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The problem of looking at SDGs (only) from the management perspective

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There is no doubt that Management Research addresses numerous critical issues covered by Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). However, after seven years since the launch of the SDGs by the United Nations in 2015, many of the reflections – and anguish – of practitioners in the field of sustainability and socio-environmental change are in the sense that it is urgent to develop theories, concepts, views and approaches in a transdisciplinary perspective to advance at the necessary speed toward the 2030 Agenda so that the SDGs are at least partially fulfilled by then.

Since the advent of Modernity, the advancement of knowledge – as well as its intrinsic practical application – has followed an increasing logic of specialization, which made unimaginable advances in virtually every sector of society. However, with the passing of the centuries, this same cartesian logic produced an increasing challenge in understanding such a multifaceted, complex and liquid reality (Bauman, 2011), in which all that is solid seems to be melting in the air (Berman, 1986). In the field of sustainability, it becomes even more urgent an integrative view, in theory, and practice, from a systemic approach, that analyzes positive and negative externalities beyond theories and actions specialized in “silos” of knowledge and expertise.

A multifaceted field in dispute

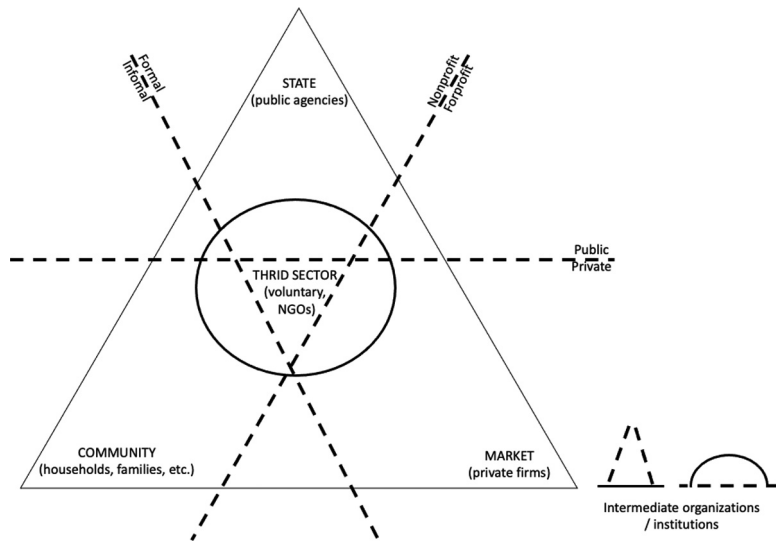
To this end, we must first recognize that sustainability comprises a “field” – in the Bourdieusian sense – of interaction space but also of conflict and competition (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Worldviews, paradigms and narratives compete in this field. At the same time, sometimes they overlap, collaborate and move away from the reductionism of the so present dualistic logic that we have been facing nowadays.

A possible framework to analyze this need for transdisciplinarity in the complex field of sustainability is the theoretical model proposed by Pestoff (Figure 1), with the space in the form of a triangle in which the vertices are the State, the market/companies and society/community (Pestoff, 1998), later worked by other researchers analyzing organizational theories for socio-environmental enterprises (Defourny & Nyssens, 2012; Then & Mildemberger, 2022). Both the circle and the whole area inside the triangle can arguably be seen as the social-environmental arena where the 2030 Agenda advances among practitioners – and researchers alike.

Thus, we could use this model as a proxy to understand sustainability as a field of disputes and collaborations in which members *in-between* these three “sectors” produce



Figure 1.
Pestoff welfare triangle
as a proxy for the SDG
arena



Source: Adapted by the author from Pestoff (1998)

socio-environmental transformation – or sustainable development, from the perspective of SDGs. It also encompasses different analytical dimensions, such as “for-profit or non-profit,” “formal or informal” and “public or private.” It is in this vast and multifaceted space, field or arena that the socio-environmental change that aims to achieve the SDGs pulsates – and the Management Research can contribute to Management Theory and Practice if applying critical, complexity- and transversality-based perspectives.

SDG in practice: an exchange of colorful little squares

By critically analyzing from a practical perspective the evolution of the 2030 Agenda, we note that usually such actors and sectors have often been in isolation – in “silos” – sometimes with multisectoral approaches, seldom even intersectoral, but rarely trans-sectorial, as required by solving complex socio-environmental problems from the view of those who work with sustainability practices beyond theory.

Several organizations – notably companies, both private and public – have “kidnapped” the SDG narrative without understanding them properly. A market of “SDG squares” was created, where companies decide which of the “colorful squares” of SDGs they will claim for themselves so that they can expose it on their websites as “proof” of contribution. Those who claim to support education, for example, will for sure have an “SDG square 4” in their marketing pieces, perhaps because of some investment in any social educational project. On the other side, a company that operates with sanitation will elect “SDG square 6.” Some even feel entitled to expose the 17 SDGs at once. Most do so, however, unaware that, in addition to the colorful mosaic, there are 169 objectives and more than 200 indicators that should be worked in a transnational and transdimensional way. It is just like the new “wave” of ESG, where companies choose among environment, social, and governance without an integrated approach.

An example experienced by this author summarizes why the SDGs demand transversality: in a program of a social organization sponsored by a multinational company, it was consistently reached the expansion of the income of participating women. In terms of



Figure 2.
17 SDGs

Source: United Nations (2022)

outputs, the results exceeded expectations to contribute clearly to SDGs 1 (no poverty) and 2 (zero hunger). Everyone celebrated. However, the months went by, and more and more participating women gave up on the program, which did not seem to make sense. When investigating the causes, it was found that the sudden income generation of those women led to other problems, such as domestic violence by husbands and companions who did not accept losing their provider status and their wives' empowerment. With the best of intentions, there was though a lack of a more empathic and situational view from the people who designed the program, who did not see the negative externalities caused, for example, because of the lack of integration with SDG 4 (quality education) and, above all, 5 (gender equality).

Just like this real case, many others could follow: to what extent does it serve to offer clean and accessible energy (SDG 7) if it was obtained with precarious labor, contrary to SDG 8 (decent work and economic growth)? Or even serving SDG 8, but with negative externalities to the environment, such as SDG 14 (life below water)?

Back to theory . . .

If in practice often the SDGs have been applied in isolation and without integration, in the Academy, the situation is no different. Returning to Pestoff's triangle, it is common for each area of specialization (and its vertices) to rigorously defend approaches that, in turn, only fit their respective specialization area. Whether in theories aimed at international relations (e.g. related to multilateral organisms), whether in the theoretical models of public management (public policies) or civil society (social movements).

And this is where there is a risk of Management Research for SDGs to reinforce the patterns of sustainable development limited to a specific worldview – in this case, of business management theory – without adequate dialogue with the other actors and sectors competing for the socio-environmental change narrative. This does not mean that it is not relevant to

look with depth and specialization; however, a systemic and integrated view, in all cases, is essential when it comes to SDGs because they, by nature, are intrinsically integrated.

Some paths can be trodden so that we can move on to this. First, there must be a genuine interest in multisectoral collaboration, whether among researchers or practitioners. Somehow in lines with what studies in the field of public management (Bichir, 2015; Marques, 2018) have been inciting, such as the increasing incorporation of the actors and contexts involved, their strategies and conflicts, as well as their beliefs and relations, with due adaptations to local conditions in terms of implementation and participating actors.

In addition to this is the realization that, as important as “robust actions,” often proposed as a key to sustainable development, are the “persistent fragile actions,” generally excluded by the Management Theory and performed by social movement organizations, which prioritize contestation over participation, exclusivity over multivocality and experience over experimentation, “challenging obstacles they are presented with, very often against the odds” (Krev, 2022, p. 109).

Although relevant, there is no doubt that the market usually has a supporting role in the face of the State and civil society when it comes to achieving the SDGs. However, this role can be played with greater protagonism as Management Theories effectively contribute to this transversality.

Finally, a criticism that presents itself to the mainstream current of Management Research is inherent to the knowledge production process itself: the need to incorporate diverse and wide voices and views, without which the core of the SDGs will hardly be achieved. For this, it is necessary to reflect on “who is producing knowledge – and how?” and “where does it depart from and with which approach?” in a decolonial perspective (Ballestrin, 2013; Grosfoguel, 2007; Quijano, 2005, 2014).

Thus, in this complex field of sustainable development, it is urgent the emergence of more initiatives and innovative research, models and frameworks, as well as inter and, above all, transdisciplinary theories. This will hardly be possible without breaking the “Academy walls,” without changing the way we measure success in research: in addition to impact factors and index H of the journals and their special editions, reaching the SDGs demands giving space to the multi- and trans-sector application of knowledge, with broad participation, appreciation of extension projects, combating epistemic racism and with the democratization not only of access but also of the production of knowledge (as well as the resignification of what we value as scientific knowledge). It is worth reflecting: is Management Research moving in this direction? Is it enabling a decolonial pluriversality (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018), i.e. the ability of local praxis and epistemologies to illuminate, relate or correlate with those that exist elsewhere?

Changing paradigms is a complex challenge (Kuhn, 1998). From the practitioners’ point of view, however, there is no time to waste – and the Academy has much to contribute to advancing the 2030 Agenda. New, transdisciplinary Management theories are desirable and needed. But we are already behind the schedule: in chronological terms, halfway to 2030; in almost all other respects, however, we are only at the beginning of this journey – perhaps the most important of all for humanity (in a broad sense).

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