

Importance of Integrating SDGs Into Business Process by Telecommunication Operators: Opinion of Estonian Customers

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Sustainable development is recognized by the United Nations as a challenge for social and economic policy Hughes&Johnston (2005), an urgent call for action by all countries addressing all groups of stakeholders (Mio et al., 2020) and one of the main priorities for business community all over the world (Tsalis et al., 2020). Successful implementation and achievement of these goals should be a result of joint efforts of all countries and nations. And while a general success is observed in case of certain SDGs, others still require joint efforts and cooperation on both national and international level. A vital role is assigned to businesses which can also contribute to achievement of SDGs by integrating them into everyday processes.

Purpose: The aim of the research was to reveal the customers opinion on the importance of embedding SDGs by businesses into everyday process in Estonia.

The telecommunication operating companies were chosen due to their central role in the modern business world and huge impact on nearly every aspect of society. There was conducted a survey in a form of questionnaire among customers of these companies and 512 responses were collected in a period of September 2020 –February 2021.

Results of the study demonstrate stakeholders concern on the achievement of the SDGs and revealed that the embedding of several SDGs: number 3 (good health and well-being), 4 (quality education), 6 (clean water and sanitation), 12 (responsible consumption and production), 15 (life on land) into business process is considered by customers to be the of the highest priority. Authors believe that the study with its findings intends to benefit SDG implementation by business companies in Estonia and provides a pattern for further developments of sustainable policies and strategies. This work provides one of the first studies in Estonia contributing towards understanding of whether businesses are supposed to embed the SDGs into their activities as seen by customers.

KEYWORDS: Agenda 2030, Sustainable development, SDG, telecommunication industry, implementation.

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Abstract

Introduction and literature review



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Table 1

Diversity dimensions

Source: Authors' basis
17 Goals by the United Nations

Goal No.	SDG	More information on the goal
1	No Poverty	End poverty in all its forms everywhere
2	Zero Hunger	End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture
3	Good Health and Well-being	Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages
4	Quality Education	Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all
5	Gender Equality	Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls
6	Clean Water and Sanitation	Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all
7	Affordable and Clean Energy	Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all
8	Decent Work and Economic Growth	Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all
9	Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure	Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation
10	Reduced Inequality	Reduce inequality within and among countries
11	Sustainable Cities and Communities	Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable
12	Responsible Consumption and Production	Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns
13	Climate Action	Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts
14	Life Below Water	Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development
15	Life on Land	Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss
16	Peace and Justice Strong Institutions	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	Partnerships to achieve the Goal	Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development

The latest document “The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development” emphasizes a “world free of poverty, hunger, disease and want ... free of fear and violence ... with equitable and universal access to quality education, health care and social protection ... to safe drinking water and sanitation ... where food is sufficient, safe, affordable and nutritious ... where habits are safe, resilient and sustainable ... and where there is universal access to affordable, reliable and sustainable energy.” (United Nations, 2021). This document also requires changes in global mentality to implement the SDGs (Tremblay *et.al*, 2020) and achieve a collective success. Successful implementation and achievement of these goals should be a result of joint efforts of all countries on all levels and is challenging not only the countries to achieve these goals but also “the evaluation practice

of multinational and national organizations” (Meyer, 2020). It would also have a vital impact on the well-being on society and planet (Silva, 2021). Biermann *et al.*, 2017 believes that these goals have a great potential, however their success depends on various institutional factors such as “the extent to which states formalize their commitments, strengthen related global governance arrangements, translate the global ambitions into national contexts, integrate sectoral policies, and maintain flexibility in governance mechanisms.” (Biermann *et al.*, 2017). However, there is a raising concern there whether SDGs address real problems of nations, particularly the developing world (Khalid *et al.*, 2020). According to Kroll *et al.* (2019) there is observed a positive development for certain goals, while in case of sustainable consumption and nature there is a need “to foster innovations and policies that can make our cities and communities more sustainable, as well as strengthen institutions and spur climate action” (Kroll *et al.*, 2019). The reason maybe the complexity of goals and diversity among countries, insufficient understanding and addressing of interactions between the formulated goals and related targets (Breu *et al.*, 2021). This is also confirmed by studies of Zhang *et al.* (2019) claiming that while according to Agenda 2030 the SDGs are universal and applicable in every country it gives no details on interaction on these goals thus making their implementation more complicated.

Numerous studies have investigated the interactions between sustainable development goals (Kunčič, 2019, Ramos&Laurenti, 2020; Scharlemann, 2020; Breu *et al.*, 2021) aiming to contribute to their successful achievement. Warchold *et al.* (2020) conducted a research for the year 2016 to understand SDGs and suggests that synergies should outweigh the trade-offs and it is important to address all inequalities among countries with no exceptions.

Numerous studies analyse performance of countries in their progress towards SDGs achievement and successful implementation outlining the ones attracting most attention and revealing difference in implementation: Allen *et al.* (2020) explored the progress of SDG implementation in Australia and their results reveal the mixed performance on the SDGs, with strong progress in goals relating to health and education and poor progress in goals relating to climate action and reducing inequalities. Findings of Xie *et al.* (2021) revealed that South Korea considers ecological sustainability a matter of high importance while social sustainability dimensions are mostly addressed in China and Japan. It should be noted that Estonia has been successful in implementation of SDGs and in 2019 it appeared to be the tenth in the global Sustainable Development Report with achieving a distinguished progress in quality education, effective healthcare organization, high employment rate with minimal long-term unemployment, and a high proportion of renewable energy in overall energy consumption. (Sustainable Development Goals Knowledge..., 2020). While several SDGs like gender equality, reducing risk of poverty achieved less progress and still need to be actively targeted (Sustainable Development Goals Knowledge..., 2020) These gaps could be overcome by the contribution of the business companies to the fulfilment of SDGs by embedding them into business strategies. This is also the matter of growing attention and raising concern among stakeholders as according to García-Sánchez *et al.* (2020) there is a growing interest from institutional investors related to the embedding of SDG into the business strategies of sustainable and responsible development. Santos&Silva (2020) investigated the reasons and ways of incorporating the sustainable development goals (SDGs) into the strategies of large Portuguese companies. Their findings suggest that among different reasons there should be outlined “the understanding of the 2030 agenda as an ethical and social contract followed by concerns over managing stakeholders” by the selected companies.

Effectiveness of positive practices contributing to SDGs are shown by Google, Apple, Microsoft, Amazon and Facebook by providing their data centers with renewable energy Patchell&Hayter (2021) and Caribbean tour operators designing new products and services implementing fair labor and operating practices. (Milwood, 2020).

Different studies examined the SDGs implementation by various businesses: Avrampou *et al.* (2019) examined whether the reported performance of small leading European banks was in line with supporting the SDGs and their findings reported low level of contribution being diversified to individual SDG goals.

Cai&Choi (2020) have investigated the possibilities of textile and apparel supply chains to comply with the SDGs. The results of the study confirmed that while some goals like “Responsible Consumption and Production”, “Clean Water and Sanitation”, and “Climate Action” receive a considerable amount of attention the other ones like “No Poverty”, “Reduced Inequalities”, “Life below Water” and “Life on Land” gained least attention. They also noted that the stakeholders’ initiatives could have a strong impact on the focus and actions of companies. (Cai&Choi, 2020)

Kandler Rodríguez (2020) investigated which SDGs are most mentioned in the sustainability programs of two hospitality companies of Costa Rica and stated that most closely these programs would support the achievement of the following SDGs: Sustainable Cities and Communities, Responsible Consumption and Production, Climate Action.

The literature overview enables to conclude that companies are shifting their focus towards the SDGs implementation into their strategies and examples of positive contribution in different countries are numerous and impressive. The main motivators are ethical and social responsibility as well as raising concern among stakeholders. However, little is known about the opinion of Estonian stakeholders on this matter. Therefore, authors decided to fill this gap by the present study aiming to determine the opinion of Estonian respondents on the importance of embedding SDGs by businesses into everyday processes. Hence, the telecommunication operating companies were chosen due to their growing impact on every aspect of society and important role in everyday life. Almost all Estonian people use their services being well aware of their activities and visit websites of these companies quite often. The main aim of this research is to reveal the customers opinion on the importance of embedding SDGs by businesses into everyday process in Estonia.

Therefore, authors have set the task to arrange a survey among the customers of these companies in order to find out their opinion on the importance of embedding SDGs by businesses into everyday process in Estonia. The study with its findings intends to benefit SDG implementation by business companies in Estonia. This study also provides one of the first in Estonia contributing towards understanding of whether businesses are supposed to embed the SDGs into their activities as seen by customers.

Research design and methods

The authors conducted a survey, which consisted of questions related to the importance of incorporation of the SDG by the business companies: opinion of customers. The languages of the questionnaire were Estonian and Russian. To present the questions and make it possible to collect data, an online survey engine Google Forms was used, authors also distributed questionnaires personally to respondents via email or in a paper form. The survey included three single choice questions, where respondents were asked about their awareness of social responsibility, whether it adds value to the image of the company and the importance of disclosing information on sustainable development of companies. The main part consisted of linear scale questions, where respondents were asked to rank each argument from 1 (strong disagreement) to 5 (total agreement) in order to express their agreement or disagreement with each statement. The arguments presented the SDG definition together with the full detailed explanation as provided in Table 1. This table in short is summarizing all the information about the SDGs and gives respondent a good overview of all goals. Estimated time for the survey completion was between 10 to 15 minutes.

The survey was conducted among users of services provided by telecommunication company currently operating in Estonia. Pilot survey was organized prior to the survey period, which received positive feedback from respondents and therefore, the questionnaire was distributed in Estonia during the period of 22.09.2020-22.10.2020 with 230 responses received (this data was used by one of the authors in the master thesis) and 01.12.2020 - 01.02.2021 (282 responses were collected). In total 512 responses were collected and authors consider this data as a basis for new and independent research presented in this article. This information was compiled and analysed. [Table 2](#) shows demographic data of the survey.

Age of respondents	Number of respondents	Percentage of respondents
26 years and younger	157	30,7%
27-50 years	321	62,7%
51 years and older	34	6,6%
Total:	512	100%
Education of respondents	Number of respondents	Percentage of respondents
Bachelor	227	44,3%
Master	184	35,9%
PhD	4	0,8%
Other	97	19%
Total:	512	100%
Work experience of respondents	Number of respondents	Percentage of respondents
< 1 year	34	6,6%
1-5 years	98	19,1%
6-10 years	115	22,5%
11-15 years	100	19,5%
> 15 years	165	32,2%
Total:	512	100%

Table 2

General data about respondents

Source: Authors'.

It should be noted that 95% of the respondents claimed to be aware of what social responsibility and associated benefits for the business entity. They also agreed with the statement that a company should provide information to stakeholders about its sustainable development. More than 80% of respondents also confirmed that socially responsible behaviour would add value to the reputation of the company.

The following tables represent the opinion of respondents on the importance of SDGs implementation into business practices of telecommunication operators. Authors have divided 17 SDGs into three groups "People, Planet and Society". [Table 3](#) represents data for the "People" section. Data of the [Table 3](#) reveals that in the opinion of respondents from "people-orientated" SDGs the most important ones the companies should contribute to is "quality education" (average score 4.02) and "good health and well-being" (average score 3.82). These results are in line with the data of Estonia's Voluntary National Review 2020. According to this review Estonia is generally successful in implementing the SDGs, with the main strengths: accessible and quality education, effective

Table 3

Embedding SDGs into business processes by telecommunications companies operating in Estonia Group 1-People (rated by Likert scale, 1- not important at all; 5- very important)

Source: Authors'.

SDG	1		2		3		4		5		Average score
No poverty	42	8,20%	58	11,33%	95	18,55%	165	32,23%	152	18,95%	3,64
Good health and well-being	28	5,47%	46	8,98%	85	16,60%	186	36,33%	167	32,62%	3,82
Quality education	27	5,27%	35	6,84%	56	10,94%	177	34,57%	217	42,38%	4,02
Gender equality	32	6,25%	64	12,50%	100	19,53%	138	26,95%	178	34,77%	3,71
Zero hunger	51	9,96%	75	14,65%	101	19,73%	142	27,73%	143	27,93%	3,49
Decent work and economic growth	42	8,20%	55	10,74%	99	19,34%	197	38,48%	119	23,24%	3,58
Reduced inequalities	55	10,74%	31	6,05%	133	25,98%	126	24,61%	167	32,62%	3,62

healthcare organisation, high employment rate with minimal long-term unemployment, and a high proportion of renewable energy in overall energy consumption. (Sustainable Development Goals Knowledge..., 2020) The results of the present research confirm the fact that Estonia works hard on achieving the abovementioned SDGs as this is expected and highly valued by its inhabitants. This also enables to conclude, that Estonian people are concerned with the implementation of the selected goals and consider business companies to make their contributions by implementing them into everyday business processes. The data of Estonia's Voluntary National Review 2020 also pointed out that several SDG areas still require improvement: "need to focus on establishing gender equality (although decreased, the wage gap still remains among the highest in Europe), decreasing the risk of poverty for women and disabled people, including families with disabled children, establishing effective waste management and recycling, decreasing greenhouse emissions, and maintaining natural diversity" (Sustainable Development Goals Knowledge..., 2020) These findings are confirmed by the data presented in Table 4 related to the "Planet" section..

Table 4

Embedding SDGs into business processes by telecommunications companies operating in Estonia Group 2- Planet (rated by Likert scale, 1- not important at all; 5- very important)

Source: Authors'.

SDG	1		2		3		4		5		Average score
Clean water and sanitation	23	4,49%	27	5,27%	59	11,52%	157	30,66%	246	48,05%	4,13
Affordable and clean energy	25	4,88%	37	7,23%	64	12,50%	154	30,08%	232	45,31%	4,04
Climate action	31	6,05%	44	8,59%	116	22,66%	127	24,80%	194	37,89%	3,80
Life below water	21	4,10%	37	7,23%	92	17,97%	164	32,03%	198	38,67%	3,94
Life on land	19	3,71%	27	5,27%	67	13,09%	148	28,91%	251	49,02%	4,14

Data of the Table 4 reveals that in the opinion of respondents from "society-orientated" SDGs the businesses should embed in their activities the SDGs aiming to provide "clean water and sanitation" (average score 4.13), which is in line with the results of research performed by Cai&Choi (2020) while the "Climate Action" (average score 3.80) received least attention, contradicting their results. In authors opinion such controversial results are highly influenced by COVID-19. As

disease outbreak outlined the importance of health measures helping to prevent getting infected (UNICEF, 2020) and also happened to have some positive effects on wildlife (Bates *et al.*, 2020). Manenti *et al.*, 2020).

Table 5 represents the data for the “Society” section.

SDG	1		2		3		4		5		Average score
Industry, innovation and infrastructure	38	7,42%	52	10,16%	75	14,65%	154	30,08%	193	37,70%	3,80
Sustainable cities and communities	25	4,88%	45	8,79%	127	24,80%	145	28,32%	170	33,20%	3,76
Responsible consumption and production	13	2,54%	18	3,52%	62	12,11%	162	31,64%	257	50,20%	4,23
Peace, justice and strong institutions	42	8,20%	55	10,74%	135	26,37%	109	21,29%	171	33,40%	3,61
Partnerships for the goals	47	9,18%	49	9,57%	139	27,15%	112	21,88%	165	32,23%	3,58

Table 5

Embedding SDGs into business processes by telecommunications companies operating in Estonia Group 3 – Society (rated by Likert scale, 1- not important at all; 5- very important)

Source: Authors'.

Data of the Table 5 makes it obvious that at the first-place business should contribute to the achievement of “responsible consumption and production” (average score 4.23). The fact that this goal gained most attention is also confirmed by the findings of Kandler Rodríguez (2020 and Cai&Choi (2020) claiming that this goal also gained most attention and is prioritized by companies. In authors opinion this is also due to growing debates over the consumer society in mass media and growing number of examples of minimalism in everyday life. “Partnership for the goals” gained least attention and importance but in authors opinion this is considered by most respondents to be reached on the state and international level.

The SDGs represent a real challenge to the worldwide community and a call for an urgent action on all levels. The main focus should be addressing all inequalities across the world with no exception. Successful implementation of these goals would require joint efforts of all stakeholders. Effectiveness of positive practices contributing to SDGs are already shown by large well-known companies in different countries. Numerous companies have included SDGs into their sustainability programs and strategies of future development. Latest research findings demonstrate that companies are nowadays focusing on the SDGs implementation being driven by ethical and social responsibility and initiated by stakeholders' concern. These developments were also confirmed by the present research, where stakeholders demonstrated high level of awareness of CSR also stating that company should provide information on sustainable development.

Current study focused on stakeholders' opinion on the SDG importance of embedding the SDGs into everyday business processes with the main task to arrange a survey among the customers of telecommunication companies. These companies were chosen due to their growing impact on every aspect of society and important role in everyday life and almost all Estonian people use their services being well aware of their activities and visit websites of these companies quite often. The task was reached by summarizing and analyzing findings of the survey.

Conclusions

The results revealed several SDGs as the top areas of contribution: SDG 12 „responsible consumption and production”, SDG 15 “life on land”, SDG 6 “clean water and sanitation” and SDG 4 “quality education”. In authors opinion these results are highly influenced by the COVID -19 outbreak, which led to the transformation of human conscience and shifted the priorities by highlighting the importance of environmental health and long-lasting values like good health and education. The study also concludes that SDG related activities should be highly prioritized by companies and boosted by their business activities.

In general, it can be concluded that joint efforts are required to make Agenda 2030 a real action plan for everybody and contribute to the successful achievement of the SDGs.

These results give a good understanding of stakeholders' opinion on the importance of SDG achievement and a role of business community in this process. However, they should be treated with caution as the sample of the respondents is quite small and while the rate of response was quite high, still the results of the survey cannot be generalized. In future it may be useful to differentiate respondents according to age, social status, working experience etc. and arrange survey among different groups. The study also provides a good path for future research in this area as well as a guidance for companies' managers in preparing strategic plans for the companies and attracting potential investors.

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