

# **Private Regulatory Governance and Sustainable Development: Is there a connection?**

Mapping linkages of Voluntary Sustainability Standards (VSS) and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

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## **Abstract**

Voluntary Sustainability Standards (VSS) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) share similar objectives. VSS are being increasingly used because of their claims to address sustainability issues at the production stage, such as greenhouse gas emissions in production, biodiversity conservation, labor rights, worker's wages, local pollution and good corporate governance. These issues are also at the heart of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. This commonality has picked up momentum, and there is an increasing reference to the SDGs in the official communications that VSS make, i.e., through their sustainability reports and their websites. Given VSS's broad relationship to sustainability, it becomes evident that there could be linkages between VSS and the SDGs. It is also apparent that VSS formal requirements should mostly align with SDG goals and targets. Despite this evident connection, there is scant research that systematically presents what SDGs do VSS contribute to and the motivations that drive this engagement. This thesis addresses this research gap and identifies the current key linkages between VSS and the SDGs. The thesis also describes the motivations for VSS to engage with the SDGs and illustrates the role that leadership of VSS organizations plays in advancing the VSS-SDG engagement. Data collection is done majorly through 270 VSS organization websites and ten semi-structured interviews with VSS organization leaders. The results are analyzed through a framework developed using the categorization of SDGs, the logic of calculated strategic behaviour of certification organizations and the dynamic capabilities theory. The results show that for the VSS studied in the thesis, SDG 12- Sustainable Production and Consumption and SDG 8- Decent Work and Economic Growth, are the focus SDGs. It is also highlighted that some key SDGs that can be influenced through VSS work, like SDG 1- No Poverty, need more attention and contribution from the VSS. The research highlights motivations and driving factors for the VSS-SDG engagement and the challenges that are prevalent for this engagement to grow. Further, the thesis notes that overall, there is a positive outlook among the VSS organizations to contribute in the future towards the achievement of the SDGs. For future research, it is concluded that there is a need to establish whether there is any actual contribution to the SDGs that the VSS claim to be contributing to.

**Keywords:** Voluntary Sustainability Standards, Sustainable Development Goals, calculated strategic behavior, dynamic capabilities, motivations, leadership, challenges

# Executive Summary

## Problem definition

SDGs present a unique approach of governance through the goals and are non-binding and non-authoritative in nature. With less than ten years remaining to achieve the SDGs, there is a need for different types of actors to show leadership for the goals. VSS, despite criticism, exercise influence with global scope across many different commodity/supply chains as they provide mechanisms to make informed choices (for buyers) and to capture market value for sustainability-related credence goods (for producers/retailers) across value chains. They are also effectively ‘arenas for agenda setting’ where stakeholders affecting/affected by a certain value chain come together to define relevant goals. Thus, VSS organizations could be one type of actor providing an important service in terms of ‘leadership for the goals. Selective studies reveal that certain sets of VSS exhibit overlap with some SDGs at the level of the criteria for certification, even though many VSS were established before the SDGs were adopted. A major study done by the International Trade Centre (ITC) considers all the VSS mentioned in their Standards Map database (ITC, 2017) and shows alignments between the SDGs and VSS criteria. But, due to the timing and complexity of criteria development/revision, the continuous development of these, and the recognition that VSS organizations/secretariats typically provides services that extend beyond the criteria (assurance, capacity building etc.), it is also interesting to explore how VSS are currently incorporating SDG perspectives also in other aspects of their work, so we get a richer understanding both of what SDGs these organizations provide leadership on, and how they view their role and ability to provide this type of leadership. This phenomenon has not been well researched to date. It is also worth exploring the question of why. Recognizing that there may be strong incentives for VSS to align with the SDGs, e.g., because it aligns with core values/goals of VSS organizations, and/or as a means to maintain/increase legitimacy and/or funding, but also recognizing that there may be barriers and that depending on the business model/finance model of the VSS, the activities of VSS need to be aligned with ‘club members’ expectations/willingness to pay. This thesis aims to address these research gaps, identify the current key linkages between VSS and the SDGs, and understand what drives these linkages and the role that VSS bodies envision for the future of this engagement. The thesis uses the conceptual framework that uses the doughnut model of SDGs, given by Niestroy (2010), the logic of calculated strategic behaviour of certification organizations (Grabs et al., 2020), and the dynamic capabilities theory (Barreto, 2010), to analyze the data collected. The thesis addresses the following research questions:

***RQ 1: Which SDGs do VSS contribute to, beyond their formal requirements for securing a certification?***

***RQ 2: Why do VSS bodies choose to engage with SDGs?***

***RQ 3: How do representatives of these VSS bodies see their own role/role of the standard body in contributing to different SDGs and a transition to sustainable development?***

The research design follows an exploratory approach. Data was collected from 270 VSS organization websites, a survey conducted among VSS organizations, 10 semi-structured interviews with VSS organization leaders, 10 industry-relevant reports, and 9 subject-relevant webinars and podcasts. The website and survey data analysis are done using Microsoft Excel, and the qualitative data analysis is done using NVivo software.

## **Findings**

For the **first research question**, the results indicate that the leading SDGs actively linked to the studied VSS are SDG 8- Decent Work and Economic Growth, and SDG 12-Responsible Production and Consumption. From Niestroy (2010)'s doughnut model, the maximum linkages were in the 'Production and Distribution Services'. This can be attributed to many linkages with SDG 12 and SDG 8 and a greater number of SDGs within that classification, as presented by Niestroy (2010). However, significant linkages were also observed with SDG 15- Life on Land, and SDG 13- Climate Change, which were in the 'Natural Environment' category. To complement Niestroy's (2010) model, another classification is proposed for the private regulatory governance systems: High-Linkage, Medium-Linkage, and Low-Linkage SDGs. This categorization could be beneficial for the researchers and the practitioners. VSS organizations could benefit from knowing where they need to make more efforts to advance the 2030 Agenda or communicate more on their contributions to specific SDGs. Overall, this study shows that there is a case for VSS to improve their contributions, especially towards a certain set of SDGs, or increase their reporting if they are already contributing- and provide more transparent information.

The **second research question** highlights factors that motivate the VSS bodies to engage with the SDGs. Firstly, the experience of having contributed to the MDGs was highlighted as an inspiration to engage with the SDGs. Some VSS organizations also made efforts to adapt to the SDGs and modify their functioning and/or requirements post-2015. i.e., after the UN released the 2030 Agenda. Other motivating factors included collaboration, the need to establish legitimacy and credibility, external pressure from consumers and the market push, escalated/more accessible access to financing, SDGs as a benchmarking tool, and communication purposes. Each of these factors was brought forth by VSS organization leaders interviewed from almost all VSS sectors. Though the results might not apply to all VSS, they provide an overview and an insight into the driving factors for the VSS-SDG engagement.

The **third research question** brings light to the fact that VSS, which have a governance system in place and have a leadership more focussed or aware about the SDGs, are inclined to contribute to or align with the SDGs. A push towards the SDGs coming from top management is undoubtedly one factor that influences the engagement even for the future. In addition, the question also shows that leaders mostly see the VSS organizations as being imperative to the achievement of the 2030 Agenda and believe that VSS could play a crucial role, especially given their nature of operation across supply chains.

## **Contributions and recommendations for future research**

The **contributions** of the thesis are three-fold: The thesis contributes to the current state of knowledge about the VSS-SDG linkages. It explores these linkages beyond the formal requirements specified for certification. Thus, the thesis shows how VSS, through their organizational activities, and their functioning, contribute to and align with the SDGs. The thesis allows VSS organizations to identify gaps in their contributions to the SDGs through the preliminary classification of High-Linkage, Medium-Linkage, and Low-Linkage SDGs. They can further align their work towards those areas and help accelerate the transition to sustainable development. Secondly, the thesis explores why private regulatory governance systems interact with the SDGs and align with them. While research is abundant on the factors that motivate businesses and governments to align with the SDGs, the thesis is one of the first attempts at highlighting the motivating factors for private regulatory governance systems. The thesis also explores how the VSS bodies envision continuing this engagement and how the leaders of these VSS organization affect the growth of this contribution to the SDGs.

Further, the thesis highlights some challenges hindering the VSS-SDGs engagement that are discussed by the VSS organization leaders. These challenges can be a starting point for practitioners and policymakers to overcome and to increase the contribution of VSS to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Thirdly, the thesis looks into a topic that has picked up momentum, especially seeing the increasing reports from VSS bodies- the alignment of VSS and SDGs- and condenses the results from data into a conceptual framework. This framework further presents a framework for future interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary research in the domain of private regulatory governance and sustainable development goals- a topic on which research is scant. Through this, the thesis closes the research gap which it envisioned to do. In conclusion, the research indicates that VSS have the potential to contribute to the SDGs and there is a momentum among the VSS bodies to align with the SDGs. While the thesis illustrates these linkages, motivations, and the visions of the VSS leaders for the future engagement with the SDGs, there is still further research needed to prove the claims that the VSS make with respect to contribution to the SDGs.

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## Abbreviations

ABVTEX- Associação Brasileira do Varejo Têxtil (Association for textiles standard in Brazil)

ASC- Aquaculture Stewardship Council

CEO- Chief Executive Officer

EU- European Union

FSC- Forest Stewardship Council

GOTS- Global Organic Textiles Standard

IFOAM- The International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements

IISD- The International Institute for Sustainable Development

ILO- The International Labor Organization

ISEAL- ISEAL Alliance, the global membership organization for sustainability systems

ITC- The International Trade Centre

MSC- Marine Stewardship Council

MDGs- The Millennium Development Goals

MSI- Multi-Stakeholder Initiatives

NGOs- Non-governmental Organizations

PRTO- Private Regulatory Transnational Organization

RA-SAN- Rainforest Alliance's Sustainable Agriculture Network

RSPO- Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil

RQ- Research Question

SDG- Sustainable Development Goals

SERI- Sustainable Electronics Recycling International

SAI- Social Accountability International

UN- The United Nations

UNCTAD- The United Nations Conference on Trade and Development

UNFSS- United Nations Forum on Sustainability Standards

VSS- Voluntary Sustainability Standards

WWF- The World-Wide Fund for Nature

# 1 Introduction

The last three decades have witnessed a worsening of the world's environmental problems. We are in the middle of the sixth greatest extinction—the only one to be caused by humans. The role of globalization and industrialization in environmental degradation has been implored adequately, and it has been well-established that these two are critical pain points (Gobby et al., 2021; Rahman, 2020; Singh et al., 2009; van der Velden & White, 2021; Z. Wang et al., 2020; Zafar et al., 2020). Many efforts, including multiple regulatory strategies and international agreements, have been taken to mitigate the adverse effects of globalization and industrialization (Tröster & Hiete, 2018). Shareholder activism and interest over the years has led to the rise of many multistakeholder initiatives, and reporting voluntarily on sustainability issues has gained traction among businesses (Mena & Palazzo, 2012). Alongside regulations and shareholder activism, growing awareness among consumers and demand for sustainable products pushed global trade practices to comply with sustainable production and consumption standards. The growth in international trade practices is a key lever. This, combined with an increasing demand among consumers and willingness to pay more for sustainably produced commodities (Khandual & Pradhan, 2019; Shao & Ünal, 2019), obliges and encourages the producers to upgrade their capabilities and include product differentiation methods that reflect their good business practices.

Voluntary sustainability standards (VSS) have been a great asset in this respect. VSS focus on addressing environmental and social concerns in transnational production (UNFSS, 2018). VSS are multistakeholder initiatives that address the interaction between private actors, civil societies and governments and usually operate across national boundaries (Lambin & Thorlakson, 2018). They, therefore, fall under the umbrella term of private regulatory governance schemes, which is also alternatively addressed as, among others, transnational regulation schemes (Bartley, 2011), nonstate market-driven governance schemes (Cashore et al., 2004) and regulatory standard-setting schemes (Dietz & Grabs, 2021). VSS started emerging in the 1970s, and since then, they have been expanding across sectors like fisheries, agriculture, textiles and forestry (Marx, 2010; Smith & Fischlein, 2010). As their name suggests, VSS are voluntary— not required or mandated by the government authorities (Komives & Jackson, 2014). They can either be public, like the EU Organic Farming, or private, like Fairtrade (Blankenbach et al., 2020). VSS typically address sustainability issues at the production stage, which, in most cases, do not affect the nature of the final product (Blankenbach et al., 2020). Some examples of these issues that they aim to address are: greenhouse gas emissions in production, biodiversity conservation, labor rights, worker's wages, and local pollution (Blankenbach et al., 2020; Marx et al., 2017; Tayleur et al., 2017). They thus help consumers identify sustainable products and production practices, which is otherwise hard to determine by just seeing a product. Through this, VSS aim to drive sustainability and promote sustainable practices across global supply chains (Komives & Jackson, 2014). Each VSS has its own set of formal requirements, which further specifies criterion and actions that must be met to comply with the standard and ensure traceability of products (Bissinger et al., 2020; Komives & Jackson, 2014).

As shown in Figure 1-1, for selected commodities, an increase in the VSS-compliant commodities has been witnessed alongside the growth in international supply chains (Bermúdez & Perri, 2020), making VSS a popular business tool. Despite the much-debated issues linked to VSS implementation, like the costs and risks associated with their adoption (Gulbrandsen, 2014), VSS have more than often been considered a filler for the gap between the state regulations and global environmental policies, even though they were born outside the traditional international and national legislative, governmental frameworks. This gap is detrimental to the achievement of the SDGs (see Appendix 1 for explanation and list of 17

SDGs contained in the 2030 Agenda). The creation of the SDGs has laid 17 goals that the world as a whole must attain by 2030. These were created for nations but the SDGs also indicate the impacts that businesses and private firms can have in driving the sustainability agenda. The attainment of the SDGs, among other things, has created a need for businesses to be sustainable and reduce the negative impacts that supply chains can have, both socially and environmentally. VSS have been thus partners of these global supply chain efforts and sustainable businesses. Given their mandate and aims to improve sustainability in the sectors that they operate in, it is not surprising that ever since the adoption of the SDGs, there has been an evident increase in the reference of SDGs in the VSS schemes and other official publications and/or communications (Ugarte et al., 2017). It is indeed interesting to see how VSS have started to be linked to SDGs in UN reports and are also, in some countries, part of the implementation and reporting strategies for SDGs at the national level (UNFSS, 2018).

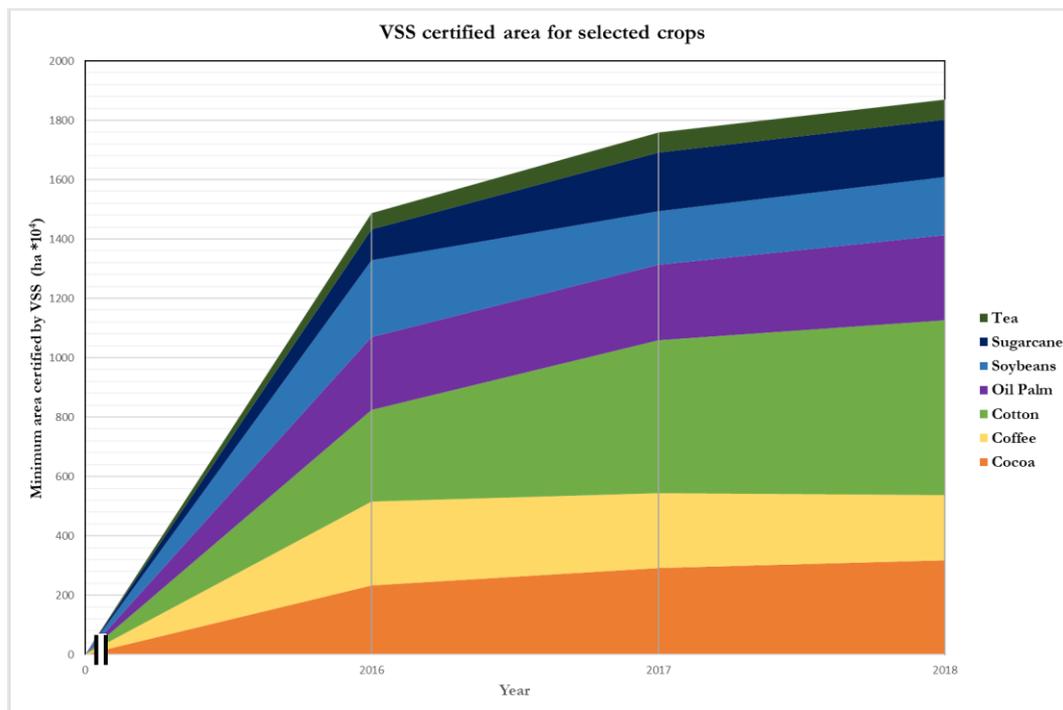


Figure 1-1 Growth in the crop area certified by VSS

Source: Own representation of data taken from ITC The State of Sustainable Markets reports of 2020, 2019, 2018

In the light of the aforementioned discussion, it is clear that there is a need to investigate the role of VSS in the context of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Thus, the thesis project aims to elaborate on the current linkages between the VSS and SDGs. The thesis will specifically analyze and condense information from VSS websites, several VSS publications, a survey, and interviews to understand patterns of links prevalent between VSS and SDGs.

## 1.1 Problem definition

The SDGs came into being in 2017 following a comprehensive and inclusive process undertaken by the United Nations (UN). The SDGs present a unique governance tool that provides a policy framework for sustainable development (Kanie & Biermann, 2017). To attain this ambitious agenda set in the form of SDGs, the UN has emphasized the critical role that businesses and

civil societies can play in advancing sustainable development, for example, via the adoption of responsible business practices like the incorporation of sustainable production practices within the supply chain (Brandi, 2017). Businesses and civil societies are also at the heart of most VSS, amongst other actors (Derx & Glasbergen, 2014; Pedersen, 2018). VSS are market-based tools that establish a set of criteria that relevant actors along the supply chain (like producers) must meet to facilitate positive social, environmental and economic impacts (WWF & ISEAL, 2017). VSS help consumers make sustainable purchases. VSS claims help set apart responsible products and services and simultaneously equip consumers with information about social, economic, and environmental issues. VSS allow consumers or buyers to differentiate the sustainable commodity, which in turn reflects one of the factors that push for advancing sustainable development or the SDG agenda. **Despite the commonalities in what they aim for, surprisingly, research on the role of VSS for achieving the SDGs is scant.**

Given VSS's broad relationship to sustainability, it becomes evident that there could be linkages between VSS and the SDGs. It is also apparent that VSS formal requirements should mostly align with SDG goals and targets. This has been advocated enough by even the UN organizations like UNFSS (UNFSS, 2018). A major recent study by the ITC shows that based on the requirements of the standards specified in the ITC Standards Map, there are "significant linkages" between VSS and SDGs, and 508 VSS requirements are linked to 16 SDGs (Bissinger et al., 2020). The study also points out that based on the criteria specified in VSS, crucial SDGs like SDG 13 (Climate Action), SDG 14 (Life below water), and SDG 17 (Partnership for the Goals) find very few to no links with VSS. Although there is flourishing academic literature on transnational governance interactions and public-private partnerships for sustainable development (Bäckstrand, 2006; Marx, 2019; Pattberg et al., 2012), there is **little systemic knowledge on VSS complementarity in the context of the SDGs** and information mainly exists as some grey literature (Bissinger et al., 2020; UNFSS, 2018; WWF & ISEAL, 2017). Most of the studies fail to provide an insight into the institutional linkages and do not go beyond studying what the VSS requirements or certification criteria reflect. They also do not look into the motivation factors for the VSS-SDG engagement and the role that VSS can play to advance the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The thesis aims to address this concern.

## 1.2 Aim and Research Questions

The problem discussion highlights that the role of VSS and their potential contributions to the SDGs can be explored in more detail to develop a greater understanding among academia and also the practitioners. Pursuant to this, the thesis aims to contribute to the following:

Firstly, the thesis aims to contribute to the broader discussion of the trend of alignment across public/private sustainable development interests. The thesis aims to contribute to a better-informed role that VSS play to advance the SDGs. The topic has garnered interest recently, and for anyone (be it VSS bodies, external organization, the government bodies or the consumers) to be able to leverage this relation, it is crucial to: a) contribute to the state of knowledge- identify what are these institutional linkages that VSS have, i.e., beyond their specified requirements, with the SDGs. This will help understand and appreciate VSS's intentional contributions, which might get skipped when looking at only requirement-based mapping. The absence/relatively low links of these crucial SDGs, like SDG 14, can undermine the efforts that VSS bodies might be making, for example, Marine Stewardship Council, which has been working to combat overfishing. b) understand what motivates these VSS bodies to contribute to the SDGs, given that the SDGs are a relatively new policy reality. c) understand what role VSS organization leaders play in this engagement, and the visions of VSS organizations for the future of this engagement with the SDGs as there are just eight years left to achieve the goals.

Second, the thesis aims to understand what makes VSS- SDG integration strong versus weak and what can be learnt from that for strengthening integration. It does that by critically looking at the role of leadership and by exploring the challenges faced in aligning with the SDGs. The thesis also contributes to filling the gap of lack of studies focusing on how all VSS contribute to or interact with SDGs and, consequently, outline future pathways for research into this topic. In the same vein, the thesis is also envisioned to help understand if there are any effects of the emergence of SDGs on the VSS. The theoretical lens for analyzing the information is based on the framework of the SDGs, the logic of calculated strategic behaviour of certification organizations (Grabs et al., 2020, p.8), and the dynamic capabilities theory (Barreto, 2010). The research done in the thesis can inform private standard-setting and public policymaking about the VSS-SDG engagement.

Against this background, the thesis investigates the role of VSS in the context of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development based on the following research questions:

***RQ 1: Which SDGs do VSS contribute to, beyond their formal requirements for securing a certification?***

***RQ 2: Why do VSS bodies choose to engage with SDGs?***

***RQ 3: How do representatives of these VSS bodies see their own role/ role of the standard body in contributing to different SDGs and a transition to sustainable development?***

### 1.3 Scope and Limitations

VSS have many conflicting issues and many plausible research areas. Subjects like the multiplicity of these standards and the sheer increase of VSS, especially in specific sectors like coffee, that has led to a lot of confusion among the producer/producer organizations, have been debated at length. However, these issues and debates lie outside the scope of this thesis as the thesis's focus would be to understand the VSS-SDGs linkage, and in that, the thesis will make use of the comprehensive VSS list described by the International Trade Centre's Standards Map (ITC, 2017) to conduct all the research for the thesis. The scope will be 270 standards defined in ITC Standards Map, from here on referred to as the VSS landscape, which cover fifteen sectors- agriculture, consumer products, electronics, energy, fish aquaculture, fish-wild capture, industrial products, jewellery, forestry, livestock, mining, processed foods, services, textiles and toys. As described previously, the thesis will look into the linkages beyond the level of formal requirements specified for complying with the VSS as that part of the study has already been undertaken by the ITC and published in their report. It is also important to note that the thesis uses SDGs and the '2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development' interchangeably.

Key limitations relate to the relative novelty of the idea of understanding VSS and SDG interlinkages. As mentioned before in Section 1.1., there is substantial research that focuses on interactions and contributions of the multistakeholder initiatives and private governance initiatives to the SDGs, but studies explicitly focussing on VSS and SDGs is scant. Due to time constraints, the thesis also assumes that the information provided by the VSS organizations on their websites and in the interviews is accurate and true. Meaning if VSS organizations mention that they contribute to a certain SDG, then it is assumed to be true as the time frame of the thesis does not allow to investigate each and every linkage mentioned. **The thesis instead aims to give a macroscopic view of the linkages as the first step towards research in this domain.** The theoretical framework and the coding structure for data collection and interview analysis are not directly taken from a single source. To understand them and derive meaningful

results, the thesis instead adopts a framework that is synthesized interdisciplinarily. Apart from that, methodological limitations are included in Chapter 3 and limitations of the research process are illustrated in Section 6.2.

## 1.4 Ethical Considerations

The thesis design is developed keeping in mind the criteria for research set by the ethics board review at Lund University and HIEE. It must, however, be noted that some key findings and results will be used in the project/paper that is being undertaken by Dr Clara Brandi from the German Development Institute and other researchers, along with the author of the thesis. However, this is not expected to influence the nature of results or conclusions as the thesis is independent and complementary to their project. Participants for the interview for the thesis were made aware of the collaboration and informed about how the interview results would be utilized. It is expected that this knowledge would not skew the results, and the interviewees would answer as per the best of their ability. The participants are also given a choice to demand anonymity, and permission is taken for recording and using their responses.

## 1.5 Audience

This study provides insights into what role the VSS and the standard bodies play in advancing the SDGs, illustrates the current state of linkages, identifies the motivations that drive these linkages, and outlines the role that VSS leaders play in accelerating the achievement of this linkage. The thesis results are anticipated to contribute to academic research and be relevant for practitioners. The novelty of this research on VSS and SDGs will outline pathways for future research in this domain. The availability and transparency of information on these linkages, the motivations and the role of leaders, will help VSS organizations and other relevant actors to identify synergies and gaps and potentially address some of the gaps- enabling a more meaningful VSS involvement in furthering the SDGs.

## 1.6 Outline of the thesis

The thesis is organized to have a logical flow. *Chapter 1* introduces the topic and outlines the research questions in light of the problem identified. *Chapter 2* focuses on providing the background and theoretical framework for the research. It gives a greater understanding of VSS- what they are, how they function, and a general overview; and an understanding of the SDGs or the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Chapter 2 also highlights the theoretical framework that the thesis adopts and explains each of the elements of the framework. Following that, *Chapter 3* reviews the literature available and underscores the research gap. *Chapter 4* describes the research design and methodology adopted for the thesis. It outlines the methods selected to collect and analyze the data, and reasoning for the same along with anticipated limitations. *Chapter 5* presents the results that are obtained by the analysis of data collected. Chapter 6 gives a discussion of the results obtained- presents a comparison with what is already known, and provides their relevance, and illustrates how results are synthesized into the theoretical framework. *Chapter 6* also reviews the limitations of the research design and presents the implications of the results for academia and practitioners. Lastly, *Chapter 7* provides a conclusion with a synthesis of results for each research question and provides recommendations for future research.

## 2 Background and Theoretical Framework

This chapter serves a dual purpose. It first describes the context of the thesis. It elaborates the background and disciplinary context in which research for the thesis is conducted, which is based on voluntary sustainability standards and the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda. The Section 2.1 thus illustrates definitions and concepts that are vital for the thesis. Secondly, this chapter discusses the theoretical context and framework that is used to answer the research questions. These are based upon the framework of Sustainable Development Goals, the logic of Calculated Strategic Behaviour, and the Dynamic Capabilities Theory as discussed in Section 2.2 and 2.3.

### 2.1 Voluntary Sustainability Standards (VSS)

VSS are frequently used interchangeably with ‘certifications’, ‘standard systems’, ‘eco-labels’, and ‘private standards’; however, the thesis focuses on the private voluntary sustainability standards (VSS). There is no universal definition attributed to VSS, but they most commonly refer to a standard systems that are **voluntary, private, multistakeholder initiatives** - often dominated and managed by NGOs and multistakeholder groups (Komives & Jackson, 2014). The emergence of private governance is seen by some scholars as a *response* to the lack of state-led regimes to address sustainability challenges, while others argue it to be a *cause* of the lack of state-led regimes (Jeria & Vera, 2014; Komives & Jackson, 2014). But more recent studies emphasize that private authority and public policy are co-constitutive (Cashore et al., 2021). The earliest standards, mostly private organic standards for agriculture like the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM), were seen in the 1970s (Paull, 2010).

The role of the 1992 Rio Summit and its emphasis on the development of multistakeholder environmental standards marked a crucial acceleration point for the development of these standards (Jeria & Vera, 2014). In parallel, Fairtrade labelling organization strengthened and the early 90s saw the development of standards for forestry, fisheries, agriculture, and labor- Forest Stewardship Council (FSC), Marine Stewardship Council (MSC), the Rainforest Alliance’s Sustainable Agriculture Network (RA-SAN), and Social Accountability International (SAI), respectively (Komives & Jackson, 2014; Marx, 2010; Smith & Fischbein, 2010). This then laid the path for *commodity-based standards*, like Global Good Agricultural Practices (GlobalG.A.P.), and later *commodity-based multistakeholder roundtables*, like Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO) (Jeria & Vera, 2014). Many VSS are *multi-sectoral*- they operate among multiple sectors, for example, Fairtrade works in the sector of textiles, mining, and agriculture; and many VSS organizations are *multi-standard* organizations- meaning they have multiple standards operating in either the same sector or different sectors- for example, Aquaculture Stewardship Council (ASC) has standards that address the different species of fish: ASC Pangasius, ASC Salmon, ASC Shrimps, ASC Tilapia.

VSS can be best defined as a “**set[s] of criteria defining good social and environmental practices in an industry of product**” (Blankenbach et al., 2020, p.3). All VSS have a ‘system’ which implies that *they are not just a set of standards with a mandatory list of practices and performances, but they go beyond it in order to drive a change* (Komives & Jackson, 2014). Komives and Jackson (2014), also describe the four market mechanisms that form a crucial part of the standard system: “*assurance, labels and claims, traceability, and capacity building*”, as illustrated in Figure 2-1. VSS are considered instrumental in transmitting this information from producers to the consumers, mainly via *labelling* (Fiorini et al., 2019a; Larson, 2003). They also have a wide range of *sustainability metrics*, which include not only environmental measures but also social aspects like labor rights and workers’ health. These standards seek to *create a market for sustainable products* and aim to *increase sustainable production and consumption* (Komives & Jackson, 2014). Through all

their elements, VSS seek to also help consumers and producers identify sustainable products and production practices, enable sustainable supply-chain management, and act as a viable market governance tool (Henson & Jaffee, 2004).



Figure 2-1 Four market mechanisms that form a part of the standard system

Source: Own illustration based on Komives and Jackson (2014)

In the market segments that these dominate, they have the potential to become de facto mandatory as they are now needed by most importing countries, which has allowed VSS to position as tools for accessing markets (Fiorini et al., 2019a; UNFSS, 2018). They have become a crucial component of governance of international trade and production (Fiorini et al., 2019a). In sectors like agriculture, VSS adoption has been argued to show immense potential to deliver positive environmental outcomes for global agricultural problems (Smith et al., 2019; Tayleur et al., 2017). Voluntary standards have more than often also been criticized for either being too-open/vague or being restrictive and not delivering desired outcomes and improvements (Christensen et al., 2017). Multistakeholder Initiatives (MSI), like VSS, have been argued to exhibit a policy-practice decoupling or a means-end decoupling which leads to no/negligible positive outcomes of their adoption as adopters do not fully implement the requirements specified by the MSI or do not aspire to go beyond formal MSI requirements and meet the goals set by the MSIs (Bakker et al., 2019). Another much-debated issue with VSS is their growing multiplicity (Henson & Jaffee, 2004; Schmitz-Hoffmann et al., 2014). Discussion on whether these standards act to foster competition or do they really add value, especially in comparison to other legal standards available, are also recurrent (Komives & Jackson, 2014). VSS systems have drawn criticisms but their growing popularity and growth in the certified commodities is reflective of the fact that VSS are now a reality and despite these criticisms, they have established a position for themselves and are here to stay. While this section provided an insight into these criticisms as they are crucial for the reader to get a complete understanding of current VSS systems, it is imperative to note that discussing these criticisms in detail or finding a solution to them is not the main focus for the thesis and this falls outside the scope of the thesis.

The exact population of VSS is dynamic, and varies depending on what database one is referring to and how often that is updated. There are certainly some well-established VSS but the VSS landscape is always evolving as new ones are being created. For the same reason, there are a

number of databases that exist. The EcoLabel Index<sup>1</sup> and ITC Standards Map, are an attempt to combine the information on VSS. As mentioned in Section 1.3., the ITC Standards Map provides a comprehensive database of over 270 sustainability standards and this database will be used as a basis for the thesis. The database is a free and accessible collection of verified and transparent information about these VSS (ITC, n.d.). At the time of the data collection and using the standards map for accessing the information for VSS, the map consisted of VSS from fifteen broad sectors and 270 standards operating in 180 countries. In addition to private standards, the standards map also has some public systems, like China Environmental Labelling Program.

## 2.2 The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

With the 2030 Agenda, the UN brings locus to the point that problems like poverty, climate change, gender equality, hunger, and health are interlaced. The 17 SDGs and the targets defined within them, are contained in the 2030 Agenda (see Figure 2-2 for the representation of the 17 SDGs and Appendix 1 for the full list of the SDGs and targets) and are arguably the result of one of the most inclusive proceedings, taking into consideration inputs from all segments of the society and all nations across the globe (Busco et al., 2018). The Open Working Group created for the development of the SDGs had a 30-member mandate, but was also open to other relevant stakeholders like businesses and civil societies (IISD, 2014). Being agreed upon by all member states of the UN in 2015, the goals became the world's agenda for sustainable development and a pathway to fight inequality, end poverty, and protect the planet (UN, 2015). The SDGs are in essence indirect successors of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Unlike the MDGs, which had the developing countries as their cornerstone, the SDGs are more comprehensive, both spatially and thematically, and aim to “leave no one behind” (Blankenbach et al., 2020). The 17 goals and 169 targets within the goals address the multiple complex challenges that the world faces today, and are better formulated in comparison to the MDGs which had problems due to siloed implementation (Waage et al., 2015).

The 17 SDG goals address many issues and exhibit interactions that might be implicit or explicit (Pradhan et al., 2017). For example, when looking at SDG 12 (Sustainable Production and Consumption), it can be seen that this goal links with SDG 1 (No Poverty), SDG 3 (Good Health and Wellbeing), SDG 6 (Clean Water and Sanitation), and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities) (Le Blanc, 2015, p. 7). Le Blanc (2015) describes this “*network of targets*” wherein the interactions among the SDGs and elaborated targets can either be positive- aiding progress, or negative- where progress in one goal area might lead to obstruction in achieving the other goals. Such interactions are imperative for policymakers, present a framework for integration across sectors, and highlight the challenges that various stakeholders might face – governments, businesses, civil societies, and others, to meet the sustainable development agenda (Blankenbach et al., 2020). This theme of coordination and interaction is also reflected in SDG 17- ‘Strengthening the means of implementation and revitalizing the global partnership for sustainable development’. Target 17.7 talks about the need for “effective public, public-private and civil society partnerships”. This *further reflects the need to have institutions in place that can foster the SDGs’ achievement* and have actors that represent specific issues and policy objectives (Prescott & Stibbe, 2015).

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.ecolabelindex.com/>



Figure 2-2 The 17 SDGs

Source: Taken from <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/news/communications-material/>

The SDGs present a unique perspective to global governance via the vital action of *'goal-setting'*. With their inclusive approach to *goal-setting*, *non-binding* and *non-authoritative nature*, and dependence on institutional arrangements, the SDGs typify the idea of *'governance through goals'* (Biermann et al., 2017). Biermann et al. (2017) put sustainable development goals as *'governance innovation'* and elaborate on facets like norm promotion, rulemaking, regulatory arrangements, multistakeholder agenda on goal setting and others- leading to the evolution of the SDGs- and show how it is imperative to bring the change from *'environment or development'* to *'environment and development'*. Having said that, while the MDGs drew the criticism of being focused on low-income countries (Sachs, 2012), the SDGs, even though being appreciated widely by policymakers and businesses because of the approach of linking sustainability and development, have been condemned for being *'over-ambitious'* (Aziz & Basir, 2019). *'Cherry-picking'* has been one common negative aspect of SDG implementation; wherein organizations selectively work on certain goals because it easily aligns with their work (Forestier & Kim, 2020; Valencia, 2016). Discussions and research agendas, like those put forth by the Global Goals Project (Global Goals Project, n.d.), have also been around the **'Steering effect'** of SDGs- which can be two ways- i) the effect of SDGs on the operation of nations/organizations/institutions etc. and ii) the idea that entities involved in the creation of the SDGs find it easier to implement the SDGs in comparison to others (Biermann & Banik, n.d.; Copernicus Institute of Sustainable Development, n.d.).

Overall, the SDGs present a very novel language of transformation to sustainable development. From the 1972 Stockholm conference to the adoption of the SDGs in 2015, there has been a resurrection of the idea of sustainable development and the concept of sustainable development in most sorts has been operationalized in the SDGs or the 2030 Agenda. SDGs came into being

after a long set of international negotiations, and they span across all the sectors that demand work to be done for achieving sustainable development, but the SDGs were developed mostly keeping in mind efforts aimed at countries at large (Robert et al., 2005). These are also now essential considerations for businesses and organizations- which are considered instrumental for achieving these goals by 2030. However, not all societal sectors, and thus all VSS, contribute equally to all SDGs. The SDGs, provide a converging point for all the development goals- climate change, biodiversity, poverty, health, and others, and have the potential to be ‘gamechangers’. These issues are at the heart of many VSS also. Despite the seeming match, it still remains to be seen precisely what SDGs do VSS link to, and what are the factors that motivate the VSS bodies to contribute to the SDG agenda, something which is a relatively new policy reality and certainly not primarily envisioned for the VSS organizations to contribute to. At the same time, while ‘leadership for the SDGs’ is a popularly discussed topic, the idea of the same remains unexplored in the VSS landscape. The thesis would make use of this classification, and the theoretical framework explained in the next section, to answer the following RQs, also stated in Section 1.2.:

***RQ 1: Which SDGs do VSS contribute to, beyond their formal requirements for securing a certification?***

***RQ 2: Why do VSS bodies choose to engage with SDGs?***

***RQ 3: How do representatives of these VSS bodies see their own role/ role of the standard body in contributing to different SDGs and a transition to sustainable development?***

## 2.3 Theoretical framework

The previous sections set forth the background in which the thesis is placed. They underline the problem and highlight the research questions. This section’s objective is to deductively expand on a theoretical framework that can help in understanding and elaborating the explanations for the research questions.

When consulting research previously done on private regulatory governance in general and VSS in particular, there is a wide range of theoretical perspectives that have been taken into account. This can be attributed to a growing academic literature that study these regulatory schemes, over the years. This includes studies that have been done by scholars from a diverse set of backgrounds. For instance, the VSS in the agricultural sector tend to be studied by researchers trained in the disciplines that are related to agriculture, like ecology, geography, or development studies (Grabs et al., 2020; Milder et al., 2015; Reynolds, 2000; Tayleur et al., 2017). More recent topics concerning issues like climate change, labor rights, and biodiversity- in relation to private regulatory governance- has drawn attention from political scientists, economists, and international relations (Abbott, 2017; Abbott et al., 2016; Dietz et al., 2019; Eberlein et al., 2014; Grabs et al., 2020; Marx, 2010; Widerberg & Pattberg, 2017). There is thus a multidisciplinary analysis of voluntary certifications and standards and that has also induced a plethora of theoretical perspectives (Grabs et al., 2020). As described in earlier sections, the thesis has its scope and limitations and not all academic logics and theories apply to the analysis of research questions that the thesis envisions to study.

The framework that the thesis adopts, starts with the concept of sustainable development and SDGs, and deploys the ‘dynamic capabilities theory’ (Barreto, 2010) and the academic logic of ‘Agent/synchronic: calculated strategic behavior (of certification organizations)’ (Grabs et al., 2020). It must be noted that these are selected assuming that other factors are not interacting

with the VSS systems and only their interactions with SDGs are being looked at. Through these, the framework addresses the research questions, highlights the motivations of VSS bodies to align with the SDGs, understand the role of leadership in VSS and the future for VSS contribution to the SDGs. The framework also assists in analyzing the data collected for the research questions and discerning the results.

### 2.3.1 The Framework of the SDGs

Before the SDGs came into existence, the report- ‘SDGs for a small planet’ provided a framework with themes that covered all the key sustainability priorities (Pinter et al., 2014). The report presented priority themes for SDGs, like Poverty and Inequality and Food Security, Sustainable Agriculture and Fisheries. It also identified a system of SDGs that could aid in its broader application at the global and national level. The report highlighted that the SDG implementation would require consideration of the interlinkages among different themes that it presents (Pinter et al., 2014). To set national priorities, research was done to thematically categorize the SDGs and a policy study done for SDGs for Netherlands illustrated the clustering of the SDGs into *concentric circles* (Lucas et al., 2016). Drawing on the same, another model- the ‘Doughnut model for the SDGs’- was given by Niestroy (2016). Niestroy (2016) gives the framework that can be used to visualize clusters of the SDGs. SDGs are clubbed under the categories represented in concentric circles as **“Natural Environment,” “Production and Distribution services,”** and **“Well-being”** (Niestroy, 2016) (see Figure 2-3.). The model has ‘well-being’ theme as the core and has the *‘people-centric’* SDGs (SDGs 1, 3, 4, 5, 10), followed by the middle circle that has ‘production and distribution services’ (SDGs 2, 6, 7, 8, 9, 11, 12), and then the outermost- the *natural environment* (SDGs 13, 14, 15) (Niestroy, 2016). While all three of them are represented in concentric circles, SDG 16 and SDG 17 are outside the circles, and are referred to as goals for ‘Means of Implementation’ (Niestroy, 2016).



Figure 2-3 The SDGs Categories in the ‘Doughnut Model’

Source: Own adaptation of the model presented by Niestroy (2016, p. 11)

### 2.3.2 The Academic Logic of Agent/Synchronic: Calculated Strategic Behaviour (Of Certification Organizations)

The academic logic of Calculated Strategic Behavior is a theme that is elaborately discussed by Grabs et al. (2020). This logic built on *'calculated strategic behavior' that either organizations, individuals or firms adopt and consequently make 'rational choices' or one that is based on a realistic evaluation of benefits and costs of probable outcomes* (Grabs et al., 2020) and this is one of the reasons that this theory is selected to understand motivations to align with the SDGs. This logic is 'actor-centric' and this view draws attention to both intentional and unintentional activities of the state, and how private regulatory governance systems can help to work towards tackling some failures or drawbacks in state's activities and what they are not being able to achieve. The logic looks at three broad categories- "Calculated strategic behavior of individual consumers", "Calculated strategic behavior of producing firms", and "Calculated strategic behavior of certification organizations" (Grabs et al., 2020). In their discussion on calculated strategic behavior of individual consumers, Grabs et al. (2020), discuss that theories either originate in the domain of political science or build on the economic theories of supply and demand and information signalling in the markets. These investigate state intervention as a mechanism to correct market failure for the "credence market" for eco-labelled or sustainable products and give this a positivistic and problem-oriented perspective. On the other hand, the logic of calculated strategic behavior of producing firms focuses on the advantages that any producing organization might have with the incorporation and enforcement of private regulation (Grabs et al., 2020). The framework build largely on game-theory and club theory wherein "*Voluntary standards are conceptualized as clubs that require firms to incur costs not required by law that lead to the production of positive environmental externalities which in return provide shared branding benefits to club members*" (Grabs et al., 2020, p.8).

Having briefly explained the first two categories, it is essential to note that the thesis will mainly focus on the logic of **calculated strategic behavior of certification organizations**. This logic looks at the certification organizations and VSS bodies as **'rational actors'** and are expected to perform activities to increase their organizational benefits (Grabs et al., 2020). The logic talks about variables that cause the proliferation and growth of private regulatory governance systems, their rapid expansion (like low entry costs and greater organizational flexibility) and *their urge to form alliances with the various intergovernmental organizations in order to have greater access to resources and legitimacy* (Abbott et al., 2016; Grabs et al., 2020). These factors are also explained with core concepts in regards to private regulatory transnational organizations (PRTOs) using the *organizational ecology approach* by Abbott et al. (2016) (see Figure 2-4.) wherein they show that there is a convergence of strategic and structural factors and reflect that institutions have a differing level of agency and comprise of a set of interconnected rules and practices which ascertain their behavior. The *organizational ecology approach* also suggests the other important aspects like the entrepreneurial nature of PRTOs, their tendency to collaborate, and the need for legitimacy (see Figure 2-4).

Further, the definition of organizations, with respect to private transnational regulatory governance systems, is given as "*Organizations are institutions capable of exercising agency*" (Abbott et al., 2016, p. 256). Another set of literature that adopt this logic focusses on how the standard setting organizations might need to focus on **capturing more market** and in that sense are bound to actively incorporate the needs of producers and consumers (Grabs et al., 2020; T. M. Smith & Fischlein, 2010) and this usually focusses on institutional shortcomings and most often neglect tracing of field-level impacts. Some studies also use this logic to elaborate on how these standard organizations are dependent on **external funding**- from both the government organizations and private bodies- and that might also lead to an "upward improvement" of standards (Bartley, 2007; Dingwerth & Pattberg, 2009; Grabs et al., 2020).

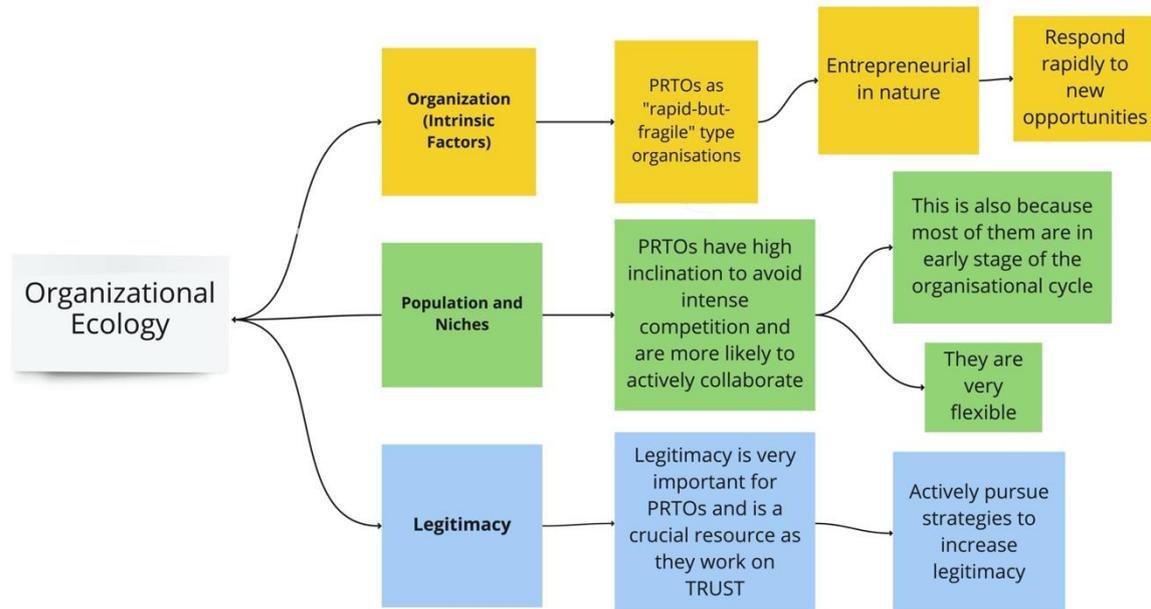


Figure 2-4 Visualization of Organizational ecology theory and concepts in relation to private transnational regulatory organizations (PRTOs) as given in Abbott et al. (2106)

Source: Own illustration based on Abbott et al. (2106)

In summary, the theorists that talk of this logic focus on how standard-setting organizations operate in ways where most of them still **work to establish legitimacy or authority** and there is still an influence of the state in their activities and thus the shadow of the state is still prevalent (Grabs et al., 2020). This shadow, Grabs et al. (2020) drawing on from Verbruggen (2013), say acts as a “gorilla in the closet” and guides standard setting organizations towards enhancing their effectiveness and this might also be instrumental for these organizations to be problem solvers (Grabs et al., 2020; Verbruggen, 2013). Along the same lines, the thesis would use this logic and try to explore the plausibility of the linkages of these standard setting organizations with the SDGs, which inherently is also a framework set-up by the UN with a focus on the state and goals that must be met primarily by the state.

### 2.3.3 Dynamic Capabilities Theory

Dynamic capabilities is defined as a “firm’s ability to integrate, build, and reconfigure internal and external competencies to address rapidly changing environments” (Teece et al., 1997, p. 516). This theory was introduced by Teece et al. (1997) and has gained a lot of attention in not only its original domain-strategic management, but also in other areas of scholarly studies like business administration and management. The dynamic capabilities theory picks up and expands upon the resource based view and suggests that in a swiftly changing environment, the capability of the company to dynamically alter and use its existing resources based on needs and opportunities, is more crucial for having a ‘sustained competitive advantage’ rather than just having resources (Teece, 2000; Teece et al., 1997). It is an addendum to the theory of resource-based view, which, while making least assumptions about the nature of the firm and its strategic behavior, *talks about the nature of firms* and explains how the identification of key resources of the firm leads to enabling the firm to have a competitive advantage and use those resources in the best possible way when an external opportunity presents itself (Barney, 1991; Grant, 1999; Heldt, 2020; Lockett et al., 2009). Examples of types of these resources might include financial, technological, human, and

their combination (Barreto, 2010). The way in which a firm uses these available resources is referred to as ‘*capability*’ (Barreto, 2010).

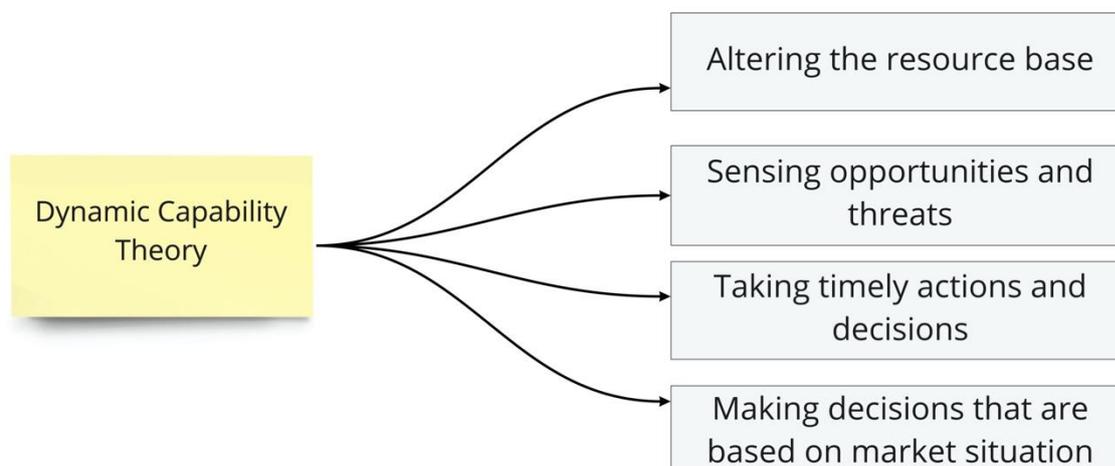


Figure 2-5 Four essential elements that dynamic capabilities exhibit

Source: Own adaptation based on Barreto (2010), p.217

The term “rapidly changing environments” in the definition given by (Teece et al., 1997, p. 516) has been contested, and it has been argued that the idea also holds for not so much dynamic environments and markets (Molina et al., 2013; Wang & Ahmed, 2007). This was later refined and it was acknowledged that the concept *does apply to any company in a global market* and not merely the ones that work in dynamic markets (Teece, 2007). Apart from that, the initial definition of dynamic capability theory’s concept drew criticism for being vague (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007) as it was highly debatable that resources alone could influence a company’s strategic decision and these decisions were also dependent on other factors like timing according to market orientation, which made it difficult to understand how resources were being turned into a competitive advantage (Morgan et al., 2009; C. L. Wang & Ahmed, 2007). In line with all the drawbacks that were pointed out, an amended definition was put forth, defining dynamic capability as “***the firm’s potential to systematically solve problems, formed by its propensity to sense opportunities and threats, to make timely and market-oriented decisions, and to change its resource base***” (Barreto, 2010, p.217). The definition gives four essential elements that dynamic capabilities exhibit (see Figure 2-5).

This thesis uses the definition given by Barreto (2010) as it seems better suited for exploring the answers to the research questions and comes across as less ambiguous in understanding the motivation of VSS bodies to align with sustainable development goals. This definition also takes into account the aspect of uncertainty- which is an inherent characteristic of many sustainability problems. The thesis makes use of this theory, which is in essence primarily focussed on firms, because it highlights why an organization would make rapid changes and how. Even though VSS are more than just firms, the dynamic capabilities theory can provide crucial insights into why VSS would engage with the SDGs. Previous applications of this theory in the broad domain of private regulatory governance have been sparse and are primarily focused on how industries like tourism are innovating for sustainability via the use of standards and labels (Dias et al., 2021)

and how they can be used in the food industry to drive a change beyond the sustainable agricultural activities (Miranda-Ackerman & Azzaro-Pantel, 2017). It has also been used in studies to see how selective firms in the food sector are ensuring that they meet customer demands and prove *transparency and traceability* (Beske et al., 2014). Applications of this theory also exist in understanding the adoption of new technologies, like remote sensing, in global supply chains (Heldt, 2020).

This thesis argues that in the domain of private regulatory governance, the shift and attraction towards sustainable development, the motivation to align activities to the SDGs, and an impetus among the relevant leaders in these VSS bodies, has the potential support towards elements of dynamic capabilities theory outlined above. It must, however, be noted that no previous study has reviewed the VSS-SDGs interaction considering the dynamic capabilities theory and thus it still needs exploration as to how it would combine with other factors to maximize the full potential of VSS contribution.

### **2.3.4 Alignment of Standard-setting bodies with the SDGs considering calculated strategic behavior and dynamic capabilities theory**

As already described in Section 1.2, there is a considerable momentum in observing how VSS might aid in advancing the SDGs. Despite it being relevant, the studies exploring the issue are not extensive. The thesis, therefore, aims to study that and argues that the overarching alignment can be understood first using the doughnut framework given by Niestroy (2019) and the categories of “Natural Environment,” “Production and Distribution services,” and “Well-being”. Further, the perspectives on calculated strategic behavior of standard-setting organizations and the dynamic capabilities theory could provide novel insights into why VSS are aligning with the relatively new policy reality that is set forth by the SDGs and what are the roles that VSS bodies, and their leaders could play in advancing this agenda.

The logic of Calculated Strategic Behavior provides a lens for- first, understanding the various factors that *might* have a role to play in driving the linkage of VSS and SDGs, and second, for *critically reviewing* how these factors might have a role to play and understanding what might be the possible extensions of already identified factors. The contingency variables present in the logic, like the need of standard-setting bodies to establish legitimacy, provides insights into how a VSS might be in a position to benefit from creating dynamic capability; and second to understand how VSS can leverage from aligning with the framework set up under the SDGs and understand the mechanism of alignment, if any. The elements present under the dynamic capabilities theory can be seen as a starting point for the alignment to happen, or alternatively, these can also be a result of the alignment and influence the SDGs that VSS prioritize. This will have to be evaluated from the data but theoretically, both possibilities seem plausible. The combination of both these logics will also help to understand the motives behind the alignment. Following this line of thought, the thesis also seeks to explore what role the VSS bodies envision for themselves in meeting the 2030 Agenda and consequently the role that VSS body leaders see in contributing to the SDGs. Overall, as discussed in Section 2.2, the framework also seeks to understand if there are any steering effects of SDGs on VSS. The resulting theoretical framework based on the above discussions is presented in Figure 2-6.

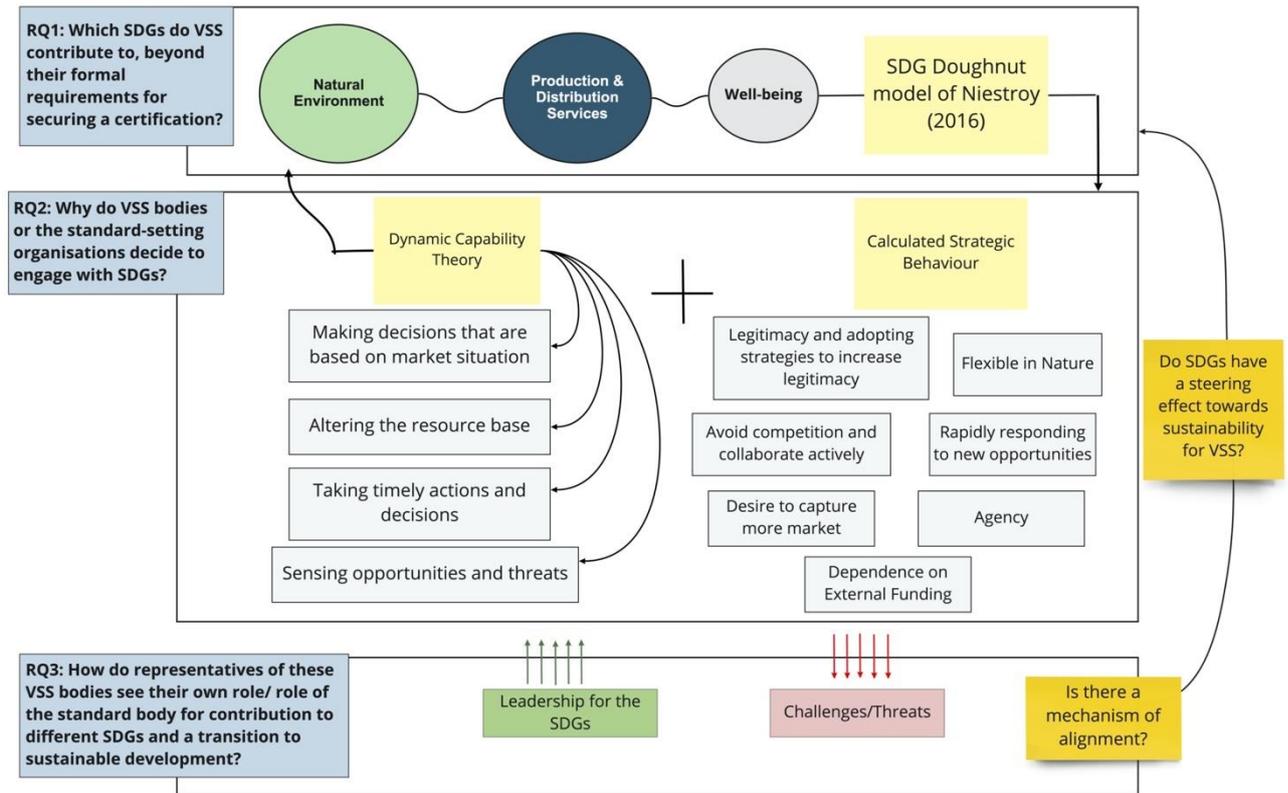


Figure 2-6 Theoretical Framework for understanding the VSS-SDGs linkages using the Niestroy (2010) framework for SDGs, the Dynamic Capability Theory, and the logic of Calculated Strategic Behavior of Certification Organizations

Source: Own framework based on Niestroy (2010), Grabs et al. (2020), Barreto (2010), Abbott et al. (2106), and Heldt (2020)

The thesis proposes that VSS-SDGs linkages can be understood using the framework presented in Figure 2-6. The SDG model, from Niestroy (2010), will allow to empirically assess and gain an overview of what are the SDGs, the SDG categories, and the focus areas that VSS tend to align themselves with. This will feed into the component of the framework that looks at understanding further what are the motivations among the VSS bodies. Drawing on the dynamic capabilities theory and the logic of calculated strategic behavior of the certification organizations, the thesis will aim to analyze the reasons that reflect why SDG linkage is gaining traction in the VSS landscape. Data will be analyzed to explore the role of VSS leaders in this alignment with the SDGs and understand what role do VSS organizations envision for themselves in attaining the 2030 Agenda. The framework also allows to see if there are any ‘steering effects of the SDGs’ on VSS (Copernicus Institute of Sustainable Development, n.d.).

Further, based on the analysis of the data collected, the thesis will also present an updated framework, if there are observed deviations/additions, in the Discussions Chapter (see Chapter 6), and would also highlight implications of the research results for academicians and practitioners, in Chapter 6.

### 3 Literature Review

This chapter reviews the current literature that is available on VSS, SDGs and sustainable development. Interdisciplinary literature is studied to gain an understanding of the extant research. The chapter also helps to build the context to which the thesis aims to contribute. Academic publications on VSS and SDGs are scant, but grey literature is not included at this stage.

The evolution of academic literature on private regulatory governance is marked by a multidisciplinary analysis of VSS that includes, but is not limited to, studies in law, economics, business, sociology, and ecology. Consequently, specific research on VSS reflects **interdisciplinarity**. Much of the extant research looks into a range of themes that fit into the concept of sustainable development, like improving working conditions within global supply chains or helping conserve biodiversity (Bennett, 2018; Piao et al., 2019; Solér et al., 2017; Tayleur et al., 2017). In the **political science research**, VSS are mainly studied for their design, emergence and expeditious growth (Auld, 2014; Fiorini et al., 2019b; Schleifer et al., 2019); the pattern of competition or coordination among them and other public regulatory bodies (Bartley, 2011; Fransen et al., 2016); and the legitimacy of the rule-making activities of VSS and the legitimacy of a ‘new mode of governance’ (Bernstein, 2011; Fiorini et al., 2019b; Marx & Wouters, 2018). From an **economic literature** perspective, the use of VSS reflects quality (of product or services). It is based on the assumption that consumers are willing to purchase and even pay extra for the products that exhibit “unobservable credence attributes that consumers cannot discover through search or experience” (Baron, 2011, p.1331). It allows consumers to get information on variables like social justice, fairness and other unethical business practices (Micheletti et al., 2008). Some studies also reflect on a collective action or ‘club theory’ or the fact that organizations join VSS as they produce club goods, provide reputational benefits wherein the members have the advantage of using the club’s brand as a way to communicate their environmental performance to consumers (Baron, 2011; Fiorini et al., 2019b; Mzembe et al., 2020; Prakash & Potoski, 2007). From an **ecology** strand of literature, VSS have been extensively researched in the agricultural sector and their impacts on the conservation of resources. This involves studying their effect on water usage, better irrigation practices, and other biodiversity conservation elements that most agricultural VSS address (Milder et al., 2015; Ruyschaert & Salles, 2014; Smith et al., 2019; Tschardt et al., 2015). Lastly, from a **sociological perspective**, VSS have been studied for working in a regulatory space for non-state actors and their effects on labour- social rights, worker wages, living conditions; and in general as an effort to bridge inequality (Bennett, 2018; Dietz et al., 2019).

It has been researched that private regulatory systems, like international certifications, have been increasingly undertaking the work that has been traditionally ascertained to be done by national governments; there is a complementarity of actions (Ponte et al., 2020). In particular, VSS have emerged as an *integral tool to advance sustainability* (Jeria & Vera, 2014). Much of the studies that focus on VSS and sustainability are aimed at seeing the impacts of VSS on smallholders, social justice, and worker’s wages (Bennett, 2018; Brandi, 2017) and on their efforts at aiding sustainable production practices and making supply chains more sustainable (Bitzer, 2012; Giovannucci et al., 2014; Hiete et al., 2019; Smith et al., 2019). Before the SDGs came into being, some research already had been initiated to look into how VSS can play an instrumental role and practically aid in translating the sustainable development vision put forth by the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Given their capability to improve the workers’ condition, they were considered, by the likes of the German Government, essential tools to combat poverty (Schmitz-Hoffmann et al., 2014). Schmitz-Hoffmann et al. (2014) also discuss how VSS demonstrate the possibility of making businesses sustainable and reflect that they were vital contributors to MDG 1- halving extreme poverty, MDG 2- providing universal primary

education, MDG 3- promoting gender equality and empowering women, MDG 7- ensuring environmental sustainability, and MDG 8- creating a global partnership for development. In addition, some studies have also looked into the role of global supply chains in meeting the goals defined under SDGs and the consequent adoption of voluntary standards and agreements for setting up sustainable management practices and ensuring sustainable supply chains (Thorlakson et al., 2018).

When we talk about VSS's role in advancing the SDGs, the available literature is exiguous. This **limited coverage of all VSS and their links to SDGs** in academic literature in contrast to grey literature (Bonsucro, 2018; Forest Stewardship Council, n.d.; Marine Stewardship Council, n.d.) is conspicuous given the aims that they have ascertained for themselves fall primarily under the categories defined under the SDGs. There have been some explorations on how linkages are prevalent on the level of requirements of the standards. Blankenbach (2020)'s study on 16 standards picked from the agriculture sector, forestry, and biofuels reflects that *there were linkages with almost all SDGs at the requirement level of selected standards; however, not all SDGs have the same strength of linkage*. The research highlights that VSS that were studied have strong linkages with SDG 2 (Zero Hunger), SDG 8 (Decent Work & Economic Growth) and, SDG 12 (Sustainable Consumption & Production). Further, it is highlighted that this might not be entirely surprising as *“such topics and areas are commonly associated with VSS”* (Blankenbach, 2020, p.25). The research further underscores that most VSS, at least on paper, require eradicating forced and child labor and refer to many labor rights, like fair wages, family-friendly policies, and increased participation of women. This is one of the reasons for VSS to be highly aligned with SDG 8- Decent Work & Economic Growth. While for SDG 12- Sustainable Consumption & Production, the high linkage can be reflective of the fact that many VSS have criteria and requirements that focus on annual reporting, audit and transparency of operations, and also the fact that VSS are working on improving procurement processes (Blankenbach, 2020).

Overall, it is suggested that *requirements specified by VSS seem to have many linkages with SDGs and related targets*. **However, it must be noted that some crucial aspects and areas of concern, like climate change, poverty reduction, and gender, appear to have not very strong links** (Blankenbach, 2020). In their flagship publication, UNFSS, 2019, highlights institutional complementarities among VSS standard requirements and the goals and targets specified under the SDGs. The study was done on a selection of 10 SDGs (SDG 2, SDG 3, SDG 5, SDG 6, SDG 8, SDG 12, SDG 13, SDG 14, SDG 15, SDG 17) and the sustainability indicators contained in the ITC Standards Map and found that most connections were with SDG 8 (Decent Work & Economic Growth), SDG 12 (Sustainable Consumption & Production), and SDG 15(Life on Land) (UNFSS, 2018). It also indicated the institutional design of VSS, geographic coverage, and willingness of businesses and governments to engage with standard systems are crucial variables that might play a role in influencing the contribution of VSS to the SDGs (UNFSS, 2018).

Unlike both the above studies that focus on selective VSS and selective SDGs, a more detailed analysis is given by the International Trade Centre (ITC). The ITC study maps 232 VSS and more than 800 VSS requirements and 17 SDGs and highlights that *VSS are linked to all SDGs*, with some SDGs having more prominent linkages than others (Bissinger et al., 2020). The analysis is done by connecting VSS requirements with the targets defined under the SDGs, with *linkage to be considered when VSS requirement's criteria were relevant for the SDG target achievement* (Bissinger et al., 2020). The report is from the perspective of SDGs, i.e., keeping the SDGs as the focal view. It shows that there are **“significant linkages”** between VSS and SDGs and indicates the number of VSS linked to each SDG based on the VSS requirements (see Figure. 3-1.). The report effectively advocates for the fact that VSS **“are tools that businesses can use to attain sustainable development through trade”** and also shows that agriculture is the

most covered sector, right ahead of textiles. Their mapping shows that *SDG 12 (Sustainable Consumption & Production)*, *SDG 8 (Decent Work & Economic Growth)*, and *SDG 2 (Zero Hunger)*, are the ones that display strong interlinkages across all VSS. It also explicitly shows sectoral arrangements, and for the leading *SDG-SDG 8*, agriculture-based standards display the maximum number of linkages. The report is crucial as it also discusses target-level interlinkages to rule out the possibility that only one or two targets drive strong linkages with any *SDG*. Interestingly, the report also briefly discusses the interlinkages within a country context, focusing on *SDG 8* as that was a leading linkage at the requirement level.

The ITC report illustrates that there are *opportunities for VSS to engage more actively in less linked SDGs, which are SDG 5, SDG 7, SDG 10, SDG 15, and SDG 16*. It is also surprising that despite the focus on many VSS being on addressing environmental issues, there are very few linkages with the *SDGs* that are focused on ‘Natural Environment’, like *SDG 13- Climate Action*. *In addition, the report also points out that there are very few or no linkages to SDG 13 (Climate Action), SDG 14 (Life Below Water), and SDG 17 (Partnership for the Goals)*, and it implores VSS to be crucial for these key goals. This, the report suggests, **could be because of lesser VSS in the domains pertaining to these SDGs or because the SDGs are designed keeping in mind a country context and not a business context**. The report also says that finding linkages is just one part of the story, and there is a need to go beyond the requirement level and also see what happens on the ground. The report concludes that VSS, via their power to create consumer awareness and initiate a demand for political change, are *in a strong position to aid SDGs’ achievement*. There are also some key recommendations for governments, businesses, business support groups, and standard-setting bodies for enabling VSS to make for a better governance ecosystem to aid in achieving the *SDGs*. In particular, for the standard bodies, the report recommends- i) VSS to improve their design in order to create more synergies with *SDGs* and tap into the untapped targets for linkages with *SDGs* and ii) VSS to have additional and complementary measures to help achieve *SDGs*.

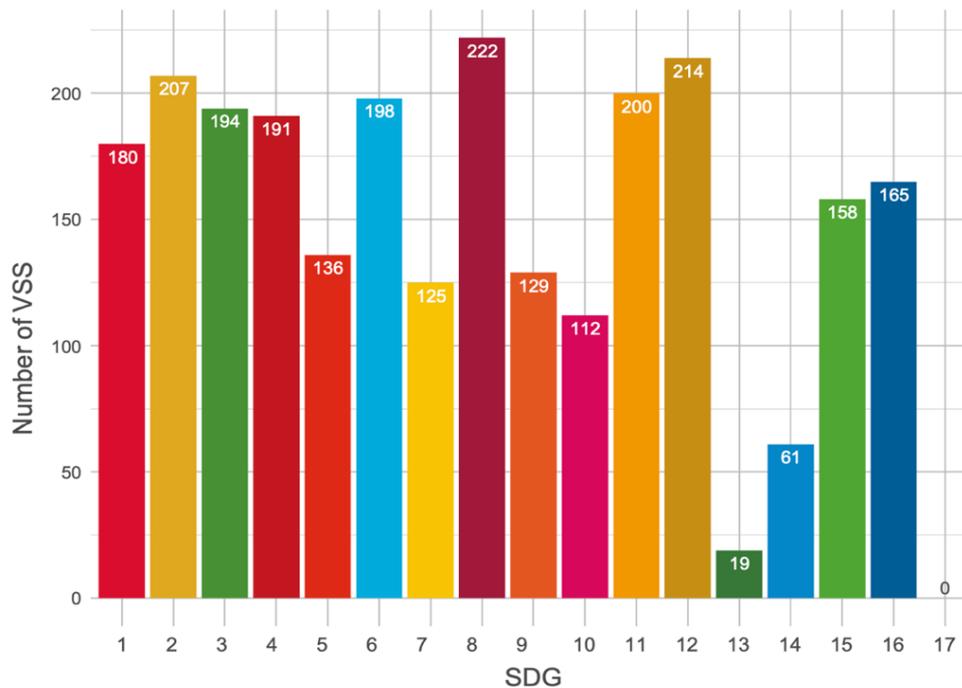


Figure 3-1 Number of VSS linked to each SDG, based on VSS requirement

Source: Taken from Bissinger et al. (2020), p.9.

Overall, VSS have been studied in various fields and have diverse literature in social sciences, political studies, business and ecological sciences. It is rather apparent that given the discussion of VSS about being a new governance tool, being used for ascertaining sustainable supply chain management/governance, aiding biodiversity conservation, and working to advance sustainable consumption and production practices- there would be definitive overlaps between the VSS and the SDGs. Despite that, it is striking that most studies (like Bissinger et al., 2020; Blankenbach, 2020; UNFSS, 2018) focus primarily on a particular set of voluntary standards or a specific set of SDGs, which makes it difficult to derive conclusions for the whole group or see general patterns. The recent studies (both ITC and Blankenbach) show links based solely on the requirements, reflecting the plausibility for the mapping to be purely accidental, creating a chance of missing out on crucial information that helps us identify **'intentional'** linkages. They also recognise that the gaps or lesser linkages might be attributed to the formation of SDGs and their 'state-centric' perspective, which might be inefficient to correctly identify what contributions VSS are making (Bissinger et al., 2020). It must, however be noted, that it is not *the mapping* done by these authors that is accidental, but rather the identified overlaps between the criteria and the SDGs. *To simplify, this means that when looking at only what VSS requirements specify, it is likely to skip what the VSS might be doing, for example- at an organizational level, to advance the SDG agenda. More so, it might undermine the activities of some VSS and bring forth incorrect or incomplete conclusions.* Additionally, almost no literature looks at what motivates these VSS organizations or private regulatory governance systems to engage with the SDGs, and there is no mention of how VSS bodies envision their role in advancing the SDGs in the coming years.

The literature review conducted in this section of the thesis suggests that there is adequate momentum around the idea of exploring how VSS might aid the achievement to the SDGs, and it can be anticipated that this discussion would only pick up among academicians and policymakers given the timeline to attain the SDGs is fast approaching, not to mention the least that the world is facing numerous global challenges like climate change and accelerated extinction of species. Additionally, in light of the current pandemic, and its associated economic and social consequences, there is a debate around the role that global governance initiatives like VSS play in advancing sustainable transition and helping "build-back-better" (Baliño, 2021; UNCTAD, 2021). A parallel expansion of the pre-existing interdisciplinary literature on VSS that includes research on links between VSS and the SDGs and follows a transdisciplinary method is thus considered valuable.

While the current chapter evaluates the literature available on the topic and elaborates on the themes and domains to which this thesis aims to contribute to, the next chapter traces the research design and methodology that the thesis adapts to produce its intended contributions.

## 4 Research design, materials and methods

This chapter elaborates on the research design and the logic used for this thesis. It describes the methods adopted for data collection and data analysis and outlines the reasons for selecting these methods and their limitations.

### 4.1 Research design

The research design follows three main characteristics of the research problem that dictate the flow of research. Firstly, a very limited study is available that explains the contribution or potential contributions of the VSS to the SDGs. Secondly, apart from the recent ITC Report (Bissinger et al., 2020), the available literature and studies do not encompass all the VSS under the ITC Standards Map and focus on popular VSS. Most studies, including the ITC Report, overlook that VSS are a product of interactions and do not exist in solitary and consider the relationship of VSS and SDGs only at the requirement and criteria level of the VSS. Additionally, most studies do not compare or study contributions towards also SDGs but a selective sample (for example, in Blankenbach, 2020; UNFSS, 2018). Thirdly, there has been very active advocacy from various organizations, like ISEAL and UNFSS, and the standard bodies themselves, to study the links or the contributions that VSS have to the SDGs and to further understand the impacts.

This reflects that a transdisciplinary thesis project focusing on empirically analyzing relations between VSS and SDGs, exploring the linkages beyond the requirements and criteria, and understanding the motivations behind the said contributions, could be helpful for both academia and the practitioners. To facilitate a change or a meaningful contribution to sustainable development, the thesis envisions understanding and illustrating not only the strong VSS-SDG linkages, but also the relatively weaker ones. This study can serve as a crucial step towards understanding where VSS bodies need to make more efforts. The thesis thus aims to fill the aforementioned gaps, which can be best done by describing the linkages first and then understanding explanations that drive VSS’s contributions, followed by an exploration of the role that leaders of VSS bodies play. The thesis follows a *mixed-methods* approach, and the three research questions described in Section 1.2 are approached as shown in Figure 4-1.

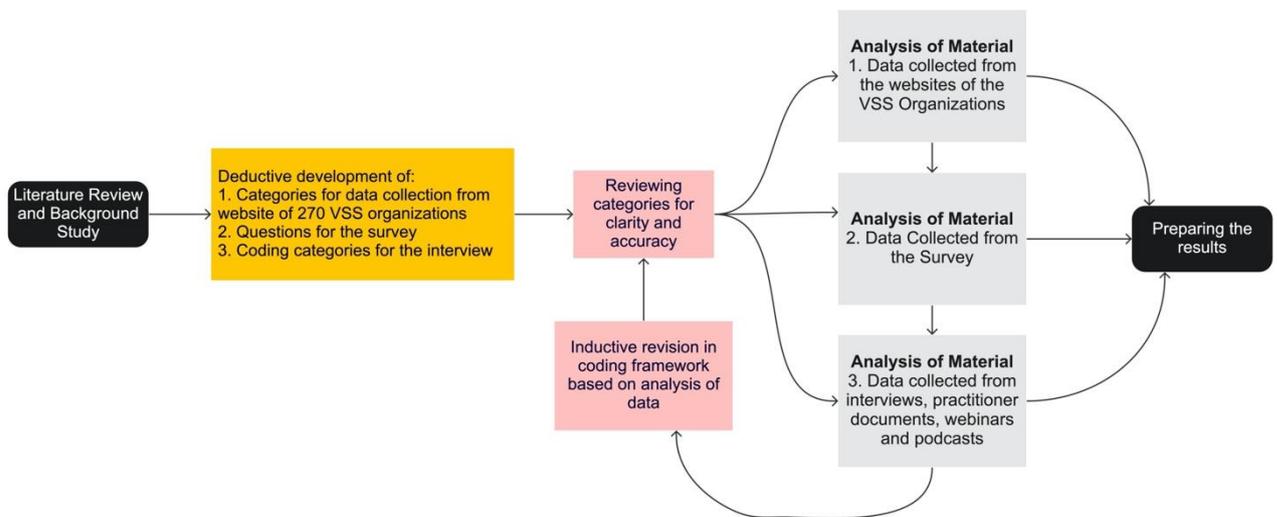


Figure 4-1 General flow of research process adopted for this thesis

First, a literature review is conducted, and the gaps are identified. Then, to get an overview or an overarching picture of what SDGs are linked to the VSS beyond the requirements, a large set (n=270) of VSS websites was looked for information. This large set was chosen to get a macro-level view of the SDGs being aligned and make an informed comparison with the results obtained in the ITC report by Bissinger et al. (2020), as described in Chapter 3. The limitations of the data being collected from websites, like the lack of updating of website, prompted the use of another method- survey. To capture the links with the SDGs, a survey was sent to the 270 VSS contacts that were available publicly or through supervisors. The survey instrument also included a few *open-ended questions* that could help understand the response to some questions and capture some noteworthy quotations. The survey also included questions developed deductively based on literature review and background study, based on pre-empted reasons for VSS to engage with the SDGs or highlight VSS leaders' role or governance mechanisms of VSS bodies.

Thereafter, an *explanatory* approach was followed- the quantitative phase allowed for the development of the qualitative phase and provided the basis for selecting participants for further qualitative research (Blaikie & Priest, 2019). The VSS organizations that responded to the survey were contacted for the availability of an interview. Only these were contacted as it was assumed that since they responded to the survey- a) they would be better positioned to elaborate on their responses and b) they would be more responsive to the requests. This allowed generating responses for both RQ 2 and RQ 3.

## 4.2 Methods used to collect data and materials collected

For describing and illustrating the links that VSS have with the SDGs, a *descriptive design* (Mayring, 2014) was adopted for the thesis. The first step was to scan and do a *content analysis* of the 270 websites of the VSS mentioned in the ITC Standards Map (ITC, 2017) at the time of data collection. *The ITC Standards Map was chosen as a basis for the thesis due to the following reasons:*

- a) The standards defined in the map satisfy the following criteria – they are not legally binding; they are not merely technical standards but also have environmental and social aspects in focus; and they have some form of governance mechanism (Fiorini et al., 2019a).
- b) Comprehensive nature of the Standards Map
- c) The time constraint of the thesis- which wouldn't allow studying more than 270 standard's websites.
- d) The author's familiarity with the database due to prior work experience.

Websites of VSS organizations were searched for information as that appeared to be the best way to get information from a large sample in a limited time. Further, it is expected that if VSS are engaging with the SDGs, there is a possibility of that being mentioned in some organizational report or on their website in one form or the other. The aim was to look for information and arrange it systematically according to Table 4-1. The categories for the data collection were formed after doing the background study, reviewing the literature described in Chapter 3, and after discussion with practitioners, i.e., a deductive category development process was followed, as also explained in Mayring, 2014. The material collected from this process was arranged in an excel file and is accessible at <https://www.dropbox.com/s/t6an080evpptsq/MegaSheet.xlsx?dl=0>, upon request. To understand the level of engagement at a sectoral level, this data, especially for the priority SDGs, was also analyzed for each sector in the ITC Standards Map.

Table 4-1 Categories of data collection from websites of VSS organizations

S.No.	Category for data collection	VSS data (example)
1.	Name of the Standard Body	Example 1
2.	Link	example_sdgs.com
3.	Website mentions any relationship to SDG?	Yes/No
4.	Are any particular SDGs in focus?	Yes/No
5.	If yes, which?	SDG 1
6.	Is it a self-established link to SDG?	Yes/No
7.	Is the link verified by a third party?	Yes/No
8.	Did they change the standard version to incorporate SDGs?	Yes/No
9.	If yes, mention any specific/noteworthy changes	Not found
10.	Do SDGs form a part of official compliance requirements?	Yes/No
11.	Do they, in particular, address production processes?	Yes/No
12.	Does the standard have indicators and measurement tools to assess VSS's contribution to SDGs?	Yes/No
13.	Do they have a specific governance structure that helps them steer towards the achievement of SDGs?	Yes/No
14.	Do they have workshops etc., to address alignment with SDGs?	Yes/No
16.	how explicitly they mention the synergies/trade-offs	Not specific
17.	Is the engagement institutionalised?	Yes/No

To add an additional layer of analysis and negate the possibility of skipping details due to content on websites not being updated, a **structured web-based survey** was conducted. The survey was sent to a database of 270 VSS organization through emails. Contact information was collected from websites and personal contacts. Three reminders were sent for the survey. The survey was designed using Google Forms. The survey was designed to complement the information collected as per Table 4-1, and understand and incorporate any discrepancies in the web content analysis. Additionally, it helped gauge the representatives' viewpoint and gave an insight into their behavior. It was also valuable as most information that Table 4-1 aimed to gather, could not be found on the VSS websites. The survey responses also served as a base for the interview questions for the VSS bodies. The survey questions are in Appendix 2.

The next step was to conduct interviews. **Semi-structured interviews** were conducted because of the following benefits (Barriball & While, 1994):

- a) It allows for exploration of the perception and opinion of the respondents. Therefore, it allowed the author to explore what the VSS bodies have to say about the critical issues and research problem that is the focus of the thesis.
- b) It allows to capture the thoughts of people coming from different backgrounds, or different set-ups, which was true for the case of the thesis as interviews were to be done with representatives of all VSS sectors, and some sectors might theoretically have more alignment and ease of contribution to the SDGs in comparison to the others.
- c) To ensure flexibility for additional questions.

Semi-structured interviews of 10 VSS bodies listed in Table 4-2 was conducted. The process for selection of the VSS bodies for an interview was based on the following criterion:

- a) The maximum effort was made to ensure *at least one VSS body to be interviewed from each sector defined in the ITC Standards Map* (see Figure 4-2 for the sectors represented in the ITC Standards Map) to maintain inclusivity and diversity of opinions and facts.
- b) VSS bodies who responded to the survey were prioritized for the interview process for reasons like ease of contact and a greater likelihood of response.

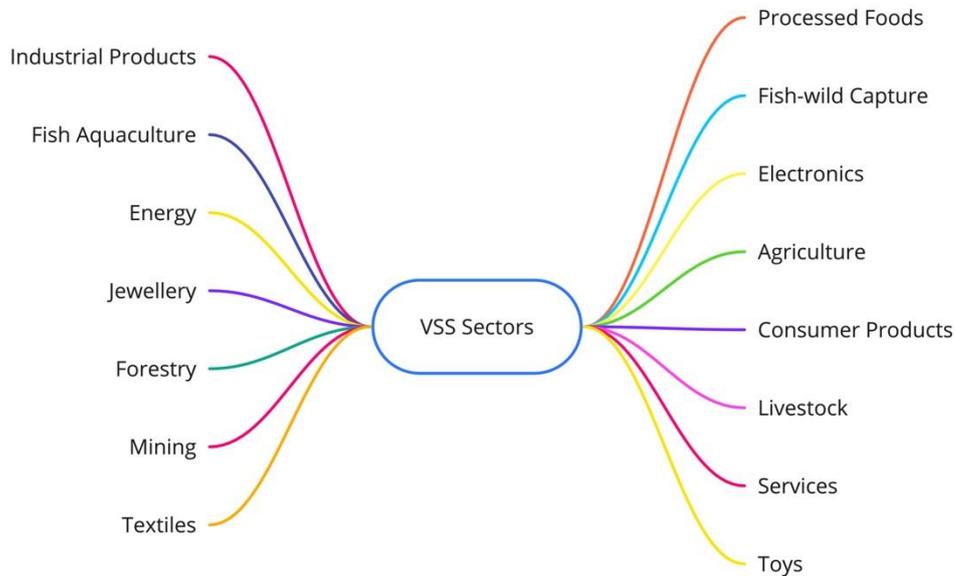


Figure 4-2 VSS Sectors as categorized in the ITC Standards Map

Source: Information from the ITC Standards Map (<https://standardsmap.org/>)

The information synthesized from website data content analysis and survey was analyzed before the interview. Questions were modified based on the need for specific details, like the engagement with a particular SDG or the lack of a governance structure. The interview guide (see Appendix 3) contained some pre-defined questions, and all measures were taken to ensure that the questions are non-leading, open-ended, and objective. The guide was also discussed with both the supervisors.

Each interview took around 45-60 minutes, depending on the availability of the interviewee. For data analysis, the interviews were recorded, and interview notes were taken. Transcription software was used for transcribing the interviews wherever recording was allowed.

In addition to these, documents were also consulted. This included reports and brochures, and other information, relevant to the topic, provided by the practitioners. In addition, some webinars and podcasts were also included to gain in-depth insights on what the current thinking on the subject is and what are the ongoing discussions. Interviewees also shared some relevant, unpublished documents before the interview. All of these mentioned sources were consulted before the interview and were also consulted for deriving results. For the list of documents, videos, webinars and podcasts, see Appendix 7. It must be noted that this list is not representative of all the documents available and is not exhaustive but is only the list of documents that the author studied to supplement the analysis.

Table 4-2 List of VSS organizations that were interviewed and their respective sectors

S.No.	Standard Body	Sector	Interviewee Role
1.	Marine Stewardship Council	Fish- Wild Capture	Director, Scandinavia and the Baltic Sea Region
2.	SERI - Sustainable Electronics Recycling International	Electronics	Executive Director
3.	The Brazilian Association of Textile Retail	Textiles	Executive Director
4.	Green Seal	Services, Cleaning and facility care products, including bath tissue, paints, coatings, stains, sealers, and personal care products.	Director, Science & Standards Department
5.	Fair Wear	Textiles	Country Representative- India
6.	Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO)	Agriculture	Research & Advisory Manager
7.	ProTerra	Agriculture, Fish-Aquaculture, Livestock, Processed Food	Managing Director
8.	Fairtrade International	Agriculture, Mining, Textile/Garments Carbon emission certificates (Fairtrade Carbon credits)	Development Policies Manager, Fairtrade Germany
9.	Global Organic Textiles Standard (GOTS)	Textiles	Representative in Germany, Austria and Switzerland
10.	Rainforest Alliance	Agriculture	Advocacy Officer and Senior Specialist, Science & Impacts

### 4.3 Methods used to process information

The data analysis was done in the following ways- The data collected through websites and categorized, as mentioned in Table 4-1 above, entered into a Microsoft Excel worksheet and then was analyzed also using the same software. Subsequently, the 'pivot table' function was used to collect data and assemble tables and relevant graphical representations. Apart from being relatively simple and cost-effective, Microsoft Excel provides the ability to handle, sort and analyze the extensive data set efficiently (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017; Ose, 2016). It was also a preferred medium of analysis due to the author's knowledge and comfort in using the software. The *same method* was used to *analyze the data collected from the surveys*.

For data analysis for interviews, qualitative content analysis was done using the NVivo software. Here, a deductively prepared coding framework was used (Appendix 4). This was based on the background study, the theories, and the literature review, and later inductively revised based on the data collected and analyzed from websites and survey. It was primarily focused on the research questions for the thesis. The coding framework was revised iteratively, and codes were also modified on a need basis (see Appendix 5 for revised framework). Based on the analysis from the website data, the survey, and the interviews, a conceptual framework of the relationship between the major themes and the factors that could answer the thesis's research question was synthesized.

## 4.4 Limitations

The methodology adopted for this thesis has a few limitations. Firstly, not all standards might get covered as the thesis is only focusing on the ones mentioned in the ITC Standards Map while there are also other databases available like the Ecolabel Index. The data collected from websites and the VSS documents that are publicly available is expected to provide a broad level of information. However, it is possible that some of the websites are not frequently updated, and the information about VSS bodies and their work is relatively old. Most websites also do not satisfactorily give insights into the impacts that the VSS bodies have in the field of SDGs, and all of the website/organizational documents do not provide information about the challenges that they might face or what their future engagement plans are for contributing to the SDGs. It is also assumed that the information mentioned on the websites is true – for instance, if a VSS body says that it links its work to SDG 1- it is assumed to be true as time limitation does not allow to investigate all the claims. Additionally, it can be hard to find negative aspects or inadequate contributions of the VSS bodies on the web.

Interviewing the VSS bodies is expected to fill these gaps, however, it can be difficult to schedule interviews with the relevant persons and also interviews with all VSS bodies, given the time constraints of the master thesis. To ensure richness of data and diversity of opinion, efforts were made to have at least one interview from each of the VSS sectors in the ITC Standards Map (see Figure 4-2). The problem of lack of contribution from VSS and any other negative aspects might still be difficult to bring forth in the interview and depends majorly on the interviewee's willingness to share. It also needs to be understood that the interviewees, like any other human being, are subject to cognitive limitations and hindsight biases (Blank & Nestler, 2007; Novakowski & Mishra, 2018). Outcomes of the interview are prone to social and interview bias in most cases, and interviewee/interviewer might give/take the interview based on what they feel is right, or the correct answer should be, or they will say what they think the interviewer wants to listen to (Blaikie & Priest, 2019; Chenail, 2011). These biases can be reduced by focusing the interview on both retrospective and current events and also via triangulation via other sources of information (Blaikie & Priest, 2019; Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007; Noble & Heale, 2019), which the thesis also aims to do through survey and website data content analysis, in addition to the interviews. It is essential to consider the implications that these biases may have as one of the aims of the thesis is to find the motivations, drivers, opportunities, and challenges that VSS might have for contributing to the SDGs. However, the fact that it is a current topic and most people interviewed are highly engaged with the subject, is deemed sufficient to provide a comprehensive picture.

## 5 Results and Analysis

This section provides results and analysis of the data collected. As described in the methodology section, the quantitative data is collected from the website of 270 VSS bodies as per the categories explained in Table 4-1 and the survey conducted. The qualitative data was collected through semi-structured interviews with top-managerial individuals in 10 VSS organizations and organizational reports and brochures. The data was triangulated using the information from the 270 websites, 54 VSS organization’s responses to the survey questions, 10 semi-structured interviews with VSS body members, 9 videos, industry webinars, and podcasts and 10 company reports, brochures and articles (the complete list of these documents is in Appendix 7). The chapter has the following structure, which is following the framework described in Figure 5-1. This framework is updated later according to the results obtained.

Section 5.1 provides an overarching view from data collected from 270 websites and helps to understand the findings for the central SDGs that VSS are aligned with and claim to contribute to through their work. This gives a broad perspective of the prioritization of SDGs among VSS. This section lays the foundation for understanding the further sections, as per the RQs outlined in the thesis in Section 1.1. Further, Section 5.2 highlights the motivations for the VSS-SDG alignment. The section also explores any pattern in the alignment, mechanism of alignment, and the steering effect of SDGs on VSS. This is further done by understanding various factors and exploring the themes that came up through interviews, survey responses, industry-relevant documents, webinars, and podcasts. Section 5.3 looks at the role of the leaders of VSS bodies and the pathways. This section is crucial for highlighting what ‘leadership for SDGs’ looks like and hints at the role that governance mechanisms within VSS might have to play in ascertaining what the VSS envision as their future contributions to the SDGs.

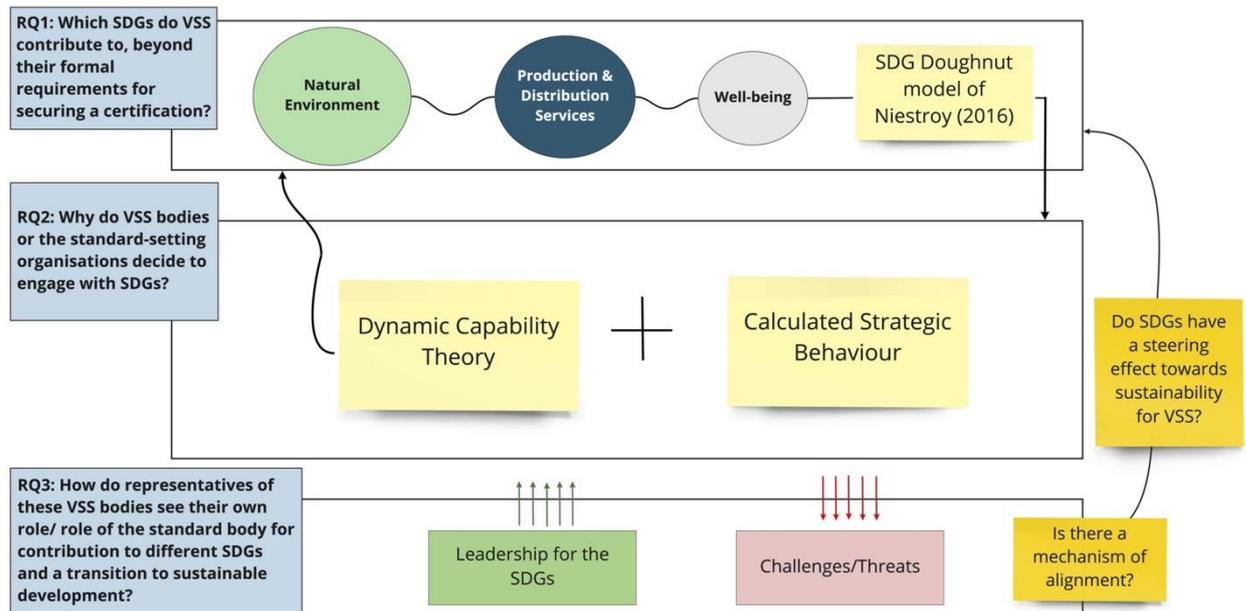


Figure 5-1 Illustration of the analytical framework adopted for the thesis

### 5.1 VSS-SDGs linkages-An overview

As discussed in Section 4-2, the websites of 270 VSS organizations (from the ITC’s Standards Map) were scanned. The literature review highlights some studies done on selected SDGs and selected VSS. The ITC Report, discussed in literature review, is the one that uses a large set of VSS to map the VSS requirements to the SDGs- the report has limitations due to the ‘state-centric’ characteristic of the SDGs and how they are defined (Bissinger et al., 2020). As mentioned earlier in Section 1-1, this thesis is an attempt to have a macro-level view of the SDG linkages and give an additional insight over the earlier works that illustrate the linkages only based on principle and criteria requirements of the VSS mentioned in ITC Standards Map that raises concerns about the identified non-linkages and gaps. The examination of linkages from the websites attempts to understand what VSS bodies are doing to align with the SDGs **intentionally** and at an organizational level. It is further also an attempt to depict the overall picture for all VSS bodies and not just limit the analysis to a particular set of VSS or a certain set of SDGs.

Out of 270 VSS, 136, i.e., almost 50%, have no mention of SDGs. However, it must be noted that this does not reflect for certain that they do not contribute to or align their activities with the SDGs. The absence of a mention can be due to many factors, such as a lack of updating of the website or the absence of a website altogether. For the remaining 50% of the VSS organizations that mention links to SDGs, the graph in Figure 5-2 shows the results. The leading SDGs that VSS organizations have mentioned to be contributing to are *SDG 12- Responsible Production and Consumption*, *SDG 8- Decent Work and Economic Growth* and *SDG 15- Life on Land*. This is similar to results produced by the UNFSS study and the ITC Study- for UNFSS one, the leading SDGs were SDG 12, SDG 8, and SDG 15; while for the ITC one, they were SDG 2, SDG 12, and SDG 8 (Bissinger et al., 2020; UNFSS, 2018).

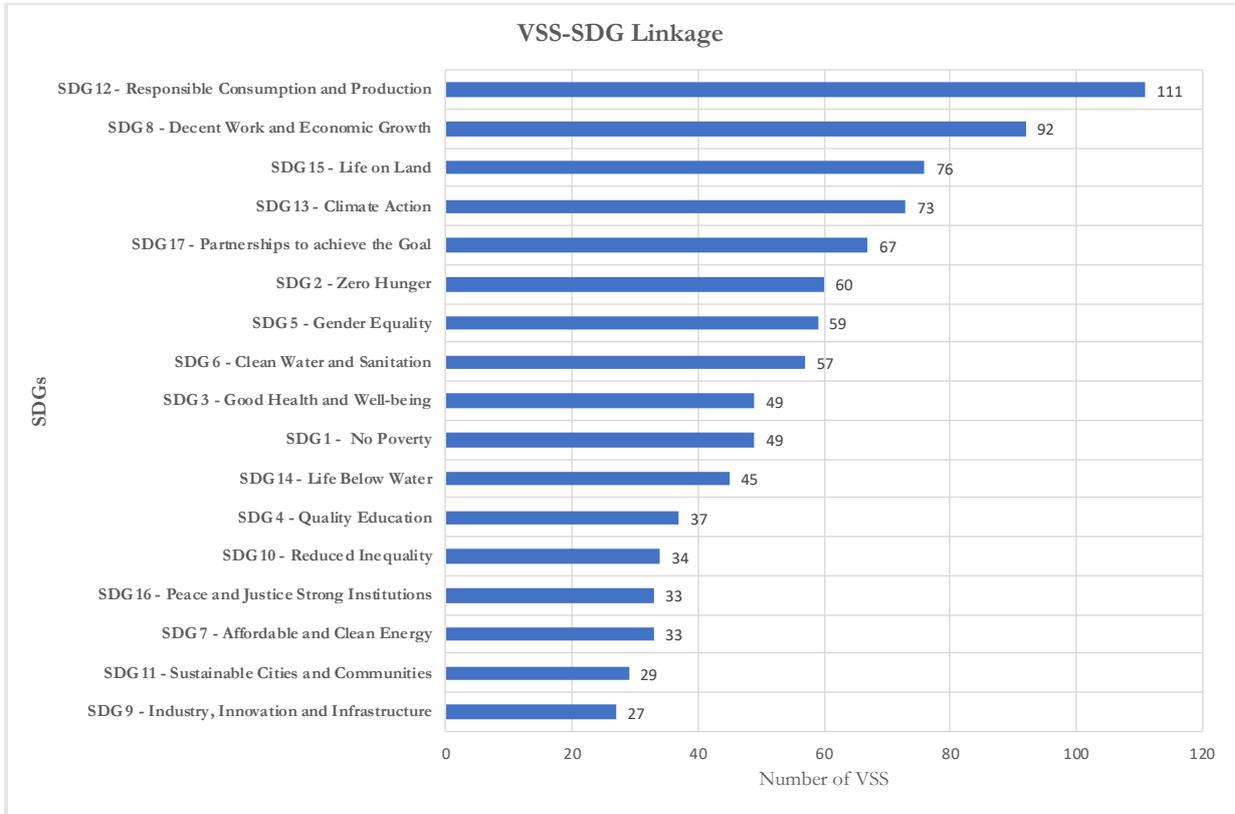


Figure 5-2 Number of VSS linked to specific SDGs (based on data collected from 270 VSS websites)

While an absence of mention on the website does not reflect the lack of work towards SDGs, a presence of the mention on the website for certain is reflective of a conscious effort on the part of the VSS organization to align with the SDGs. This, at the minimum, shows that at VSS organization in consideration is aware of the SDGs. They must have put some intentional effort, and some work to show some form of alignment on their public website. While this mention might not be a direct proof of activity for all VSS organizations, however, for the ease of data collection and availability, the website information and mention of links to SDGs is used as a proxy measure of data. Some VSS organizations, for example, Forest Stewardship Council, even have a whole section or a whole page on their website dedicated to their work towards the SDGs (see FSC, n.d.). Such VSS organizations show more than just a mention of the links to SDGs and try to prove some linkages also.

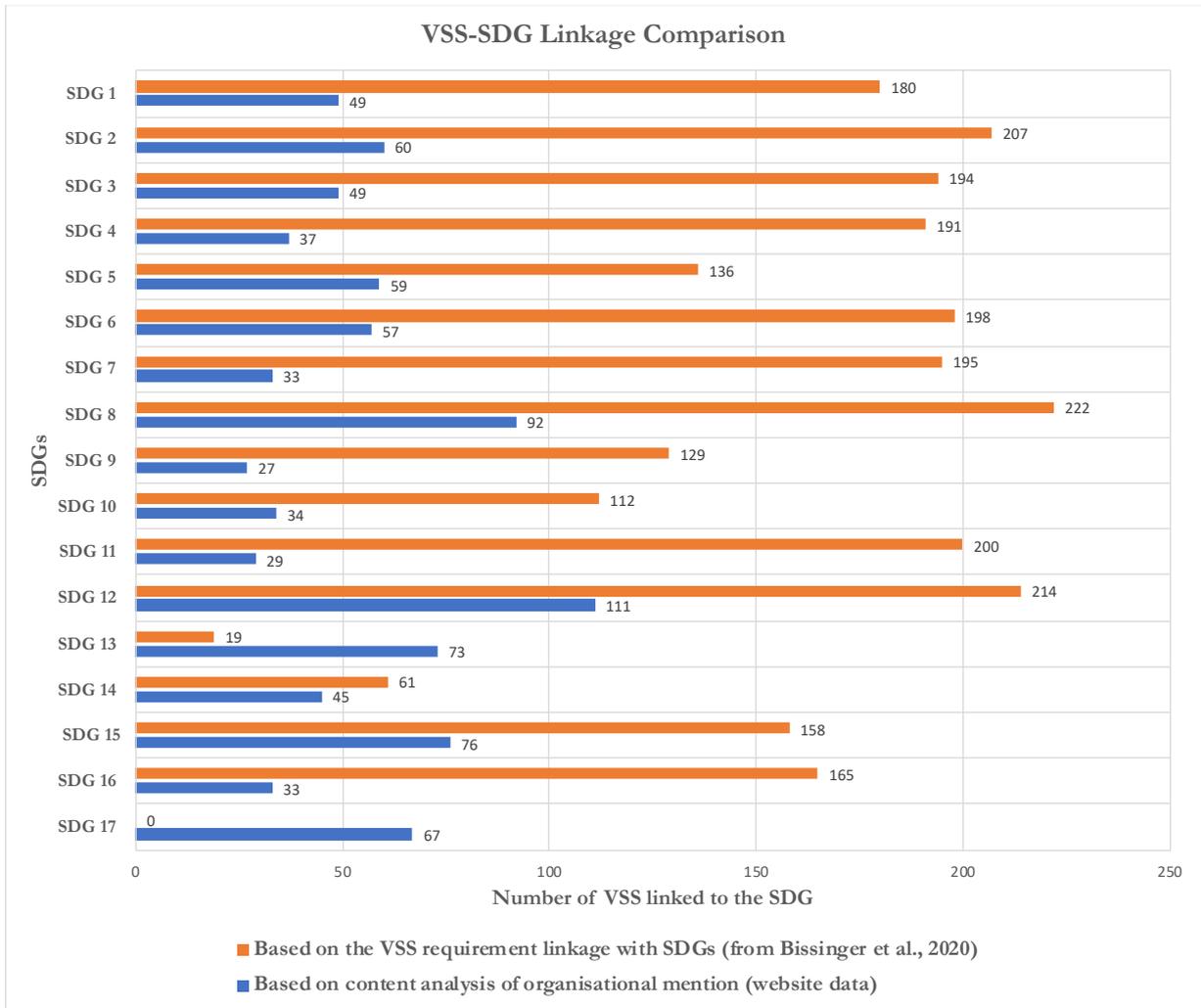


Figure 5-3 Comparison of the VSS-SDGs linkages based on mapping done considering only VSS requirements (based on Bissinger et al.,2020) and the linkages found when also considering the organizational activities and other initiatives that VSS bodies undertake (based on web data analysis)

As described in the literature review, Section 3, the previous study by ITC (Bissinger et al., 2020) mapped the VSS and SDGs based on the requirements of the VSS in the ITC Standards Map. In line with what the thesis aimed to investigate- the linkages beyond the requirements, Figure 5-3, helps to observe the key similarities and differences. There is almost the same pattern that both mappings have. The leading SDGs in both cases are SDGs 12 and SDG 8, and VSS directly refer to SDG 12 and SDG 8 on their websites also. For instance, Bonsucro mentions on its website that it contributes to achieving SDG 8 by ensuring workers' safety and having the lowest recorded farm accidents (Bonsucro, 2018). FSC indicates that it contributes to SDG 12 by providing consumers with a choice concerning sustainably produced timber for construction, furniture and thereby, the system specifically aims to contribute to the achievement of SDG targets 12.2, 12.6, and 12.8 (FSC, 2016). Similarly, for SDG 15- Life on Land, there are stronger linkages when mapping based on organizational activities. For example, Global Organic Textiles Standard mentions its contribution to SDG 15 via mandating the use of certified organic fibre, which in turn leads to reduced soil degradation (GOTS, n.d.-b).

Based on mapping beyond the VSS requirements (Figure 5-2), it is surprising to observe the low ranking of SDG 1- No Poverty, as VSS are believed to be critical tools to aid poverty reduction via their embedded practices that aim at ensuring higher wages, gender equality, food security, and increased market access for farmers- which reflect at plausible contribution to SDG 1 or poverty reduction (IISD, 2020). In the same vein, one would not expect to have a relatively low ranking for SDG 10- Reduced Inequality, given the fact that VSS requirements reflect at improving 'minority rights' and promoting 'no discrimination at work' (Blankenbach, 2020; ITC, 2017). Lastly, based on these mappings, there is still less alignment with crucial goals like SDG 4- Quality Education, SDG 9- Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure, SDG 11- Sustainable Cities and Communities, and SDG 7- Affordable & Clean Energy.

When observing **disconnects**, the mapping based on requirements shows high alignment with SDG 2 (Zero Hunger), while it is not so highly ranked in the mapping based on organizational activities and is relatively low. However, it is striking that while based on the requirements, there were significantly fewer linkages with SDG 13-Climate Action, there are higher when we talk of linkages also considering what VSS bodies do beyond their specified requirements. An in-depth reading of the SDG 13 and its targets, as specified by the UN, discloses that one reason for the same might be the fact, as also suggested in the literature review, that like most SDGs, the targets for SDG 13 are devised in a way that is more inclined for nations to act upon. For example, target 13.1.: "Strengthen resilience and adaptive capacity to climate-related hazards and natural disasters in all **countries**" and target 13.2.: "Integrate climate change measures into **national** policies, strategies and planning" (UN, n.d.). While if we do not go only by language per se, VSS tend to make many efforts to align with SDG 13, as reflected in the mapping based on the website. This is also in line with studies done to explore the potential of VSS to mitigate climate change (Potts, 2012). One more example of VSS contributing to the SDG 13- Climate Change, is of Fairtrade - even though its main foci are on trade justice for smallholder agriculture, labor rights and workers conditions, it ensures a contribution to SDG 13 through helping farmers use their 'premium' (extra money for social or environmental projects earned due to certification) on projects such as tree planting, irrigation, and crop diversification (Fairtrade, n.d.). Similarly, if we take the case of SDG 14-Life Below Water, the low ranking of the SDG based on requirements specified by the VSS is because its targets lie outside the scope of what VSS aim to do, and there are fewer VSS that aim at working towards the issues that SDG 14 addresses. In that sense, it undermines the work of some VSS, like Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) or Aquaculture Stewardship Council, that are very active in this domain, and all their efforts are aligned towards improving fisheries.

There is also a stronger focus and linkages of VSS with SDG 17- Partnership for the Goals, which found **no linkages** based on only the requirement specified by the VSS. That also comes under the ambit of the SDGs being ‘state-centric’ and the SDG 17, along with SDG 16, to be more of an enabling goal for the other SDGs. But if we look beyond the language barrier, VSS have a strong focus on SDG 17 indeed and contribute to it. One example is of Rainforest Alliance, which states it contributes to SDG 17 by promoting alliances and working with stakeholders to improve livelihoods, conserve biodiversity, and achieve their goals for improving the conditions of farmers (Rainforest Alliance, 2020). This discussion also highlighted in the report by ITC, where they note that for SDG 13, SDG 14, and SDG 17, the targets are designed in a **“state-centric way that leaves little room for private governance action”** (Bissinger et al., 2020, p. ix).

Applying the results to Niestroy’s (2010) framework for the SDGs, it is seen that there are dominant linkages in the ‘Production and Distribution Services’ circle, with a representation of around 44% of total linkages (409 out of the total 931 linkages that were present). This includes all the linkages present with all SDGs in this circle- SDG 2, SDG 6, SDG 7, SDG 8, SDG 9, SDG 11, and SDG 12. This is followed by the circle of ‘Well-being’ which represents around 24% of total linkages considering SDG 1, SDG 3, SDG 4, SDG 5, and SDG 10. The last one is the outermost circle- ‘Natural Environment’ that has 21% linkages but also has only three SDGs- SDG 13, SDG 14, and SDG 15. Despite the overall linkages, it must be noted that *individually, the linkages with SDG 13 and SDG 15 are rather higher* (See Figure 5-2). Similarly, the SDGs in the category of Well-Being, or people-centric SDGs, like SDG 3-Good Health and Well-Being, are lower on priority. What is also striking is that there is a lot of mention of linkages to SDG 17- Partnership for the Goals, which despite being argued as an ‘enabling goal’ in Niestroy’s (2010) framework, is the focus of many VSS organizations.

Further, to analyze more in detail and look into *linkages at the sectoral level* in VSS, an analysis was done using the same data but according to the sectors given in the ITC Standards Map, as also explained in the Methods Section 4.2. The heatmap presented in Table 5-1 shows that again, SDG 12 is the one that finds most linkages. This is closely followed by SDG 8- Decent Work and Economic growth. This is true for almost all sectors that were studied and shows the focus of VSS. It is also observed that SDG 15- Life on Land, and SDG 13-Climate Action, closely follow SDG 12 and SDG 8. From the sectoral mapping in Table 5-1, it is interesting to see that some SDGs that might be obvious for some sectors are not always the ones that are main focus SDGs for the sector. For example, for the VSS in the agriculture sector, it is not SDG 2- Zero Hunger, that came out as the most linked to SDG, but SDG 12. SDG 2 for the agriculture sector was in fact the seventh most linked to after SDG 12, SDG 8, SDG 15, SDG 17, SDG 13, SDG 5, and SDG 6 (see Table 5-1). Similarly, except for Mining, Services, and Toys, SDG 12 was the leading focus SDG for all sectors. For Mining, Services, and Toys, SDG 8-Decent work and Economic Growth, was the leading focus SDG.

The data collected from the websites has inadvertent limitations. It might not be updated or it might just happen to be the case that the VSS organization does not have a website or does not have someone to manage their websites. There is also a possibility that some VSS organizations might be working towards contributing to the SDGs but just not reporting them on websites or publishing reports about the same. This reason prompted the need for a more direct response to be collected from the VSS bodies. As explained in the methods section, this was one of the reasons to conduct a survey that could help in collecting first-hand information from VSS body members. The results and analysis for the same are presented in the next Section 5.1.1.



Table 5-1 Percentage of VSS that are linked to specific SDGs in a given sector (Sector distribution is based on ITC Standards Map)

Sector  (As per ITC Standards Map)	Percentage of VSS that are linked to SDGs in the given sector																
	SDG 1	SDG 2	SDG 3	SDG 4	SDG 5	SDG 6	SDG 7	SDG 8	SDG 9	SDG 10	SDG 11	SDG 12	SDG 13	SDG 14	SDG 15	SDG 16	SDG 17
<b>Agriculture</b>	15.91	18.94	18.94	12.12	21.97	21.97	7.58	33.33	7.58	10.61	6.06	34.09	28.03	9.85	29.55	9.09	25.76
<b>Consumer Products</b>	16.67	16.67	10.26	14.1	16.67	11.54	10.26	25.64	6.41	10.26	8.97	42.31	25.64	11.54	26.92	10.26	17.95
<b>Electronics</b>	0	0	0	0	0	25	25	50	25	0	0	50	0	0	0	0	0
<b>Energy</b>	23.08	17.95	12.82	15.38	25.64	10.26	10.26	28.21	7.69	10.26	12.82	38.46	25.64	12.82	25.64	10.26	28.21
<b>Fish Aquaculture</b>	8.77	19.3	12.28	5.26	12.28	12.28	8.77	28.07	5.26	7.02	5.26	42.11	15.79	28.07	24.56	7.02	14.04
<b>Fish Wild Capture</b>	11.36	13.64	11.36	6.82	15.91	11.36	6.82	25	6.82	9.09	6.82	29.55	18.18	15.91	13.64	9.09	13.64
<b>Industrial products</b>	17.24	10.34	17.24	13.79	27.59	24.14	20.69	31.03	17.24	17.24	10.34	37.93	27.59	17.24	17.24	20.69	17.24
<b>Jewellery</b>	25	25	0	0	0	0	0	75	0	0	0	75	0	25	25	0	25
<b>Forestry</b>	30.77	20.51	12.82	20.51	30.77	12.82	15.38	30.77	7.69	15.38	12.82	35.9	28.21	12.82	23.08	12.82	23.08
<b>Livestock</b>	11.86	11.86	11.86	6.78	15.25	11.86	8.47	22.03	6.78	10.17	6.78	25.42	13.56	11.86	18.64	8.47	15.25
<b>Mining</b>	34.38	28.13	31.25	18.75	43.75	31.25	12.5	46.88	12.5	21.88	18.75	43.75	31.25	12.5	21.88	21.88	31.25
<b>Processed Foods</b>	18.18	20.78	18.18	14.29	19.48	16.88	6.49	27.27	3.9	11.69	10.39	32.47	20.78	7.79	16.88	12.99	22.08
<b>Services</b>	28.57	26.53	14.29	20.41	28.57	26.53	20.41	44.9	22.45	22.45	22.45	44.9	32.65	24.49	30.61	24.49	26.53
<b>Textiles</b>	14.86	14.86	14.86	10.81	17.57	14.86	9.46	27.03	8.11	12.16	10.81	31.08	18.92	10.81	13.51	13.51	14.86
<b>Toys</b>	11.43	14.29	17.14	8.57	17.14	14.29	8.57	34.29	8.57	11.43	11.43	31.43	14.29	11.43	14.29	14.29	14.29

Key for the table- Percentage of VSS linked to SDG:

	0-10		20-30		>40
	10-20.		30-40		



### 5.1.1 Alignment based on results of the survey

This section explains the analysis done using the data collected from a survey conducted with all VSS bodies. As described in Section 4.1, the survey was sent to all 270 VSS bodies. The survey was sent a total of three times to collect the maximum possible responses. In the 270 VSS bodies mentioned in the ITC Standards Map, most are multisectoral and multi-standard VSS organizations, meaning that one VSS body can have multiple standards and/or can be having one standard that covers multiple sectors. For example, the standard-setter Fairtrade International works in the sectors of Agriculture, Mining, Carbon Offsetting and Textiles and also has multiple standards like Fairtrade International Textile Standard and Fairtrade International - Gold Standard; Global GAP has GLOBALG.A.P. Aquaculture, GLOBALG.A.P. Crops, GLOBALG.A.P. Floriculture, GlobalG.A.P. Livestock, and GLOBALG.A.P. Risk Assessment on Social Practice (GRASP). For the analysis, a response from one representative of these organizations is considered as a response from all the standards that the VSS organization has. In total, the survey received 54 responses from VSS in 16 sectors (see Figure 5-4). Considering the multi-standard bodies, the responses represented 83 voluntary sustainability standards, and thus the survey had a response rate of 30.7%.

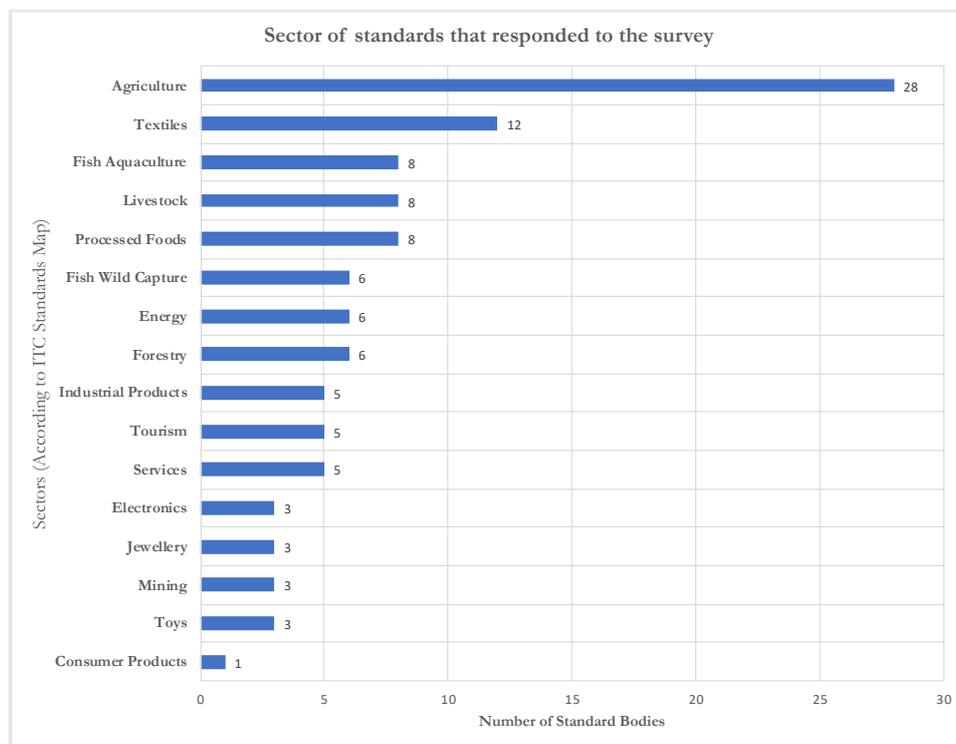


Figure 5-4 Sectoral representation of the VSS Organizations that responded to the survey

Among the respondents, 26 (48%) said that SDGs were **very important** for the work of their standard, while 19 (35%) stated it to be important, the remaining majority were neutral about the role of SDGs in their work. Most of the responses in the survey were filled by someone in the top management or in a leading position in the VSS organization. An important finding is that according to the survey responses also, SDG 12 comes out as the main priority SDGs among the VSS organizations that responded (see Figure 5-5). It is interesting to compare that based on website information and the survey responses, the leading focus SDGs remain still SDG 12 and SDG 8. It is also imperative to note that SDG 13- Climate Action, is also among the focus SDGs and is ranked relatively high. Despite that, it is also interesting to see that SDG 7- Clean Energy, is very low, despite the fact that energy is a key lever in climate action.

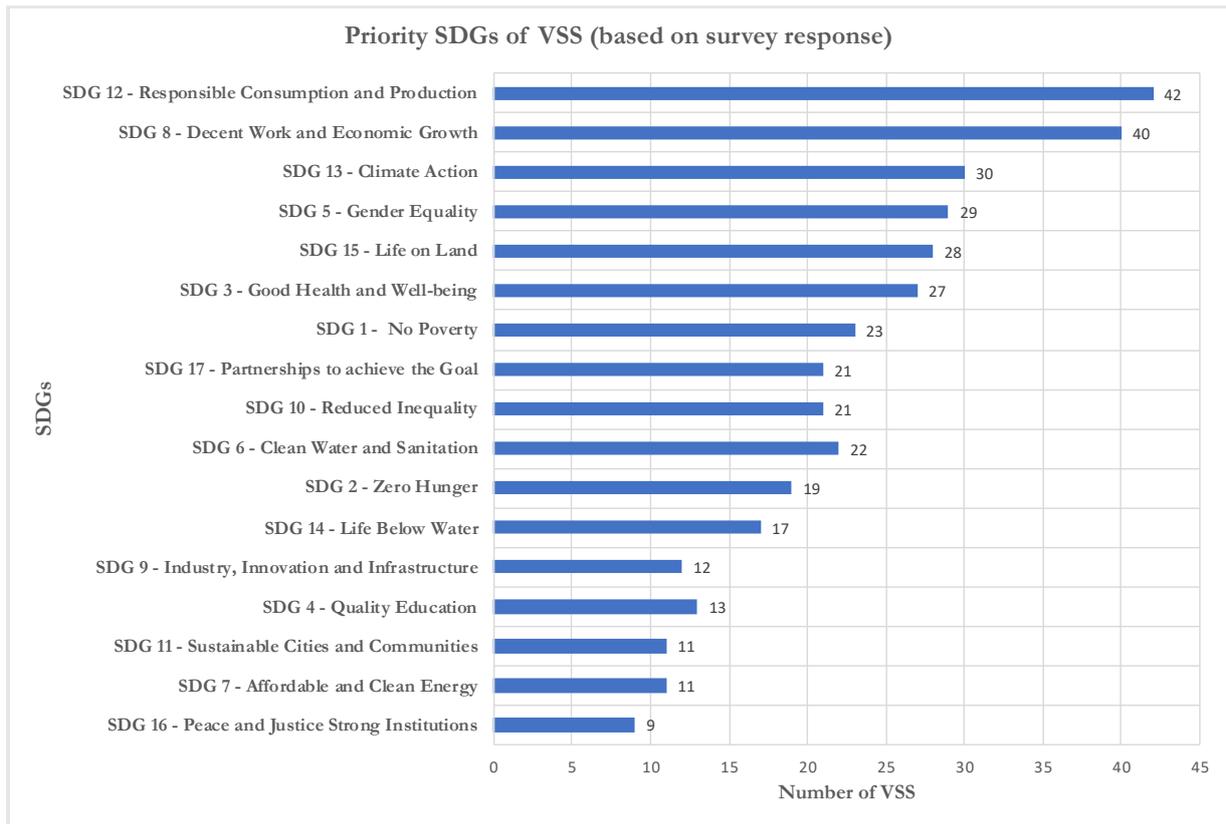


Figure 5-5 Priority SDGs based on the survey responses of VSS organizations

The results for VSS-SDGs linkages and the focus SDGs for the VSS bodies were similar from both the web analysis and the survey (refer Figure 5-2 and Figure 5-5). What the thesis aims to focus on, as explained earlier, is that there are some differences when looking at the linkage only based on requirements and the linkages that go beyond the requirements specified by the VSS. Some key SDGs, like SDG 17-Partnership for the goals, find no linkages at the requirement level but find linkages when analyzing beyond the requirement level (see Figure 5-3 for comparison).

Comparing Figures 5-2 and 5-5, the thesis proposes the following categorization for the VSS-SDGs linkages: **high-linkage SDGs, medium and low-linkage SDGs**. While it is clear from both figures that SDG 8, SDG 12, SDG 13, and SDG 15, are certainly among the top and SDG 4, SDG 7, SDG 9, SDG 11, and SDG 16 are towards the bottom- the others can be said to be having a medium level linkage- these are SDG 1, SDG 2, SDG 3, SDG 5, SDG 6, SDG 10, SDG 14, and SDG 17. This is illustrated in Figure 5-6.

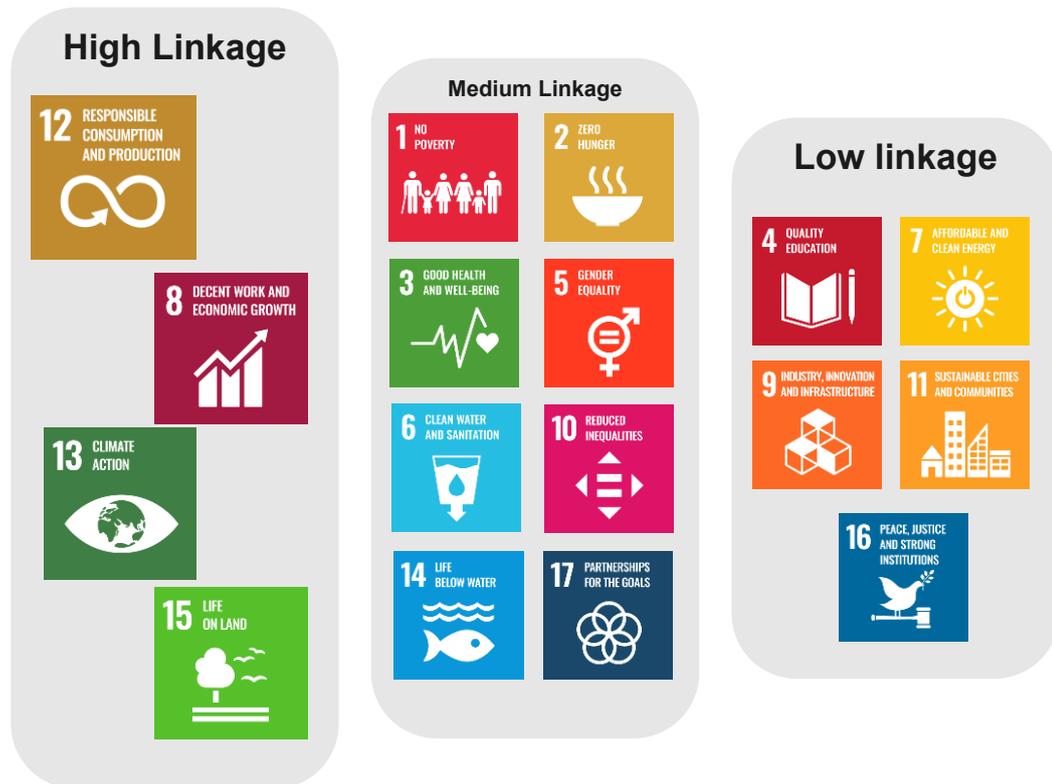


Figure 5-6 Illustration of the current VSS-SDG linkage based on content analysis and survey results

According to the theoretical framework, after understanding what are the main SDGs and getting an overview of the linkages in this section, the next section helps to understand why VSS bodies chose to engage with the SDGs and what are the motivating factors that drive this engagement.

## 5.2 Motivations that drive the VSS to engage with the SDGs

This section elaborates on the other findings that help understand the nature of VSS-SDG linkage in more detail. This section draws on insights from 54 responses received in the survey, the 10 semi-structured interviews with people in senior positions in the VSS organizations (refer Table 4-2 for the complete list), 9 industry webinars and videos, and 10 web documents (Appendix 6). In addition, it also contains some information from email conversations with leading persons of some VSS organizations. Wherever a reference to the interview has been made, it is highlighted in square brackets, and the code of the VSS body has been mentioned (Refer Appendix 3 for codes). Similarly, documents and webinars referred to are also mentioned wherever information is used from them.

Using all this information, the section continues from the overview that is provided in the previous section. It explores the motivations among the VSS organizations that drive the linkages. It looks at the motivating factors, the thoughts that VSS bodies have about the new policy reality of the SDGs, while also reflecting on the framework for addressing the research questions as defined in Figure 5-1.

### 5.2.1 Moving beyond the MDGs

When talking about the motivations to align with the SDGs, it is essential to reflect that the UN, before the SDGs, laid out the MDGs. As also discussed in the literature review, even though the MDGs focused on developing countries, some studies reflected the involvement of VSS and their efforts to contribute to the MDGs (Blankenbach, 2020). Before the alignment or talk about SDGs started picking up momentum in the VSS community in the recent few years, there were also some efforts that VSS organizations made to align with MDGs or make contributions and consequent alignment with goals defined under the MDGs, like eradication of poverty and hunger, and gender equality [RA, FT, FW]. Moving further from that, some VSS organizations had a smooth transition to the SDGs and could align their work with the SDGs and set goals in accordance with the SDGs, relatively more easily [FT].

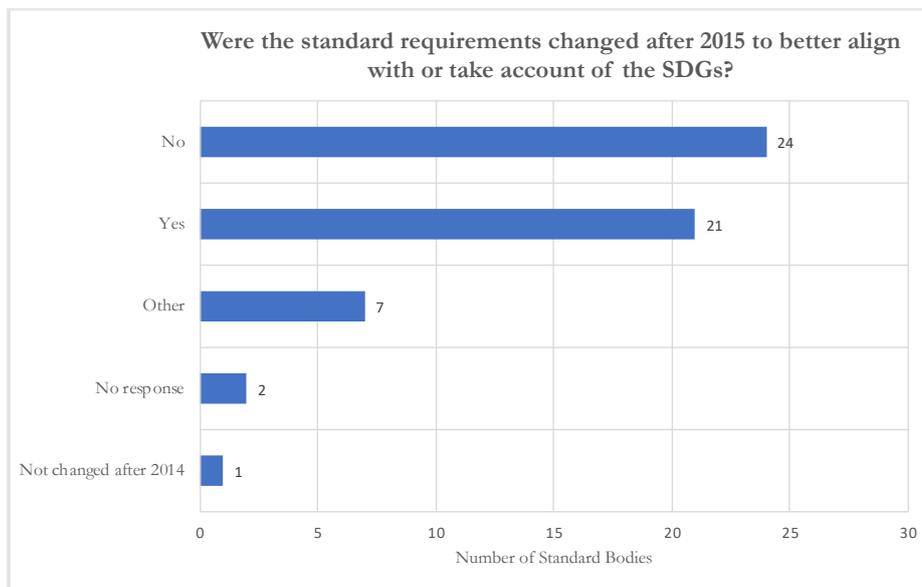


Figure 5-7 The distribution of responses of VSS organizations that took part in the survey, to the question of altering the standard requirements to incorporate the SDGs.

Given the fact that the SDGs succeeded the MDGs, it was also imperative to see if the VSS organizations made any changes post 2015, i.e., after the SGDs were adopted. The results from the survey indicated that 21 out of 54 (38.88%) respondents had changed the standard requirement in some way to better align with the SDGs or take into account the SDGs (see Figure 5-6). Further questions in the survey prompted the respondents to elaborate, if possible, about their response to altering the requirements to contribute to the SDGs. Among the ones that said **yes**, some concrete responses from respondents of the VSS organization (see Appendix 8 for web links of these mentioned VSS organizations) representatives include:

- *The Gold Standard Foundation* mentioned that they “evolved their standard to form Gold Standard for the Global Goals - whereby climate projects need to deliver against at least three SDGs.”
- *4C* reflected that “The structure of the latest 4C Code of Conduct and its requirements better reflects the SDGs and these are easy to recognize beyond most of the criteria. Apart from that, new criteria were included with the SDGs mind, e.g., ensuring food security and development of soil and water conservation plans.”

- *Biosphere Tourism* noted that they made a “shift from Millennium Development Goals to Sustainable Development Goals and they restructured compliance requirements to be certified Destinations and Entities, focused on all 17 SDG’s and their individual targets.”
- *Fairtrade International* mentioned that in the newest version of criteria goals related to gender have been strengthened, contributing to SDG 5- criteria changed from “developing a gender policy” to “developing and implementing a gender strategy”; *OEKO-TEX®* stated their “standards are updated annually to align with SDGs as well as other relevant requirements (e.g., mandatory wastewater testing for textile & leather producers).”
- *Textile Exchange* indicated- “We have a portfolio of standards all on different schedules, the most recent revision of the Responsible Wool Standard strengthened the alignment with the SDGs e.g., by an increase focus on climate and biodiversity along with the introduction of social welfare requirements.”

While these VSS explicitly identified what changes were incorporated, the others mentioned the inclusion of sustainability criteria, sustainability monitoring, and other such revisions being regularly made in order to take into account the SDGs. Some also mentioned that their prior alignment with MDGs was an advantage, and some had UN organizations as founding members who gave impetus to the alignment. The idea that entities involved in creating the SDGs find it easier to implement the SDGs in comparison to others has also been discussed in the context of nations implementing the SDGs (Biermann & Banik, 2020), also given the fact that these members were instrumental in shaping the SDGs in the Open Working Group that was formed for the creation of the SDGs.

Figure 5-6 also highlights that many respondents also state either that they did not change the requirements or marked ‘other’. Despite that, it is imperative to note that most of them stated that **they are in the process of reviewing their standard and are willing to incorporate the SDGs into their requirements or to want to align their requirements more with the SDGs in the upcoming versions of the standard** (e.g., Aquaculture Stewardship Council (ASC), Bonsucro, LEAF Marque, SOCIAL CARBON and Botswana Ecotourism Certification System by Botswana Tourism Organization). ASC highlighted that there are efforts within their organization to take into account how responsible aquaculture can best be aligned and address several SDG targets and indicators, and there is an endeavour to inform ASC governance about potential areas where eco-certification and meaningfully addressing SDGs on a global scale is possible in the realm of aquaculture. It is also crucial to highlight that some that responded as ‘no’ also commented that their standards did not need to be changed or modified as they were already aligned with the themes of SDGs and the problems it addresses, even before the SDGs came into existence, and hence did not find a need to make any alterations in order to align with the goals. The fact that some of the VSS bodies did not change or modify their working can be reasoned to be because of this prior engagement with the themes that SDGs address or can also be an important finding hinting that there might be the possibility that the contribution to the SDGs is just done for auxiliary benefits, such as marketing or improving their image. It stems from the discussion of SDGs being used as a ‘smokescreen’ (Biermann & Banik, 2020; Ho, 2020; Zeng et al., 2020). It also shows how some entities might be resistant to real change and adopt strategies of compliance (with anything, especially if there is no real consequences) only in words and for public relations.

These responses highlight the fact that **there has been a conscious effort in parts of the VSS community to align with the SDGs**. With many VSS already altering the standard requirements and others planning to move on the same path, it is evident that even though the

process might be slow as of now, there has been a clear recognition of the importance of the SDGs and the alignment is gaining momentum. For some, prior engagement with the MDGs was a factor that led to engagement with SDGs, for others their work just naturally found a fit with the SDG Framework and many others are trying to adapt their requirements based on SDG Framework.

### 5.2.2 Collaboration

As discussed in the literature review and also in Section 2.3.2 under the organizational ecology theory, it has already been pointed out that private regulatory governance systems tend to collaborate. The survey results also provided a flavor of the same as 48 out of 54 respondents (88%) mentioned that they collaborate and cooperate with other standard organizations. Bonsucro, for instance, mentioned about its cooperation with ISEAL, RSPO, Global Platform for Sustainable Natural Rubber (GPSNR), Better Cotton Initiative (BCI), AWS International Water Stewardship Standard, RA/UTZ, Sustainable Agriculture Network, and Roundtable on Sustainable Biomaterials (RSB); Textile exchange mentioned it works with GOTS; and Aquaculture Stewardship Council (ASC) mentioned that it shares a Chain of Custody programme with the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC).

One organization that was pointed at many times as an enabler for this kind of cooperation was ISEAL. Among the standards in the tourism industry, it was the Global Sustainable Tourism Council. In addition, 30 out of 54 (55%) responded to being active participants of external events that are linked to SDGs, like the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development or the International Convention on Sustainable Trade and Standards; and they were already a part of an organization or a network that is linked to the SDGs- most common one being ISEAL. When inquired in the interviews, a recurring point was made that an alignment with the SDGs is crucial for collaboration [RA, PT, FW, RSPO, SERI]. This collaboration is not only limited to VSS organizations working together but also for collaboration between internal stakeholders, governmental organizations, and private bodies [RA, FT]. Most standards have a multistakeholder approach, and they have programs that bring together NGOs, civil society, businesses and governments. For example, MSC standard runs various programs that work on joint participation of multiple sectors of the society and ensure the implementation of science-based sustainability principles, criteria and measurements of progress (MSC, n.d.-b). In such collaborations, conversations can be facilitated and made easier using the SDGs [PT, MSC].

The SDGs also provide common language/ontology. By providing commonly accepted and understood terms, definitions, and guidelines, SDGs also allow for easing these collaborations and making the working of the VSS more efficient by ‘avoiding the step of reinventing the wheel’ [PT]. SDGs have been considered as an essential and relevant tool for this kind of collaboration, and it was also pointed out that collaboration was crucial as nobody could attain all the goals under the SDGs while working individually [MSC, RA, PT].

*“...my basic vision for sustainability is that you never can achieve something, nor can you ever change big things alone. So, I want to work together, use existing standards, definitions such as the accountability framework and the SDGs... You don't have to redefine sustainability every time you do something. You have definitions and very good summaries of what the key topics are. And of course, none of them is perfect, but you have them there, so use the existing tools, use the existing definitions. And it helps companies, specifically when operating global supply chains, to use ILO conventions, SDGs etc., so that everybody knows what you're talking about. In the end, it makes it so much more efficient”* (Interview, ProTerra, Managing Director).

The role of collaboration is also considered crucial for the attainment of the SDGs. A point that was brought up was that collaboration is imperative as SDGs cover a broad range of goals, and while most VSS can directly contribute to at least 2-3 SDGs, together, they can make a bigger impact [FW, PT]. Additionally, being associated with the SDGs allows the VSS bodies to be a part of the ‘global effort’ to achieve the goals, provides guidance to direct the efforts of many actors, allowing them to progress to advance solutions to some of the most pressing issues that the world faces today [RA].

The points raised about collaboration also help understand the linkage with SDG 17- Partnership for the Goals, observed in Section 5.1 (see Figure 5-3). Most VSS members who were interviewed agreed to contribute to SDG 17 [RA, FT, MSC, PT, SERI, RSPO, GOTS, GS]. For example, Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) aids in the betterment of the image of tropical timber in Northern markets, therefore contributing to target 17.11, which advocates for improving trade from developing countries (FSC, 2016, 2019e). However, the contribution to SDG 17 is also not direct in most cases. That is also reflected in the mapping presented by Bissenger et al. (2020) (see Figure 3-1), where there were zero linkages with SDG 17 based on requirements. Instead, there are other ways in which standard bodies ensure their contribution and alignment with the meta goal SDG 17. For example, Fairtrade International has aimed to address the requirements under SDG 17, among other SDGs, in their ‘theory of change’ and one of its themes under its aimed outputs is “Increased networking and collaboration within and beyond Fairtrade around common goals” (Fairtrade, 2016, p. 18). Another example is SERI, which contributes to SDG 17 via knowledge sharing and convening those multi-stakeholder forums [SERI]. SDG 17, in the VSS landscape, also represents a call for stronger multi-stakeholder partnerships that enable the sharing and mobilization of resources – knowledge, expertise and financial resources- that can further aid in achieving other SDGs (Rainforest Alliance, 2020). The contribution of VSS to the SDG 17 is therefore driven by the formation of alliances, for example-between Rainforest Alliance and UTZ, bringing together organizations that can enable changes to address environmental and social issues (Rainforest Alliance, 2020). Reports also suggest how some standards might act as a catalyst for developing collaborative partnerships [MSC].

### 5.2.3 Legitimacy and Credibility

In sustainability science legitimacy and credibility has been defined and studied by Cash et al., (2003) (in the context of global assessment institutions). Credibility is stated as something that “involves the scientific adequacy of the technical evidence and arguments” while legitimacy as “reflects the perception that the production of information and technology has been respectful of stakeholders' divergent values and beliefs, unbiased in its conduct, and fair in its treatment of opposing views and interests” (Cash et al., 2003, p. 8086).

It has been claimed that the use of ‘credible’ voluntary sustainability standards can help businesses contribute to multiple SDGs and targets through their mechanism of advancing sustainable practices in their respective sectors (WWF & ISEAL, 2017). It is also claimed by some standards, like MSC, wherein they state that “The MSC and other credible standard setters have a key role to play in helping companies and governments to achieve the SDGs. We can provide best practice guidance for *‘what good looks like’* in a specific industry and create roadmaps for action” (MSC, n.d.-b). It is something that is yet unexplored as to how this alignment with the SDGs might be driven by the desire of these VSS bodies to prove their credibility. However, results from interview indicate that the alignment with SDGs is one way for the VSS to prove their credibility. As discussed in the theory Section 2.3.2, it is imperative for private regulatory governance systems to have credibility and legitimacy: “*It’s very, very important for an organization like MSC to get recognized by the UN*” (Interview, MSC, Director, Scandinavia and the Baltic Sea

Region). And an alignment with the SDGs allows them a medium to do that [MSC, PT, GS, FT]. It is also a way in which they want to show their drive for transparency, but still make sure that things move towards the SDG Agenda, slowly but steadily: “...And, of course, like being vigilant on sustainability, like where do we position ourselves with the standard? I mean, standard development is ongoing. It’s an ongoing topic, but it’s extremely technical, and it gathers global best practices, but there is a lot that we can do regionally and locally with engaging with other actors to drive progress. And just the topic of transparency, traceability, like where we have a discussion within the E.U. on putting cameras on board of vessels- And that’s how you move the needle. I guess slowly, slowly, you enhance progress” (Interview, MSC, Director, Scandinavia and the Baltic Sea Region). This example of MSC indicates the proof that some standards are aligning with the SDGs while also trying to prove their alignment and being transparent about their operations.

For most standards, their credibility and impact cannot be ascertained by the standard requirements alone: “the credibility and of impact of Fairtrade is not alone due to standards. There are many other pathways, and jointly they create impact and credibility” (Interview, Fairtrade, Development Policies Manager, Fairtrade Germany). Also reinforced as: “Yes, I think it (alignment with SDGs) will make us more valuable to our multinational corporations. And they are continuously in a very positive way, looking for more ways to promote and recognize their own achievements” (Interview, Green seal, Director, Science & Standards Department). The diverse arena of SDGs gives them a tangible way of showing their work and thus helps prove credibility. It is claimed by VSS organizations that it is the impact level that provides evidence for SDG contributions, and the respective underlying Theory of Change of standard-setting organizations, such as Fairtrade. In other words: not all desired changes/developments can be addressed by means of standard requirements, there are many more levels of interventions than standard-setting, which go way beyond the scope of standards, and might even have more impact and contributions of a VSS to the SDGs. For example, Fairtrade network in India started projects in collaboration with The Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Bhutan (BCCI), the Fairtrade Producer Network in Asia and the Pacific (NAPP), and other multinational companies, to work on raise awareness on sustainable consumer behavior among consumers and public sector and therefore contribute to the SDG 12- Sustainable Production and Consumption (Fairtrade, 2021). These contributions also help standards to align with SDGs that might also not be directly related to their requirements but certainly aid in reinforcing their credibility.

The finding that comes surprising in light of the above discussion is that from the survey, only 15 out of 54 standards (27.77%) stated that they were implementing an impartial third-party verification of the links that they ‘claim’ to have with the SDGs. **In essence, for the remaining, it is a claim that they make, and no third party verifies it.** When inquired about the same in the interviews, most VSS said they did not find a need to get their claimed linkage with the SDGs third-party verified as their impacts and certifications are third-party audited and that should be directly linked to the claimed linkages [MSC, ABVTEX]. But the one positive outcome from interviews is that most standards were open to this idea of having verification of the claims that they have made regarding contribution to the SDGs, and that indeed could be a crucial step for them to strengthen their credibility [MSC, SERI, GS, ABVTEX, FW]. Many standards **do not per se ‘prove’ these linkages but certainly, mention how they contribute** through the likes of sustainability reports and brochures. For example, Global Organic Textiles Standard (GOTS), in a flyer, stated its contributions to the SDGs and mentioned precisely how it aligns with all the SDGs, like for SDG 2- Zero Hunger, GOTS stated- “Crop rotation is mandatory in organic farming. Therefore, the farmers engaged in cultivating organic fibre also grow organic food as a part of rotation, contributing to food security and reduction in hunger” (GOTS, n.d.-a). Another example can be of Forest Stewardship Council, which in its report mentions how the FSC certification can be pivotal to further the achievement of SDG 7- Clean and Affordable Energy- “FSC certification can be used to ensure that wood energy is effective

as an alternative to fossil fuels, and avoids adverse impacts. FSC recognizes that carbon capture and storage is an important component of forest ecosystem services – one that is paradoxically both central to climate stability, and threatened by increased demands for carbon-neutral bio-energy” (FSC, 2016, p.5).

## 5.2.4 External Pressure

External pressure- from both the consumers and the market, is a factor that came up repeatedly in the interviews. *“But on the other hand, we do have an external pressure today coming from outside and consumers and also countries’ regulations. We are working on the European import guidelines in certain countries. That’s important and that’s where we really have to find common ground. That’s where you can really create efficiency by using existing definitions and guidelines, like those given by the SDGs”* (Interview, ProTerra, Managing Director). In addition, some VSS bodies, such as Fairtrade International, emerged from a bottom-up process and have a strong influence of civil societies and organizations. So, there is also this external pressure, of relevant stakeholders, that makes them engage with SDGs: *“So, for example, Fairtrade Germany has a very strong link into civil society and politics... The political framework of the SDGs had been introduced following the MDGs, it became clear to us in particular - also through our member organizations, that were a part of the founding history, and still today vote every year in our Annual General Meeting and provide us with renewed mandate each year - that we should be concerned about aligning with what the SDGs want to achieve”* (Interview, Fairtrade, Development Policies Manager Fairtrade Germany). With VSS in general, there has been an extensive debate about the credibility of standards in light of the lack of progress on a wide range of sustainability issues (see Section 2.1). Some of the external pressure also relates to the doubts around this topic of progress. This section therefore explores both the themes of consumer demand and market demand.

### 5.2.4.1 Consumer demand

As discussed at the beginning of the problem setting for this thesis, the increase in consumers demands for sustainable products is among the leading reasons why supply chains have started becoming more sustainable and why there is much more attention being drawn towards VSS. This consumer demand was also the fact that most VSS organizations stated as one of the reasons that encouraged the alignment with the SDGs [PT, MSC, ABVTEX, GS]. The demand from consumers has been a push that is prevalent across sectors and nations: *“Here in Brazil, the consumer the clients are always pushing the companies to follow some good practice regarding social regarding environmental now. So, this is why we are engaged with SDGs”* (Interview, ABVTEX, Executive Director). This pressure or demand from consumers is also popularly perceived as a ‘movement’, and it is a clear direction for VSS to engage with the SDGs as they symbolize the sustainable development goals that the world must meet [MSC]. Here, certification bodies ensure that the demand for sustainable products is met [MSC, FT, PT, FW]. In addition, some certification bodies also consider this as a responsibility to communicate to customers and stakeholders about the global agenda:

*“We do see it as our part of our service to our customers and to our stakeholders, to inform them about these ongoing global priorities. And so, if Green Seal can be a tool and advocate a promoter of the SDGs and make them more actionable to our groups, you know, slowly introducing them to the terminology to the concepts to the way that other groups are using them to the reason why a global perspective can help, speed transformation toward reduced health and environmental impacts, healthier products, cleaner production”* (Interview, Green Seal, Director, Science & Standards Department).

### 5.2.4.2 Market pressure

As also discussed in Section 2.3., the VSS bodies tend to collaborate and align with the larger community: *“And it's definitely very important to be science-based and to align yourselves with that kind of community”* (Interview, MSC, Director, Scandinavia and the Baltic Sea Region). In light of that, there were some other critical reflections from the interviews that indicated the importance of market-related factors that led to VSS aligning their activities with the SDGs. This is not just limited to the pressure to engage with SDGs but also a pressure to address the sustainability issues that the VSS might aim to address, for example, for ABVTEX, working in the fashion sector: *“Our project developed by ABVTEX must be aligned with the SDG's. Now, we are always thinking about social and environmental impacts when we are developing any action or project in the ABVTEX together with our members. This is why we are engaged with SDGs now, as a fashion segment, we have a lot of issues regarding sustainability. Now, and we are trying to address a lot of this challenges”* (Interview, ABVTEX, Executive Director). The VSS also want to be the market leaders and example setters, at least in their respective sector, in showcasing their alignment, and that is also a key driver to align with this new policy agenda of SDGs [MSC, PT, ABVTEX].

### 5.2.5 Funding

For standard organizations, there can be two streams of funding- recurring and non-recurring. The recurring ones include the likes of membership fees and the non-recurring ones include public and private grants and other sources of income (Potts et al., 2010). Given that not all VSS are dependent on external funding, one of the reasons that came up sparsely was the use of alignment with the VSS to have access to funding, directly or indirectly, or as a means of revenue. This becomes more important when the funding agencies either lay focus on SDGs or give preferential treatment to the organizations working with the SDGs- the alignment with SDGs, in this case, makes it relatively easier to prove the work that VSS are doing and allows greater acceptance into these societies. The SDGs are seen as a means to an end and not an end in itself, meaning that they are used to achieve VSS objectives [FT]:

*“And if you want to reach out, say, to the BMZ (Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development) or to the German Sustainability Committee, through these, that is also beneficial to obtain results... And if we have to reach out to political entities, to push the debate within the framework of the SDGs, then we also have to do that. That opens doors. It opens the interfaces. And it is also positioning Fairtrade in the development arena. So, we have to have a development strategy and the SDGs is a nice means to provide evidence for that. i.e., that Fairtrade contribution to the SDG8. So, we can say, yes, Fairtrade is an actor in that field. It creates also more acceptance among civil society organizations”* (Interview, Fairtrade, Development Policies Manager, Fairtrade Germany).

In addition, it allows for more funding streams to open up since it allows to claim credibility among standards (also discussed in next section): *“But I thought, like, as a very commercially driven standard, you rarely sometimes acknowledge the fact that you need to do this kind of fluffy things...So it's not hard, doesn't boil down to like money or revenue streams directly, but in the end it does come down indirectly to revenue stream because it's building credibility and it's positioning yourself in very, very important forums”* (Interview, MSC, Director, Scandinavia and the Baltic Sea Region).

Overall, the results from the points raised about funding reflect that not all VSS would employ them to gain funding or as an access to revenue, but it is not uncommon and the ones already incorporating the SDG alignment, tend to leverage the alignment for revenue. It is a means of establishing relevance and leveraging the brand value of SDGs which in turn has economic relevance.

### 5.2.6 Benchmarking

Another point discussed during the interview that promises a lot for VSS-SDGs alignment in the coming years was the alignment of VSS and SDGs to be driven by the use of SDGs as a benchmark [RSPO, PT]. SDGs provide a means to have measurable goals and provide unified guidelines [PT]. Some standard organizations are also considering creating benchmarks to measure their own performance by creating benchmarks against the SDGs [RSPO]. Thus, instead of reactively approaching the development of SDGs, some VSS bodies are using the goals and targets of SDGs more proactively and creating benchmarks to measure their performance and/or modify their requirements based on SDG benchmarks. This is a compelling claim because many private organizations are also working on creating a framework for having benchmarks that drive the private sector's engagement with the SDGs. One of them has been developed by The World Benchmarking Alliance and aims at “measuring what matters the most”, while looking at seven systems transformations- Social, Agriculture and food system, Decarbonization and energy, Circular transformation, Digital, Urban, and Financial system (Urlings, 2019). Insights from such benchmarking exercises can serve as examples for the VSS organizations. It is a promising claim as in the realm of private regulatory governance systems, benchmarking systems are few, and primarily provided through guidelines from the likes of ISEAL Alliance (ISEAL, n.d.).

### 5.2.7 Communication

SDGs have been seen as providing a ‘shared language’ for actions that can be taken by both public and private sectors (Casey, 2019; Fiorini et al., 2019a; WWF & ISEAL, 2017). The SDGs have gained so much traction that it is “*impossible to skip on talking about the SDGs at any meeting, conference, discussion, policy, paper, et cetera*” (Interview, Rainforest Alliance, Advocacy Officer). From the interviews, it is evident that the SDGs are also a useful communication tool for VSS organizations, for instance by easing communication and facilitating talks with stakeholders, both public and private, which might be speaking in different terminologies and have different ambitions for the certification program [ABVTEX, SERI, GS, RSPO, FT, PT, RA]. The SDGs provide the VSS organizations tools to speak with different kinds of partners and talk to them all in the same language and thus help them in doing their work better [PT, GS, RA, ABVTEX]. It provides with a framework that enables VSS organizations to create interfaces, to debate and discuss and influence other players [FT]. It was also reiterated that, in majority cases, the work being done by the VSS bodies naturally aligns with SDG targets and that helps the organizations communicate about their work in a better way and in a way that would be easily comprehended by the majority of their target groups [RA]. Rainforest Alliance points out that

*“...But we have to speak these different languages. We speak business cases and business language to business when we want to make the case for certification. And we can talk to government or to researchers if necessary. So, it's a bit highbrow policymaking that goes behind it. And it's useful for us to have this paper (that shows the standard's linkage with SDGs) because we say, look, the work we do translates into (as contribution to SDGs) in this and this way. So, it talks to us, SDGs, but it does not steer our work. And that's not because we have taken a decision not to let the SDGs influence our work, but because it's **fully compatible**”* (Interview, Rainforest Alliance, Senior Specialist).

The point of RA being fully compatible with the SDGs might also stem from the fact that RA and other VSS organizations were a part of creating the SDGs through the ‘Open Working Group’ process (see Section 2.2), so the buy-in was generated through their development approach. While allowing for communication at various levels, the alignment with SDGs at the same time also provides a channel for advocacy work: “*We do lobby and advocacy work, and yes, we do that proactively. Jointly with the WFTO (World Fair Trade Organization), Fairtrade has a lobby office*

*in Brussels, and I don't see anything wrong with that. Our target is a fairer trade, and we lobby for that. And if political entities, the debate within the framework of the SDGs, then we also have to do that"* (Interview, Fairtrade, Development Policies Manager, Fairtrade Germany). Though not always for advocacy and lobbying, many VSS bodies also view communicating their work in alignment with the SDGs as a crucial step to align with the global community, display their interest in engagement with the international goals and make sure that they are speaking and promoting the correct terminologies that align with the needs of the world [GS, SERI]. Since the SDGs are easily recognisable and many people know what they are, it can be an easy way to communicate to the end users about the good practices that VSS is adopting. It is an added benefit as it eases the explanation of work, as mentioned earlier: *"You know, a soft benefit was just being able to explain what we do, and how it fits in the bigger picture... But for us, that was the opportunity to demonstrate where we fit into this whole puzzle with our work"* (Interview, SERI, Executive Director). It helps the standards body be more visible and be a part of the global talk: *"And that (alignment with SDGs) got us invited to the UN decade project on the Arctic. So, I don't think if we did not put out this kind of more NGO based material where we explain how sustainable fishing is conducted, how we see what are the challenges with the oceans in our markets, I don't think we would have been invited to a process like that because we weren't visible"* (Interview, MSC, Director, Scandinavia and the Baltic Sea Region).

There has been an evident increase in the number of VSS organizations referring to the SDGs in their official communication (Blankenbach, 2020; UNFSS, 2018). Alignment with SDGs has been increasingly referred to by VSS bodies for communicating the domain of the VSS work and to show what contributions VSS are making to sustainable development (FSC, 2019e, 2019d, 2019c, 2019a, 2019b, 2019e; MSC, n.d.-a; ProTerra, n.d.; Rainforest Alliance, 2020). This communication is also imperative for standard bodies to promote themselves and claim their accountability: *"Yes, I think it will make us more valuable to our multinational corporations. And they (standard organizations) are continuously in a very positive way, looking for more ways to promote and recognize their own achievements... And by connecting Green seal to these targets, it helps to have useful talking points useful promotional blurbs, to define why they use eco-labels. So, it is connecting transparency, accountability, third party review systems, or conformity assurance systems, to a global strategy"* (Interview, Green Seal, Director, Science & Standards Department).

This increase can also be attributed to the fact that some of the SDG targets and indicators of contribution to the SDGs are very well suited to convey the work of the VSS; for example, for Fairtrade, the focus is on SDG 8 and SDG 12, and there is consensus among them that *"there are these nice indicators contributing to the SDGs"* (Interview, Fairtrade, Development Policies Manager Fairtrade Germany). In most cases, this communication is usually reflective of the work that the VSS bodies are already doing and that aligns with the SDGs and allows them to do better while explaining that to potential stakeholders- *"But if anything, it allows us to continue to do our work and gives us more tools to speak with other partners in certain companies or to all be speaking the same language. So, we want to do what we've always wanted to do. But now they understand this through the SDG Agenda; perhaps before, they didn't see it as much as an important subject. So, they're (the SDGs) also a tool for us to continue to do the work that we've been doing and to all be speaking the same languages with different kinds of partners"* (Interview, Rainforest Alliance, Standards Specialist). This point of the VSS not changing their working due to the SDGs and aligning it with what they are already doing, provided important implications for the 'steering effect of the SDGs'. It reflects that the steering effect is minimal and VSS organizations' work is not steered by the SDGs. They rather use it as an additional tool to continue working on what they are doing and other benefits like easing communication.

### 5.3 The role and vision of leaders of VSS organizations

The previous sections provided an overview of the linkage of VSS and the SDGs and provided an insight into what factors drive this alignment with the SDGs. This section will look at how leadership (and governance) influences the alignment and the future possibilities for this kind of engagement to continue and be meaningful.

#### 5.3.1 Governance mechanism

There has been considerable research on the organizational structure and institutional design prevalent in the VSS landscape (Fiorini et al., 2019a). That hinted at the possibility that the engagement of VSS with SDGs might also be influenced by the presence of a particular type of governance structure. An impression of the same was perceived through the results of the survey where 27 out of 54 (50%) of the respondents stated that they had a governance structure either separate or a built-in one, like a sustainability committee at the Board Level, that helps the standard body steer towards the achievement of SDGs. For example, Aquaculture Stewardship Council (ASC) stated that “There is no such specific SDG Committee at Board Level, but there are several staff members reporting directly to the CEO and working on a full mapping of the ASC standards and Programme in relation to the SDGs; and on a gap analysis of where the standards can more fully contribute to the achievement of the SDGs”; and The Gold Standard Foundation mentioned “We have a Technical Advisory Committee that supports our standard and aligning with the Paris Agreement and the SDGs”.

It must also be taken into consideration that the remaining 50% stated that they do not have any separate governance mechanism, but it is more in-built. For instance, Rainforest Alliance mentioned in their survey response that “There is a governance structure, but it's mandate is not specifically linked towards the SDGs as such”; and RSPO mentioned that “The Board is responsible for steering relative to strategy. SDG is not a regular agenda item. It would have to be written into the Board and Secretariat requirements.”

A majority of interviewees also reported not having a ‘separate’ governance structure as such and the SDG agenda item being discussed in the already prevalent governance structure: “*We don't have a separate governance mechanism. So, I think the main governance decisions in Rainforest Alliance pertain to the content of the certification standard, which is the multistakeholder process, and has businesses, producers, environmental NGOs, auditors. So, these stakeholders all contribute and have a say on the standard. We follow the ISEAL code, which mandates also that it's a public consultation and we have to be transparent on how the standard is formulated*” (Interview, Rainforest Alliance, Advocacy Officer). Similarly, another example: “*We have a strong governance in the ABVTEX program. We have a committee which has one representative of each member to establish the requirements of the program...and of course this committee, they are always thinking about the SDG's and their impact in our supply chain, especially regarding social and environmental issues?*” (Interview, ABVTEX, Executive Director).

It was also mentioned that there is a great deal of insight that is drawn from ISEAL and that is also one of the institutions that VSS organizations look up to for ascertaining how their contributions should be planned: “*they look to ISEAL, located in London, their impact impacts code of best practice. I don't believe that they specifically mentioned SDGs. But that would be our framework for identifying intended outcomes, identifying impact achievement, and then converting either the intended outcome and the recognized outcome into SDG and into how they flow into SDGs. So yes, I think it would be informal and more like a depiction rather than rather than anything like a formal system*” (Interview, Green seal, Director, Science & Standards Department).

Overall, it can be inferred that the presence of a separate governance mechanism can be a helpful for driving the VSS-SDG engagement, but would be incorrect to infer that its presence solely can be responsible for influencing the contribution to, or alignment with the SDGs. A separate governance may not be enough if it is not accompanied by systematic mainstreaming throughout the VSS. Other initiatives like ISEAL Alliance can also play crucial role in influencing the engagement with the SDGs (Derkx & Glasbergen, 2014).

### 5.3.2 Leadership and agency

The next factor that plausibly pushes the SDG Agenda in the VSS landscape is the role of leadership and agency. There has been some discussion about the role that leadership and agency have to play in the advancement of the SDGs and also considerable focus on the role of leadership in businesses to help accelerate the transition to sustainable development (Gould, n.d.; IISD, 2018; UN, 2019; UN Global Compact, 2017). A report by the United Nations Global Compact provides a 'blueprint' for the businesses- irrespective of their geographical location, size, or sector- to make leadership more effective for achieving the SDGs (UN Global Compact, 2017). The report highlights that the leader must have "Intentionality, Ambition, Consistency, Collaboration and Accountability" in order to advance the SDG agenda. Although not exactly businesses, but VSS are also private regulatory governance networks of which businesses are a main aspect and interviews with the VSS organizations did hint at some of the above-mentioned qualities being a part of the leaders of VSS organizations that engaged with the SDGs actively.

VSS organization leaders that are more actively aware of the SDGs and more personally driven by the agenda, allow for that to also reflect in their policies and actions that they ascertain for the respective VSS. For example, one such leader would be Linnéa Engström, Director, Scandinavia and the Baltic Sea Region, Marine Stewardship Council. She states: "*In my personal and professional life, I mean by working in good faith, building a professionally strong eco-label, that's my personal choice, rather than to be (working) in corporate America. So, I see my choice of career and sector to be something that I think contributes to, is a personal way of trying to contribute to the SDGs and becoming more aware of the SDGs communicating with friends outside of the environmental and health, public health sectors about SDGs*" (Interview, MSC, Director, Scandinavia and the Baltic Sea Region). She also comes with a strong policy background, and her prior engagement with the SDGs, an understanding and appreciation for the quantifiable nature of the SDGs, could also be one of the key reasons that she played a crucial role in the alignment of MSC's activities with the SDGs [MSC] (MSC, 2019). In addition, an intention to engage with the SDGs, as highlighted above, is also one of the factors that are imperative to push VSS organization's contribution to the SDGs that do not directly relate to their work. For example, for MSC, given its nature of work with fisheries, the main SDG is SDG 14- Life below water. However, as stated in MSC's interview: "*I have been instrumental so far, and I'm, for example, very, very keen on also promoting, SDG 5, like women's participation rights. It's very low on the industry agenda. And definitely, when we talk about the fisheries industry and the sector, it's very far behind. So, I hope I can support, gender equality within the organization and within specific projects*" (Interview, MSC, Director, Scandinavia and the Baltic Sea Region).

All of the VSS leaders interviewed conveyed their conviction in VSS bodies' role in advancing the 2030 Agenda. [RA, FT, MSC, SERI, ABVTEX, GS, GOTS, FW, PT, RSPO]. For instance, "*We're all supporters, right? We're all, you know, have our one piece of it. And so, I mean, our organization, I can't speak for all organizations or all standards, but we're trying to be a catalyst. We're trying to help others take up the initiative, give them the guidance and the information to be able to drive it forward. So, we're, we're the source behind it, behind the scenes we are supporter. And so that's where we're trying to align the electronics industry, driving towards, sustainability, a circular economy, and ultimately, these goals*" (Interview, SERI, Executive Director). This already points at the future possibility of seeing probably more engagement and meaningful engagement of the VSS with the SDGs. The readiness of the VSS

organizations to participate in the thesis survey and the interviews is also an indicator of the growing interest of these organizations and their leaders in the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda.

### 5.3.3 Vision for future engagement with SDGs

From the interviews, it was clear that at the least, all VSS bodies that were interviewed agreed that an alignment with the SDGs was important and the VSS organizations recognized their role in furthering the 2030 Agenda for sustainable development [FT, MSC, ABVTEX, SERI, FW, GOTS, RA, GS, RSPO, PT]. The SDGs are crucial and *“the language to talk priorities in developmental terms and to bridge the policy gap between what governments do, what civil society wants, what business can do - that's the merit and that's the function of the SDGs”* (Interview, Fairtrade, Development Policies Manager Fairtrade Germany). But what is also true is that many VSS do work that is contributing to sustainable development and addresses many social and environmental problems, they either do not use the language of the SDGs or do not formally align their work with the SDGs and refer to other frameworks, like the ones given by ISEAL Alliance, to report their work: *“It's one of several tools or wider frameworks that we look to aligning with, but it's not the primary tool that we use”* (Interview, Green seal, Director, Science & Standards Department).

This comes in light of the fact that VSS also not always have an influence of SDGs on their work (as discussed in Section 5.2.7), which is to say that they do not change anything in their work because of the SDGs: *“But perhaps we have done our work alongside of (the SDGs) but not necessarily stemming from them. So, we knew it intersected. We knew it touched upon in many various points, but it has not been up until now, I believe, like a guiding tool in deciding where we act. That has, I suppose, evolved a bit more organically with the needs of the farmers we work with or the companies we work with”* (Interview, Rainforest Alliance, Senior Specialist, Science & Impacts) and *“At the RSPO, we do refer to and look at how we can contribute to the SDGs. But it's more of how we can contribute to the SDGs rather than how the SDGs shapes our standards”* (Interview, RSPO, Research & Advisory Manager). They admit that they have always been doing the work that fit well with the SDG framework: *“That we did that step by step and actually came to the conclusion almost everything we do can be said to relate to one or other of the so-called SDGs. It is not that we have been waiting for them. It's rather that have fallen well into that framework”* (Interview, Fairtrade, Development Policies Manager, Fairtrade Germany) and that their work in the supply chains would further continue their contribution to the SDGs:

*“We don't really do things because SDG requires us to do or it is mentioned in the SDGs, but we do it because we think that is how our sustainable supply chain should look like ... all our work is driven through the supply chain, and supply chain responsibility is what we are putting on all our efforts... We offer training to suppliers on gender sensitivity, on harassment of women at workplace or gender-based violence at workplace, and ensure systems are in place to take up complaints-grievances. So, yeah, this is how we contribute to the SDG 5. And the same thing goes with labor standards on SDG 8... this is how we address work on the SDGs through supply chain”* (Interview, Fair wear, Country Representative- India).

In summary, there is a positive outlook about contribution to the SDGs among most VSS organizations that were interviewed. Most of the current work of VSS is not solely driven by the SDGs and is rather based on their prime stakeholders, such as farmers for Rainforest Alliance. But it is also true that majority of the work that VSS do is aligned naturally with the SDGs, for instance, labor standards by Fair Wear, and thus most of them are open to and working towards incorporating the SDGs into their system in the coming years.

### 5.3.4 Challenges for future contributions

The exemplary role of leaders, and the nature of governance mechanism, certainly play a role in the kind of contributions that the VSS bodies have for the SDGs and the vision that the VSS organizations have for continuing this engagement. However, some key points raised during interviews highlighted the challenges that might prevail in this engagement despite favorable leadership and governance mechanisms.

It is widely discussed that the SDGs, unlike the MDGs, are rather a very **diverse set of goals** and targets that cover almost all aspects of sustainable development and that this diversity can be a challenge even for nations at times (Swain, 2018). It also poses a challenge with businesses because, as discussed before, the goals are defined for nations to take action- they are more 'state-centric'. For example, when talking of SDG 1- No Poverty, the language of majority of the indicators is in such a way that it indicates the targets at government level. Multiple VSS work on improving income, access to basic necessities, social protection and secure tenure etc. However, the nature of the VSS itself does not allow for it to directly link to SDG1 as the reduction of poverty at government level includes many other aspects which can fall outside the jurisdiction of VSSs. In addition to the diversity, there is also the challenge of having no clear guidance on how to downscale the SDGs and the targets.

In the same vein, one challenge that came forth with the VSS engagement with the SDGs was this diverse spread of the goals and the language of the goals, especially the targets within the goals, that is not directly related to the VSS. [RA, PT, FW, GS]. Given their nature and the kind of work VSS aim to do, they are very attractive to align with but mostly come across as too broad: *"I think, for the SDGs, because it's very broad and beautifully put together"* (Interview, ProTerra, Managing Director). The language and broadness of the SDGs also results in the absence of a particular mechanism for aligning VSS with the SDGs and then it boils down to the VSS organization to do it however they want or it depends on the consultant that they hire and each consultant can have their own methodology as the language of SDGs is broad and open to comprehension [PT].

Another factor to consider here is also that the work that the VSS are doing towards sustainability might just not be because of the SDGs, as they are very general, and can be because of other motives also: *"they are super diverse and inside each SDG there are things that could fit into other narratives"* (Interview, Rainforest Alliance, Advocacy Officer). This natural alignment is also discussed in Section 2, Section 3 and Section 5.1. The role of financial needs and other resources, like human capacity, are also integral for achieving the SDGs (Khattak, 2020; Mawdsley, 2018; Scheyvens et al., 2016). This issue was also raised by interviewees about the **availability of resources** and the **capacity** to engage with the SDGs or for that matter, to even report on any engagement that is happening: *"But of course, everything takes resources and knowledge and I don't add capacity and I think we're struggling with capacity also when it comes to these things and. When it comes to areas where you know, the standard might be not directly impacting stuff, but indirectly and there are definitely areas where we see that we as a standard engaging with industry and a lot of other NGOs can have can play a significant role, for example, in social poverty eradication, climate change"* (Interview, MSC, Director, Scandinavia and the Baltic Sea Region).

Lastly, some challenges could also be associated to the **sector** that the VSS operate in. For some industries, SDGs are not that popular, and engaging with them has not yet been the topmost priority. They are not popular frameworks to be used to report on sustainability efforts and are not reported on that often, even if some work is being done on issues that they address: *"And it's my understanding that, or at least for the industries where we work SDGs are not yet a common impacts framework or intended outcomes communication tool. And so, while we were developing our programs, working toward alignment and measurement toward these goals, so that Green Seal plugs in or integrates with the UN*

SDGs, we don't often communicate that if it's not going to be relevant, beneficial, or have great return for our customers, customers, meaning not only those who pay, but for those are stakeholders, those who benefit and use our materials?' (Interview, Green seal, Director, Science & Standards Department). Another aspect that relates to the sector in which the standard is working, is that their work does not allow or does not present an opportunity to work on SDGs directly:

*"I think that for eco-labels in certain sectors, like forestry, and textiles- more supply chain commodities-coffee, I think they more naturally integrate into these goals... And if you're looking farther back earlier in the supply chain, with raw materials, mining, for example, right, where there's more of an immediate, direct impact, I think, whereas, you know, we work in a sector where there's, maybe I'm missing something, it might be that we haven't analyzed these strongly enough, more in depth. But our impacts are primarily on several different audiences for which it doesn't seem that there's a huge target for our beneficiaries, like, you know, cleaning service professionals, you know, those who are using cleaning products every day, those who are using paints every day, you can have a very indirect link to that. But it's not, as I think, immediately clear"* (Interview, Green seal, Director, Science & Standards Department).

This further also relates to the limitations posed by the **geographical location** of the operation of the standard and kind of **commodity** that the standard certifies, if it is a commodity-based standard:

*"In the case of agriculture, it's extremely regional and also crop dependent. What issues you face, for example, soy, you have the bigger margins. You have the bigger businesses that control the whole supply chain globally. So, they work with machinery. They don't have actually really big child labor or social issues. But on the other hand, they have the case of indigenous people, especially in the continent of South America. On the other hand, you have sugarcane production where you see misuse and have many modern slavery cases as well. And then you have a huge amount of social aspects that you have to control and constantly focus on that because it's sometimes cheaper to use people than the machines"* (Interview, ProTerra, Managing Director).

The location of the operation of the standard also brings into consideration the local regulatory environment and its conditions. Thus, VSS organizations also have limitations that might be internal or might be due to the nature of the SDG framework. For some VSS that are operating in sectors like in coffee, in forestry, in textiles, in mining, there might be a more direct link to the SDGs in comparison to the others [GS]. These inherent and external challenges can also be important considerations when thinking of alignment of private regulatory governance systems with agendas like those presented by the SDGs. Overall, Figure 5-8 illustrates these challenges.

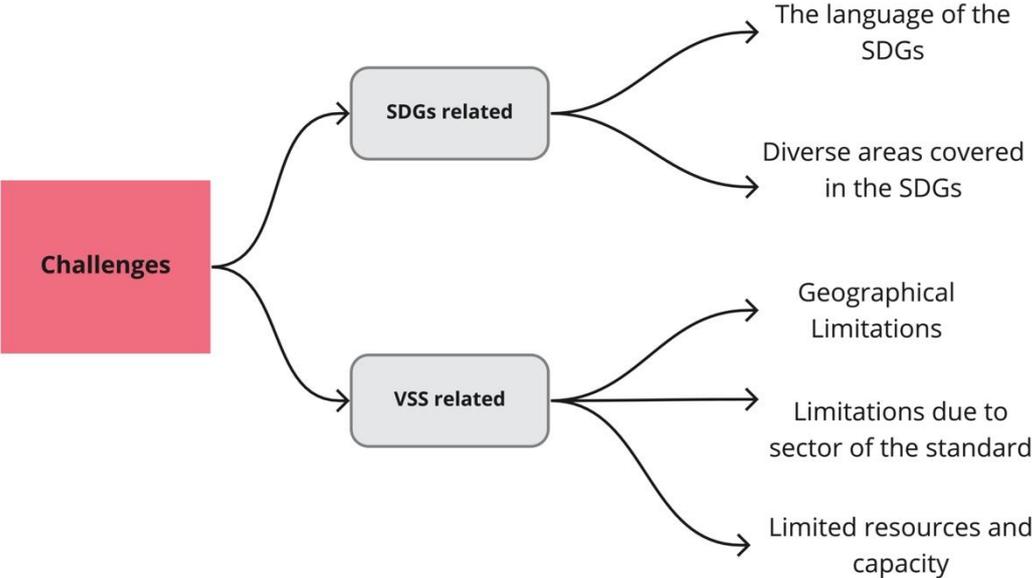


Figure 5-8 Challenges that VSS have in aligning with the SDGs

Based on the results obtained for the three research questions, the framework adopted in Section 2.4 can be revised. The revised framework, presented in the next Chapter, synthesizes the results that are obtained for all the three RQs (see Figure 6-1). It clearly illustrates the status of the linkages of the VSS and SDGs, illustrates the factors that drive the VSS-SDG engagement and puts into perspective of the theories adopted for the thesis, and illustrates the role that the VSS envision for furthering the 2030 Agenda. While the results are clear from analysis presented above- their significance and recommendations for future research are discussed in the next chapter.

## **6 Discussion**

This discussion chapter sets out to review the results and analysis more critically. The chapter thus develops a basis for the following conclusion. Firstly, the chapter considers the context of research questions set forth by the thesis and discusses the results obtained. Secondly, limitations of the research are made more explicit via a discussion of the aptness of the research methods and research design- also considering the generalizability and the reliability of the design. Lastly, the chapter highlights the contributions of the findings and implications for practitioners and outlines the possibilities for future research on this subject.

The thesis aims to contribute to a more informed discussion and understanding of VSS's alignment with the SDGs and further understand why this alignment occurs. The thesis research seeks to inform private standard-setting and public policymaking. The discussion of this alignment and contributions of the VSS to the SDGs has picked up momentum in the last few years. Still, there is no systematic study that looks at all the VSS sectors and all the SDGs and studies this engagement (refer Chapter 2). The literature review on prior research on the topic hints at some studies that focus on either some popular VSS or a particular set of SDGs. This indicated that some VSS might be more studied than the others, which indicates conclusions drawn from this selective set. The single study done by ITC covers all 273 VSS in the ITC Standards Map, but focuses only on the linkages that can be observed between the VSS and SDGs based on the requirements specified formally by the VSS (refer Chapter 3). This leaves out some key contributions that the VSS might be making which might get skipped because of not getting an overall picture and only including the linkages at the requirement level while ignoring other aspects that are at play in the VSS landscape, like trainings and workshops. This thesis has connected the framework of the SDGs, the logic of calculated strategic behavior of certification organizations, and dynamic capabilities theory to investigate the alignment of VSS with the SDGs, motivations of VSS, the role of their leaders and how they envision this engagement to continue in the future.

### **6.1 Findings, significance and relevance**

The thesis answers the three research questions that were set forth in Section 1.2. Comparing the empirical results obtained from the survey, website data analysis, interviews and document analysis, with the literature review, it became evident that in terms of linkages with the SDGs, the overall patterns were primarily similar for information gathered from literature review, the data collected from VSS organization websites, and the survey results. For all three of them, the leading SDGs were SDG 12 (Responsible Production and Consumption), and SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth). There were some deviations in linkages, for example with, SDG 13 (Climate Change), SDG 15 (Life on Land), and SDG 17 (Partnership for the Goals). While for the motivations, it was observed that the logic of calculated strategic behavior and the dynamic capabilities theory could be modified to completely represent the complete picture of what drives this engagement of the VSS with the SDGs. Agency and governance in the VSS organization seem to play a role in enabling this alignment with the SDGs and in planning what this would look like for the coming years.

#### **6.1.1 Research Question 1**

**Which SDGs do VSS contribute to, beyond their formal requirements for securing a certification?**

This question seeks to explore what SDGs are more integrated into the VSS landscape and what SDGs does VSS mention linkages with. It also aims to supplement existing research done on

the topic, mainly by Blankenbach (2020), and Bissinger et al. (2020), which did not consider all VSS and activities of VSS beyond their requirements, respectively. After an exploratory research through the analysis of websites of 270 VSS organizations in the ITC Standards Map and the survey results analysis, it was clear that **there are linkages with all SDGs**. The leading SDGs across all surveyed VSS and from website data analysis were SDG 12- Responsible Production and Consumption, SDG 8- Decent work and economic growth, and SDG 15- Life on Land. The next step was to understand the observed results in light of what was already known, as described in Chapter 3 and illustrated in Chapter 5. When comparing these results with the alignment study, undertaken by ITC, based on requirements of the VSS, the similarities and differences were visualized on Figure 5-3, as presented in the Results and Analysis chapter, Section 5.1. It is interesting to see that the mapping done by Blankenbach (2020), as mentioned in Chapter 3, also concluded that SDG 12 and SDG 8 were in the top three leading SDGs. A triangulation of data reflects that the same results could be made for the top SDGs as the same pattern is seen from the literature review results, survey, and website data collection (see Figure 5-4, Section 5.1.1).

### Understanding the linkages

A greater inclination of the VSS towards SDG 12- Responsible Production and Consumption, and SDG 8- Decent Work and Economic Growth, is also not entirely surprising, as also mentioned by the study done by Blankenbach (2020) on a set of selected VSS. One of the reasons why SDG 12 might come across as the leading SDGs is that SDG 12 is the one that is defined extremely broadly and has connections with almost all other SDGs (Blanc, 2015). SDG 8 and SDG 12 are in the top-ranking positions as VSS mainly focus on addressing issues at the production level that are mostly not reflected in the final product- issues like labor rights, decent work, gender policies, and envision to improve supply chain practices (Bitzer, 2012; Giovannucci et al., 2014; Hiete et al., 2019; Smith et al., 2019). As discussed in Chapter 3, while this fact is proven already by existing literature (see Chapter 3 for highlights of results from Bissinger et al., 2020; Blankenbach, 2020), the results from the data analysis in the thesis reflecting SDG 12 and SDG 8 to be the focus SDGs for VSS, strengthen the belief that VSS seem to be inclined towards contributing to improving consumption and production practices and improving the conditions of workers. Even for sectors like agriculture, for which one might assume SDG 2- Zero Hunger, to be a leading SDG, there is greater alignment with SDG 12 and SDG 8 (see Table 5-1, Chapter 5).

When comparing the analysis already done based on formal requirements, there are observed disconnects and variations in results obtained through research for the thesis. This reflects that the whole truth of VSS- SDG linkages cannot be based solely on formal requirements, as VSS go beyond that and are defined additionally by other activities like the criteria for governance mechanisms, as these standard systems usually tend to have a whole support system of their own. When observing through analysis, there is a variation in linkages with SDG 2 based on VSS requirements-where it ranks third, and based on mapping based on mention on websites-where it is relatively low in the ranking (see Figure 5-2). This might reflect the fact that mapping done only on the requirement level might give some incomplete or misleading linkages. For example, based on Blankenbach (2020), there are many linkages at the requirement level of VSS with SDG 2 because of the inclusion of factors like soil, water and biodiversity conservation and chemicals and waste treatment. Whereas very little with aspects that focus on food security and eradication of hunger. When it comes to mapping of activities of VSS in the domain of soil, water and biodiversity conservation, depending on their understanding of the SDGs, VSS organizations might tend to align with the likes of SDG 15- Life on Land, or even SDG 14- Life Below Water.

As explained in Section 5.1, there are important disconnects with respect to SDG 13-Climate Action and SDG 17- Partnership for the SDGs. While for SDG 13, there was an observed increase when ascertaining the contributions of VSS beyond the specified requirements, for SDG 17, there were very strong linkages found in comparison to no linkages at all. The SDG language or the very definition of the SDGs is not entirely accurate to present the linkages or the contributions that VSS make to the SDGs. This confirms the intuition that issues like climate change and biodiversity conservation and partnerships are important factors and policy objectives for VSS but like most SDGs, its state-centric formulation results in it being inadequately reflected in the VSS requirements. One common theme that comes out of the results and analysis presented in Section 5.1 is that the **SDGs are framed with a ‘state-centric’ view** and in view of that, a mapping based only on requirements specified by the VSS and on the language of SDGs and targets, is bound to give results that are not accurate or overlook some aspects and integrate some more than they should be. For instance, from Figure 5-3, and as the thesis illustrates in Section 5.1- the case of linkage with the meta-goal SDG 17- this linkage is missing when mapping on the basis of requirement as the goal is not addressed directly in the standard’s requirements but is more linked because of the very nature of existence of private regulatory governance systems, which are multistakeholder bodies and are inclined to collaborate (See Section 2.1, Section 2.3.2, and Chapter 3). This is further discussed in the discussion for RQ 2.

### **The results in light of the Doughnut Model for the SDGs**

The results provide an insight of how the alignment with SDGs looks like for private regulatory governance systems. Applying our results to the Niestroy’s (2010) framework for the SDGs, the results for the mapping based on organizational activities, depicts stronger representation in the second circle- ‘Production and Distribution Services’. This can be partly explained from the fact that there are simply more SDGs that lie under this category and also the nature of VSS which is to be more active in supply chain policies (Hiete et al., 2019; IISD, 2020; Thorlakson et al., 2018). While from the literature review it was also clear that VSS work towards increasing sustainable consumption and production practices (Bitzer, 2012; Komives & Jackson, 2014), from a practitioner’s perspective there has also been much research on how VSS are crucial in ensuring resilience and sustainability in supply chains, especially in the agriculture sector (IISD, 2020).

The linkages with SDG 15 and 13, both in the outermost circle of Niestroy’s (2010) doughnut or the circle that focusses on Natural Environment, reflect the VSS’s efforts and desire to contribute to the betterment of environment and addressing critical issues like conservation and protection of environment and natural resources. It is surprising that there is a lot of mention of linkages to SDG 17- Partnership for the Goals, which despite being argued as an ‘enabling goal’ or a ‘meta-goal’ in Niestroy’s (2010) framework, is a focus of many VSS organizations. This also stems from the earlier discussions of VSS to be multistakeholder organizations that aim towards collaboration. There are not so many linkages with the SDGs in the category of Well-Being. There are, for instance, very few links to SDG 3- Good Health and Well Being, which can be attributed to the fact that **not many SDGs focus directly** on ‘good health’ per se and are not covering the aspects mentioned under this SDG. The disturbing aspect is the low linkage with SDGs that are still relatively more under the ambit of what VSS aim to do, like SDG 1- No Poverty, which is tenth in ranking based on linkages from mention on website (see Figure 5-2 from results and analysis). This also interlinks with the findings for challenges that VSS face for linking to the SDGs, wherein a link to targets under the likes of SDG 1 might not show because of reasons like the language of the SDGs and the targets being defined more for nations to achieve and nations have more leverage to influence such goals for example via taxes and social policies.

The model that correctly describes how the VSS-SDG engagement is happening is different from the ‘SDG Doughnut model’ presented by Niestroy (2010) and is more accurately presented by Figure 5-6. For the purpose of understanding where private regulatory governance systems need to put more efforts to contribute to furthering the 2030 Agenda, the classification of high-linkage, medium-linkage and low-linkage SDGs is more appropriate (see Figure 5-6). Drawing from both the mapping on the VSS formal requirement level and on the mapping beyond that, it is clear that VSS, in almost all sectors, in their current shape are not very well suited to make substantial contributions to SDG 1- No Poverty, SDG 4- Quality Education, SDG 9- Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure, SDG 11- Sustainable Cities and Communities, and SDG 7- Affordable & Clean Energy. It can also reflect that the work that VSS are doing does not fit into the language of the SDGs or perhaps they can make a partial contribution, but the main levers for achieving progress are with other actors like governments. Either ways, there must be more research and evidence provided for engagement of VSS with the SDGs, especially for the ones that fall under the category of low-linkage SDGs.

## 6.1.2 Research Question 2

### Why do VSS bodies choose to engage with SDGs?

This research question attempts to make a novel contribution to both research and practice in the domain of VSS and SDGs. The question explores VSS’s motivations and drivers to align with the SDGs, when and where they do. VSS organizations and other stakeholders can use scholarly research and inputs by the practitioners to develop an understanding of what drives the standard-setting organizations. Elucidating the factors that determine the linkages and alignment of VSS with the SDGs is further supposed to illustrate what effects the SDGs have on VSS.

### Discussion of the motivating factors

The empirical data suggests that first, the motivation to align is supported by a **previous alignment with the MDGs**. This can also be derived from previous research, which hints at the ease that countries with prior experience with MDGs had when they wanted to align with the SDGs. Research highlighted the ‘goal-oriented governance’ logic whereby countries with an experience of dealing with the MDGs had a relatively less difficult time preparing a framework to engage with and contribute to the MDGs (Biermann et al., 2017). This logic of reasoning also seems to be similar for the private regulatory governance system and is one of the reasons why they align with the SDGs. These results also highlight the efforts VSS organizations make changes to their standard to incorporate the SDGs (see section 5.2.1.).

Secondly, the alignment and contributions are driven by most factors that fall under the logic of the Calculated Strategic Behavior of certification organizations or can be explained using Dynamic Capabilities theory, as explained in Section 3.3. There is a motivation to align that stems from collaboration, as also explained under the organizational ecology theory. With respect to the SDGs, an alignment is driven by need for VSS to **collaborate**, not only with internal and external stakeholders and achieve goals together, but also with meta governance initiatives like ISEAL. From the interview results, it is evident that the VSS organizations tend to follow the guidelines and good practices defined by ISEAL. Besides that, the advantage of such metagovernance institutions is that can address coordination issues and increase harmonization (Derks & Glasbergen, 2014; Fransen, 2018), which can advance collaboration for achieving the SDGs. further reflected also in a high engagement with the mandate presented by SDG 17.

Additional factors that also aligned with the discussion of VSS working towards building legitimacy and adopting strategies that could help them establish **legitimacy and credibility**-aligning with the SDGs is one of the means to do the same. In addition to the 3Ps for sustainability, i.e., People, Planet, and Profit (Bal & Satoglu, 2019; SmartBrief, 2020; Villena & Gioia, 2018), there is another fourth P that the VSS organizations have started looking at: Proof. Providing proof requires data, tools (indicators) and mechanisms (of verification, analysis and reporting, follow-up action) to respond to findings as in an adaptive learning cycle and this might just not be sufficiently provided by solely mentioning the links to SDGs. Proof is also important for regulators and is increasingly being demanded by investors. However, it must be noted that the evidence of studying how this credibility is established is still low and is out of the scope of the thesis, given the time limitation. But some available evidence and reports are studied and highlighted in Section 5.1.

The other factors that align with selected logic of Calculated Strategic Behavior of certification organizations and the Dynamic Capabilities theory are **external pressure**- from consumers and markets and the **dependence on external funding**. While pressure from consumers is more on the side of explicitly showcasing the VSS's contribution to sustainability, the pressure from the market is more spiralling from the fact that alignment with the SDGs is '*the right thing to do*' and it is important for VSS to be a part of the 'community'. The factors that were traditionally not mentioned under the theories selected for the thesis, but came out strongly were **communication** and **benchmarking**. Some VSS bodies that were interviewed argued that the SDGs could be crucial for developing benchmarking systems to measure the VSS's performance on various aspects of sustainability. It must however be kept in sight that benchmarking can be technically and conceptually challenging, especially when considering the diversity of sectors and geographical locations in which VSS operate. While most VSS interviewed were open to the idea of using the SDGs as a benchmarking tool for sustainability related activities, setting up benchmarks based on these global goals might not be straightforward and would likely require a mix of technical rigour and participation of those who would be benchmarked. There would also be a need to accept the judgement based on the benchmark developed.

When talking of **communication**, given the very nature of SDGs- the fact that most people know what one is talking about when there is a mention of the SDGs- is pivotal for communication by the VSS about their contributions to sustainable development. What is important is that besides the SDGs providing common terminology, there is also a need for VSS organizations to go a step further and get concrete evidence through targets, indicators, and implementation programs. There has been an observed increase in mention of SDGs among the official communication by the VSS organizations. Phenomenon like these are commonly observed with issues around sustainable development (Holt & Barkemeyer, 2012). Such reaction is expected with a novel high-level science and policy concept. The question that remains, and is a major one for future research on this subject, is whether (and when) this peak in reporting will go down, which most often occurs if one looks at the use of concepts like sustainable development through the issue attention cycle lens (Holt & Barkemeyer, 2012). Despite that, it is crucial to note that the results obtained for communication on SDGs are also interlinked with other factors-collaboration, credibility, and demand from consumers and market, because communication on the alignment with SDGs, and a claim to be contributing to sustainable development, would be pivotal for each of the above-mentioned factors, given the brand value associated with the SDGs.

### Interpreting results in the context of calculated strategic behaviour of certification organizations and the dynamic capabilities theory

The factors explained above can be integrated into the theoretical framework- the logic that we used of Calculated Strategic Behavior and Dynamic Capabilities Theory. The factors that directly relate to the calculated strategic behaviour logic, as explained in Section 2.3.2, are- collaboration, legitimacy and credibility, funding, and market demand. The factors of external pressure (including market demand and consumer demand) and funding relate to the key elements of dynamic capabilities theory as identified in Section 2.3.3. The factors that were not directly mentioned in either of the theories were prior experience with MDGs, communication, and benchmarking. Benchmarking could be seen as an opportunity and thus could relate to the ‘sensing external threats and opportunities’ element of Dynamic Capabilities Theory. The explanations and analysis done for communication reflect that the factor stems more from the logic of the Calculated Strategic Behavior of certification organizations. The same can be said about the driving factor of prior experience with the MDGs- the analysis for that is more indicative of the logic of the Calculated Strategic Behavior of certification organizations. A summary of the same is given in Figure 6-1. In the figure, the red arrows relate to factors that fall under Dynamic Capability Theory, the blue arrows relate to factors that fall under calculated strategic behaviour and the dotted arrows showing the new factors discussed in the interviews.

Together with results obtained from RQ 1- a greater inclination with SDG 12 (Responsible consumption and production) and SDG 8 (Decent work and economic growth) and the motivations that were captured under the study for RQ 2 is reflective of the alignment of VSS and SDGs forming a part of **dynamic capability** of certification organizations. This dynamic capability allows them to act on the needs of the market and consumers, justify their position, adjust resource base and take into consideration future risks and opportunities, and these fit into the definition given by Barreto (2010) (see Section 2.3.3).

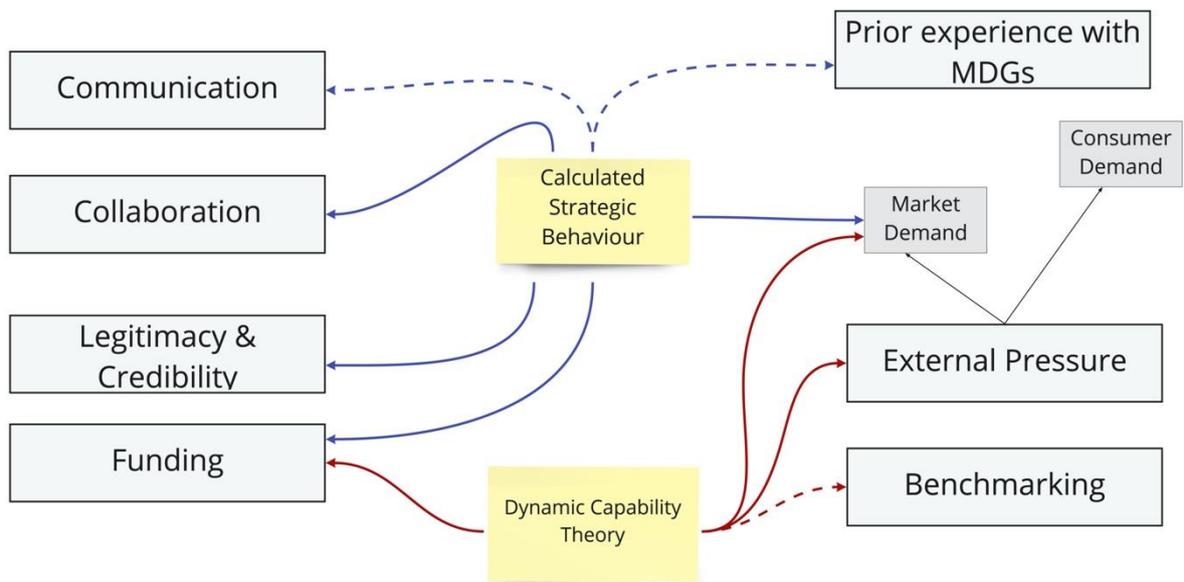


Figure 6-1 Factors that motivate VSS to engage with the SDGs

The thesis presented in Section 2.3.4 how the alignment of VSS with the SDGs can be a potential ‘resource’ for VSS organizations and VSS could, in turn, play a critical role for attainment of SDGs. Following this, it can also be argued that the dynamic capability is also a starting point that drives this alignment- that whether an alignment with the SDGs is driven by the need to have dynamic capability. From the analysis, VSS align with SDGs given that it is a need of the market, both consumers and other international stakeholders demand; it presents opportunities to communicate and prove credibility and also impacts their revenue stream; and finally, it is a timely decision, based on the issues pertaining to sustainability that the world faces today. Following this discussion, the dynamic capabilities components can be argued to be providing an impetus for the SDG alignment or even coming out as a result of the SDG alignment- VSS organizations tend to align given their need to collaborate and prove credibility, but for most of them, **their work is not driven by the SDGs**. Which highlights the possibility that this alignment can also be a way to attain dynamic capability. But it must be noted that SDGs alone and an alignment with the SDGs alone will not allow VSS organizations to attain these functions described under the dynamic capabilities theory. Following from the evidence, wherein even after linkages of the VSS with SDGs there is more effort that needs to be put in by the VSS bodies, for instance-a need to prove credibility and prove their contributions. VSS would need to stretch further on these aspects, like accountability, that will allow them to get the components of the theory to their advantage.

### **6.1.3 Research Question 3**

**How do representatives of these VSS bodies see their own role/ role of the standard body for contribution to different SDGs and a transition to sustainable development?**

RQ 3 seeks to understand the role leaders of these VSS organizations play in achieving the SDGs and what role they see for the VSS bodies to further engage with the SDGs. In that, the question looks at the governance systems that VSS have and whether it supports the alignment and contribution to the SDGs, the vision of the VSS leaders and role of agency, and some challenges that inhibit the contribution of the VSS to the SDGs.

#### **The role of a governance mechanism and the role of leaders of VSS organizations**

The dilemma of whether a separate governance system within the VSS organization has any effect on alignment with the SDGs is similar to the dilemma of whether to have a ‘Ministry of Sustainable Development’ in government or to have an integration across Ministries in order to integrate sustainable development strategies (Volkery et al., 2006). Volkery et al. (2006) tended to argue that some central coordination and strategy was necessary, but otherwise mainstreaming required a more organic organization-wide integration. The exploration of a governance mechanism led to the apparent conclusion that VSS are multistakeholder organizations. Thus, hinting at the role that stakeholders might have in deciding the alignment to the SDGs. An insight into whether there is a particular form of governance mechanism that acts as an enabler for the alignment and contribution to the SDGs was given by the survey where 50% of the respondents agreed to have a particular governance framework for addressing the SDGs; wherein there was a mention of either an independent body that looks into contributions to the SGDs or there was some form of reporting to the CEO that happened.

An obvious next step was to understand the role and vision that leaders of the VSS have. From the interview results (Section 5.3), it is safe to say that as for the business and nations, the idea of ‘leadership for the SDGs’ is also crucial for the contributions of VSS to the SDGs, drawing from the previous discussion in Section 5.3.2, most VSS that align with SDGs have a strong

influence from their leaders. What still remains unexplored in the thesis and is a plausible area of future research is the question of whether it made a difference if VSS leaders participated directly in the negotiation of the SDGs and built ownership through the process. A formal background or an interest in the SDGs in most cases has played a pivotal role in ascertaining the VSS organization's contributions and future path towards sustainability and the SDGs, like in the case of MSC. As for the vision, most VSS bodies were optimistic about the plausible contributions that VSS could make to the SDGs, and they could also address issues in the supply chains globally. This reflects that it can be expected that there would be an increase in VSS activities related to the SDGs and maybe also an increase in consequent reporting on the same.

### **Challenges for VSS-SDG engagement and the vision for future engagement**

The empirically identified challenges included the vast nature and language of the SDGs, resource availability, and limitations of the VSS sector or geography. From the analysis in Chapter 5 and previous discussions, it is not surprising that the language of SDGs is a challenge as they are formed in a more state-centric way. This however stems from the fact that governments led the Open Working Group, or the whole process through which the SDGs were negotiated and conceived. The broad nature of the SDGs also is inherent because of the multi-scale challenge of sustainability. The lack of any common framework for private regulatory governance systems is a drawback that can be worked upon. Inspiration can be taken from the likes of SDG Compass<sup>2</sup>, a tool developed by GRI, the UN Global Compact and the World Business Council for Sustainable Development (WBCSD), to ascertain the alignment of businesses with the SDGs. In this context the idea of a metagovernance framework for the implementation of sustainable development goals (Meuleman, 2018) becomes crucial. As discussed in Section 5.3.1, here organizations like ISEAL can play an important role as a metagovernance institution and aid VSS in achieving the SDGs. For the same reason as of lack of common framework, all mappings by VSS organizations are being done in any way that suits the VSS organizations and/or the firm or consultant that is being hired for the process, and there is no fixed mechanism of alignment or uniformity in the alignment process. The presence of this kind of a mechanism or uniformity at least in terms of reporting on the work that private regulatory governance systems do to align with the SDGs, could be vital for determining their exact impacts.

Section 5.3.3 highlights firstly, that some VSS did not change anything in their working solely because of the SDGs. This might come across as a bit of a misconception. The SDGs are not only about what spheres one must act in, but they are also about the what actions must be taken to meet the targets. So, while it may not have yet led to doing different things, it may put whatever has been done in a different light. That would require a different way of analysis and then the question would be if the SDGs changed the way in which VSS views what it already does. This also remains open for future research. Yet, the SDGs resonate well in the VSS landscape. The reason SDGs may also resonate is because if one looks at them through the broader context of strategic sustainable development management or governance that already has been around for quite some time, the SDGs fit; so, they don't need some fundamentally different approach, they represent an incremental (even if rather important) change in management and governance mechanisms. Secondly, the results from Section 5.3.3 reflect that overall, there is a positive view that VSS leaders have towards the future contribution of their organizations in advancing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. While this is a fact, it is also seen from results obtained in Section 5.2.3, that there is very little accountability or third-party verification that is observed in these mentioned linkages. A part of the question still

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<sup>2</sup> <https://sdgcompass.org/>

remains whether the contribution mentioned by the VSS is actually happening or not and if there are any consequences of the same and whether it is adequate in terms of the potential of VSS members to contribute to the solution (i.e., meeting the targets before it is too late).

#### **6.1.4 Did SDGs change anything in the VSS landscape?**

Biermann et al. (2017), in their ‘Governance through Goals’ issue discuss how, from the point of view of governments, the SDGs serve as governance instruments (see Section 2.2 for explanation). In that sense, beyond their thematic focus, the SDGs also represent an instrument of governance that puts more emphasis on goals and targets, perhaps even more explicitly than the MDGs. Arguably, this creates opportunities for stricter forms of accountability that may have broader implications and impacts on how a VSS is governed and managed. This thesis speculates the same. Section 2.2 illustrates how there has been a continual discussion about the ‘Steering Effects’ of SDGs. From the discussions for the results obtained, when thinking of the ‘steering effect of the SDGs’, it is rather inconclusive, and it would not be 100% accurate to state that the SDGs have a steering effect on the VSS. Having said that, it is imperative to mention that the steering effect is also not zero. As discussed in a podcast on ‘The impact of the sustainable development concept’, the discussants at one point say that “It is important to see if anything at all has changed since 2015. It is a big question to look into whether governance through goals has any effect on politics” (Biermann & Banik, 2020). In that sense, there have been some changes that VSS bodies made to incorporate the SDGs, as is evident from the results explained in Section 5.2.1, Figure 5-6. From the analysis presented in the thesis, at a macroscopic level, the SDGs have allowed for greater collaboration among VSS bodies and reduced institutional fragmentation. Still, a glaring lack of contribution, or at least information on contribution to key SDGs, like SDG 9, or SDG 11, is indicative of the fact that the steering effect of SDGs, on VSS, towards sustainability still is not adequate.

The results and analysis for the three research questions led to a revision of the analytical framework that was set forth for the thesis (see Figure 2-5). This revised framework, as shown in Figure 6-2, takes into account the results and discussions for all RQs set forth in the thesis. The revised framework shows that instead of Niestroy’s (2016) SDG model, the more appropriate categorization would be High-Linkage, Medium-Linkage, and Low-Linkage SDGs. This further is driven by the factors that are defined in the logic of Calculated Strategic Behaviour and the Dynamic Capabilities Theory. The factors that were not identified in either of these but still influence the alignment with the SDGs are shown with the dotted arrows. The logics drive also what SDGs are prioritized by the VSS organizations. Further there is an expected influence of leadership, and there are some challenges (discussed in Section 5.3). overall, the VSS organizations surveyed and interviewed had a positive outlook towards continuing this VSS-SDG collaboration and increasing the contribution of VSS in advancing the SDGs. From the discussion of results and analysis it was reflected that there is no particular mechanism of alignment that is adopted by the VSS organizations and that the alignment is rather driven by the factors or is done based on the work of individual VSS organizations. Lastly, the discussion on the steering effect of the SDGs also highlighted that there is not a 100% steering effect observed and the effect is not just of SDGs on the VSS but has also been observed the other way around, i.e., the effect of VSS on the SDGs. This came into light through discussions of involvement of the VSS organizations and their leaders in the Open Working Group that was formed for the creation of SDGs. Drawing on these findings, analysis and discussions, the framework is revised and shown in Figure 6-2. This framework can be used by practitioners, especially VSS organizations, to understand where the current linkages with SDGs are, what is driving the linkages and what is needed to be done to strengthen the contribution of VSS where there are gaps, especially with crucial SDGs.

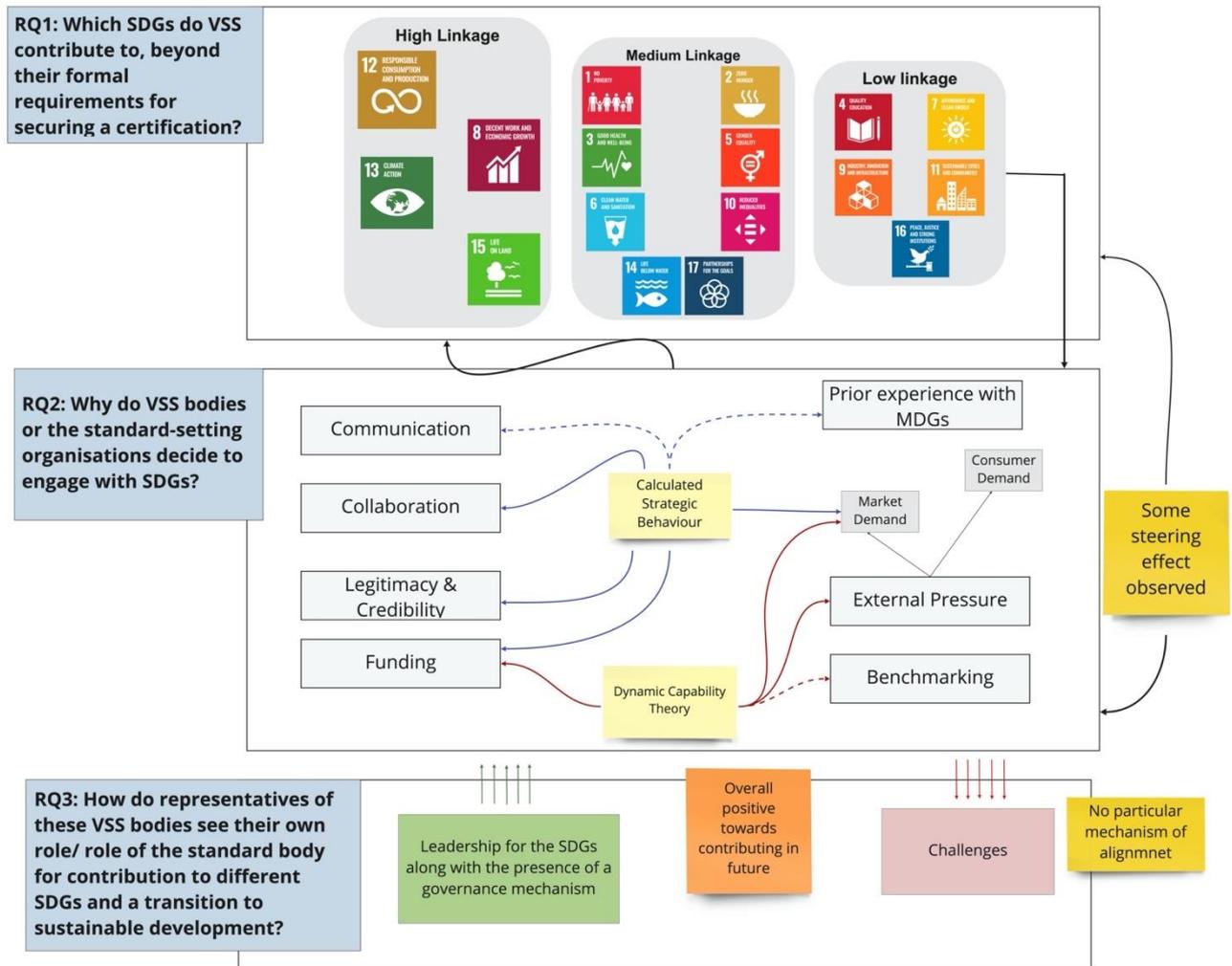


Figure 6-2 Revised conceptual framework identifying key linkages, motivations, and vision for future engagement of VSS and SDGs

## 6.2 Reflections on methodological and analytical choices

This section talks about the appropriateness of the research design selected for the thesis, the methods and the limitations.

The research design was implemented keeping in focus three key questions identified from the research problem. The research questions were influenced by the notion that very little research talks about the private regulatory governance systems and their contribution to the SDGs. Even lesser information is available on what drives these linkages- given the fact that SDGs are a relatively new policy reality. The literature available in this domain is scant, but some evidence can be found in the practitioner documents, i.e., the individual VSS websites or the websites of organizations like ISEAL. The thesis thus adopted an exploratory approach wherein the first step was to investigate the linkages to the SDGs beyond their specified requirements or, to put it simply, identify ‘intentional’ linkages. This was majorly done by the website content analysis for 270 websites of VSS organizations. The websites did not mention much except what SDGs were being linked to and some VSS organizations also illustrated in what way were the contributing to the SDGs. The other categories for data collection were defined in Table 2-1.

All categories did not have sufficient information, and it was difficult to analyze results for them solely based on website data. Thus, to further understand the linkages, a survey was conducted for the same 270 VSS organizations, which received a response rate of 30.7%.

The investigation of the motivations of VSS to align their activities and align themselves with SDGs, was studied using the qualitative empirical data collected through interviews with VSS body representatives and head of organizations, from VSS bodies that worked in multiple sectors- including textiles, agriculture, mining, services like cleaning products, fish-wild capture, fish-aquaculture, electronic, livestock, and processed foods. The only sectors from the ITC Standards Map, that could not be covered in the interview were forestry and tourism. Interviews with these pioneering practitioners also helped gain insights on the role that leaders play in the contribution of VSS to the SDGs and the future goals of VSS for alignment with the SDGs. Findings from all the data were synthesized to understand the topic and build a framework for future research by hinting at potential research gaps. It is also aimed to serve as a foundation for other practitioners that envision including the SDGs in the functioning of VSS or simply report on their contributions.

The fact that VSS are spread over multiple sectors and some VSS, via the nature of their being, might be in a better position to contribute to the SDGs over some others that might face limitations due to their sector and/or nature of functioning-plays a role in the SDG alignment. For example, the standards focused on the coffee sector can contribute to combating climate change via integrating principles like agroforestry. In contrast, a standard working in the electronic industry cannot adopt this method and would probably have to make more or different efforts to combat climate change. It is also worth noting here that the expectation is not that VSS contribute to all SDGs, but that they contribute to the SDGs that are relevant and where they have a significant potential and responsibility to achieve progress towards targets; there will be SDGs that don't meet these criteria for a given VSS and therefore fall outside of the scope of their interests and capabilities. Having said that, the research for the thesis was not defined as being restricted to a particular sector or commodity or VSS or SDGs. It aimed to provide a macroscopic picture, for the following reasons- a) when considering change to be happening in a VSS landscape, there is a lot of study on the so-called popular VSS or the VSS that are more mainstream. To understand the contributions to the SDGs, it is imperative to also understand what the laggards are doing, and it is crucial to understand what SDGs are still not being aided via VSS b) if some VSS are studied more than others, there are learnings that are drawn only from those studies, and that fails to provide the macroscopic picture, which the thesis envisioned to do. In addition, the author assumes the information provided on websites to be true and the claims made for contribution to the SDGs by a particular VSS are accurate. The time limit of the thesis does not allow to investigate the claims.

The thesis aims to provide some results at the sectoral level but the motivations to align, the role of leadership, the governance mechanisms, and the challenges might vary for VSS based on their sector or other individual factors. This approach, despite the drawbacks, was deemed necessary as the aim was to cover a broad set of VSS and their websites, documents and have a detailed set of interviews. A limitation over the VSS would've risked the possibility of having limited resources to study and understand exactly what is happening in the VSS landscape. The thesis further wanted to look at the motivations for all VSS organizations, and thus it was considered appropriate to take a broader approach and try to encompass views from at least one VSS from each sector.

When considering **validity**, the results are obtained from a large sample set- data collection and analysis from 273 VSS websites, 54 survey respondents, 10 interviews, and multiple practitioner documents. Interviews were conducted with officials from VSS operating in different sectors to

gain a diversity of opinion and understand the perspectives of VSS from all sectors that could be covered. Interviews were also not limited to the VSS bodies that were actively engaging with the SDGs but also with VSS bodies that were still in the nascent stage of engagement. The combination of data for all themes from website data, survey, and the interviews, allowed to reduce the possibility of individual bias and therefore have greater internal validity (Andrade, 2018). This triangulation of data was an attempt to provide a more nuanced picture of the linkages and the motivations that VSS have, while improving reliability and validity. To make the results more robust, the data from surveys, websites and interviews was also complemented with 10 practitioner reports, 9 videos, webinars and podcasts from relevant researchers and academic practitioners. Thus, the sample and validity seem realistic and adequate and appropriate, especially when considering the limited time frame of the thesis.

In the same vein, when discussing **reliability**, while quantitative data collection from websites and surveys – the data from websites should remain the same until, of course, the websites are updated. In that case also, it is expected that as more VSS bodies start to align with the SDGs, a change is expected in the number of VSS that do that and consequently a change in the number of SDGs. However, a) the websites that do mention already a link to the SDGs are expected to have an upgrade rather than going towards not aligning with the SDGs at all, and b) the website data is complemented with the survey data. From the data of the survey, similar results were obtained, and it helped gain conclusion on the fact that at the least, the top priority SDGs remain the same through literature review, website data collection, and survey, and this is an attempt at convergence (Heale & Twycross, 2015). The laggard SDGs are also similar and the focus on them is needed which can be a learning point for practitioners. As for the qualitative data, interviews are more susceptible to biases and variation due to collection and analysis of data and for the same reason, elements of the qualitative data study were also collected via the open-ended questions included in the survey and practitioner documents- another attempt at triangulation of data (Noble & Smith, 2015). In addition, interviewees were provided with the same information, all interviews were conducted in a semi-structured fashion, using the same interview guide and were analyzed using same code in NVivo.

The next aspect to be considered is of **generalizability**. Given the diversity of the VSS- both sectoral and geographical, brings light to the fact that certainly not all VSS have similar alignments with SDGs and similar challenges. But an incorporation of the interviews with practitioners from almost all sectors defined in the ITC Standards Map certainly provides insights that motivations to align remain similar among all sectors. However, the *thesis aimed to provide a starting point* for the research and the qualitative data used does not also reflect to aim for generalizability and universality of results. One more limitation, that is already explained, is the fact that not all VSS would have the same potential to align with the SDGs or contribute to the SDGs, given the limitations of their sector or other inherent limitations. In addition, facts pertaining to transparency and credibility cannot be proven within the scope of the thesis and that is also a limitation of the time available to conduct the thesis. Even though efforts were made to reduce the common method bias, one issue that remains with the survey is that it was filled by an individual from the VSS organization. Future research may focus on collecting multiple responses from the same organization.

The theories and logics used in the framework for the thesis also come with their inherent limitations. The use of the **Niestroy's (2010) model** for SDGs is done due to ease of understanding, even though there are other frameworks available- this one provides a general overview which was also the idea behind the thesis. The use of **calculated strategic behavior** logic also has been used in very different situations to study private regulatory governance frameworks. The larger logic also considers the individual customers and producing firms; however, the thesis was more inclined at exploring the behavior of certification organizations

and thus focused on the same. The **Dynamic capabilities theory** has also been, in multiple instances, pointed out to have limitations due to its vagueness but for the same reason, the thesis adopts a standard definition for the same in an attempt to limit this criticism. Having said that, it is also imperative to make note of the fact that no prior frameworks are available that allow for studying the VSS-SDGs interaction and the author made an attempt to overcome this barrier. While the results would have been more trustworthy if they could be verified by another researcher, this was not under the ambit of the individual thesis project. To partly compensate for this, the findings from the data were repeatedly discussed with supervisors and peers for feedback.

It is also worth putting in a caveat that the *mention* of a link is a proxy measure for analytical and data availability convenience; it is not direct evidence of *practice* and this needs to be kept in perspective. Besides these limitations that were expected, some limitations also were met due to Covid-19. The pandemic, lasting for almost two years now, left many VSS organizations with a shortage of staff and therefore limited time availability. For this reason, even though 54 VSS organizations filled the survey, out of them only 10 were available for interviews. This was also the reason that not all sectors could be covered for interviews. Many organizations declined the request for interview due to shortage of time and staff that could look into concerns of students and academic research. In light of the same, it can also be expected that the response to the survey could also have been much better. But apart from that, the other aspects of thesis went as planned and progress was on track- scheduling survey in earlier days, contacting the potential interviewees ahead of time to ensure sufficient time for accommodating their schedules and complementing the data with other relevant documents was also one factor that played a crucial role in mitigating the potential damages due to corona-related problems. The author faced some personal issues also because of Covid but the author has planned for contingencies and potential delays which allowed to progress and finish the research on schedule.

### 6.3 Implications for practice and research

The thesis aimed to get an overview of the potential contributions that VSS have with the SDGs and understand the role of VSS organizations in furthering the 2030 Agenda. In that, the thesis could conclude some critical learnings for both-practitioners and researchers. The results were aimed at having a feedback effect, wherein they could inform the standard setting organizations and public policy making bodies on how to move further in ensuring better contributions of private regulatory governance systems to the SDGs. On the research front, the results clearly lay out pathways for future research that would be need to build on the current results and explore critical components, while complementing the current analysis.

The thesis is one of the first attempts to map the VSS with the SDGs. It allows for a more comprehensive, and plausibly a more elaborate, understanding of what SDGs are the VSS focussed on and why. The thesis explores the linkages beyond VSS requirements, for example by considering VSS activities, and makes it possible to attribute intention to the observed interlinkages. It can be interesting for all kinds of players- both public and private-to see which SDG targets are covered well by standards in which country and which sector. And the thesis also highlights the gaps, but also illustrates where there's also potential for synergies. Given their mandate to aid sustainability in supply chains and aim towards sustainable products and services in general, it is not a complete surprise that they contribute, or claim to contribute, to the SDGs. For the private sector it can be interesting to know that if they are focusing on these kinds of sectors, they are well-positioned to play a role in SDG achievement. The thesis makes some of this information transparent and puts it out there so that it can help different types of actors to in the VSS landscape to leverage the potential-to make use of the synergies that are out there and potentially address some gaps. Future research is needed to further examine why some VSS

systems appear to be more receptive or more engaging than others and the need for research on actual impact of VSS on the SDG progress - a perennial challenge to the standards community.

The thesis thus also highlights what SDGs, and consequently what areas of sustainable development, do VSS still need more work to contribute to. Understanding why, even though there are clear motivations for VSS to align with the SDGs (as identified in Chapter 5), is there low engagement on crucial topics like 'No Poverty' is a clear area that needs investigation based on this thesis. Further, as stated earlier, one of the reasons that VSS also claim to be aligning with the SDGs is 'credibility', but due to time constraint a verification of this claim was not feasible. The claim to be motivated to contribute to the SDGs in order to gain credibility and legitimacy, along with other claims, would be more robust if there was some form of accountability or verification that could be done. For example, if a particular VSS claims to be contributing to SDG 8- Decent Work and Economic Growth by its practices and thereby claim credibility as SDG 8 is easily recognizable, then an investigation of how true this claim is, would make the results more trustworthy. This exercise that allows to provide an accountability framework and understanding is there is any sort of SDG-proofing happening- these are another potential research areas that stem from the discussion in the thesis. The last thing that could be researched more is pertaining to the challenges. While SDGs are broad and all-encompassing, there is a need to study how they can be made more adaptable for the private regulatory governance systems and this could also be one of the things that needs research by the policy-makers.

What remains surprising is that despite the interest among practitioners and academicians in the subject of VSS and SDGs, there is apparently scarce research or studies that have been done on this topic (refer Chapter 3). The probable reason for this gap can be the fact that interdisciplinary research that looks at all VSS in all sectors and all the issues that SDGs address is still limited, and there might have not been adequate awareness or push from either the VSS organizations or any external stakeholder to investigate the topic. Interestingly, one thing that can be derived from the empirical search is that this lack of study is much more on the academic front. Most VSS organizations tend to publish reports or flyers or some form of communication that at least indicates their priority SDGs. At the same time, some go one step further and explain how they contribute to their selected SDGs. This reflects the growing interest among practitioners for the linkage. Related to these points, is essential that there is a necessity to undertake a more **inter- and transdisciplinary research** in order to understand the nuances of the VSS-SDGs relationship in more depth and for more accuracy.

**As for the practitioners**, the research highlights the overall picture of how VSS are already aligning with the SDGs. They key points that can be used by practitioners from all VSS sectors. From the analysis, it is clear that 'credible standards' can be crucial for attaining the SDGs and can be adopted even by businesses and governments to further the SDG agenda. In light of that, the VSS bodies, besides mentioning what SDGs are their focus SDGs, need to also more actively provide examples or cases where their claimed linkage happened. There needs to be more transparency in the working of VSS towards the SDGs and clearer practices that help them, in the true sense, to attain credibility by aligning with the SDGs. This is to also say that the alignment of VSS with the SDGs is just one part of the bigger picture and the obvious alignment of VSS with the SDGs can be used to businesses advantage to also attain the SDGs, provided there is credibility to these claims and there is a better understanding of how they undertake said programs on-ground. A greater understanding of these linkages and a more elaborate description by the VSS bodies is needed also **because even for the SDGs where there are strong linkages, it cannot be necessarily translated into a more effective impact**. This could also be an important research question for future studies.

In addition, the thesis provides a framework as to why the VSS are engaging with the SDGs and that can be used by practitioners, who wish to align with the SDGs, to navigate their decisions and prioritize their needs. For them, it can be imperative to translate insights provided in this thesis and help that inform action. Analysis done in the thesis can also inform governments, international organizations and development cooperation agencies, about the potential links they can make use of and inform VSS where the gaps are with respect to engagement with the SDGs.

## 7 Conclusion

The thesis aimed to identify the current key linkages between VSS and the SDGs. It also set out to investigate the motivations or the driving forces for this kind of engagement to be prevalent and pick up momentum in the VSS landscape and what role leadership plays in propelling this engagement. The thesis thus anticipated to advance the current state of knowledge in the domain of VSS-SDG engagement, allow for practitioners to have access to more transparent knowledge and make better-informed decisions on how, if they wish, to contribute to accelerating the achievement of sustainable development goals. Given that research on the topic of VSS and SDGs is relatively scant, the thesis relies on information not only from academic sources, but also from direct accounts of VSS organization leaders through semi-structured interviews, industry-relevant podcasts and webinars, and relevant reports. Based on the analysis of the data answers were provided to the research questions:

***RQ 1 Which SDGs do VSS contribute to, beyond their formal requirements for securing a certification?***

***RQ 2: Why do VSS bodies choose to engage with SDGs?***

***RQ 3: How do representatives of these VSS bodies see their own role/ role of the standard body in contributing to different SDGs and a transition to sustainable development?***

For the **first research question**, it can be concluded that the leading SDGs where current engagement is happening in the VSS landscape are SDG 8- Decent Work and Economic Growth, and SDG 12-Responsible Production and Consumption. Although according to Niestroy (2010) SDG doughnut model, the maximum linkages were in the 'Production and Distribution Services'. It came across so mainly because of a large number of linkages with SDG 12 and SDG 8 and a greater number of SDGs within that classification. However, significant linkages were also observed with SDG 15- Life on Land, and SDG 13- Climate Change, which were in the 'Natural Environment' categorisation. The doughnut model could thus be complemented with another one, as shown in Results and Analysis, Section 5.1, that more reflects the SDG groups as High Focus, Medium Focus, and Low Focus. This categorisation could be more beneficial for the researcher but even more for the practitioners and VSS organisations that could benefit from knowing where they could make more efforts to advance the 2030 Agenda. Overall, this study shows that there is a case for VSS to improve their contributions, especially towards certain set of SDGs, or increase their reporting if they are already contributing- and provide more transparent information.

The **second research question** brings to light essential factors that motivate the VSS bodies to engage with the SDGs. Firstly, an experience of having contributed to the MDGs was highlighted and there was an effort by some VSS bodies to adapt to the SDGs and modify their functioning and/or requirements post 2015- after the 2030 Agenda came into being. Other motivating factors included collaboration, the need to establish legitimacy and credibility, external pressure from consumers and the market push, escalated/ easier access to financing, use of SDGs as a benchmarking tool, and communication purposes. Each of these factors were brought forth by VSS organisation leaders from almost all sectors. Though they might not be the same for all VSS operating in the sector, it gives an overview of and an insight into the driving factors for the VSS-SDG engagement. The analysis for the second research question also highlights how these factors are interlinked and how they fit into the logic of calculated strategic behaviour of certification organizations and the dynamic capabilities theory.

The **third research question** brings light to the fact that VSS, which have a governance system in place and the ones that have a leadership more focussed or aware about the SDGs are inclined to contribute or align with the SDGs. The agency's role became clear from the case of MSC, and the push towards the SDGs coming from top management is undoubtedly one of the factors that influence the engagement even for the coming years. In addition, the question also shows that leaders mostly see the VSS organizations as being imperative to the achievement of the 2030 Agenda and believe that VSS could play a crucial role, especially given their nature of operation across supply chains.

The thesis **contributes** in a three-pronged way: Firstly, it contributes to the extant state of knowledge on the interaction between VSS and the SDGs. In that, the thesis provides an overview of the VSS-SDG linkages, beyond the requirements specified by the VSS. It illustrates how VSS, in their organisations, their activities, their functioning- contribute to and align their motives with the sustainable development goals. This information can be imperative for VSS bodies that have an inclination to more actively engage- the SDGs that are yet not being advanced through the VSS landscape can be drawn into focus. Secondly, the thesis gives an insight into the motivating factors that drive this engagement. While motivations of governments and businesses to engage with SDGs has been adequately covered, the thesis is among the first attempts to define them for the VSS landscape or more broadly for the private regulatory governance systems. This, the thesis does by drawing on insights from the data and validating analysis through the logic calculated strategic behavior and the dynamic capabilities theory. These results can further be used as motivations to engage by the VSS bodies that are yet not contributing to or engaging actively with the SDGs. The thesis also explores how the VSS bodies envision to continue this engagement and how the leaders of these VSS bodies affect the growth of this contribution to the SDGs. Thirdly, the thesis looks into a topic that has picked up momentum, especially seeing the increasing reports from VSS bodies- the alignment of VSS and SDGs- and condenses the results from data into a conceptual framework. This framework further presents a framework for the future interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary research in the domain of private regulatory governance and the sustainable development goals- a topic on which research is largely non-existent. Through this, the thesis closes the research gap which it envisioned to do, as elaborated in Chapter 1 and Chapter 3.

The thesis, even though achieved the initially set aims, is not without limitations- and it is essential to acknowledge them. A major limitation is that not all VSS bodies could be interviewed- even though that would be the best way to describe motivations and future engagements- due to the limited time and the large number of total VSS organisations. The sample used to obtain the insights is limited but the results stand on their own and are still very insightful. Even though the information from all VSS websites was collected, in most cases, not all categories of data being looked for was available on the websites. Further, the thesis assumes that the information provided on the websites of VSS organizations is true. Stemming from that, the analysis assumes that if a particular VSS organization mentions the contribution to a particular SDG, that is also true. Verification of all claims and truth could not be done within the scope and time limit of the thesis. To partly make-up for that, wherever proofs and examples of said contributions were available, they have been highlighted in the results and analysis Chapter 5. For the interviews, there is an inevitable method bias- the interviews were with single representatives of the VSS bodies and the single VSS body in a particular sector. For the same reason, the motivating factors and the role that leaders envision for the future, might not be considered completely relevant or true for all VSS bodies. Future research on this topic can thus consider including multiple VSS bodies from the same sector and interviewing multiple individuals from the VSS bodies.

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## Appendix

### 7.1 Appendix 1- The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the SDGs

The 2030 Agenda for sustainable development urges public and private actors to deliver solutions aimed at combating various global challenges ranging from poverty to climate change. It defines 17 sustainable development goals (SDGs) that the world, as a whole, must strive to attain. More information at: <https://sdgs.un.org/2030agenda>

The list of the 17 SDGs is as follows:

SDG 1-No Poverty

SDG 2: Zero Hunger

SDG 3: Good Health and Well-being

SDG 4: Quality Education

SDG 5: Gender Equality

SDG 6: Clean Water and Sanitation

SDG 7: Affordable and Clean Energy

SDG 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth

SDG 9: Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure

SDG 10: Reduced Inequality

SDG 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities

SDG 12: Responsible Consumption and Production

SDG 13: Climate Action

SDG 14: Life Below Water

SDG 15: Life on Land

SDG 16: Peace and Justice Strong Institutions

SDG 17: Partnerships to achieve the Goal

## 7.2 Appendix 2- The survey questions

The following provides the questions asked in the survey that was conducted among the VSS organizations. The survey was filled by 54 VSS organizations.

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### VSS and SDGs survey

#### ABOUT THE STANDARD:

1. Name of the Standard Body
2. What is the focus sector of the standard?
3. Does the standard body cooperate with other standards /standard bodies? (Yes/No)
  - 3.1. If yes, which one(s)?

#### EXPLORING THE LINK TO THE SDGS

1. How important are the SDGs are to the work of the standard? (Very Important, Important, Neutral, Low importance, Not important at all)
2. Are there any particular SDGs that are prioritised (multiple answers possible)?
3. Is the link between the standard and the SDGs verified by a third-party or audited? (Yes/No)
4. Were the standard requirements changed after 2015 to better align with or take account of the SDGs? (Yes/No)
5. If yes, could you mention any noteworthy changes?
6. Are the SDGs a part of the compliance requirements for the Standard? (Yes/No)
7. Does the standard have indicators and measurement tools to assess VSS's contribution to SDGs? (Yes/No)
8. Is there a specific governance structure, like a sustainability committee at the Board Level, that helps the standard body steer towards the achievement of SDGs? (Yes/No)
9. Do you have workshops/seminars etc to address alignment with SDGs? (Yes/No)
10. Does the standard body participate in any external events that are linked to SDGs, like the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development or the International Convention on Sustainable Trade and Standards? (Yes/No)
11. If yes, could you mention which ones?
12. Does the standard body form part of an organisation/network that is linked to the SDGs? (Yes/No)
13. If yes, could you mention which ones?
14. Please feel free to share any other relevant information

#### CONTACT DETAILS

1. Name and designation
2. Email Address
3. Contact number

## 7.3 Appendix 3- Interview Guide

This appendix illustrates the list of questions that were asked from the interviewees. These questions were also adapted as per the VSS organization being interviewed, their response to the survey questions, and any other relevant background information that was studied before the interview. Some modifications were also made based on interview responses from previous interviewees.

Before each interview, the following information was provided to the interviewees and permissions were requested accordingly:

- Brief introduction about the author, and the thesis- with a focus on aims of the thesis and the usage of results
- Request for consent to record the interview
- Request for consent to use the information of the interview
- Brief information on the storage of information -personal details to be deleted within one year of the publication of the thesis

### Main Questions:

*Understanding the nature of links/engagement with SDGs:*

1. How do you (your Standard) engage with the SDGs?
2. How do you see your Standard contributing to the SDGs?
3. Do you align with/ try to contribute to the targets and indicators for the SDGs?
  - 3.1. Do you have your own targets and indicators to check your performance for /contribution to the SDGs?
  - 3.2. Were there any targets set to measure sustainability performance before the SDGs came into play?
4. Would you consider adapting /have you adapted the standards requirements/P&C to better align them with the SDGs?
5. Do you have a specific governance mechanism to address the SDGs?
  - 5.1. If yes, what kind?
  - 5.2. If no, do you plan to introduce one?

*Understanding the reasons behind links/engagement (and lack thereof) – key question:*

6. Why do you focus on the SDGs and (strongly) engage with them? (OR: Why don't you put a strong focus on engaging with the SDGs?)
  - 6.1. Are there any benefits for communication with wider public or stakeholders or regulators?
  - 6.2. Does engaging/involving with SDGs aid in getting access to funding? / or more generally, how did it affect the revenue of the standard body (assuming that some are for profit, so 'funding' may not be an applicable term)
  - 6.3. Are SDGs being used as a benchmarking tool/ as a framework to measure performance or contribution to sustainable development?
  - 6.4. Do the SDGs contribute to the value of a brand?
7. Given that SDGs is a rather new policy reality, how do you see the role of VSS bodies in general, and your organization, in contributing to the Sustainable Development Agenda / aiding a transition to better achievement of SDGs?

8. Do you think it is important to have impact verification for your contribution to SDGs?
  - 8.1. Is there an impact verification mechanism for understanding the impacts of your contribution to the SDGs or for verifying the said-impacts in your reports?

**Additional Questions:**

9. Which SDGs do you focus on? How do you decide your priority SDGs (if they have any)?
10. How do you see the linkage of your Standard with SDG 17?
11. I would also like to understand who is responsible for reporting on the SDGs especially if there are deviations in responses from what is found on the web?
12. Could you help us understand how the members of the VSS body or the decision-making body react to inclusion of SDGs or maybe even exclusion of some, if there be any?
13. What were the implications related to the incorporation of the SDGs for the partners who are using the standard?

## 7.4 Appendix 4- Initial coding framework

This is the list of the basic coding framework that was prepared deductively from literature review, background study, and theories. This framework was later modified based on the readings of practitioner documents and the interview responses.

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### **Motivations to engage with SDGs**

Resources

Legitimacy

Power

Competition/ Market demand

Timely needed

Stakeholder pressure

### **Role of leaders**

Governance mechanism

Additional activities

Top management involvement

In certification activities

### **Future opportunities/Role of VSS**

Positive

### **Challenges/ what dissuades VSS bodies from engaging with SDGs**

Lack of incentives to align

Lack of Stakeholder interest

Lack of understanding

Certification limitation

## 7.5 Appendix 5- Final coding framework

This is the extended coding framework. This is based on the revisions from the initial framework. In order to understand the codes, one example is provided with each code. The updated parts are marked in green.

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### **Motivations to engage with SDGs**

Resources/**Funding**

Legitimacy

**Credibility**

Power

Competition/ Market demand

Timely need

Stakeholder pressure

**Communication**

**Benchmarking**

### **Role of leaders**

Governance mechanism

Top management involvement

**Additional activities by VSS**

**Awareness about SDGs**

**Willingness to further the alignment/contribution**

**Prior experience with the SDGs**

### **Future opportunities/Role of VSS**

Positive

**Not a solution alone**

### **Challenges/ what dissuades VSS bodies from engaging with SDGs**

Lack of incentives to align

Lack of Stakeholder interest

Lack of understanding

Lack of resources

Certification limitation/Limitation of standard

Geographical limitation of standard

Language of SDGs

Diverse problems covered by SDGs

## 7.6 Appendix 6- List of VSS organizations interviewed, their sector of operation, and codes used for analysis

<b>S.No.</b>	<b>Standard Body</b>	<b>Sector</b>	<b>Codes used in analysis</b>
1.	Marine Stewardship Council	Fish- Wild Capture	MSC
2.	SERI - Sustainable Electronics Recycling International	Electronics	SERI
3.	The Brazilian Association of Textile Retail	Textiles	ABVTEX
4.	Green Seal	Services, Cleaning and facility care products, including bath tissue, paints, coatings, stains, sealers, and personal care products.	GS
5.	Fair Wear	Textiles	FW
6.	Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO)	Agriculture	RSPO
7.	ProTerra	Agriculture, Fish-Aquaculture, Livestock, Processed Food	PT
8.	Fairtrade International	Agriculture, Mining, Textile/Garments, Carbon emission certificates (Fair Carbon Credits)	FT
9.	Global Organic Textiles Standard (GOTS)	Textiles	GOTS
10.	Rainforest Alliance	Agriculture	RA

## 7.7 Appendix 7- List of relevant practitioner documents, webinars and podcasts

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FSC. (2019b, February 4). Together We are FSC - SDG3 Good health and well being. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qppnQoUxdPw>

FSC. (2019c, February 4). Together We Are FSC - SDG6 Clean water and sanitation. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hojLv7Yhx4I>

FSC. (2019d, February 4). Together We are FSC - SDG16 Peace, justice and strong institutions. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oV0k8UxOQmQ&t=38s>

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## 7.8 Appendix 8- Links for more information of VSS organizations mentioned in Section 5.2.1

<b>Name of VSS organization</b>	<b>Link for more information</b>
The Gold Standard	<a href="https://www.goldstandard.org/">https://www.goldstandard.org/</a>
4C	<a href="https://www.4c-services.org/">https://www.4c-services.org/</a>
Biosphere Tourism	<a href="https://www.biospheretourism.com/en">https://www.biospheretourism.com/en</a>
Fairtrade International	<a href="https://www.fairtrade.net/">https://www.fairtrade.net/</a>
Textile Exchange	<a href="https://textileexchange.org/about-us/">https://textileexchange.org/about-us/</a>
Aquaculture Stewardship Council	<a href="https://www.asc-aqua.org/">https://www.asc-aqua.org/</a>
Bonsucro	<a href="https://www.bonsucro.com/">https://www.bonsucro.com/</a>
LEAF Marque	<a href="https://leafuk.org/farming/leaf-marque/leaf-marque-standard">https://leafuk.org/farming/leaf-marque/leaf-marque-standard</a>
SOCIAL CARBON	<a href="https://www.socialcarbon.org/">https://www.socialcarbon.org/</a>
Botswana Ecotourism Certification System	<a href="https://www.botswanaturism.co.bw/eco-certification-system">https://www.botswanaturism.co.bw/eco-certification-system</a>



