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Working Paper – Research Proposal

Truly Sustainable Strategies in the Food Sector

Translating the SDGs into strategic business opportunities in
order to define strategies that effectively contribute to
sustainable development

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Introduction

Increasing environmental degradation and resource shortage, growing social inequality and poverty as well as an unstable economic situation in many countries are some examples of the global challenges humanity is facing today. The expected population growth of 30% until 2050 will exacerbate the unprecedented situation (UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2015). Especially the food sector will be faced with the increasing challenge to feed the growing population well and within the planet's carrying capacity. On the one hand, the increasing population and demographic shift towards a larger middle class will lead to different consumption patterns. Thus, production of calories will need to increase by 70% until 2050¹ (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations [FAO], 2015). This shift on the demand side is identified as one of the two most critical uncertainties influencing future sustainability scenarios in the food sector besides the connectivity of markets² (World Economic Forum [WEF], 2017). "The concentration of population growth in the poorest countries presents its own set of challenges, making it more difficult [...] to combat hunger and malnutrition" said John Wilmoth, Director of the Population Division in the UN's Department of Economic and Social Affairs. On the other hand, with current production levels, the food sector already uses almost 40% of landmass and accounts for 70% of freshwater withdrawal. Additionally, the whole industry is responsible for 30% of all greenhouse gases worldwide and by 2050, it is expected to consume 70% of the tolerable greenhouse gas emissions that would be consistent with the goal of limiting global warming to two degrees. (World Resources Institute, 2013) Furthermore, there is a huge inequality and misbalance in the distribution and availability of food: almost 850 million people are suffering from chronic hunger (FAO, 2015), while obesity has more than doubled in the last 35 years worldwide (WHO, 2015). Thus, the challenge is to increase food production and ensure healthy nutrition for a growing population, while at the same time keep food production within the environmental planetary boundaries. Additionally, governmental regulations, new technologies and growing competition will intensify the challenges in the food sector (Frost & Sullivan, 2015, 2016). To tackle these multiple challenges and to ensure that the core aspirations for the world's food system defined by WEF (2017), namely 'efficient', 'sustainable', 'inclusive' as well as 'nutritious and healthy', are fulfilled, radical changes in human's use of economic, ecologic and social resources are needed. For that, food production and consumption cannot continue in the same way as it is today. Shifting the food and agricultural system towards a sustainable development pathway requires changes in all parts of the value chain - inputs, production, primary and secondary food processing companies, logistics, retailers as well as consumers (AlphaBeta & Business and Sustainable Development Commission, 2016; TruCost, 2016) .

¹Especially the consumption of resource-intensive food, like meat and dairy, is expected to rise. The increase of 70% is referred to the year 2006, meaning that the available calories in 2006 need to be increased by 70% in order to meet the calories demand in 2050. This difference is often labeled as the 'food gap'. (World Resources Institute, 2016; FAO, 2015)

² The connectivity of markets refers to the openness of trade, trust and resilience of commodity markets or the inclusivity of innovation (WEF, 2017).

The importance of the private sector to successfully tackle these sustainability challenges has become integrated into a joint global consensus around the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (United Nations, 2015). Those goals are replacing the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and shape the agenda for sustainable development until 2030. Unlike the MDGs, the SDGs explicitly address the responsibility of businesses in sustainable development and point to their important role for a successful implementation. In turn, business' success depends on the global achievement of SDGs (Corporate Citizenship, 2015). In addition, incorporating the SDGs into the strategy of companies creates a wide range of market opportunities for businesses. In the food and agriculture industry reducing food waste in value chain, promoting dietary switch or fostering sustainable agriculture are some examples of big market opportunities (AlphaBeta & Business and Sustainable Development Commission, 2016). Especially the reduction of food loss and waste can generate immense economic, social and environmental benefits (Champions 12.3, 2017). Overall, addressing the SDGs provides market opportunities for businesses of US\$2.3 trillion annually in the food and agriculture system in 2030 (AlphaBeta & Business and Sustainable Development Commission, 2016). Although national governments, civil society and international policy systems are jointly responsible to contribute to a sustainable future, „it would be hard to drive such [a sustainable] development without businesses being on board" (von Angerer et al., 2016, p.4). Companies play a key role in promoting changes towards sustainability and the Post-2015 declaration "call upon all businesses to apply their creativity and innovation to solving sustainable development challenges" (United Nations, 2015, p.29). In fact, in the food and agriculture system, businesses can support the achievement of one quarter of the 169 SDG targets (AlphaBeta & Business and Sustainable Development Commission, 2016). Hence, the relevance and importance of businesses for achieving a sustainable development is tremendous.

In light of the widely discussed role of businesses as active rule-makers that shape and create economic as well as societal development (Beckmann et al., 2014), references to corporate sustainability and sustainability strategies have increased exponentially in practice as well as academia in the past years (Montiel & Delgado-Ceballos, 2014). More and more companies realize the potential to create value by incorporating sustainability into business strategies and increasingly engage in sustainability practices. Studies show that 93% of the Fortune 250 companies are publishing a sustainability report (KPMG International, 2013). Furthermore, an increasing number of CEOs rank sustainability among the top five corporate goals (BSR & GlobeScan, 2016).

However, despite the increasing popularity of sustainability activities on the business level, sustainability activities of companies are not reflected in an improvement of the planet's state. In contrast, the social, ecological and economic challenges get more and more severe and companies fail to use their potential and to contribute significantly to sustainable development. This discrepancy between microeconomic-level improvements and macroeconomic-level deterioration results in a phenomenon which is described as a *big disconnect* between business activities and the global state of the planet (Dyllick & Muff, 2016; Whiteman et al., 2013).

In order to enable companies to effectively contribute to sustainable development, the two levels need to be linked and strategies aligning business activities with global sustainability challenges need to be defined. However, current sustainability management approaches fail to support businesses “in identifying and attaining goals that contribute significantly to sustainable development” (Baumgartner & Rauter, 2017). Despite the movements towards “making sustainability sustainable” (Montabon et al., 2016) and the claim to dramatically change value creation towards an integrated and balanced approach (Shevchenko et al., 2016), sustainability strategies are still mainly addressed from the perspective of *how can businesses become less unsustainable and benefit from incorporating sustainability issues into their strategies* rather than *how can business strategies significantly contribute to sustainable development*. This predominant inside-out perspective leads to an overemphasis on the business and the economic domain and results in an asymmetric value creation in which the needs of the wider society and the planet are neglected.

In light of the pressing sustainability challenges, the starting point for this research is the need to reduce the disconnect between business and societal level by defining truly sustainable strategies that enable companies to effectively contribute to sustainability challenges in the food sector and thereby fostering an inclusive value creation of businesses.

Background and Problem Definition

Research and practice identify several causes for the missing contribution of businesses to sustainable development and propose different approaches to align the societal level with the business level in order to enable a balanced value creation as well as to increase the effectiveness of business strategies. Shortly introducing and analyzing these streams helps to define the theoretical background and problem statement of the dissertation.

According to the concept of True Business Sustainability (TBST) or Business Sustainability 3.0 (BST 3.0) by Dyllick and Muff (2016), truly sustainable businesses reflect on the question how they can create significant positive impact and translate sustainability challenges into business opportunities. As a key characteristic and prerequisite the authors define the fundamental shift from an inside-out perspective to an outside-in approach. This means that a company does not primarily focus on the business itself, but “starts out by reviewing pressing sustainability challenges that society faces, and then engages in developing new strategies and business models that overcome these” (Dyllick & Muff, 2016, p.166). Thus, the company moves away from merely reducing the negative impacts but searches for ways to create positive environmental and societal values. Hence, in order to link the business and societal level and to reduce the stated discrepancy, there is a need to change business perspective from inside-out to outside-in, so that strategic business goals are set based on societal needs and the sustainability challenges are taken as a starting point to develop new strategies to address them (Dyllick & Muff, 2016; GRI et al., 2015).

Researchers in the field of strategic sustainability management argue that the reason for the limited impact and effectiveness of sustainability management approaches is the lack of

strategic orientation of sustainability practices and the incompatibility between strategy contents and societal needs (Baumgartner & Rauter, 2017; Baumgartner & Korhonen, 2010). Engert et al. (2016) conclude that further research should focus on developing concrete practical guidance for companies how strategic integration of sustainability issues can be increased. Therefore, there is the need to improve the strategic relevance and integration of sustainability management so that both, businesses and sustainable development, will benefit.

In addition to this tension between business and society, companies are confronted with intertemporal tensions between short term and long term inherent in sustainability topics. Slawinski and Bansal (2015) conclude that the reason for the misalignment between business and society is the separation between short-term business goals and long-term societal goals. In reality, these two levels are interrelated and businesses need to juxtapose the intertemporal tensions in order to align business goals and societal needs in the long run. This contribution is embedded in a broad discussion about how companies should deal with trade-offs, tensions and conflicts involved in sustainability activities. Several streams of organizational research propose coping strategies for the intertemporal tensions, such as paradox strategies or temporal ambidexterity. While the latter treats conflicts as an 'either/or' choice, the paradox lens takes a 'both/and' approach and investigates how organizations can attain multiple competing or divergent demands simultaneously (Gibson & Birkinshaw, 2004; Smith & Lewis, 2011). Such a paradoxical thinking can be an effective and beneficial way to deal with tensions inherent in sustainability issues (Hahn et al., 2014). Yet, there is the need for "a better understanding of managerial responses to various sustainability challenges" (Hahn et al., 2015, p.311) and additionally, "there is a lack of empirical studies examining *how* firms effectively integrate the dimensions of sustainability without focusing on win-win [or] trade-offs" (Van der Byl & Slawinski, 2015, p.70). Therefore, researchers point to the importance of ambidexterity and paradox approaches to effectively deal with the complex tensions inherent in sustainability topics. By doing so, the misalignment between the business and societal level can be reduced.

Yet, in reality, current forms of sustainability engagement are often based on a limited business case thinking and a focus on win-win situations (Agarwal et al., 2017). This leads to self-serving sustainability activities so that companies fail to meaningfully contribute to some of society's most pressing sustainability challenges. Even in more recently developed approaches like shared value creation (Porter & Kramer, 2011), sustainability issues are ultimately dominated by generating economic value and trade-offs are addressed by prioritizing financial profits over other sustainability outcomes (Crane et al., 2014; Hahn et al., 2010). The tendency of the scientific and practical dominance of the economic domain is also proved by the high number of studies on the relationship between financial profitability and sustainability (Eccles et al., 2014; Orlitzky et al., 2003; Bonini & Görner, 2011). Researchers conclude that academics and practitioners still predominantly focus on the financial outcomes of sustainability activities rather than on the impacts on society and a broader understanding of value creation (Banerjee, 2011; Margolis & Walsh, 2003). A coherent integration of economic, social and environmental performance is still missing (Schaltegger & Burritt, 2005).

More recently, the normative discussion about an ideal view of sustainability and the desirable outcomes from businesses to support sustainable development is raised (Schaefer et al., 2015; Upward & Jones, 2016). This discussion is of high interest with regard to the missing contribution of businesses to sustainable development as it reflects on the aspirational, ideal purpose of business and the value contributions a business can or should deliver to society. The concepts of a “good company” (Handy, 2002), “successful sustainable businesses” (Schaltegger & Burritt, 2005) as well as “sustainability-as-flourishing” (Ehrenfeld, 2008) go beyond surviving and sustaining. They try to define what outcomes businesses should aim at so that “humans and other life will flourish on Earth forever” (Ehrenfeld, 2008, p.8). These concepts are based on the understanding that business is a significant part of society and embedded in a larger system. In line with the previously presented ideas, Schaefer et al. (2015) identify the prevailing focus on financial profit as a fundamental limitation to reach this ideal state. Further, they point to the importance of knowledge about how to deal with trade-offs and contradictions inherent in achieving the desired outcomes. In general, a normative perspective of business contributions to sustainable development is of high relevance in this research because it can be seen as the starting point for truly sustainable strategies which are a conceptual model for achieving desired outcomes.

Besides these scientific suggestions for further research to increase effectiveness of business strategies, a cause for the missing contributions is also identified on a more practical level with regard to the complexity of the concept of sustainable development itself. Although governmental institutions, NGOs and different actors in the private sector developed several principles and tools to support businesses in fulfilling their responsibility (e.g. Corporate Citizenship, 2015; GRI et al., 2015; UN Global Compact; KPMG, 2015) the concept does not offer clear guidelines which strategies need to be implemented (Baumgartner & Rauter, 2017). However, this is becoming more and more important as companies will be increasingly asked to show their contributions to the SDGs. This increases the need to use the SDGs for strategy development (Corporate Citizenship, 2015). Additionally, more and more people value sustainable products or services and expect businesses to act in an environmentally and socially responsible manner. A study shows that 90% of citizens believe that the private sector is important to reach the SDGs and 78% prefer goods and services of companies that had signed up to the SDGs (PwC, 2015). Many companies recognize this increased relevance of the SDGs for businesses and intend to consider them for goal setting and general sustainability management, although, the SDGs receive varied attention and relevance within organizations (Globescan & SustainAbility, 2017; BSR; GlobeScan, 2016). Agarwal et al. (2017) agree that businesses should not aim to address all SDGs but prioritize goals and focus on those areas where the greatest impact is possible. Prioritizing makes sense as companies have limited resources, different capabilities as well as strengths for problem solving. Furthermore, prioritizing is necessary in order to address global sustainability challenges most efficiently. Besides, focusing on material issues increases business profits from sustainability (Kiron et al., 2017). Despite the increased awareness of businesses to integrate the SDGs into business activities, only 13% of companies identified the appropriate tools they need to take action (PwC, 2015). A study shows that 90% of executives perceive sustainability strategies as essential to remain competitive, however, only 60% of the companies have developed a

sustainability strategy (Kiron et al., 2017). Due to the interconnectedness and interrelations between the SDGs (Nilsson et al., 2016), it is difficult for companies to deal with this complexity and find goals, which fit their competencies and at the same time effectively address a specific sustainability challenge. Hence, consistent approaches and clear guidelines or tools how the complex SDGs can be addressed by the private sector are still missing.

To sum up, the problem definition of this research project derives from the need of concrete guidance and a robust framework that could help businesses to effectively contribute to sustainable development. In order to support businesses to navigate in this direction, business activities need to be directly linked to global sustainability challenges. For that, a shift towards an outside-in perspective and a stronger integration of sustainability issues into business strategy is inevitable. Finding ways to effectively deal with trade-offs and defining a normative view of business success are also important aspects in order to ensure balanced value creation and specify a strategic approach for true business sustainability.

Research Objective and Questions

Against the background of this problem definition, the aim of this research project is to connect and align the societal level with the business level in order to unlock and use the potential of businesses in the transformation towards sustainable development. The translation of the SDGs into strategic business opportunities operationalizes and specifies an outside-in perspective and provides a starting point for strategy formulation that effectively contributes to sustainability challenges. This enables businesses to address the SDGs more effectively and to integrate them into strategic management. The results of this dissertation aim to show a strategic roadmap which guides companies towards true business sustainability and significant contributions to sustainable development. This helps to bridge the gap between the societal and business level and aims at an inclusive and balanced value creation as well as at a strategic integration of sustainability challenges.

Additionally, the purpose of the dissertation is to deepen the theoretical understanding of characteristics of truly sustainable strategies and further concretize the implications of an outside-in approach for strategy development, formulation and configuration. Besides, the results of the dissertation aim to contribute to the scientific discussion about the creation of 'real' win-win solutions and deepen the understanding of possibilities to deal with trade-offs inherent in sustainability issues. Furthermore, this research project seeks to clarify the meaning of balanced value creation of businesses and to contribute to a refined normative definition of business success.

The problem definition and research aim can be combined to the following overarching research question (RQ): *What does a strategic approach look like, that enables companies to make significant contributions to sustainable development?*

In order to answer this overarching research question, the research process is set up in two research steps in which several questions need to be considered.

1st research step: Translating the SDGs into societal value contributions (SVCs)

RQ 1.1: What are the societal value contributions a company should aim at in order to contribute effectively to sustainable development?

RQ 1.2: What are current and relevant societal value contributions in the food sector?

RQ 1.3: How do current societal value contributions differ from the ideal state?

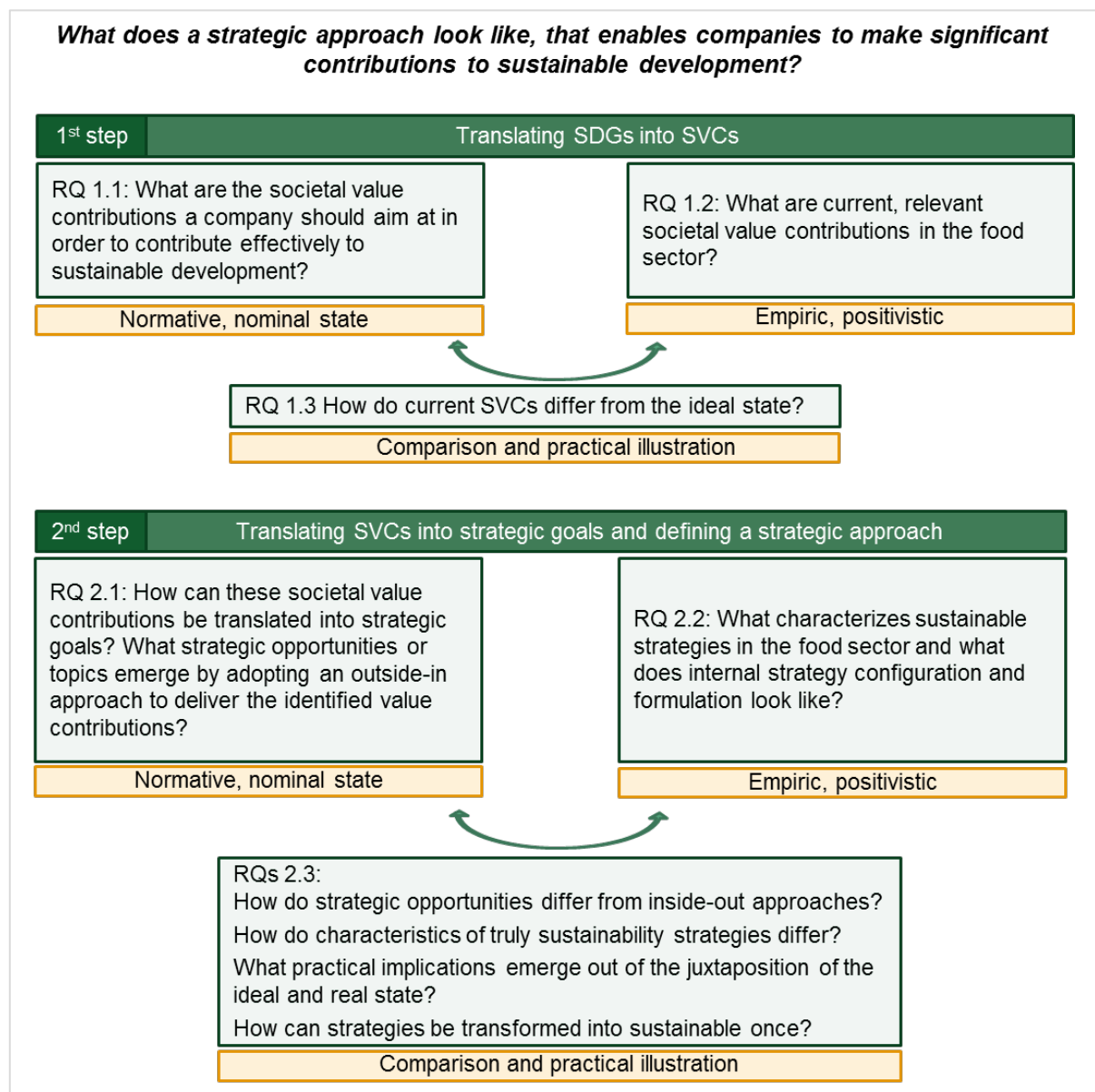
2nd research step: Translating SVCs into strategic goals and defining a strategic approach

RQ 2.1: How can these societal value contributions be translated into strategic goals?
What strategic opportunities or topics emerge by adopting an outside-in approach to deliver the identified value contributions?

RQ 2.2: What characterizes sustainable strategies in the food sector and what does internal strategy configuration and formulation look like?

RQs 2.3: How do strategic opportunities differ from inside-out approaches?
How do characteristics of truly sustainability strategies differ?
What practical implications emerge out of the juxtaposition of the ideal and real state of companies?
How can strategies be transformed into sustainable once?

Following figure illustrates the research questions and process:



*Figure 1: Research Questions and Process
(own illustration)*

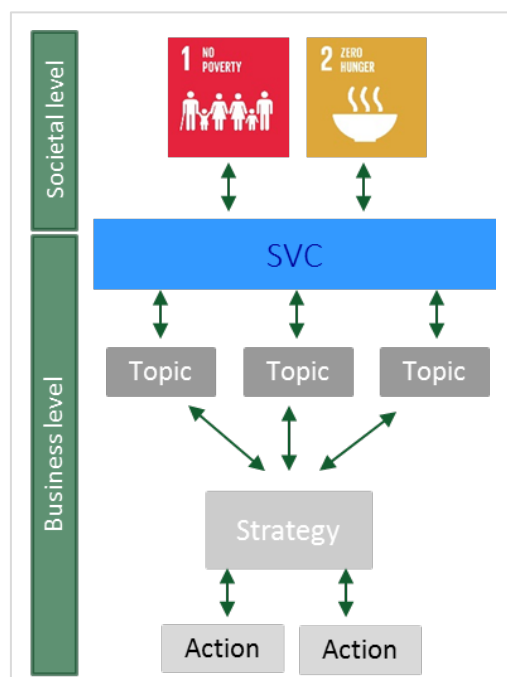
Against the stated background of the missing guidance for companies to effectively address the SDGs, the first research step aims to translate the global, societal goals to the company level. Due to the complexity and interconnectedness of the SDGs, there is the need to clarify what the SDGs mean for businesses. In order to enable business to contribute to sustainable development and to improve the strategic relevance of SDGs, they have to be more specific and focus on the company level. To do so, it is necessary to find a mechanism which translates the SDGs into concrete sustainability topics on business level, which can be addressed strategically and integrated into corporate strategy. We call this intermediate term 'societal value contributions' (SVCs). The SVC concept serves as a transmission mechanism to bridge the societal and the business level and to formulate sustainability topics which can be addressed effectively.³ (RQ 1.1)

³ This part of the research is jointly conducted with Fiona Stappmanns.

In a next step, this ideal state of societal value contributions will be specified and applied to the food sector. A more focused view on one specific industry makes sense, as the sustainability challenges are very complex and highly differ among industries. As already stated in the introduction, the food sector has immense environmental, social as well as economic impacts. The provision of healthy food for an increasing population within the planetary limits is getting increasingly challenging and is calling for radical innovations in the private sector. Hence, RQ 1.2 aims to take a closer look at the challenges in the food sector and how they are addressed by companies today. The identified industry-specific SVCs will be compared and juxtaposed with the results of the first research question in order to identify new avenues for business actions and to derive practical implications. (RQ 1.3)

After having identified and clarified the SVCs, they will serve as a starting point for business strategy and define a vision for success. Addressing the SVCs and related topics may help to overcome the reductionist approach identified by Baumgartner & Korhonen (2010) as it was already stated in the introduction. This is a first step to operationalize an outside-in perspective as developed by Dyllick and Muff (2016), which allows for effective contributions to sustainable development and represents what they call true business sustainability. By defining relevant sustainability challenges and taking them as a starting point for strategy development, companies can make significant contributions towards sustainable development.

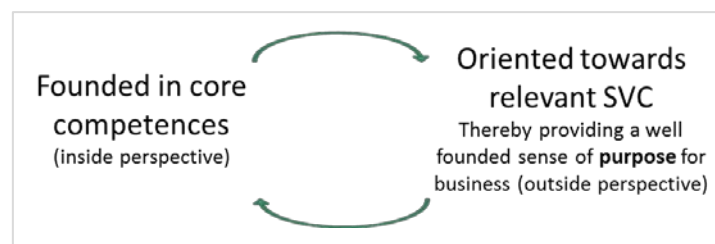
Following figure illustrates the transmission paths and the relationships between the different levels.



*Figure 2: Connecting SDGs to the business level
(own illustration)*

As stated in the background section, strategies need to be based on businesses' core competencies in order to be efficient. Additionally, the SVCs provide not only orientation but also purpose for the businesses. The purpose of a company is defined "as a concrete goal or

objective for the firm that reaches beyond profit maximization” (Henderson & Steen, 2015, p.327). In research and practice, purpose-driven businesses are an increasing phenomenon with promising impacts regarding value creation for both, business and society (Henderson & Steen, 2015; Zedlmayer, 2015). By aligning the core competencies with relevant SVCs, effective business strategies can be developed. Taking SVCs as a starting point for iterative strategy development and incorporating them into strategy content, supports both, the operationalization of an outside-in approach as well as enabling a strategic integration of sustainability management. This process helps companies to identify strategic opportunities and goals that align their strategic orientation and strategy contents with societal needs. (RQ 2.1) Following figure illustrates the conceptual basis and shows the duality of purpose and core competencies.



*Figure 3: SVCs and strategy
- Duality of core competences and purpose
(own illustration)*

This will form the basis to define and analyze characteristics of strategies that effectively contribute to sustainable development. Practical examples will help to further refine the characteristics as well as internal strategy configuration and formulation (RQ 2.2). By juxtapositioning the normative and empiric perspective as well as practically illustrating the findings, the strategic approach will be specified and practical implication will be derived (RQ 2.3).

Research Approach and Methodology

This dissertation is based on a conceptual research approach, whereby existing concepts are enhanced, criticized or refined. New empirical insights do not have a causative role but serve as clarification and illustration (Dyllick, 2015, p.43). This approach seems feasible for the research project because in business sustainability practices there is a high gap between the normative perspective (the ideal state) and the empiric perspective (facts that can be empirically observed in the real world). Therefore, the comparison and reciprocity between the two perspectives play an important role and are conducted throughout the research process to identify possibilities to bridge the gap and guide companies towards truly sustainable strategies. A normative perspective in research related to sustainability is suitable and presumed due to the normative characteristics of the concept of sustainability itself (Dubielzig & Schaltegger, 2004). In general, as a result of the high complexity of the sustainability phenomenon, research in this field is regarded as inter- and transdisciplinary science, which operates within tensions of social and natural science and needs to integrate knowledge from multiple disciplines (Schaltegger et al., 2013).

Due to the fact that the problem of the dissertation is a comparably unexplored topic, a conceptual and qualitative research approach seems suitable. To ensure high quality of the research, the conceptual model should be built on consolidated knowledge and it should allow a broad potential for application. Besides, conceptual research should aspire a high degree of innovation and originality as well as a profound level of differentiation and justification (Dyllick, 2015).

In order to make sure that these requirements are met, the conceptual work will be based on a systematic literature review. Contribution from the field of sustainability strategies, strategic sustainability management, normative concepts of business sustainability and strategic approaches as well as sustainability challenges in the food sector will be analyzed in order to define an ideal state and define possible courses of actions for business strategies to significantly contribute to sustainable development. To guarantee a high degree of innovation and originality, established as well as progressive concepts will be considered and contemporary 'grey literature' will be included. In order to ensure applicability of the developed conceptual framework, case studies and expert interviews will be conducted to refine and practically illustrate the results. Case studies allow for applied practical insights and are suitable to answer 'how' and 'why' questions (Yin, 2003).

To be more specific, in the first research step, relevant contributions of the discussion about business' value creation will be systematized and restructured in order to identify important elements and similarities. Publications like the *SDG Compass* (GRI et al., 2015), *Valuing the SDGs prize* (AlphaBeta & Business and Sustainable Development Commission, 2016) and *SDGs mean business* (Ugarte et al., 2017) will be selected and suggestions to address the SDGs on a business level will be identified and clustered. By logically deducting and identifying suggestions for value creation as well as conducting feedback loops with sustainability experts, they will be aggregated to overarching patterns, which will be defined as SVCs.⁴ In order to apply these generic findings to the food sector, an industry analysis will be conducted by combining literature with practical findings in the food sector. Investigating companies in the food sector and comparing the outcomes to the results of the first research question will help to define practical relevant SVCs in the food sector.

These industry-specific SVCs will be used to deduct sustainability topics and strategic opportunities in the second research step. This will help to define characteristics of truly sustainable strategies, which will be refined by analyzing contemporary literature on sustainability strategies as well as progressive company examples. Literature and practical insights about strategies to cope with tensions, complexity and paradoxes will help to further specify truly sustainable strategies. Finally, by combining and aggregating the normative and practical findings, the strategic approach will be illustrated. In addition, practical as well as theoretical implications for companies will be derived to strategically address sustainability challenges.

⁴ This research step is jointly conducted with Fiona Stappmanns.

As already stated, the dialectic between the normative and empiric perspective plays an important role throughout the research as it helps to bridge the gap between the two states. Exploring the gap between the empirical state and the nominal state of business sustainability activities supports the identification of new avenues for truly sustainable strategies as well as the applicability and relevance of the developed framework in practice. The comparison and reciprocity between normative and empiric perspective with a simultaneous consideration of practical illustrations demonstrates the dialectic between inside-out and outside-in perspective developed by Dyllick and Muff (2016). Following figure illustrates this dialectic in the research approach:



*Figure 4: Research approach –
Dialectic between normative and empiric perspective
(own illustration)*

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