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Sustainable development goals and new approaches to HRM: Why HRM specialists will not reach the sustainable development goals and why it matters

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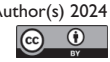
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Sustainable development goals and new approaches to HRM: Why HRM specialists will not reach the sustainable development goals and why it matters

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Abstract

Many of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals apply directly to Human resource management (HRM) within organisations, and most of them have indirect relevance. It is clear, however, that by 2030 the world will have failed to meet the Goals. Although the connection between the SDGs and HRM is not so apparent, it has been argued that the two are, or perhaps should be, related: but maybe there is failure there too. This conceptual paper uses extant research to argue that the reasons for this are inherent in our understanding of HRM, in the nature of the Goals themselves, and in the relationship between HRM and the SDGs. We argue that HRM fails to advance the likelihood of the Goals being met because of construct clarity problems. Nonetheless, we argue that the SDGs have value for HRM specialists in signalling the importance of the multiple stakeholders involved and in focusing attention on crucial aspects of the role of HRM within organisations.

Keywords

Construct clarity, national perspectives, new approaches to HRM, practicality, SDGs, sustainable HRM

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Introduction

On the 18th September 2023 Antonio Guterres, Secretary General of the United Nations, told the General Assembly that not only was there little or no chance of the world reaching the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that they had signed up to, but that in many cases any progress that had been made had been reversed: he said 'the SDGs need a global rescue plan'.

Achieving the United Nations' Goals (United Nations, 2015; 2022) by the target date of 2030 is not just a laudable aim, it is one that has been agreed by national governments, businesses, third sector organisations, individuals and scholars. It is hard to believe that there might be rational commentators anywhere who would not want to see a world where there was freedom from poverty, hunger, ill-health, where the future of the planet looked more positive, and so on. Indeed, the SDGs have been supported by all governments around the world. Given that each of the SDGs can be said to impact, and be impacted by, the actions of businesses, the United Nations (UN) created the Global Compact through which, at the time of writing, almost 24,000 firms in over 165 countries have signed up to do their best to make progress towards the SDGs (https://unglobalcompact). Organisations as different as financial and academic institutions (Weybrecht, 2022) have measured themselves against the SDGs (Ghauri and Cooke, 2022). There is more: under each of 17 Goals and the (now) 231 unique indicators, there is individual action taking place. Literally millions of words have been spoken and written about the SDGs: the UN Global Compact alone registers almost 100,000 reports on its work.

And yet . . . like the predecessor Millenium Development Goals, which the United Nations ended in 2015 and replaced by the SDGs and 'Agenda, 2030', it seems that achieving the SDGs by 2030 and having major political effects in global, national, and local governance remain impossible targets. In many areas we are further from achieving the goals than we were when they were declared and signed up to (Biermann et al., 2022; SDG Tracker).

Although the SDG targets, and the associated indicators, are set at the macro, national, level they cannot be met without a considerable involvement of business, which is why the UN Global Compact exists. And since the SDGs require changed behaviours by people in businesses, including public, private and third sector businesses, the SDGs are directly relevant to human resource management, or HRM (Chams and García-Blandón, 2019; Kramar, 2022) and there has been a plethora of recent publications linking the SDGs and HRM. We examine this inter-relationship. We question what, as was argued in the Call for Papers for this Special Issue, is the growing influence of the SDGs on HRM, leadership and employment relations topics. We examine the challenges to the current understandings or mainstream models of HRM and how the current rethinking of HRM takes us towards the achievement of the SDGs. We also examine the nature and form of the SDGs themselves. We explore why they will not be met – and, whilst we accept the limited role of HRM in achieving the goals, we argue that for those who are interested in the relationship between the SDGs and HRM (see our References and the other papers in this Special Issue) a lack of construct clarity in both HRM and the SDGs is one of the key problems that we face. Against this background, we consider the value of the SDGs for HRM.

Understandings of HRM

We start by discussing the concept of HRM. There have always been debates (Legge, 1995) about whether HRM a field of study, encompassing an area of academic concentration as well as being a discipline in itself, covering all aspects of the different ways that people can be managed by whoever is managing them. Or is HRM an agenda, outlining things to be considered and simply focused on linking people management directly to the objectives and strategy of the organisation? The first approach would imply a 'value-free' approach to HRM, meaning that it is a discipline that explores how people are managed in every context where they are so managed. The second approach would imply that there are ways of managing people that don't meet the relevant criteria (a strategic approach to ensuring that HRM contributes to the strategy and, it is argued, by extension, the success of the organisation). In this approach, forms of people management that do not meet the criteria are not considered to be HRM at all, so there will be organisations 'without HRM'.

Consistent with calls for business and management studies to focus on actions that will make a positive contribution to dealing with society's Grand Challenges (Doh et al., 2021; George et al., 2016; Ghauri and Cooke, 2022) – a call reflected in HRM studies specifically (Lee and Szkudlarek, 2021) – there have recently been attempts to develop new conceptions of HRM that aim to find some kind of middle ground between the two 'standard' approaches to HRM. These look to take a wide definition of the subject and apply it in all circumstances (as in our first approach above), but not to be value-free. Rather, like the second approach, they aim to insist that there are key criteria against which the success of HRM can be measured. These criteria, however, go much wider than the relationship to business strategy or business success and aim to encompass a broad set of objectives that serve the common good (Aust et al., 2020). These approaches have a long history (Legge, 1995) and are often couched in terms of being 'critical' or 'ethical' versions of HRM (Keegan and Francis, 2010; Greenwood, 2013; Greenwood and Van Buren, 2017).

Basically, what these newer conceptions of HRM aim to do is to reinforce an understanding of HRM as encompassing a wider view of the stakeholders – rejecting the notion that the purpose of HRM is, like the purpose of the management of all other resources in businesses, to get quality resource in as cheaply as possible, to exploit it as much as possible and then to get rid of it, in order to ensure the profitability of the firm (Steers, 2008).

Rather, sustainable HRM, and similar forms of HRM, emphasise the need for a multi-stakeholder perspective on the subject. HRM should (a value statement) focus on long-term objectives that meet the needs of this more extended group of stakeholders. This is not new: indeed, it was explicitly included in one of the seminal texts that introduced the subject (Beer et al., 2015, 1984; Boselie and Brewster, 2015). It is however, particularly in the last decade and specifically the last few years that this particular approach to HRM may be said to have taken off in the scholarly press with attempts to identify different approaches to HRM, including, as the Call for Papers for this Special Issue noted, Sustainable HRM, Socially Responsible HRM (Shen and Benson, 2016), Green HRM (Renwick et al., 2016) and Triple Bottom Line HRM (Bush, 2020) and Common Good HRM (Aust et al., 2020).

Sustainable HRM has been defined as 'people-management practices that take the development of social, environmental and human capital into account' (Guerci and Carollo, 2016: 221). There are different potential meanings under the overall rubric of Sustainable HRM, one of the most popular of these terms (Ren and Jackson, 2020; Stahl et al., 2020), and one where there is arguably the greatest number of different meanings. Aust et al. (2020) review the field and attempt to bring some clarity to the different forms of HRM included.

Socially responsible HRM

Aust et al. (2020) distinguish a specific approach under the heading of Corporate Social Responsibility or Socially Responsible HRM (Raubenheimer and Rasmussen, 2013; Sarvaiya et al., 2018; Shen and Benson, 2016). This involves Corporate Social Responsibility directed internally, via HRM policies and practices, at employees, and argues that operationalising SRHRM leads to measurable financial results for businesses. In many respects this attempt to include employees as stakeholders mirrors the more established debate in HRM about pluralist or mutual approaches to HRM (Boxall, 2021; Greenwood and De Cieri, 2007), focused primarily on management and employees as the key stakeholders, but arguing that these need to be set in a societal context. This focus has been made explicit in the notion of 'human-centred' HRM (Cooke et al., 2022). In these cases, context is given more prominence. A key part of the argument here is that the different interests of the key stakeholders (owners and employees) can be aligned and that, when they are not, negative consequences follow. It therefore makes sense to work to bring these interests into alignment. It is not clear whether such systems should be implemented if that alignment cannot be achieved and if trying to do so costs businesses significant elements of their profits. It has been noted (Stahl et al., 2020) that currently HRM specialists are a long way from influencing organisational CSR.

Green HRM (Alcaraz et al, 2017; Harris and Tregidga, 2012; Renwick et al., 2016) has been defined as 'the HRM aspects of environmental management' (Renwick et al., 2013): encouraging behaviours that focus specifically on looking after, or at least not negatively impacting, the physical environment. This involves HRM policies and practices that increase and maintain the interest of workers in cherishing the environment, usually either that part of the environment local to the businesses' operations or more generic targets such as lower carbon emissions. The examples given in this literature tend to be about encouraging employees to 'act Green' (not wasting lighting or heating, volunteering for 'clean-ups' outside work), rather than changing organisational HRM policies, though there have been attempts to discuss issues such as Green recruiting, Green training and Green compensation. It is not clear how widespread or howe successful such attempts have been to create different behaviours and here again, as Aust et al. (2020) point out, the evidence of Green HRM influencing organisational policy is limited.

Triple Bottom Line HRM is another term that has adherents. Aust et al. (2020) address issues raised by the notion of Triple Bottom Line HRM (Bush, 2020; Elkington, 2018) or even Quadruple Bottom Line HRM (O'Higgins and Zsolnai, 2017), adding to the focus on employees an emphasis on the environment, often characterised as balancing the three 'p's –profit, people, and planet. Quadruple Bottom Line thinking adds in

(to follow the 'p's): purpose, or sometimes 'spirit' or 'future'. Again, the idea is to emphasise the importance of the organisation successfully balancing the interests of different stakeholders.

Common good HRM

The most comprehensive version of sustainable HRM, seen by Aust et al. (2020) as a further extension of what had existed prior to their work, is the innovative notion of Common Good HRM, which they argue requires a 'fundamental change' in thinking; one that 'has consequences regarding current understanding of the purpose, concerns and output of HRM'. Common Good HRM would require organisations to 'radically review their traditional profit-oriented viewpoint and *instead* [our emphasis] focus more on environmental and societal impact'. This would be a hugely radical change for most private sector organisations. The notion can be ascribed to the whole scope of HRM (Aust et al., 2020; Lu et al., 2022) or it can be applied to specific areas of policy (Taylor and Earl, 2023) – confusingly, some papers also use the term to refer to what Aust et al. (2020) categorised as Socially Responsible HRM (Pham et al., 2023). Common Good HRM assumes that it is the fundamental responsibility of business to 'make an effective contribution to resolving the sustainability challenges we are collectively facing' (Dyllick and Muff, 2016: 156) and that business organisations' long-term self-interest lies in sustaining our collective livelihood (see Ehnert, 2009). The common good may encompass both immediate communities, local and global society, but may also encompass other living creatures and our shared natural ecosystem.

Assessing these new forms of HRM. All of these are relatively newly developed terms that often lack construct clarity and, in some ways, reflect discussions of fads and fashions (Abrahamson, 1991; Rotolo et al., 2018). Generally, managers do not like uncertainty and do not like to appear anything but 'up-todate' (Rotolo et al., 2018). "Management fads exist. Some fads become institutionalised within companies (e.g. MBO, matrix management, core competence); other fads fade (e.g. time management, zero-defects, T-groups). They are shiny new ideas that get attention but do not endure (e.g. learning organisation, Japanese management, 1-minute manager, reengineering)' (Rasmussen and Ulrich, 2015: 236). What scholars' study is, despite our pretensions to science, often merely a question of fashionable ideas taking over from other ideas and then, in turn, dying away (Abrahamson, 1991; Brickley et al., 1997), even if much of the material within the new terminology is 'old wine in new bottles' (Cappelli, 2008). Both fads and fashions are more likely to develop when construct clarity is lacking (Benders and van Veen, 2001; Suddaby, 2010): that allows for a variety of interpretations and articulations, of course, and lends them to them being applicable to many situations and topics (Benders and van Veen, 2001; Legge, 1995; Swan, 2004).

Arguably, this diversity of concepts may provide added value, since the different visions may indicate progress in the research on this topic. In this sense, it could be said that the disparity that is presented may be positive, offering a foundations upon which both HRM and Sustainability may advance together in the future. The diversity of understandings offers greater opportunity for experimentation, both in research and in

practice. Paradoxically, a lack of construct clarity can fuel the popularity of a concept, since studies of rather different interpretations of the subject – in this case Sustainable HRM – are all able to position themselves within the rubric (Benders and van Veen, 2001; Legge, 1995; Suddaby, 2010).

However, without greater construct clarity the measures used in empirical studies may not accurately represent the underlying concept being tested (Cappelli and Keller, 2013; Gerhart, 2012). It then becomes difficult to draw inferences from research and almost impossible to assess and compare findings across studies (Bono and McNamara, 2011). We appear to be experiencing a classic 'jangle fallacy' (Molloy and Ployhart, 2012): the notion that if a term is unclear and not being widely adopted, inventing or adding new terms for the same or largely overlapping notions will resolve the issue. At present there is a worrying issue of construct proliferation and redundancy that can in practice create confusion and misinterpretation, where 'old and new constructs overlap to such an extent they are largely interchangeable' resulting in a 'proliferation of definitions, indeterminate construct boundaries and confounded measures' (Klein and Delery, 2012: 59). Arguably, despite serious efforts, these new versions of HRM lack 'clear agreement on the substantive definitional content' or any 'contextually specific and clear definition of the term[s]' (Suddaby, 2010: 348).

Will these new version of HRM, like the other examples noted by Rasmussen and Ulrich (2015) fade (Abrahamson, 1991; Brickley et al., 1997)? Or is it a reflection of a genuine paradigm shift in HRM that will endure?

All these new approaches to HRM are underpinned by a greater challenge to the underlying pro-market growth agenda of many current neo-liberal and exploitative economic ideologies (Matthews et al., 2018). There does seem to be some momentum in this direction that, whilst it is unlikely to challenge the 'single shareholder' focus, may reflect a growing awareness of the need to take other stakeholders into account (Lopez-Cabrales and Valle-Cabrera, 2020; Pfeffer, 2010). Setting aside the fundamental issues of construct clarity, and of how change may be created, what these approaches to HRM are attempting to do is to question the purpose of HRM and attempt to bridge a gap in competing stakeholder-shareholder interests (Beer ett al., 2015). These new approaches attempt to shift the focus of HRM away from the interests and objectives of what has up to now been mainstream (the best interests of the business; therefore, of the owners of the business) and to develop a wider view of the subject, based on responding to a different view of stakeholders and a different set of objectives – objectives aligned to the UN's SDGs. As such they imply, or in some cases very clearly state, that they are proposals for completely changing the objectives and the nature of private sector businesses. That is a considerable burden to put onto the HRM specialists within the business.

Many of the questions raised by these new approaches to HRM can be considered as part of the on-going debate about the power and influence of HRM (Galang and Ferris, 1997; Hermans and Ulrich, 2021; Russ et al., 1998; Sheehan et al., 2014). Of course, the influence of HRM specialists in changing the objectives of senior or of line managers varies from country to country (Brewster et al., 2015) but it is generally assumed to be minimal. Although many of the contributors to these debates are able to note one or two cases where a realignment of a business away from the bottom line has occurred, amongst the millions of businesses in the world it is hard to envisage that many companies would

decide to put the interests of other stakeholders on a par with the interest of the owners of the business, never mind place them *instead* of those interests, because of an intervention from a well-meaning HRM specialist (see discussion on power and sins of omission below). Still less is such a change likely to happen as a result of input by scholars. There is now a long list of articles in the business and management area noting, and usually bemoaning, the gap between practitioners and academics, whether created by academics who fail to talk the same language as the practitioners (Keegan and Francis, 2010; Rynes et al., 2002, 2007; Tenhiälä et al., 2016) or because they have little in common (Greenwood, 2013; Gubbins and Rousseau, 2015) or because the practitioners just do not care to listen (Gill, 2018; Steers, 2008).

Whichever definition of HRM is adopted, arguably, all of the SDGs will require people in organisations to behave differently and might therefore be said to have HRM implications, but there is an obvious and immediate relationship between some of the SDGs and HRM. For example, calls to end poverty (SDG 1) and reduce inequalities (SDG 10), ensure good health and well-being (SDG 3), create gender equality (SDG 5) and provide decent work and economic growth (SDG 8), all chime with current HRM research on pay systems (e.g. Gupta and Shaw, 2014; Suleman et al., 2022), well-being (e.g. Guest, 2017; Haak-Saheem et al., 2022), diversity (e.g. Benschop, 2001; O'Donovan, 2018; Triana et al., 2021) and decent work (e.g. Alzola, 2018; Cooke et al., 2019). However, while these might be live (and lively) topics in HRM, these SDGs are as far from being achieved as any others. We explore some of the reasons why this may be and challenges the perceptions of some commentators about what HRM is and what it can be expected to achieve.

All of this raises questions about the value of the SDGs (Chams and García-Blandón, 2019; Kramar, 2022). Is a set of targets valuable if they are, as the Economist put it, a 'sprawling, misconceived . . . mess' (The Economist, 2015) and if there is no chance of meeting them? Any HRM specialist will be able to explain how and why it is that while 'stretch' targets may have a positive effect on performance, 'impossible' targets will demoralise and demotivate so that performance actually falls away (Sitkin et al., 2017). The Secretary General of the United Nations has made it clear that the SDGs will not be reached; and perhaps they never could be. Are they therefore useless?

HRM cannot escape responsibility for the distance we currently are from some of the SDGs. There are sins of commission and omission (Evans et al., 2023). Much of what is seen as mainstream HRM involves actions that take our societies further away from achieving the SDGs. The extraordinary increase in the inequality in pay systems that has occurred in recent years (Dundon and Rafferty, 2018) cannot be separated from the drive in the mainstream HRM literature for performance-based pay and for 'talent management'. The gap between the rich and powerful in society and the 'precariate' (Polacko, 2021), and the extent of poverty in some of the richest countries in the world (Cerra et al., 2021, Nolan et al., 2019), cannot be separated from the drives for talent management, flexible working practices, cost-effective workers, lean and mean organisations, that currently characterise much of HRM both in scholarly and practitioner contexts. The HRM function is seen in many organisations as purely administrative and therefore 'not responsible' for any of these issues. In others it is, because labour is the largest single element of operating costs in most organisations, seen as a key contributor to profitability; but

that leaves little room for sustainable HRM. For a more positive outcome key changes would be needed: pay policies targeted at reducing inequality, performance appraisal targeted at meeting the requirements of multiple stakeholders and training to include environmental concerns. So far, despite the claims for a role for such specialists as institutional change agents (Ren and Jackson, 2020), the evidence for these changes happening on any significant scale is lacking.

And there are also sins of omission: if the HRM specialists are the guardians of decent work, equality, and fairness in the workforce, then, arguably, they do not have a record they can be proud of. Despite various attempts to show the value-creation of overall HRM practices (Malik et al., 2018) or of particular HRM technologies (see e.g. Maatman et al., 2010; Ruël and Van der Kaap, 2012) these HRM models – almost always linked to financial accounting results for the organisation – reflect the extant power balance between even well-meaning HRM specialists and the forces pushing for profitability in the organisation.

The problem is one of the power of the HRM function or, more precisely, the lack of it. The difficulty of operationalising HRM relates directly to definitions of the subject and to power relationships. Critiques of HRM (e.g. Kaufman, 2020) argue that, either as practice or as a field of study, it has become increasingly focused on a single stakeholder, the owners of the business, and on the management of individuals within the organisation to achieve that end and, hence, it has become divorced from power relationships. In larger organisations, that includes HRM specialists: a long history of research shows that they generally have very little power indeed (Francis and Keegan, 2006; Keegan and Francis, 2010; Keenoy, 1990; Steers, 2008; Toulson and Defryn, 2007). The specialists may support some kind of multi-stakeholder HRM but their lack of influence on the behaviour of the organisation or the key people within it severely reduces their ability to create relevant change. Some respond to the associated cognitive difference by 'buying into' an owner-focused agenda and become part of the problem; others just resign themselves to doing whatever they can, however rhetorical or minimal, to nudge the organisation in the right direction without risking confrontation.

A small minority of organisations have had multiple stakeholders: thus co-operatives, for example (Cheney et al., 2023; Paranque and Willmott, 2014) have always been driven primarily by the interests of their employees or, depending on the model, of their consumers. Arguably, too, public sector organisations have always had to be aware of the interests of the public in their operation (Jurisch et al., 2013). By contrast, most organisations around the world are small- and medium-sized businesses that operate without an HRM department and even without any HRM specialists. In such organisations, the owners of the business manage their people directly and, despite some laudable attempts to explore these locations (Harney and Alkhalaf, 2021), our knowledge of HRM in such places is limited. Although, in some cases, family-run, small businesses pay less attention to the bottom line and more to providing employment for members of the family (Haynes et al., 2021), small business, and informal business, is often related to forms of people management that are a long way from these new approaches to HRM (Bacon and Hoque, 2005; Verreynne et al., 2013). With the vast majority of such businesses struggling just to survive, it is unlikely that they will be devoting much of their energy to the

SDGs, even if the owners had heard of them. The majority of businesses around the world will be managing their people without any reference to the SDGs.

Overall, the likelihood of businesses replacing a profit focus with a multi-stakeholder driven sustainability focus seems to be small.

Problems in meeting the SDGS

Before we discuss these issues any further, we note that as well as problems with these new concepts of HRM, there are also issues with the SDGs themselves (for more detail see Brookes and Brewster, 2024). These lie in the nature of the SDGs, the limited cultural lens they reflect and the practicality of the SDGs.

The nature of the SDGs

The SDGs themselves are far from perfect. They are United Nations' policies, and like all such policies, they are the outcome of heavy and detailed negotiations. In many cases, forms of words are agreed that can have a wide variety of interpretations – forms of words that all the interested parties can sign up to, however fundamental their disagreements. Where the disagreements cannot be resolved with any form of wording (e.g. in the case of LGBT+ rights, or religious tolerance) then they are not included. That is the way the United Nations operates, and it is the price for reaching consensus. Without this uncertainty of meaning there would be no agreement at all; with it, the price of consensus is blurred goals – and the price of blurred goals is that different parties can mean or do different things under the same umbrella terms.

In HRM, for example, SDG 8, 'Decent Work and Economic Growth', clearly evidences an unresolved debate between those who see economic growth as crucial to progress, whatever the short-term pain involved, and those who believe that no economic growth is acceptable if that requires people to be working in miserable conditions or with ethically dubious contracts. Montiel et al. (2021), for example, discussing how multinational enterprises can contribute to the SDGs, put SDG8 firmly into their 'increasing wealth' category. The twelve targets (and 16 indicators) under SDG8 include seven related to increased economics, productivity and growth; two demanding national (forced labour) or global (youth employment and the Global Jobs Pact) policies; and three linked directly to decent work – 1. Achieving full and productive employment and decent work for all, and equal pay; 2. Reducing the number of youths (15–24 years old) not in employment, education, or training; and 3. Protecting labour rights and safe and secure working environments for all workers including migrants and those in precarious employment. The targets, and the indicators, fail to address the issue of the potential conflict between the productivity and growth targets and the decent work targets.

Where there are measures of SDG8, in the real world they are tending in the wrong direction. Economic growth is widely stagnant or reducing; precarity is increasing; investment in training and education is under pressure in many countries; and there is no sign of progress in dealing with forced labour, human trafficking, child labour and the bizarrely titled 'modern slavery' (Winterdyk, 2020).

For HRM specialists, this blurring of targets means that in different sectors, for example, different activities might count as moving an organisation towards the relevant SDGs, Thus, it becomes important not just to know the SDG, but to establish its relevance in the context of each business.

A limited cultural lens

A second issue concerning the SDGs is that they reflect a specific way of thinking about human beings – and therefore about HRM. They are based on 'advanced' conceptions of topics that are widely shared (at least rhetorically) in the societies that are seen as the most 'modern'. These are the WEIRD countries (Henrich et al., 2010) – the western, educated, industrialised, rich, democratic countries in which most of our management and HRM research is carried out and from which our theories are drawn.

The result is that some of these countries, particularly those in the Nordic states for example, can claim that they have already accepted the principles of many of the SDGs and indeed have taken action at national and organisational level to meet them. Thus, the Nordic countries have got closer to the objectives than other societies on earth ever have done in terms of many of the targets underlying the SDGs on poverty alleviation, gender equality and education, for example, meeting even some of the detailed indicators of achievement of those targets (Brookes and Brewster, 2024).

The other side of this coin is that these countries are weird not just as a mnemonic, but also because they are distinct from the vast majority of countries in the world. The cultural distinctiveness of these countries, with their lower power distance, greater tolerance for ambiguity, lower levels of gender distinction and more individualist character (Hofstede, 1980 and many other scholars since), their largely irreligious nature (Zuckerman, 2006) and their respect for individual lives (however rhetorical those values) sets them apart from most of the world. To take a few examples, it is not clear how much attention is being given to reducing inequalities (SDG 5, SDG 8, SDG 10), of any kind, in countries that have been logged by different cultural researchers (Zheng et al., 2021) as particularly hierarchical, with institutions (political, legal, fiscal, etc.) that reinforce inequalities. This is supported by Yassine-Hamdan and Strate (2020), who highlight the relatively poor performance of Arab countries in relation to delivering on the gender inequality SDG, and Kennedy et al. (2020), who focus on the relatively large gender health inequalities across 40 Asia-Pacific countries.

It is not clear how much attention is being paid to SDG16 on 'peace, justice and strong institutions' in many countries which, as we write, are deeply engaged in bloody and murderous conflict. The role of organisations and of the individuals managing other people in such states is unlikely to be transformative. Equally, it is not clear how far countries are willing to support the widespread achievement of SDG3, 'good health and wellbeing'. The recent pandemic, and the rapid vaccine response, highlighted the unwillingness of the richer nations to support less developed nations, leading to slow, poor performance in making vaccines available to those countries.

The implication for HRM specialists is that different policies and practices will be required in different countries. In our example Nordic countries HRM experts can afford to do very little on some of the SDGs, because their government has already moved a

long way towards many of the targets. In the Arab countries the HRM specialists will have more work to do to move their organisation towards the targets but will have to do so in a less welcoming climate.

The practicality of the SDGs

There are distinctions between the Goals: the first six goals are unequivocal – they suggest hard targets (no poverty, zero hunger, good health and well-being, quality education, gender equality, and clean water and sanitation). Even here, questions might be asked about whether the topics are discrete (wouldn't abolishing poverty eliminate hunger and improve health considerably too? Wouldn't reducing inequalities involve reducing poverty? Wouldn't clean water lead to more gender equality as millions of women would spend less time transporting water?). Questions might be asked about possible stresses between them (does a society invest in the inexhaustible demands of a comprehensive health service or the inexhaustible demands of comprehensive education?) And questions might be asked about how the terms are interpreted and measured: each SDG comes with a set of indicators, but these are generally restricted to measuring, with an assumption that the figures are expected to move in a particular direction. For many of the less developed countries around the world the targets and the indicators are utopian – they may feel that they may never reach them and certainly they cannot reach them by 2030.

Many of the Goals are either just titles covering areas of concern (industry, innovation and infrastructure; life on land) including words capable of wide interpretation ('responsible' consumption and production; 'sustainable' cities and communities; 'inclusive and sustainable' industrialisation), or are more equivocal (affordable energy might be dirty energy, as has been made apparent in the debates about energy in Europe resultant upon the disruption in energy supplies that was a consequence of the Ukraine war). There are countries which have a very long way to go to get anywhere near meeting the requirements of any of the SDGs and these are (almost entirely, but not exclusively) poor countries that would argue that with more resources they would be closer to hitting some of the targets; but that without them they will always remain unachievable.

Recent widespread reporting, at least from Western outlets related to the football World Cup in Qatar (see e.g. https://www.businessinsider.com/true-cost-of-the-qatar-world-cup-2022-10), has highlighted how far away some of the Gulf states, as examples, are from gender equality (SDG 5), looking after migrants (SDG 10), reduced inequalities, financial equality (SDG 10). The gaps that exist even in the countries that pay attention to these Goals have been made manifest by recent campaigns such as Me Too and Black Lives Matter, focusing upon the prevalence of varying types of inequality. According to estimates by *The Economist*, made at the time of the original declaration of the SDGs, achieving the Goals would cost about US$ 2–3 trillion per year for 15 years, a figure which they dismissed as 'pure fantasy'. And costs have increased, and time has shortened since then. For most of the SDGs the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic were almost entirely negative: the world moved further away from the Goals, increasing poverty, and exacerbating inequalities. The SDGs will not be met, and we will be a long way from meeting them, by the target date of 2030.

Does this mean that the SDGs have little relevance for HRM specialists; or that they need to redouble their efforts to move their organisations in the right direction (Podgorodnichenko et al., 2022a, 2022b)? We turn to these issues next.

Looking forward

A significant proportion of the narrative above has been a critique of HRM and of the SDGs, most notably in relation to them both being vague and ambiguous. This lack of clarity inevitably reduces the possibility that they will lead to agreed, common and positive action. Despite the notion that such a lack of construct clarity leads to room for innovation, we believe that the more uncertain the concepts, the more all kinds of actions can be claimed as working towards them, the less valuable they will be. As scholars, we can only work on our concepts of HRM, so we should do that: the more we can clarify a concept (or perhaps concepts) and get agreement on it (or them), the further we can get away from the 'jangle fallacy', the better for our research and its implications. The research needs to be very clear about its focus: are the changes being studied taking place within and not intended to challenge the current focus on profitability; or are the changes deliberately intended to open up a different kind of organisation and, eventually, to change the context? The problem of operationalising the current surge in what has been captured in the term sustainable HRM has meant that, to date, much of the work there has been merely exhortation or built on very partial cases. Unless scholarly work on sustainable HRM can go beyond this lack of clarity, it will become another HRM dead end.

Any attempt to link HRM and the SDGs has to take more account of the largely powerless position of the HRM specialists in organisations. Whilst they are, certainly, able to influence the activities of their Executive Boards and their line managers, and to take advantage of disruption (Harney and Collings, 2021; Minbaeva, 2021), they are unlikely to be able to change the focus or the targets for their businesses – our proposals for new, value-driven, forms of HRM have to remain realistic. Aust and her colleagues specifically address this in their notion of Common Good HRM, arguing that it 'places collective interests above – or more realistically equal to – individual (including organizational) wishes, needs, and desires' (Aust et al., 2020). Whether the HRM scholars, the HRM consultants and the HRM specialists in organisations have the ability to create such a radical change in our current capitalist societies is a moot point; but one that deserves further research. Examples of organisations that have changed their objectives in this way, and long-term research into what happened in such an event would be powerful evidence for transformative change.

Although critical (in the scholarly sense), none of this means that these approaches to what is termed sustainable HRM or to the SDGs have no rationale. They remain potentially valuable in reminding us again of stakeholders other than the owners of companies and in challenging practitioners and scholars to address big issues. Arguably, rhetorically at least, they are part of a wider movement to bring societal concerns into our studies of business and management. As such, if the concepts can be clarified and terminology broadly agreed, they may yet avoid becoming just another fad or fashion and endure. That would imply a research agenda examining power structures in

businesses and looking again at the role and function of stakeholders in businesses and how HRM specialists relate to these various stakeholders. There are numerous examples in the 'sustainable HRM' literature of such specialists taking small but, for some of the individuals concerned, important steps towards meeting one or more of the SDGs. Researching HRM's ability to change the narrative about what businesses should have as their focus is probably counter-productive, as it will lead to an unrealistic view of what HRM can do, but these smaller examples may indicate practical ways forward. It will also be necessary in future research in this area to remain fully aware of context and not to expect that the same activities will have the same effect in different situations.

Such research will help if HRM is to act as a function that can make the type of significant contribution that society requires in moving towards achieving the SDGs on a meaningful and widespread scale. Our scholarly work in HRM should be targeted at helping practitioners to deal with issues that are important for our societies. What the UN's '2030 Agenda for sustainable development', the 17 SDGs and the hundreds of related targets have done is to provide benchmarks for both business overall and HRM specifically (Chams and García-Blandón, 2019) to identify what those issues are. While there may be question marks about what constitutes a Grand Challenge and how scholars can contribute (Seelos et al., 2023), the SDGs are available, visible and legitimate. HRM studies that address the subjects they cover would give HRM a focus that it currently lacks, direct our research to the real world problems of the majority, rather than the interests of a minority, and mean that HRM in future would be addressing important issues. That is a prize worth working towards.

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