim at designing systems that are not only flexible but reversible in the fields of agriculture, economics, energy, manufacturing, technology, transport, architecture, politics, business etc. (The system would seek to put in place mechanisms that would efficiently use the earth’s natural resources in a way that will not only deliver both immediate and long term benefits /prosperity to the people but also sustain the planet). At the core of the idea is that “development is sustainable”, that is ‘a development model which not only has the capacity to meet the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs’. The construct which has come to be referred to as “sustainable development” and built on the pillars of economic growth, ecological balance and social progress has as its major goal the attainment of sustainable consumption (OECD, 2000). This specific goal, i.e. the attainment of sustainable production and consumption or in the opinion of Desimone and Popoff, (1997) as cited in Wikipedia, (2017) “the delivery of competitively priced goods and services that satisfy human needs and bring quality of life, while progressively reducing ecological impacts and resource intensity i.e. eco-efficiency” shall be the focus of this paper

2.0 The Concept of Sustainable Development
Sustainable development which largely focuses on the ability of present generations to regenerate, maintain and improve planetary resources for the use of future generations is a systems approach to growth and development which lays emphasis on the efficient management of natural, produced and social capital for the welfare of current and future generations (Wikipedia, 2017). Additionally, Wikipedia referred to the concept as “the organizing principle for meeting human development goals while at the same time sustaining the ability of natural systems to provide the natural resources and ecosystem services upon which the society and economy depend” While crediting the construct with containing the two key concepts of needs and limitations, the International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD, 2016) defined it as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”. IISD explained the two concepts making up the construct as follows:

(i) The essential needs of the world’s poor to which overriding priority should be given and
(ii) The limitations imposed by the state of technology and social organization on the environment’s ability to meet present and future needs.
In the opinion of the World Bank (2012), the construct is a “development that recognizes that growth must be both inclusive and environmentally sound to reduce poverty and build shared prosperity for today’s population, and to continue to meet the needs of future generations”. Continuing, the bank stated as follows: the question facing countries, cities, corporations and development organizations today is not whether to embrace sustainable development but how?
Historically, the term “sustainable development” was first used in 1980 in a publication of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature detailing their opinions with regards to world conservation strategy (Wikipedia, 2017). Before then Wikipedia stated that John Evelyn (1662), Hans Carl Von Carlowitz (1713), Alexander Von Homboldt, Georg Ludwig Hartig, Gifford Finchot had all written extensively on the subject matter but with emphasis on forest management i.e. the wise use of forest resources through the sowing and planting of trees in order to stop the destructive over-exploitation of forest resources. Continuing, Wikipedia observed that the debate on the relationship between economic growth and development and environmental degradation never ceased. In 1962 and 1966 for example Rachel Carson and Kenneth Boulding – both of the environmental movement – wrote extensively on the subject matter agreeing that there is a need for the economic systems of nations to fit itself to the ecological system which has limited pool of resources. Wikipedia believes that the word “sustainable” was first used in 1972 by Dennis and Donella Meadows of Massachusetts Institute of Technology in their work titled the Limit of Growth. In the cited work, they alluded to a “desirable state of global equilibrium” which they referred to as “a model system of output that represents a world system that is sustainable without sudden and uncontrolled collapse and capable of satisfying the basic material requirements of its entire people”.

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Issues relating to economic growth and development and its impact on the ecosystem, it is observed, has never left the front burner in the activities of the UN (Wikipedia, 2017). For example, before the release in 1987 of the Bruntland Report titled Our Common Future which provided the most widely recognized definition of sustainable development, the UN World Centre for Nature had in 1982 raised the five principles of conservation by which human conduct affecting nature is to be guided and judged (IISD, 2016, Wikipedia 2017). Even after the adoption of the UN World Commission on Environment and Development (Bruntland Report) in 1987, the UN had gone ahead in 1992 to establish Agenda 21 (the Earth Charter or Millennium Development Goals) which emphasized sustainable development through the building of a just, sustainable and peaceful global society in the 21st century. The publication of the Earth Charter sought to extend the concept of sustainable development beyond the initial intergenerational framework to focus more on the goal of a socially inclusive and environmentally sustainable economic growth (Wikipedia, 2017).

Continuing on its leadership role of ensuring sustainable development, the UN in September 2015 adopted the 2030 Agenda for sustainable development which established a set of 17 sustainable development goals aimed at ending poverty, fighting inequality and injustice as well as tackling climate change (The SDGs replaced the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) which ran between 2000 and 2015).

2.1 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)
The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) also referred to as Global Goals or 2030 Agenda (UNDP, 2017, Alumniportaldeutschland, 2017) are the set of 17 goals and 169 targets agreed upon by all the 193 member nations of the UN in 2015 that will guide policy and funding for the next 15 years i.e. 2015-2030 in the entire universe.... the SDGs replaced the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) which guided policy and funding in the world for the period 2000-2015. In the words of the former UN Secretary General-Ban Ki-moon- the goals represent “the people’s agenda, a plan of action for ending poverty in all its dimensions irreversibly, everywhere and leaving no one behind by 2030”(British Council,2016).

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

The UN as cited in alumiportaldeutschland (2017), see the SDGs as “an instruction manual for a sustainable future built around the dimensions of the people, the planet, prosperity and peace and a global partnership (the five Ps) and whose ultimate goal is a healthy mankind, living in a peaceful, fair society and a sound environment – everywhere in the world”. The agenda which was adopted by the 193 member countries that make up the UN, alumiportaldeutschland adds, defined crucial challenges facing the global community as well as providing a roadmap for solving them so that incoming generations will have a chance of a fulfilled life. Discussing the SDGs, Harvard Kennedy School (2016) categorized the SDGs under the 5Ps proposed by alumiportaldeutschland as follows: goals 1-6 of the SDG’s concern the people; 7-10, prosperity, 11-15, planet 16; peace and 17; partnership.

The UNDP (2017) referred to the SDGs as “a universal call to action to end poverty, protect the planet and ensure that all people enjoy peace and prosperity – the 17 goals are intended to build on the successes of the MDGs (2000-2015) while including effective actions on new areas such as climate change, economic inequality, innovation, sustainable consumption, peace and justice among other priorities. The goals are interconnected – often the key to success in one will involve tackling issues more commonly associated with another. The SDGs provide clear guidelines and targets for all countries to adopt in accordance with their own priorities and the environmental challenges of the world at large. The SDGs tackle the root causes of poverty and unite the world together to make positive changes for people and planet”.

On the SDGs, Welthungerlife (2016) opined that in contrast to the MDGs which they replaced, they will apply to all countries of the world, that is, both emerging and industrialized nations will be held accountable at least to a degree. (The universality of the SDGs, the body said is an improvement over the policy thrust of the MDGs whose focus was only on people living in the developing countries. Moreover, the SDGs were developed over a two-year consultation process that involved politicians, scientists, civil society and the private sector.)

In terms of what they cover and how they will be delivered, Harvard Kennedy School (2016) considers the adoption of the SDGs a milestone for global development. They reasons they advanced for their thinking include:

- The SDGs are not only broader in scope than the MDGs they have replaced, but they also cover 17 areas of economic, social and environmental progress.
- The SDGs place a renewed urgency on delivering, in partnership between the civil society, aid agencies, government and business.
- The SDGs apply universally to all nations, not just developing countries.
- The SDGs provide a comprehensive framework for individual and collective action and
- The recognition that everyone has a role to play opens new opportunities for exploring how best to engage the private sector in all its diversity.

### 2.2 The Domains and/or Dimensions/ Pillars of SDG’s.

The domains, dimensions or pillars of the SDGs (2015-2030) vary between a three to four-sphere frameworks. The three-sphere framework limit the pillars to the environment, economy and society or economic, environmental and social or ecology, economy and equity while the four-domain configuration add the element of culture or alternatively ecology, economics, politics and culture with the “sustainability factor” central (Wikipedia, 2017)… a three – domain framework illustration by Wikipedia is provided hereunder.
Scheme of sustainable development at the confluence of three constituent parts
Source: Sustainable Development, en.wikipedia.org
Wikipedia (2017) attempted an explanation of the above illustration in the following ways:

- With regards to the environment or ecology, sustainability requires society to design activities to meet human needs while preserving the life support systems of the planet through for example, water sustainability, utilization of renewable energy and sustainable material supplies (e.g. harvesting wood from forests at a rate that maintains the biomass or biodiversity). The on-line encyclopedia summarized environmental sustainability as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Consumption of Non-Renewable Resources</th>
<th>State Of Environment</th>
<th>Sustainability</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>More than nature’s ability to replenish</td>
<td>Environmental degradation</td>
<td>Not sustainable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equal to nature’s ability to replenish</td>
<td>Environmental equilibrium</td>
<td>Steady state economy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than nature’s ability to replenish</td>
<td>Environmental renewal</td>
<td>Environmentally sustainable</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*The ideal state is “consumption of non-renewable resources less than nature’s ability to replenish”. A steady state economy is also desirable.*

- In terms of agriculture, elements of sustainable agriculture include permaculture, agro forestry, mixed farming, multiple cropping and crop rotation.
- Sustainable economic development recognizes that the goals of environmental conservation and economic development are not conflicting and can be re-enforcing each other.
- In terms of sustainable energy, renewable energy sources like solar and wind energy that produce far less pollution is ideal. Fossil fuels and biofuels which currently provide the bulk of the world’s energy needs should be discouraged.
- In terms of technology, appropriate technology which can be used to assist people meet their developmental needs is ideal. Open source appropriate technology (OSAT) which can be freely found in the internet is ideal.
- In terms of transportation, the goal is to reduce greenhouse gas emission. “Motorized transport contributes much to such emissions. Reduction in carbon emission through the use of fuel-efficient cars is the short term goal while the long term goal is to phase out vehicles that run on fossil fuels”.
- In terms of income, sustainable development aim at reducing poverty through equality of incomes, balanced budgeting and social solidarity i.e. the strong helping the weaker.
- In terms of political sustainability, Wikipedia first defined the *political* as the domain of practices and meanings associated with basic issues of social power as they pertain to the organization, authorization, legitimating and regulation of social life held in common. This definition Wikipedia opines is in accord with the view that political change is important for responding to economic, ecological and cultural challenges. It also means that politics and economic change can be addressed.
(Wikipedia credits the political domain with having seven sub domains of organization and governance, law and justice, communication and critique, representation and negotiation, security and accord, dialogue and reconciliation and ethics and accountability.)

- In terms of culture, sustainable development appreciates the fact that the culture of a people impacts significantly on their economic tendencies, technology, politics etc. The development of a solid cultural policy and the need for public policies that possess cultural biases will enhance sustainable development.

2.3 Criticisms of the SDGs
The Agenda 2030 like any other construct has also attracted criticisms. Welthuglerlife (2016) and Wikipedia (2017) made the following criticisms of the concept:

- The agenda is voluntary i.e. the SDGs are not binding under international law. Countries may, in fact, set individual priorities emphasizing on goals that may for example result in short term profit rather than social goals.
- Many of the SDGs were vaguely formulated without specific commitments of action.
- The SDGs are the result of a political bargaining involving many special interest groups all put together to create a common appeal of political acceptability across borders making the interpretation of some of the goals ambiguous.

2.4 Business and its role in actualizing the SDGs
Traditionally, the role of business has been the profitable provision of goods and services people need or want (Allaire, 2014). Be that as it may, the argument has been raging as to what model of business best suites society... Is it the model that is stakeholder-centred or the one that is purpose-driven? Contributing to the debate, Allaire (2014) argued that “business derives its social legitimacy and right to operate from the economic value it creates for the society at large, that is, from its performance for both investors and a wider network of constituencies; its partnership with governments and other agents in solving social problems and the trust its leadership inspires in employees and society as a whole”.

Joining the debate, the World Business Council for Sustainable Development (WBCSD) as cited in Wikipedia (2017), had proposed business models that are not only ‘eco-efficient but also “socio-efficient”. Eco-efficiency in the opinion of the council is a function of the economic value added by a firm in relation to its aggregated ecological impact, that is, the ability of a firm to deliver competitively priced goods and services that satisfy human needs and bring quality of life, while progressively reducing ecological impacts. On the other hand, socio-efficiency describes the relationship between a firm’s value added and its social impacts....socio-efficiency either minimizes negative social impacts or maximizes positive social impacts in relation to value added. Stigson (2000) observes that emphasis is now gradually shifting to social progress and specifically to, what business can do to contribute to this goal, and how it is delivering its contribution...clearly business believes in free open markets, but markets must work for everyone. Recognizing that this is not the case, the former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan – as cited in Stigson stated as follows: “opening up world markets has, without doubt, created unprecedented global economic growth – with the promise of even more prosperity; unfortunately, the benefits of this have, not been shared equally across the globe”. Stigson observes that the desire to achieve congruency between sustainable production and sustainable consumption may have influenced the new thinking within the UN of shifting the world from a “bipolar one” to a “tripolar one” – the bipolar world laid emphasis on the roles of government and civil society in actualizing developmental goals while the recognition of the significant roles business will play in the attainment of such goals made its inclusion as a vector a necessity. Stigson (2000) identified some of the roles business can play in actualizing the SDGs to include:

- Development of new technologies whose application will help developing countries abandon damaging manufacturing processes, develop necessary skills and introduce innovation into the market place.
Partnering with the public sector to share insights and inspire policy making..., this will help build an environment where businesses that help solve societal problems will thrive and vice versa.

Governments alone cannot raise the $3.9 trillion required to accomplish the SDGs. Business is expected to contribute significantly to the fund through donations and sponsorships.

In the opinion of UN Global Compact (2017), the 17 SDGs, clearly define the world we want – applying to all nations and leaving no one behind and that fulfilling the goals will require an unprecedented effort by all sectors in society including business. The UN organ expects the private sector to:
- First do business responsibly and then pursue opportunities to solve societal challenges through business innovation and collaboration. Global challenges ranging from climate, water and food crises, to poverty, conflict and inequality are in need of solutions that the private sector can deliver. The challenges also represent a large and growing market for business innovation.
- Make full disclosures in financial statements.
- Make human rights part of management education.
- Avoid the use of child labour and
- Avoid the production and distribution of sub-standard products including drugs.

Harvard Kennedy School (2016) opines that Agenda 2030 sees business as being part of the solution to the global development challenges and that business generally can contribute to the solution by behaving and investing responsibly and managing their own social, economic, environmental and governance impacts. This is because; many of the development challenges highlighted are very relevant to and have a direct impact on business.

Specifically, it is their submission that business can contribute to actualization of the SDGs in the following ways:
- By applying their creativity and innovation toward solving sustainable challenges and to engage as partners in the development process.
- Through core business operations and value chains, social investments, philanthropic contributions and advocacy efforts – responsible business is central to growth, productivity, innovation and job creation – all drives of growth.
- Private sector leaders and investors advocating publicly for their government to take greater leadership in achieving the SDGs.
- Business leaders showing more transparency and accountability about the development impact of their business activities whether positive or negative.
- As businesses have direct access to consumers, they can significantly shift attitudes towards more sustainable patterns of consumption.
- Through the creation of new technologies, products, services or business models that enhance people’s lives; investing in the skills and health of its work force; or implementing responsible social and environmental business standards and support for human rights.

Agarwal, Gneiting and Mhlenga (2014) proposed a three-phased approach toward meaningful business engagement in the SDGs. The three steps for businesses are:
- Prioritize an understanding of impact
- Align core business strategies with the SDGs
- Work towards systemic change.

Continuing, Agarwal et al (2014) observed that “today, business is increasingly more than just a driver of economic development confined to creating wealth and employment and providing goods and services. Rather, its all-round presence within the SDGs represents a new development paradigm that attributes to business a more central and diverse role across all aspects of sustainability”.

Agarwal et al assigned the following roles to business in actualizing the Agenda 2030.
- Taking of bold steps that break with some of the structures and practices that obstruct the ability of governments to govern.... Too often, businesses’ lobbying efforts have limited the ability of governments to govern in the service of sustainable development by fuelling a belief that attracting
investment and trade requires keeping the cost of doing business as low as possible and the business environment as unregulated as possible.

- Investing in social development initiatives including gender equality, respect for workers’ rights, non-use of child labour etc.
- Payment of taxes to enable government have access to fund to finance essential public services like healthcare, education, public infrastructure needed to raise living standards etc.

(A recurring decimal arising from these views, we observe, is the need for the three pillars of sustainable development, that is, economic growth, ecological balance and social progress to compliment one other)

2.4 Benefits accruable to Businesses that invest in SDGs
Harvard Kennedy School (2016) and Agarwal et al (2017) identified the following benefits that may accrue to businesses that invest in SDGs:

- Opportunities for business to grow in new markets.
- Enhanced value and return on investment on corporate sustainability through partnerships.
- Strengthening stakeholder relations.
- Keeping pace with policy developments and priorities and strengthening government relations.
- Reducing risks in the operating environment.
- Stabilizing societies and markets through progress on the SDGs.
- Enhancing businesses’ license to operate and strengthening social reputation and trust.
- Attracting and retaining employees.
- Securing the long-term success of business by improving the broader, enabling environment and ecosystems in which business operates.
- Aligning business action with the vision of the company’s leadership and expectations of its employees, customers or clients.

4.0 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS
Alan Clark – Chief Executive Officer, SAB Miller – as cited in Harvard Keneddy School, (2016) was while commenting on the issue of sustainable development from the point of view of the private sector quoted to have said “the world’s challenges are our challenges. As a world leader in the brewing industry, in where ever we are operating, local issues are our issues. Our chosen business imperatives are ‘shared’ because we can only tackle joint risks in partnership will those who also face them”. In the opinion of this paper, the above statement captures the whole essence of business being committed to actualization of the SDGs. Pursuing sustainable development makes firms more competitive, more resilient and nimble in a fast-changing world and more likely to win and retain customers. It can also help them find and keep some of the best brains in the market. In addition, it can make them more attractive to investors and insurers, while reducing their exposure to regulatory and other liabilities. Business success and development success are not mutually exclusive. Finding solutions to the world’s greatest challenges also represent some of the world’s greatest business opportunities. Also, opportunities for competitive differentiation are possible where businesses include in strategy a commitment to finding solutions to SDG challenges.

4.1 Recommendations
On the strength of the literature reviewed on the subject matter, this paper makes the following recommendations as to how business can significantly impact on the actualization of the SDGs.

- Companies need to identify the SDGs that reflect their values, understand the ways in which others are using them to develop their sustainability and corporate responsibility strategies and determine how they can make the most difference.
- Businesses need to adopt a holistic approach to engagement with the SDGs by integrating sustainable development concerns into their core operations.
• Businesses need to align to a greater degree their agendas to societal aims. The social, political and ecological crises facing the world require businesses to collectively challenge the economic paradigms that have ruled their behavior in the past and address the structural barriers that prevent more sustainable businesses from flourishing.
• Business solutions to the actualization of the SDGs exist, but they cannot reach the required scale without stronger supporting policies. Governments must therefore play significant roles in putting in place the policy frameworks, rules and regulations that will allow the transformation of business models to ones that share wealth more broadly and benefit all stakeholders in society.

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