

Sustainable Development Goals

Teaching Cases: Introduction



From RSM I WILL statements. The I WILL statement reflects the spirit of RSM's diverse community of students, researchers, staff, professors, and alumni.

All change is marked by contrast, conflict and uncertainty. Rotterdam School of Management's SDG teaching cases explore the complexity of sustainable development. The cases compel students to rise above the content of their own specialisation and to view sustainable development as an integrated concept linking environmental, social and economic dimensions. Acknowledging that there are often no fixed answers to our global challenges, we provide some tools to help business students learn to navigate the unknown: it's not just about teaching sustainability; it's about tomorrow's leaders owning it, even co-creating it.

Introduction

Engaging with sustainability and responsible development is much more than simply adding a topic to the business school curriculum. It involves all aspects of teaching and learning. For students it often requires a fundamental shift in thinking that enables them to develop a clear understanding of the crucial challenges in today's management practice.

Recognising the need for sustainability and participating the discussion around it requires business students to build a thorough understanding of both their areas of specialisation – be it strategy, marketing, finance, people and organisation, technology and innovation, or supply chain management – and the influences of these areas on society at large. Highlighting sustainability in business through new teaching approaches encourages students to expand their thinking from a specialist, functional approach to a broader appreciation of the societal and environmental relevance of business activities. It furthermore allows them to recognise the fundamental complexity of economic development. All of this requires students to see both the challenges and opportunities in sustainable management for what they are and to develop business strategies and activities that are realistic and meaningful and that have enduring impact.

At RSM, engaging with sustainability has been an explicit part of our history for decades. In 1998 we established the academic department 'Business-Society Management' and anchored the development of skills, competency and attitude in the training of all RSM students. In 2017 we clarified and solidified this engagement by revising our mission statement, dedicating RSM's purpose to being "a force for positive change in the world".

As part of the activities around our mission, we began sharing our experiences with and our views on sustainability and responsible development. This case collection is part of this initiative. Throughout the school we asked our faculty members to help translate their experiences with sustainable and responsible development in business practice into innovative teaching tools.

SDG Case Collection

This collection of teaching cases, developed by RSM's Case Development Centre in collaboration with RSM faculty members, will help educators and students grasp the extent of truly engaging with sustainable development. To facilitate the navigation and use of the cases, we have organised them under the framework of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The cases discuss the challenges, dilemmas and contributions of businesses towards SDGs – varying from employee conditions in warehouses, to the refugee crisis in camp Moria in Greece, water solutions for rural areas in Brazil, and the role of a corporation in creating peace in The Philippines.

Using these cases in our classrooms helps students understand what the individual SDGs comprise and recognize the possibility for businesses to contribute to achieving these SDGs. At the same time, these cases offer the opportunity to discuss the interlinkages and interdependencies of the SDGs, and the challenges, dilemmas and trade-offs that come with striving to achieving them. Furthermore, the cases provide an opportunity to critically assess business ambitions in this respect, where both small contributions can be appreciated and lack of audacity can be identified.

The Big Theme: What's in the cases?

Underpinning the 17 SDGs are the following guiding principles: People, Planet, Prosperity, Peace and Partnership.



Source: Department of Public Information, United Nations

All cases take a business perspective and thus require engagement from the perspective of one or more functional areas of management, such as strategy, marketing, supply chain management, human resource management or finance. All cases place the presented managerial challenges in the context of sustainable development. Principles and concepts common throughout the cases include:

- ➔ Sustainable development as an integrated concept, having environmental, social and economic dimensions;
- ➔ The correlation between head, heart and hand in complex dilemmas: head only, without hand or heart working together, implies theoretical solutions without practice; hand only focuses on processes and tools, without purpose or reason; heart only, though well-meaning in its passion and enthusiasm, lacks substance and adequate implementation. In short, neither mindless action nor action-less mind will bring a sustainable result;
- ➔ Developing the capacity for 'systems thinking', rising from the silos of specialist content to view a challenge holistically;
- ➔ The (envisioned) move from short-termism to long-termism generally – in business, this also translates to a move from a shareholder to a stakeholder model;
- ➔ True dialogue implies bringing 'the whole system to the table' and is more than just engaging with other stakeholders: generative dialogue involves self-awareness, including awareness of one's own assumptions and belief systems, to be able to suspend judgement and be open to an emerging future.

When writing these cases and their accompanying teaching notes, we used the framework developed by Professor Rob van Tulder at RSM for this purpose: '[Business and the Sustainable Development Goals – A Framework for Effective Corporate Involvement](#)' (2018). Embedded in almost all of the cases are the framework's three foundational concepts: 'wicked problems', 'the nexus challenge' and 'intervention levels'.

According to Van Tulder, most sustainable development problems are 'wicked' because there is incomplete or contradictory knowledge about them, making them subject to a large number of opinions and possible solutions. Moreover, addressing one problem may cause another; to address them all would require considerable investment in facilities and infrastructure as well as the involvement of multiple stakeholders, including government, business and civil society. Wicked problems cannot be solved unless there is systemic change. On the one hand this poses great challenges, and on the other hand immense opportunities for innovation and a shift of mindset.

The 17 SDGs are inter-related. While the teaching cases each focus on one or two of the SDGs, they encourage students to consider all the SDGs relevant to solving the sustainability problem in question. When tackling a specific SDG-related problem, an organisation, too, must re-think and re-design its strategy and operations to include the interests of business, government and societal stakeholders. This phenomenon, in which successfully achieving results in one problem area is conditioned by actions, policies and progression in other areas, is known as the 'nexus challenge'.

By taking an integrated approach to decision-making that focuses not merely on individual components but the entire system, these cases compel students to explore the possibilities of nexus benefits, i.e., potentially positive interactions between different SDGs, and to propose adjustment to an existing intervention strategy. SDG strategies can be classified in four progressive ‘intervention levels’: from addressing a failure, to dealing with negative externalities, to creating positive externalities, to engaging in collective action. The cases, positioned at these various intervention levels, show students the reality of SDG progress and encourage them to search for better strategies, policies and actions.

While emphasising the interconnectedness of SDGs and stimulating systems thinking, the cases are also designed in a way to help students understand how sustainability goals – often viewed as broad and abstract – can be translated into concrete actions in day-to-day management. The table below presents an overview cases that are online at present. As part of our ongoing engagement with the topics, more cases will continue to be added to this set.

Table 1. RSM SDG case overview

Case Title	Main SDGs
Sustainable Development Goals Teaching Cases: Introduction	Introduction
Unifrutti Tropical Philippines, Inc: Planting the Seeds for Peace and Prosperity	1. No Poverty 16. Peace & Strong Institutions
Priva: Shaping Sustainable Cities	2. End Hunger 9. Industry, Innovation & Infrastructure
SISAR: A Model for Brazil's Rural Water Supply	3. Good Health & Well-being 6. Clean Water & Sanitation
Closing the Gap: Goal-setting Programme at the Rotterdam University of Applied Sciences	4. Quality Education 10. Reduced Inequalities
Flying High: Women on Wings Gives Lift to Women in Rural India	5. Gender Equality 8. Decent Work & Economic Growth
Going Greener and Smarter: The Energy Transition at the Port of Rotterdam's Industrial Complex	7. Affordable & Clean Energy

Managing Lean Success: A Warehouse Balancing Act	8. Decent Work & Economic Growth
Rotterdam 2020: Bridging the Gap of Inequality	10. Reduced Inequalities
Public Transporter RET: Taking a New and Sustainable Route in Rotterdam	11. Sustainable Cities & Communities
Sustainable Eosta: Leading Organic Trade by Valuing People and Environment	12. Responsible Consumption & Production
Interface: Creating a 'Climate Fit for Life' through Carpet Tiles	13. Climate Action
Rabobank and WWF: Partnering for a Sustainable Economy	14. Life Below Water 17. Partnerships for the Goals
Sustainable Finance for Landscape Restoration in Spain	15. Life on Land
Unite in Order to Float: Finding Solutions to the Refugee Crisis	16. Peace & Strong Institutions
The Coffee of Andradas: A Community Branding Project	General – multiple SDGs
Shifting from a Shareholder to a Stakeholder Model: Using Sustainable Investment to Align Profit with Purposefulness	Exercise - Sustainable Finance

The case collection is part of an RSM initiative to make our experiences with and views on sustainable development available to a broad audience. Related video learning materials and other resources are available at RSM's SDG website: www.rsm.nl/sdgs.

The Emerging Future

"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair ... in short, the

period was so far like the present period, that some of its noisiest authorities insisted on its being received, for good or for evil, in the superlative degree of comparison only."

In one of the most famous opening paragraphs in all English literature, Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities* captures the atmosphere of uncertainty preceding a major transition in society – the French Revolution – which anatomised the conflict between democratic and aristocratic principles.

Today's and tomorrow's leaders need to be able to deal with conflict, complexity and the unknown, and to recognise their own system's assumptions in order to shift consciousness and protect the needs of future generations. The insights in our teaching modules provide some hooks to navigate through and help co-create the emerging future, which is not simply undergoing incremental change but bears the hallmarks of transformational change – an iterative process of the build-up of a new regime and the breakdown of an old regime over a period of time, characterised by disruptions along the way.

"The SDGs are indeed a novel way of addressing an increasingly volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous world through a number of components that together constitute a (disruptive) new model of progress [...]", writes Van Tulder (2018). "The acceptance of the SDGs signals a badly needed 'paradigm shift' in the thinking around the conditions for sustainable development and the role(s) played by societal actors such as companies" (Van Tulder, 2018).

Perhaps the strongest message of our SDG teaching modules lies embedded in the belief system we are trying to shape at RSM – the hope that our Force for Positive Change mission will be part of a values-led system that helps shape the future world.

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