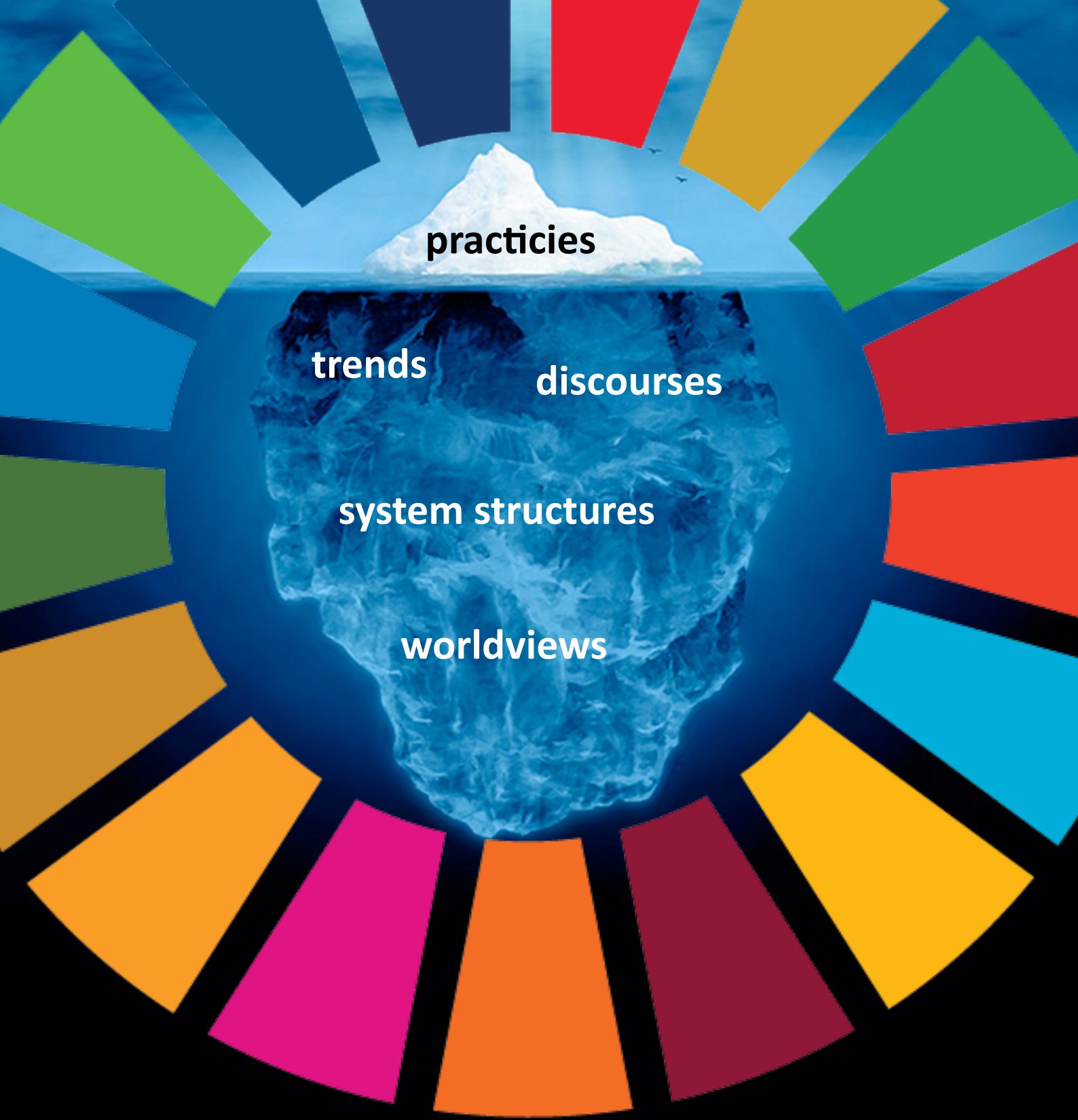

Imagining systemic transformation

A philosophical anthropology of the Sustainable Development Goals

AALBORG UNIVERSITY
DENMARK

Imagining systemic transformation

A philosophical anthropology of the Sustainable Development Goals

By

Claus Lolk
20177177

Jonas Falzarano Jessen
20172047

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Department of Architecture, Design and Planning

Supervisor: Astrid Oberborbeck Andersen

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Abstract
This thesis presents a positioned synthesis, which presents a techno-anthropological study of how the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) take discursive and material shape through the imaginaries of Danish public, political and corporate institutions. By examining how the SDGs are materialised in practice as (social) technologies, we discuss how their various materialisations unlock different imaginative horizons and possible futures. Understood as a social-technology, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is examined in a Danish context among local public institutions, private organisations and the Danish Government, presenting the ways in which it is put into practice as socio-material assemblages, highlighting the relations of power that affect it.
Building on phenomena such as labelling and the ideology of decoupling, this inquiry develops into an inquiry on whether the Sustainable Development Goals bear the potential of breaking with a conventional understanding of sustainable development, which is criticized, in order to address the need for transformative change in perception. A change which is argued to bear the potential of redefining the notion of sustainable development as a more inclusive and ethically aware process process of embracing uncertainty as a pathway for a sustainable future.

Contents

Preface

May God us keep from single vision and Newton's sleep

(William Blake, quoted by Capra & Luisi 2014)

Inspiration comes from surprisingly different sources. The embryonic idea behind this thesis aroused by reviewing one of our favourite Hollywoodian classics from 1999: *The Matrix* and, specifically, by the scene where Neo, the main character of the movie, is presented to the choice of facing the real world and its consequences or evade those challenges by turning his back to it. Or as the movie goes: *"You take the blue pill, the story ends. You wake up in your bed and believe whatever you want to believe. You take the red pill, you stay in wonderland, and I show you how deep the rabbit hole goes"* (Morpheus to Neo in 'The Matrix').

The movie and this famous quote suggest that, if faced with destruction, we may be happier with living in a dreamworld, ignoring the challenges of the real world, where we do not need to consider how our lifestyles affect the environment.

The message of *The Matrix* is clear: acknowledging reality means to take position, and it means making an effort, since with acknowledgement follows ethical concerns. It does not seem possible to both accept the realities of anthropogenic climate change and at the same time not feel morally obliged to act on this knowledge, such contradiction presents what psychology calls cognitive dissonance. Morality, thus originates with knowledge, and the best (or only) way to get rid of moral obligations is through disavowal: by ignoring the very existence of the problem and our ability to change things. Cognitive consonance, however, is possible, but it does however mean acting on the knowledge, and most likely a change of habits, lifestyle and perceptions of what is necessary, and what is not. Of what is important.

With this thesis, we seek to understand the thinking patterns and worldviews that form the basis for the creation of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) and the worldviews that are present in the Danish institutions that are interpreting them. By doing so we try to get an understanding of the possibilities of the SDGs to affect agency and potentially unlock, or hinder, change.

This thesis does not revolve around a fictitious Hollywoodian reality. On the contrary, it is centred around what can be seen as *the* topic of the day, week, year, and even decade, and if not the current decade, then surely of the forthcoming. The object of inquiry falls under the topic of a world under stress, about the use and distribution of the Earth's resources and about the impact of human-induced pressures on the environment and the ability to counter those forces. But with this thesis, we wish also, and mainly, to bring forth a holistic perspective on the Sustainable Development Goals, and the meaning and assumptions embedded in them, of how they interact with the local environment in Denmark, how the local actors (municipalities, politicians, companies and researchers) engage with them and, ultimately, how that affects the imaginative horizon - the visions and potential for transformative change within a Danish context.

Thinking of the global environmental and social challenges can be a quite gloomy subject to deal with and to write about. In fact it has affected us, as the authors of this thesis, in such a way that we, albeit in a sarcastic way, discussed whether we should have chosen another topic. Whether we should close our eyes and 'take the red pill', since we could not help but being affected emotionally of the challenges connected to this topic. However, this feeling also allowed us to realise that the mixed feelings of despair, hope, restlessness and desire for action which we experienced when writing this thesis, in fact defined the very essence of our project. The evocative powers of imagination in terms of unlocking, inhibiting or misleading agency.
It is a common reaction to turn away from something when it gets too challenging or overwhelming, to pretend that it does not exist and instead focus the attention towards more pleasant subjects, joyful subjects. Imagination can be deceitful and disavowal a dangerous trap. The subject of sustainability, and the prospects of this thesis did, luckily, also have an opposite effect on us. Contemplating the gloomy prospects of the current environmental, humanitarian, political and socio-economic challenges that, stirred up our imagination in productive ways in order to remedy for them, and to act. We do now, more than ever, feel the need to 'walk the talk', when it comes to live in symbiotic relation with our environment, within the limits of our own agency as global citizens. Moreover, we do also have to acknowledge the contribution of those who have collaborated and contributed to the elaboration of this thesis, without whom it would not have been possible for us to complete this project. A special thanks to our collaborators at

Orbicon, the municipalities of Aarhus, Skanderborg and Randers, at Engsko, to Steen Hildebrandt and last, but not least, to our supervisor, Astrid Oberborbeck Andersen.

Chapter 1: Introduction

One vision, 17 goals and 269 targets

"*This Agenda is a plan of action for people, planet and prosperity. It also seeks to strengthen universal peace in larger freedom. We recognize that eradicating poverty in all its forms and dimensions, including extreme poverty, is the greatest global challenge and an indispensable requirement for sustainable development.*
All countries and all stakeholders, acting in collaborative partnership, will implement this plan. We are resolved to free the human race from the tyranny of poverty and want to heal and secure our planet. We are determined to take the bold and transformative steps which are urgently needed to shift the world on to a sustainable and resilient path. As we embark on this collective journey, we pledge that no one will be left behind.
The 17 Sustainable Development Goals and 169 targets which we are announcing today demonstrate the scale and ambition of this new universal Agenda.
They seek to build on the Millennium Development Goals and complete what they did not achieve. They seek to realize the human rights of all and to achieve gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls. They are integrated and indivisible and balance the three dimensions of sustainable development: the economic, social and environmental.
The Goals and targets will stimulate action over the next 15 years in areas of critical importance for humanity and the planet" (UN 2015:1).

The preamble for the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (UN 2015) is, undoubtedly, the one text that we, the authors, have read the most, throughout the 5-months period during which this thesis has been developed.
As an outline of the scope and ambition of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (UN 2015), the message and meaning that lie within these lines have been absolutely central for this project. Its phrasing has been the guideline for both our methodological approach as it, due to its importance, has been decisive for the direction chosen for our research and its following conclusions. Thus we repeatedly kept coming back to reading the short, ambitious and sharp

introduction to the 17 Sustainable Development Goals for 2030, to continuously remind us of what this paragraph contains - its intent, if such *one* exist, and the thoughts behind it, and most importantly its possible impact. What is the influential potential of these lines? Both in regard to the specific rhetoric, but naturally also due to the relevance and weight given to it by means of the signatures of 193 countries of the UN General Assembly that have agreed to its Agenda. The preamble is followed by the description of 17 goals, represented by 17 different symbols, depicted in different, eye-catching colours and 169 targets to be reached by the World community before 2030, and 232 approved indicators to monitor the global advances towards the achievement of the Goals. The Agenda gathers, thus, 193 countries under the shared vision of a future "*world where human habitats are safe, resilient and sustainable and where there is universal access to affordable, reliable and sustainable energy,* [...] *a world of universal respect for human rights and human dignity, the rule of law, justice, equality and non-discrimination; of respect for race, ethnicity and cultural diversity;* [...] *a world free of poverty, hunger, disease and want, where all life can thrive,* [...] *a world in which every country enjoys sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth and decent work for all.* [...] *A world in which consumption and production patterns and use of all natural resources* [...] *are sustainable*" (UN 2015:3-4).

Signed and endorsed by 193 member states of the UN in September 2015, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is defined as "*a plan of action for people, planet and prosperity*" by the UN (2015:1) itself. Its 17 integrated and indivisible Goals aim at encompassing the three dimensions of sustainable development: the economic, the social and the environmental, through the establishment of peace and partnerships.

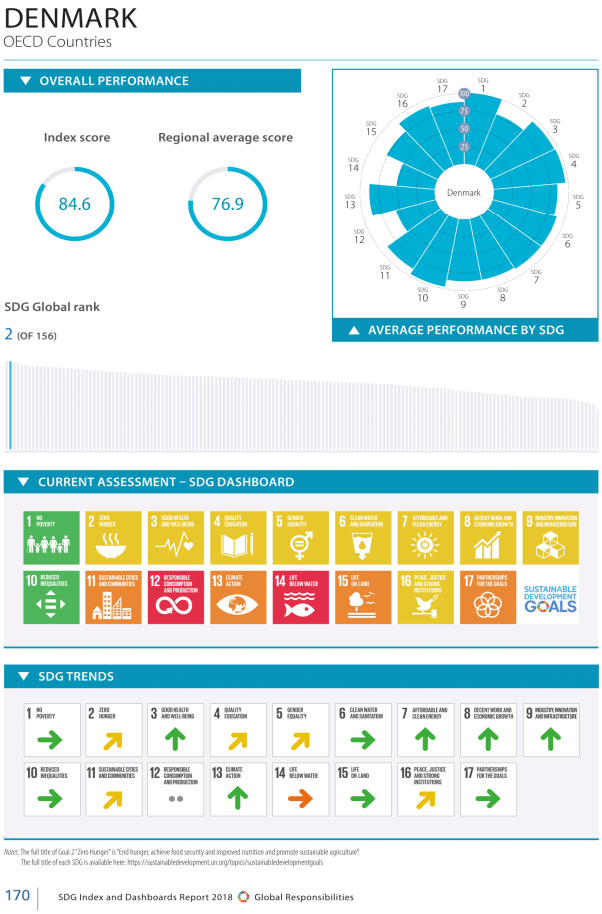
The goals have been defined as most ambitious and historic, and as a "*comprehensive, far reaching and people centred set of universal and transformative Goals and targets*", not only by its authors (UN 2015:3), but the Agenda has also been praised by an array of Danish and global newspapers, analysts and researchers across various disciplines - from economy, through political science and over to humanities and development studies (Hildebrandt 2016; Nielsen 2018a; Lu et.al. 2015; Costanza et.al. 2016; Frantz 2017). Also among influential NGOs, the vision behind the agenda seems to be relatively well accepted and widely embraced (Thomas 2018; Amnesty International 2016).

But how are the Goals interpreted locally by those actors who are intended to operationalise them?

Global Goals through local eyes: a snapshot

> *"Are you going to tell us something about how those colours can be translated onto a context that suits Skanderborg Municipality?* [points at the powerpoint presentation, showing the red-yellow-green colours of Denmark's ranking, as evaluated in the latest UN Sustainable Development Goals report from 2018 (*fig. Denmark.*)]*, because I think it is kind of abstract with those three colours from a national perspective and those 17 other colours, representing such broad global goals for sustainability!"*
>
> (Citizen participating at 'Verdensmål i Vandbranchen, Feb. 19th 2019, from fieldnotes)

A fair question, posed by one of the participants at the mini-workshop and presentation of the work of Skanderborg Municipality with the Sustainable Development Goals. ‘Global Goals in the water industry’ (Verdensmål i Vandbranchen), was a conference held at AquaGlobe, the innovative Water Solution Center of Skanderborg Utility. It was free and open to all interested citizens, among whom were students, public and private employees in organisations whose work is somehow related to water and/or the Sustainable Development Goals. The atmosphere was, moreover, clearly characterised by a common intention of networking, especially considering the many employees of consultancy companies and potential customers attending the conference. Among the facilitators of the workshop were experts from local municipalities, private companies and local politicians with a common interest in sharing their knowledge and experience with the Sustainable Development Goals, while learning from each other and from the input of the participants to the workshops. The conference had, thus, the dual function for both participants and facilitators of creating a platform for sharing knowledge and harvesting input from the attending participants within a field, that of sustainable development, which is yet ‘unexplored terrain’ for many organisations in a Danish context.



Indeed, the difficulty of understanding an abstract concept such as global sustainable development from the perspective of a minor Danish municipality is tangible, when listening to the comments of the participants in the conference. What role should Skanderborg Municipality

play in the grand vision of the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development? Indeed, the Global Goals, as they also are called, require an effort to be translated into locally adoptable plans for action. And that does not come without contestation, doubt and different interpretations - nor without political implications. And, in fact the discussion suddenly becomes very political among two local politicians from Skanderborg Municipality who are also attending the workshop:

- *"[...] I mean, if 'zero hunger' is yellow in Denmark, then I must say that this report* (UN 2015) *sort of loses its validity, considering the situation in other countries!"*
- *"You don't understand, it is about our impact on the planet, our global footprint"*
- *"Well, then it becomes a political question!"*
- *"No, it is not! It is about how many resources we seize, as a nation, in the world, and how that affects the global distribution of food. I mean, those are UN numbers!"*
  (Local politicians from Skanderborg Municipality, 'Verdensmål i Vandbranchen, Feb. 19th 2019, from fieldnotes)

This excerpt does not only highlight the challenges in translating the Sustainable Development Goals into a local context. It also illustrates how they are attributed different meanings, according to who they are interpreted by. As such, the Global Goals also bear the potential of being politicized, interpreted, perceived and used (differently), according to the context wherein they are translated. After the first part of the conference, where we met the representatives from the municipality, we were also introduced to Envidan, a company providing holistic solutions for the water, waste water, energy and environmental sectors and financial advice for their clients. Indeed, as demonstrated by the following excerpt, private companies perceive the Sustainable Development Goals, in yet another way:

> *"There are two reasons why we work with the Sustainable Development Goals at Envidan. Firstly I think they can help us steering off the way to self-destruction that we are headed towards. And, to say it in harsh words, if Envidan wants to keep existing, it needs a planet to exist on.*
> *Secondly, our clients, which are primarily municipalities, water utilities and industries*

> *are starting to organise themselves around how the Goals can be implemented in their projects. [...] Moreover, we have recently received a code of conduct for social responsibility by an organisation which includes many members among our main customers, which has placed the Sustainable Development Goals as a central pillar for their requirements. The code of conduct clearly states that they expect their partners and the value chains to think these Global Goals into their everyday activities. So now, for us, it is not even a question of using the Sustainable Development Goals to 'look good' at a tender. Working with the Sustainable Development Goals has become a question of staying in the game or not. And, as a private company, it is a pretty good motivational factor that nobody wants to work with us, unless we take this* [the SDGs] *seriously!"*
> (CEO of Envidan, 'Verdensmål i Vandbranchen, Feb. 19th 2019, from fieldnotes)

This excerpt emphasises an interesting tension between valuative and economic pressures as frameworks through which the call for action and interpretation of the Sustainable Development Goals affects the agency of Envidan. A tension, which clearly brings forth a rush for striving at being the 'best', in terms of working with the Global Goals, and a tension that calls for questions regarding the consequences of the blurring boundaries between global policymaking, local politics, the environment, corporate responsibility and economic growth.
Instances such as the ones reported above evoke questions regarding the global-to-local interplay concerning how the Sustainable Development Goals are interpreted into specific local organisational settings and translated into practice, and with what interests different kinds of actors (municipalities, companies, organisations) engage with the Sustainable Development Goals. Also, it becomes relevant to ask what effects the Goals have on the organisations adopting them, and how the Sustainable Development Goals affect their ability to envision a path that leads to 'transform our world for the better by 2030'.

This thesis is thus not specifically focused on the (indeed already vast) body of knowledge on the qualities of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in itself, and of the 17 Global Goals. The aim of this research is, rather, to investigate the *interaction* between how the current global socio-environmental challenges are perceived and presented by the UN itself through the

Sustainable Development Goals, and how the Goals, on their behalf, are interpreted, appropriated and put into practice in a local context as a material-imaginative phenomenon, in the nexus of the interests of civil society, local politics, public organisations and private enterprises. By addressing the interplay between global policies and local politics, and between public institutions and private organisations, we question what kind of agency and practice is ignited, or hindered, locally, through the Sustainable Development Goals, and what possible futures they may unlock.

With those considerations in mind, we wish to explore the ongoing complexity of the interlinked processes of materiality, representation, interpretation, imagination and action that arise with the operationalisation of the Sustainable Development Goals in a local context, by addressing the following problem statement.

Problem statement

This is a techno-anthropological study of how the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) take discursive and material shape through the imaginaries of Danish public, political and corporate institutions. By examining how the SDGs are materialised in practice as (social) technologies, we discuss how their various materialisations unlock different imaginative horizons and possible futures.

Conceptual framework

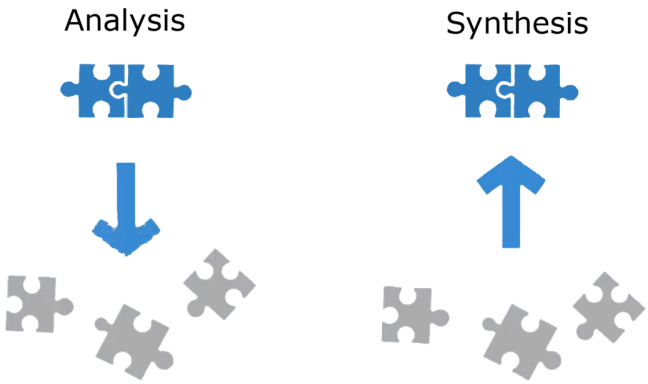
Models and social technologies

A key premise to this thesis, lies in proposing the Sustainable Development Goals as *models*: as a set of *symbols* (Geertz 1973). Inspired by cultural anthropologist, Clifford Geertz, we understand the term symbol broadly, as "a*ny object, act, event, quality, or relation which serves as a vehicle for a conception*" (ibid.:91), the conception being the symbol's *meaning*. As such, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is interpreted as "*tangible formulations, abstractions from experience fixed in perceptible forms*" (ibid.): as a mediation that resembles a perception of the

current global challenges, and, at the same time, aims at manipulating the reality that it represents, in order to achieve a desirable future. Therefore, the 2030 Agenda is also perceived as what anthropologists Steffen Jöhncke, Mette Nordahl Svendsen and Susan Reynolds Whyte (2004) define as a *social technology*. In this sense, technology is understood broadly, as the application of knowledge to how something is done within the practical aims of human life. As such, technology entails both concrete, material tools as well as methodological and valuative tools. Inspired by Foucauldian discourse analysis, the concept of a social technology is commonly adopted to highlight the normative power of ethnocentric ideals of what is a 'good life', what is 'normal' and 'desirable', and what is a 'problematic individual or behaviour' within a society. In this thesis, instead, we consider the 2030 Agenda a *social* technology, in the sense that it simultaneously encapsulates both a problem and its potential solution, by presenting an understanding of the current global challenges and a toolset, or pathway, for addressing those challenges. Both the challenges and the solutions presented through the Sustainable Development Goals are, moreover, continuously put into practice in the interaction and co-production of contextually defined socio-material assemblages of models, numbers, graphs, symbols, interpretations, imagination and desire (Jöhncke, Svendsen & Whyte 2004: 388; Latour 2005). This perspective allows to highlight the interconnection that relates the problems and solutions presented through the Sustainable Development Goals, their underlying rationale and their practical consequences in specific social contexts. Focusing on the Goals as social technologies, allows, thus, not only to describe how they affect agency in practice; it also enlightens how cultural interpretations of problems and solutions can be infringed, negotiated and changed.

Analysis, Synthesis, Emergence and systems

In our investigation of institutional thinking patterns and imaginaries we make much use of systems theory (eg. Bogdanov 1922; Meadows 2008) and the distinguished between analysis and synthesis.



In an analysis, the object of inquiry is broken down into parts in order to understand its components which is in direct contrast is the process of synthesis, which combines different parts together to gain an understanding of the whole. The whole is also called a system (Capra & Luisi 2014:66).

Synthesis takes thus a holistic view that seeks to understand how an object interrelate with its surroundings. The process may reveal a pattern or a novelty, that is something more than an assembly of the parts, this novel *emergence* is the system's function or its quality – an ephemeral and purely subjective entity. As an example, a synthetic inquiry of a bicycle is to relate it to its environment, that is, to roads and cyclists etc. (whereas an analysis of the bike is to dissect it into frame, wheels etc.). An analytic approach does not reveal any value or purpose of the bike, such is only found by asking questions to its usage.

The means to an end and the end itself

In this hermeneutic investigation we have found it relevant to focus on two specific ways of interpreting or utilising the Sustainable Development Goals, which hold distinct differences. One is to understand them as a *vision*. Inspired by anthropologist Vincent Crapanzano (2004), when referring to a vision, we think of the material, the symbolic and its relationship to imaginative possibility. Through this interpretation, a vision is strongly connected to effects of symbolisation and representation in terms of desires, hopes, the optative and the emotional (Crapanzano 2004:14) - it is a synthetic process. The other interpretation is to see the Sustainable Development Goals as, well, *goals*. As blueprint or a plan of action, an interpretation which addresses instead determination and is an analytic process. In short the two interpretations are thus about a focus on

the Sustainable Development Goals seen as a 'means to an end', against one that sees them as 'an end in themselves'. With such distinction, we aim at addressing the qualities of envisioning a possible future that does justice to the complexity of human sensibility and the possibilities that lie beyond the imaginative horizon of 'business as usual', with the desires and sense of thrill, and the dread and uncertainty it can cause (ibid.) and, continuously addressing such vision in its mechanistic enactment through goal-setting.

Reading Guide

This thesis presents a positioned *synthesis*, which is structured and thematically divided into 7 conceptually interlinked chapters:

Chapter 1: Introduction

Focuses on the global vision that must be used locally. The chapter has introduced the preamble of the Sustainable Development Goals. This preamble contains a *vision* and end *goal* of the UN (193 countries). The chapter has furthermore told a story, a snapshot, of what is almost a generic representation of local concerns and complications with translating global goals in local context.

Chapter 2: Deconstructing the 2030 Agenda

Begins by taking a deeper look at the UN 2030 Agenda and narrates the history of thoughts and physical conditions that seem to have influenced the development of the Sustainable Development Goals as a model. It does so in order to further assess what types of interpretations it may encourage.

Chapter 3: Global policies gone local

Describes the distribution of how the Sustainable Development Goals are intended to be put into practice. It illustrates how the Sustainable Development Goals can be understood as a *model* or representation of sustainable development.

Chapter 4: Agents of Change

Presents the engagement with the Global Goals from the perspective of the Danish Government, Danish public institutions and for local private companies, their visions and their strategies of implementation - or appropriation of the 2030 Agenda. It deals with incentives, thinking patterns and positions.

Chapter 5: Putting transformation into practice
Focuses on the socio-material through which engagements with the SDGs emerge. The chapter deals with implications of phenomena such as labelling and the ideology of decoupling have for transformational change.

Chapter 6: Transformation - a challenge of perception
Is a meta-enquiry of on how the Sustainable Development Goals bear the potential of transformative change through a change in perception. It builds on- and synthesises the previous chapters and reflects on the perspective that the institutions have on the SDGs. It aims at contemplating the role of values, emotions, imagination, belief, hope and desire as igniters of change and the potential redefinition of a more inclusive and ethically aware concept of sustainability and sustainable development.

Chapter 7 Final thoughts

The potentials of a new perception of sustainability are finally presented as an inclusive, ethical and moral process of embracing uncertainty as a pathway for a sustainable future

Ethnography, methods and relevance

The methodological choices that we have taken during this project are directly correlated to the nature and the context of the phenomenon that we are researching. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development represents, by its nature, an abstract vision, an imaginary future, from the perspective of the United Nations. But, at the same time, the Goals are also a comprehensive condensation of geopolitics and global policymaking with the aim of addressing the complexity of the contemporary global climatic and humanitarian challenges through quantifiable and measurable targets. All the while, the Sustainable Development Goals are embodied, enacted, perceived and materialised in an array of different ways in local epistemologies and in the

practices of different institutions. They fluctuate between a global focus on policies and a review of its interpretations and consequences on a local plan.
Located in the midst of the spectre that connects the interpretations of the current global challenges represented by the Sustainable Development Goals and the local perceptions and possible future imaginaries connected to them through their various materialisations, our fieldwork has been *flexible*, *multisited* and *widespread*.
Flexible, in the sense that the conditions of our fieldwork have required us to seize the access to data, information and opportunities that would eventually arise - or disappear - without further notice, in a research context, that of the rising awareness to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) within Danish businesses and sociopolitical environments, that is indeed undergoing a fast-paced development and interpreted differently by different organisations, as we will show. While the overall area of investigation has not changed throughout our research, this condition has nonetheless affected our ethnography. An example hereof, is our collaboration with the consultancy company Orbicon and Randers Municipality in the analysis, testing and development of the SDG-screening tool 'MYLIUS', which is currently being developed by the consultancy company Orbicon.

The development and testing of MYLIUS was initially intended to be at the core of our investigation, since this thesis was originally prepared as a traditional organisational ethnography (Neyland 2008), focusing on 'strategic practices' and perceptions of 'change' in relation to the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals in the collaborative nexus of public institutions, consultancy companies and water utilities. The reason behind this choice, is related to our previous academic involvement and collaboration with those institutions, which has undoubtedly eased the access to the field and to key informants. This condition was indeed valuable to our research, considered the limited time for the elaboration of this thesis. Moreover, the research that we have conducted during previous projects (Jessen, Lolk & Paulsen 2019; Costin et al. 2018), has also given us relevant insight in a fieldwork context and research-area of the global-to-local interplay in project management, innovation and sustainability within municipal and semi-private institutions. Those insights have undoubtedly proven to be useful in the development of this thesis.

Our original ethnographic strategy (Neyland 2008:25) consisted thus in contributing, through our research, to the development and testing of MYLIUS. A position, which allowed access to data, the freedom of an action-oriented ethnography and the purposeful contribution of our research to the development of a concrete technology.

While the data obtained by meeting those institutions has undoubtedly contributed to the formation of this thesis, the stalling development of the screening tool itself on behalf of Orbicon and the lack of dedicated work with the Sustainable Development Goals on behalf of Randers Municipality, together with the arousal of new research-opportunities, truncated the fruitfulness of this collaboration for this thesis. A situation, which speaks not only to the fast paced development of the 'trend' of the Sustainable Development Goals, but also to how ethnographic research always needs to be open to changes in the research-conditions according to circumstances. Or, in Neyland`s terms: "*an ethnographic strategy always needs to be made locally appropriate*" (ibid.:39). And indeed, our fieldwork ended up slightly shifting during the whole length of our fieldwork.

Moreover the fieldwork also ended up being both *multisited* and *widespread*. In the sense that the massive amount of accessible data currently available and the vastness of the potential fields of research concerning the Sustainable Development Goals is astonishing - and that is even only by delimiting a geographical focus within a Danish context. As we will show, Denmark happens to be ranked by the United Nations among the member countries who are topping the global rankings of the countries who performed best on the 17 Sustainable Development Goals in 2018 (Sachs et al. 2018:11,170).

Indeed, the amount of conferences, talks, workshops, meetings and seminars concerning the Sustainable Development Goals, does arguably reflect a rising organisational and political interest in the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development from a Danish perspective.

Those conditions have limited the amount of participant observation that we have been able to conduct, forcing us to delimit our fieldwork to key informants, institutions, talks and observations - a condition which has also affected the outcome of this thesis.

Specifically, the analysis and discussion presented, are anchored on an empirical basis of qualitative data gathered during a 5-month period from January 2019 to May 2019. But we would

not classify this thesis as the outcome of traditional ethnographic fieldwork by 'immersion'. In strong contrast to classical anthropological fieldwork, which traditionally entails an involvement so deep that the researcher aims at 'going native', i.e. living, thinking and seeing the world as the studied actors do, we were rather forced to a sort of 'anthropology by appointment' (Hannerz et.al. 2006:34), partly conditioned by restricted and regulated access to people, information and knowledge, yet also open to the vast knowledge available on the Sustainable Development Goals - from an international, Danish and institutional/political perspective - online. Therefore, we did, nevertheless, generate our empirical data from the elaboration of a fairly extensive corpus of ethnography, which is the outcome of a diffuse, complex and intertwined array of fieldwork-situations, including participant observations, unstructured interviews, ethnographic conversations, pictures, jottings and notes in various settings and locations, the variety of which is shortly listed in the box below.

Empirical basis

We attended 6 conferences and seminars across Denmark: from "Engaging Youth in building the business of tomorrow" at the UN city in Copenhagen, and all the way to Hjørring, in Northern Jutland, where we attended a "morning meeting" arranged by NBEN, the Network for sustainable business development in Northern Denmark. From Moesgaard Museum in Aarhus, where we were introduced to anthropological considerations on the Sustainable Development Goals during the seminar: "FN's Verdensmål - i et antropologisk perspektiv" and to the innovative Water-house of AquaGlobe in Skanderborg, where we attended a conference on the effect of working with the Goals for the water sector, during "Verdensmål i Vandbranchen".
We arranged 3 private meetings ourselves with key informants from Randers Municipality, Orbicon, Vandmiljø Randers in different configurations, which functioned ethnographically as focused group interviews (Halkier 2010), with the purpose of discussing their engagement with the Sustainable Development Goals, the function of the SDG-screening tool MYLIUS and the interest of implementing the Sustainable Development Goals in the Municipal Strategy of Randers Municipality and Vandmiljø Randers.

We attended one academic talk about an anthropological critique of the Anthropocene paradigm from the perspective of political ecology by anthropologist Andrew Bauer and the public launch of 'Danmark for målene', a campaign arranged by a collaboration of NGOs, companies and the UN with the intention of spreading the knowledge of the Sustainable Development Goals among civil society in Denmark.
We also participated in one workshop concerning the development of the SDG-screening tool MYLIUS with, among others, informants from the company developing it, Orbicon, and Hedeselskabet, the commercial fund which owns Orbicon, and key representants from various Danish municipalities and from the Danish fashion- and housing industry. We even attended the kick off of 'Global Change', an open-air theatrical performance arranged by the theatre 'Teatret Svalegangen', with the intention of creating a global common area in the city of Aarhus, an event that explores how the Sustainable Development Goals can be engaged through performance art - and thus appeal to the visions and fantasies that can activate agency among the public in bringing the vision of the Goals to reality.
Finally, we had six interviews with, among others, Steen Hildebrandt, professor emeritus, member of various SDG-advisory boards in Denmark and chairman of the 2030-panel on the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals in the Danish Parliament, with key informants from Aarhus and Skanderborg Municipality and the CEO of Engsko, a private company producing millstone systems contributing to sustainable development in Ethiopia, India and South Africa, where its production and main market is located.

All the excerpts from interviews and speeches by Danish informants, from the reports and magazines of Danish municipalities and/or companies and the quotes from Danish politicians reported in this thesis have been carefully translated from Danish to English by us, the authors.

The extent and broadness of this data has furthermore been supplied by extensive academic- and online research, the involvement, analysis and interpretation of which, has provided a sufficient basis for the focus of this thesis to be laid on the implications of various perspectives, perceptions and imaginaries connected with the different materialisations, practices and discourses connected to the Sustainable Development Goals in Denmark.

Still keeping MYLIUS as a 'brick in the wall' of the plethora of materialisations of the Sustainable Development Goals rather than the founding pillar of this thesis, our fieldwork strategy has thus shifted, from a decidedly ethnography *for* an organisation (Neyland 2008:9), towards a critically engaged ethnography, which is not to be categorised as a decidedly ethnography *on* the Sustainable Development Goals as such. Due to its flexible, multisited and widespread essence and the focus laid on the implications of perception and imagination, we would rather define it as a critical*, reflexive ethnography* (ibid.:56-57). An ethnography, which is engaged, so to say, within, without and alongside, in making sense of the worldview of our collaborators and informants and their mutual and ongoing interaction in making sense of the phenomenon of the Sustainable Development Goals from a Danish perspective.

Our research would thus, arguably fall under the rising category of anthropological research 'at home', aimed at "*making the familiar strange rather than the strange familiar*" (Van Maanen 1995:20), as in opposition to traditional anthropological studies aimed at bringing the 'exotic' back 'home' (Neyland 2008:1). That is also the case, but only to some extent, since, peculiarly, the opposite seems *also* to be true. Indeed, this thesis aims at contributing, amongst other things, to one of the key issues that the presented ethnography poses: namely that of 'translating' the abstraction of the Sustainable Development Goals, also called *Global Goals* (in Danish '*Verdensmål'*), into the concreteness of tangible, *mundane goals* and everyday-life actions (in Danish '*hverdagsmål'*). We would argue that this thesis places itself betwixt and between the two presented ethnographic traditions, aiming at 'making the familiar strange', by questioning the practices adopted by our collaborators and their underlying worldviews, *while also* 'making the strange familiar', through the intentions behind this thesis.

As such, this research contributes to the overall mode of research of policy studies, by combining a (techno-)anthropology of policy (Shore, Wright & Peró 2011) with 'climate ethnography' (Crate 2011). As climate ethnography, it aims at contributing to the overall knowledge production on the socio-political and material process that brings the social and the natural, the global and the local together, by combining "*human activity and material transformations in a dynamic, systemic interplay which climate science is still trying to understand*" (Knox 2014:408). Moreover, in this thesis, the Sustainable Development Goals are perceived both policy and as a technology, mutually affecting and being affected by the groups of people interpreting and

interacting with them through the plethora of their materialisations. And it is exactly this relation between non-humans and humans, and its capacity to cause change that is at the core of this study or, as techno-anthropologists, Lars Botin and Tom Børsen, express it: "[the potential of] *learning different logics that influence or underpin human abilities, capacities and competencies, which often, if not always, are mediated by techniques, i.e. machines*" (Børsen & Botin 2013:7).
A techno-anthropological approach does therefore not only unlock an analytical perspective that allows for the bridging of the gap between the techné (technology) and the anthropos (human). It also unlocks a terminology and the tools for a discussion on how (social) technologies affect humans and vice-versa, and how to review the processes that lead to such change from an ethical perspective.

Informed participation and participant informants

Our initial roles in the field have, obviously, primarily been as student researchers. Nevertheless, just as the character of our fieldwork, our positioning has not been constant, but flexible and variable. In what follows, we will elucidate what that has meant for our research through two cases from fieldwork. Already from our first collaboration with Orbicon, and our contribution in the development and testing of the SDG-screening tool, MYLIUS, we quickly understood that engaging in this collaboration simply as researchers would not allow us to access the data that we needed, nor to get in-depth insights in the practices and perceptions of the Sustainable Development Goals within the organisation. Indeed, participant observation often entails a give-and-take relationship (Wadel 2014:40). This kind of relationship quickly presented itself as a source to a broad range of data through our involvement in a workshop for the testing of MYLIUS in collaboration with our informants from Orbicon. In this occasion, we were induced to assume the role of co-developers and testers of the tool:

> "[...] *By the way, at the workshop we could use some more eyes and we could also use your help in testing MYLIUS. I will present you as student researchers, but also as testers, which means that, if you want, you can help us by watching over the participants while they use the tool and describe their experience of exploring the Sustainable Development Goals and applying the tool to one of their projects or their organisation. Basically, I would like you to document the user experience and usability of the tool*".

(Interview with the project manager of MYLIUS, Orbicon, March 12th, 2019).
On this occasion, and generally through our collaboration with Orbicon, we positioned ourselves in a face-to-face interaction with our informants - who had previously been informed of our participation and on our role during the workshop. This allowed us, on the one hand, to engage in cooperation with the developers and project managers of MYLIUS and, on the other hand, as testers and informal interviewers with the representatives from those organisations that participated in the workshop. This positioning unlocked, thus, a wide range of data for this thesis and, despite the limits posed by our formal positioning as testers (entailing an inherent distance from our informants), those early observations and interactions became a strong source of research questions and wonderings, eventually to be addressed through our further research. And, moreover, considered the occasion and the limited time at our disposal, such positioning was indeed the best (and only) option at our disposal to establish a bond with the present informants and gain some insights.
To compensate the role as testers and co-developers, we engaged through different roles with other informants. Beside the role as interviewers at arranged meetings and as observers and participants at conferences, which allowed us to understand the complex patterns that relate a wide array of organisations, individuals and politicians - and their interests - with work with the Sustainable Development Goals, we also acted through the role of experts.
Access to data from Randers Municipality and Orbicon has been facilitated by previous collaborations, as mentioned before. Since one of us is also currently employed in the municipality, engaging in informal discussions with its employees and management has been practically effortless, in terms of gaining the confidence of our informants.
This allowed us to engage in a quite different role, as experts, unlocking another kind of data. One that involved ourselves, and our own subjective opinions, to a higher degree:

> *I was strolling down the office towards my desk after a regular meeting at the planning section of Randers Municipality.*
> *While walking, I spot some coloured icons on the background of a desktop with the corner of my eye. It surprises me, since I have never really heard anybody talk about the Sustainable Development Goals at the municipality.*

> *I take the chance and arrange a meeting for next week with Merethe, one of my colleagues who apparently is personally interested in sustainable development.*
> *A week later, I access my laptop at work and, to my great surprise, I find out that Merethe has invited the Head of the department of planning, construction and infrastructure and the Head of the department of environment and technology to our meeting. Afterwards I understand that she had casually met them in the office during the week and told them about our research with this thesis, whereafter they absolutely insisted in joining my meeting with Merethe to hear more about it - and to get some input for the potential for implementing the Sustainable Development Goals in Randers Municipality.*
> (Fieldnotes, Randers Municipality, March 27th 2019)

Literally involving our 'selves' in the fieldwork through this role in the interaction with Randers Municipality, has affected the findings of this thesis by involving a degree of subjectivity which has, nevertheless, been treated as valid data in this research, implying that we have become, to a certain degree, our own informant (Wadel 2014:68).
The more or less systematic rotation between the above mentioned roles and informants has, as shown, unlocked the combination of more 'objective' datasets through observations and formal participations in conferences, verbal knowledge on the perceptions and worldviews of key-informants through interviews, combined with the subjective knowledge of cultural practice through our deliberate personal involvement in shaping our own field of research.

Ethical considerations during fieldwork

During the data collection and subsequent writing of this thesis, we have had several ethical considerations regarding how best to portray observations and reflections from the field in an ethically coherent way, without overly bending the gathered data or obfuscating the path that has led to the conclusion of this project, in order to fully convey the observations that lie behind our findings. In this regard, we are highly aware of the responsibilities that follow when a host organisation gives access to sensitive information, and of the inherent limits of doing organisational ethnography in terms of privacy, and of the expectations connected to it (Neyland 2008:6-10). Throughout our research, we have therefore attempted to remain true and transparent

to the agreements with our collaborators and we have striven to produce documentation and knowledge that in no way position our informants, or the organisations that we have collaborated with, in challenging situations or in a position that, in any way, could result in being negatively affected by the involvement in this research. On the contrary, we hope and believe that the knowledge presented with this thesis can positively affect their future engagement with the Sustainable Development Goals.

Therefore, some data has been excluded from direct use in this thesis, while still contributing to our overall understanding of the object of inquiry and its systemic relation to a wider context and environment.

It should be noted, that while no informant is directly mentioned by name, key informants are referred to by their title or occupation, since we deem it as relevant information for the robustness, transparency and validity of our analysis.

While this thesis is therefore not strictly anonymised, it is so only after verbal consent of the informants who have contributed to this project and, moreover, it follows principal ethical guidelines of anthropological research, such as respecting privacy, providing anonymity when requested, not exploiting research participants and respecting instances where information was requested to remain confidential (Neyland 2008: 139-140).

Chapter 2: Deconstructing the 2030 Agenda

We have mapped the road to sustainable development; it will be for all of us to ensure that the journey is successful and its gains irreversible
(UN 2015:12 par. 53)

The 'United Nations Sustainable Development Goals'. What does that even mean? - Let's take a look at this heading. Firstly we have the 'United Nations' - what does this entity entitle? Is it the notion used to explain a fellowship among nations and people in general, or may it refer to the institutional organ? And what about 'sustainable development'? How is one to read this composition? Is emphasis on the first or the second word? Is development understood as economic advancement and growth in a more sustainable way, which would mean a change of the current *approach* to growth? Or are we instead talking about developing sustainability (*into* something), as in a wish to promote it and change the way it is understood as a concept? This can be a bit confusing, since the two meanings point in different directions. The first of the two interpretations seems to suggest a focus on the current dominant paradigm of development as expansion and GDP growth, whereas emphasis on the word sustainability and its development, on the contrary, seems to suggest that development here means transformation (as in change) - namely in our understanding of this notoriously fuzzy concept (Lewis & Brightman 2017:3). And finally 'Goals' - what does this word connote? Why does the heading of the 2030 Agenda use this notion? Why not vision or policy?

To answer those questions, it seems natural to start from the fact that the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development undoubtedly has succeeded in attracting much more attention to the cause of sustainability and sustainable development than their predecessors, The Millennium Development Goals and The Brundtland report (UN 1987).

In many countries the subject of a global climatic and humanitarian crisis has gained attention in an almost exponential manner throughout the later years, encouraged by events that are starting to unfold globally such as the devastating hurricanes in the US, record droughts in Cape Town, forest fires in Northern Sweden and the record-breaking warm Danish summer of 2018 (Machariaed 2018, Watts 2018, Milman 2018, Bubandt 2018).

In this sense, the changing climate may be the ultimate witness of the global boundaryless effects of local human actions, but we have also seen other types of effects than those of rising water levels and forest fires. In Denmark, we have seen the outcome of what happens when a system breaks down in one place and the effect ripples outwards. This is what Denmark and the rest of Europe experienced with the 2015 refugee crisis. A consensus seems to have spread, due to direct testimony, regarding the understanding and acceptance that what happens in one place affects its surroundings and sometimes the whole planet; that if some people on the other side of the world are troubled, the same trouble may be felt somewhere else, one way or another, testifying to the interconnectedness of the current challenges. The results of the recent European Parliamentary elections also highlight a rising support to the so-called 'green parties' within the European Union (Henley 2019), which is arguably the result of bottom-up pressure from civil society, supporting the adoption of a 'green' agenda on a political level among the so-called OECD countries. The public debate among adults and children concerning sustainability in Europe has recently been supported by an array of movements and protests, symbolised by 'the climate girl', Greta Thunberg, who has become a symbol of the call to action of the younger generations for building a sustainable future, highlighting the responsibility of the OECD countries reducing their negative socio-environmental impact (Nielsen 2018b).

The 'Scandinavian SDG-hype'

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have brought forth a shift in perspective in terms of how sustainable development is understood and approached from different political points of view, reaching from local municipalities and public offices to the central government and ministerial policies / initiatives in Denmark. From lying solely within the agency of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, it is now becoming a broad political strategy, including the intention of creating growth and potentials for export in the Danish businesses in collaboration with civil society and the public sector (Lanthén 2018) and coupling it with an idea of sustainability, which has anchored the 2030 Agenda deeply within the Danish ministry of finance.

What has been called a 'Scandinavian SDG-hype', has arguably been driven by a belief and will to identify the Northern-European organisations as a knowledge hub that can help other countries in becoming more sustainable and achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (ibid.). A belief, which has brought the Goals from an agenda for foreign aid organisations, and onto a tool of high symbolic capital for politicians, private companies and public employees, through its highly visual materialisations (*Picture shows the colorful official SDG-Pin*).

This has caused a booming exposure of the goals and the array of symbols attached to them - such as the SDG pin and the SDG boxes, which are respectively worn and demonstrated at a vast number of public conferences, seminars and debates within political-, (inter-) organisational and educational frameworks across Denmark, wherein the goals are increasingly being articulated and included in discussions concerning the development of sustainable (business) strategies. And the public interest has been (and still is) great:

We are 180 participants at the 'Vendsyssel Theater' in Hjørring. It is a fully booked event from 8-10 a.m. on a snowy Wednesday morning. They [the organisers, Netværk for Bæredygtig Erhvervsudvikling NordDanmark] even had to find a new location for the meeting, since they underestimated the amount of people interested in attending the event!
I am astonished by the amount of people in a suit and tie from all over Northern Jutland (and a handful of daring students, probably from Aalborg University), who seem to be willing to take an early morning off work to get insights on how the Sustainable Development Goals can be implemented within businesses.
(Fieldnotes, 'Morning meeting - the UN SDGs', Netværk for Bæredygtig Erhvervsudvikling NordDanmark, Hjørring, February 6th 2019).

It is within this context that, as we will discuss in this thesis, the Sustainable Development Goals are arising as a common 'language' to talk about sustainability within the corporate and political debates in Denmark. But how do the Sustainable Development Goals, as *one* set of goals, uniting all the member states of the UN under *one* vision, relate to the complexity of countries, regions, municipalities, organisations, institutions and individuals and the variety of their agendas, interests, desires and imaginaries?

The answer to this question comes partly from an understanding of the meaning embedded in the Sustainable Development Goals themselves, which is why the following paragraphs will serve as an introduction to the historicity and narratives connected to the notion of 'sustainable development'.

A history of sustainability

The momentum that the Sustainable Development Goals have gained since their launch in 2015 is quite remarkable, but its agenda cannot be considered to treat a new topic. A notion of sustainability has been debated (and changed dramatically) through history, already since the eighteenth century: "*in the context of increasing demand for wood to fuel the furnaces of smelting plants and hammer mills in Saxony, Von Carlowitz criticized the short-term thinking that was allowing more and more wood-land to be converted to fields and meadows. He advocated greater efficiency through the insulation of buildings, improved stoves, furnaces and hearths, and the use of alternative fuels such as peat. Above all, he called for systematic reforestation. He then asked, "how such a conservation and cultivation of wood can be arranged so as to make possible a continuous, steady and sustaining use"* (Lewis & Brightman 2017:3).

From this perspective the notion of sustainability is centred around the use and management of material resources originating from forestry and, through time, adapted to other forms of resource management (such as energy, fishing, water etc.). As such, this notion of sustainability has also generated a particular view on natural resources as something that can (and should) be measured, managed and even monetarized or commodified (Haraway et al. 2016:538). Therefore the notion of sustainability, while being focused on the management of (limited) available resources, is arguably also generative of values and debates.

Throughout time, the notion of sustainability has been adopted by environmentalist movements during the 1960's, who eventually became more influential and managed to affect international policy circles through the so-called 'economy of nature'. The aftermath of this period inspired an institutionalisation of a managerial approach to sustainability, marked by documents such as 'The Limits to Growth' by the Club of Rome (Meadows et al. 1972) and the 'Brundtland Report' (UN 1987), eventually leading to the Rio Declaration (UN 1992), the Millennium Development Goals (UN 2010) and finally to the Sustainable Development Goals (UN 2015). The idea of the existence of ecological limits to population and economic growth was already articulated in 'The Limits to Growth', which already back in the 1980's advocated for the need for transformative change — both in ideology and in practice — to sustain humanity at large into the future.

While marking a paramount shift in the collective acknowledgement of human-induced changes to the 'planetary machinery', recognising the influence and interrelation of human actions on the environment, the 'Brundtland Report' is primarily known for coupling the notion of sustainability with that of development, by defining sustainable development as "*development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs*" (UN 1987: ch. 2, paragraphs 1–2). This emphasis on needs and the idea of limitations to sustainable development imposed by the unequal relation between technology, social organisation and the environment, highlights a perspective on nature as a limited 'ecological capital' available for human well being. This interpretation of nature, imbues, in other words, the environment with an instrumental value for sustainable development, recognizing that the 'developing countries' are entitled to prosperity in terms of monetary and economic growth (UN 1987: overview, paragraph 17).

As such, the Brundtland report marks the institutionalisation of a ubiquitous concept of sustainability, encompassing social, environmental and economic domains, by coupling it to an idea of the need to eradicate poverty and 'fulfill aspirations for a better life' through economic growth and market-based approaches to conservation.

The institutionalisation of sustainability, which is commonly equated to sustainable development, has therefore caused it to be inherently dominated by a preoccupation with economic considerations and a tendency to address cultural, social and ecological concerns in ways compatible with economic growth. An approach, that of sustainable development which, through

its formal institutionalisation, has moreover been criticised of being a normative concept: "*when sustainability is assumed to be a good thing and is uncritically embraced, important questions about who and what will be sustained, how sustainability will be operationalized on the ground, and what other short- and long-term outcomes that communities might desire, may be overlooked. Despite criticism of the utility of sustainability as a policy goal, initiatives promoting sustainability and sustainable development remain widespread, and different interpretations and applications of sustainability and sustainable development continue to emerge*" (Filho et al. 2018:7).

Perhaps an aspect of these challenges may originate from the very way that the United Nations is organised and its (institutionalised) understanding of sustainability.

Indeed, while the Millenium goals were primarily focused on the developing countries, the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development acknowledges on another level that the developed countries (the so-called OECD countries) are responsible for what happens in the rest of the world and are moreover the main responsibilities for the environmental challenges of the planet. With the Sustainable Development Goals, a more inclusive approach to sustainable development has been initiated. But also an approach, which in fact is given even higher prominence to the business potential of sustainability, as will be elucidated later in this thesis (Business and Sustainable Development Commission 2017; DNV GL 2018).

The agenda for sustainability of the UN has thus been coupled to economic growth and highly characterised by a managerial and top-down approach to development in a way that seems to connote a certain underlying - almost "religious" - framework of what may be called normative *managerialism* (religious is here best understood as in Erich Fromm's description of the word: *"[…] any group-shared system of thought and action that offers the individual a frame of orientation and an object of devotion*" (Fromm 1982:86)).

Thus, it may be argued, as we will do in later chapters, that in an ontological way, the 2030 Agenda continues to encourage and afford an understanding of sustainability that perceives nature as no more than a means to human needs, imbuing nature with a merely instrumental value to humanity and no intrinsic value inherently in and by itself. An approach which continues to couple sustainability with economic growth, sustaining a purely causal interrelation between humanity and nature, understood as something which needs to be managed, and promoting a

policy mechanism which tends to "*obscure attention to equity, power and justice which were initially central concerns of early proponents of sustainability itself*" (Agyeman et al. 2002).

Why Goals?

"*The end toward which effort is directed*" - such is the general definition of a goal (Merriam-Webster 2019). It may immediately seem logical to use the name and appreciate the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development as being exclusively a set of global goals. Is it not after all the purpose of any agenda - to outline things *to do* (from lat. agendum: to do)? To direct attention to the destination where its stakeholders want to be, and from this awareness to vitalize will for action?

As stated by Steen Hildebrandt, one of the most prominent researchers on the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals in Denmark, and often quoted by the Minister of Finance and the main authority for the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals in Denmark, Kristian Jensen:

"*We Danes should not and cannot save the world alone. But as citizens of the world, we have a responsibility towards ourselves and a share of the responsibility towards the world. [...] The Goals are about 'transforming our world'. And we can and have to contribute to that change as Danish citizens, families, corporations, municipalities, etc. Therefore, the Sustainable Development Goals are not the Goals of the United Nations; they are everyone's goals. They are Denmark's goals for Denmark and for the world, South Africa's Goals for South Africa and the world, etc. And the same goes for all people in all countries*" (Hildebrandt 2018:8).

This perspective on the 2030 Agenda highlights the importance of ownership, in terms of achieving the 17 Goals. Implicitly such statement does not only imply that the Goals reflect one single interpretation of the vision of the Agenda, which equals the ambitions and dreams of all the affected stakeholders. It frames instead a normative set of globally desirable goals and needs. In this context, it is interesting that the United Nations has named a set of *goals* in the 2030 Agenda for sustainable development.

The question of the relevance of goal-setting was already present in the Brundtland report which, despite its instrumental and economic language, in fact also endorses a wider moral perspective on the status of and relation between nature, humans and non-humans, evidenced by its statement

that "*the case for the conservation of nature should not rest only with development goals. It is part of our moral obligation to other living beings and future generations*" (UN 1987: chapter 2, paragraph 55, our highlights). Implicit in the statement, is not only a strong conception of sustainability as non-anthropocentric and instrumentalist, but also a review of goals, as the *only* pathway for change.

Indeed, even American economist and public policy analyst, Jeffrey D. Sachs, who serves as special adviser for the United Nations' Secretary-General António Guterres on the Sustainable Development Goals, poses the question: "can the UN goals actually make a difference?" (Sachs 2015:489).

To answer that question, he refers to President John F. Kennedy, who declared in a speech in June 1963 that "*By defining our goal more clearly, by making it seem more manageable and less remote, we can help all people to see it, to draw hope from it and to move irresistibly towards it*" (Kennedy 1963). Inspired by Kennedy, Sachs claims that goals are critical for social mobilisation, not only by stating an agreement on the direction of the efforts for solving the complexity and heterogeneity of the contemporary challenges for sustainable development. Goals are considered to also help the organisation of knowledge networks and stakeholder networks. From this perspective, the mere statement of goals, brings together multistakeholder processes, involving scientific, political, public, private and non governmental communities which, by itself, is argued to ensure improved outcomes.

Nevertheless, a goal- and action-based focus may also leave the concerns of values in a blind spot: *"most of the discussion of action gives us an image of someone wilful, someone who takes an initiative. There is this idea of 'resoluteness', to use Heidegger's term – a fixing of a will and then, of course, having a plan. Whenever any kind of enterprise or education is underway all the emphasis is on that: set up a plan, mark your goals, and then develop it and discipline the will. There is pride in being wilful and having one's own will. In that way the discourse about action becomes disconnected from other things – for instance, laughter, sensuality and hospitality. I think that in real life we understand that very well"* (Mary Zournazi 2002:34).

The UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development suggests, by developing a set of 'Sustainable Development Goals', that goal setting and resoluteness is compatible with sustainability, in fact it may seem from its phrasing that they are even related.

However, because of the implicit and inherent historical heritage of the concept of sustainable development, as elucidated in this chapter, a focused action- and goal oriented approach, hastefully based on the strategic development of a 'plan for action' bears the risk of basing action on a perception of the current challenges - and the consequent imaginaries of their potential solutions - on business as usual, rather than on 'transforming our world', which is indeed the main vision of the Agenda. As highlighted by Capra and Luisi, the association of purely quantitative economic growth with the idea of development is highly problematic. Indeed, if 'development' is understood in a narrowly economic sense, associated with the ideal of unlimited quantitative growth in a physically limited planet, "*such economic development can never be sustainable, and the term 'sustainable development' would thus be an oxymoron*" (Capra & Luisi 2014:371).

In this chapter, we have discussed the historicity of the concepts of sustainability and sustainable development, and the inherent contradictions encapsulated in their conceptions.
Eventually, we will discuss how the underlying rationale reflected by the 2030 Agenda affects the way in which sustainability and sustainable development are understood and enacted nationally and locally, but, also, how the Agenda is (re)interpreted in terms of the contextual conditions of the specific organisation or institution that engage with them locally. However, before going into depth with these considerations, with the following we will take a step back to shed light on the scientific basis that has played a part in fostering those circumstances and values that have given rise to the abovementioned contradiction.

The Earth System theory

There is no question that human-induced pressures, together with other processes, have had (and still have) remarkable implications for planet Earth for as long as our species has existed. The acceptance that the Earth and the climate are noticeably affected - to various degrees - by human lifestyles is one of the premises of this thesis, as of the 2030 Agenda and will, thus, serve as the starting point of this paragraph. Therefore, it avoids delving into the debate on the trueness or legitimacy of the research made on the matter of anthropogenic (climate) change, or in any way enter this debate or the (after all diminishing) controversy related to the (dis)approval of the

factuality of such change, the human-induced nature of it, the distrust of the consequences of it and - in general terms - on the politicisation of e.g. climate change. In this thesis, these changes are considered as factual, as well as the fact that their (future) implications are (and will be) severe.

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development calls for action to subvert these negative impacts on the planet Earth, as well as it also acknowledges the interconnection between issues of socioeconomic inequality and global poverty and the current environmental and climatic changes. The Agenda addresses, in other words, both environmental, social and economic challenges, and (theoretically) the Sustainable Development Goals, in their current form, attempt to break down the barriers between them.

Such a holistic conception of sustainability found in the 2030 Agenda, illustrates a societal shift in perspective that has gradually developed since the turn of the century, helped, among other things, by the advancing research within the scientific domains of organismic biology, gestalt psychology and the new physics of quantum mechanics (Capra & Luisi 2014:63-70). This systemic perspective (on the interconnected essence of all living species and our planet) has given rise to the so-called Earth System Theory and the idea of the arousal of a new geological epoch: the Anthropocene.

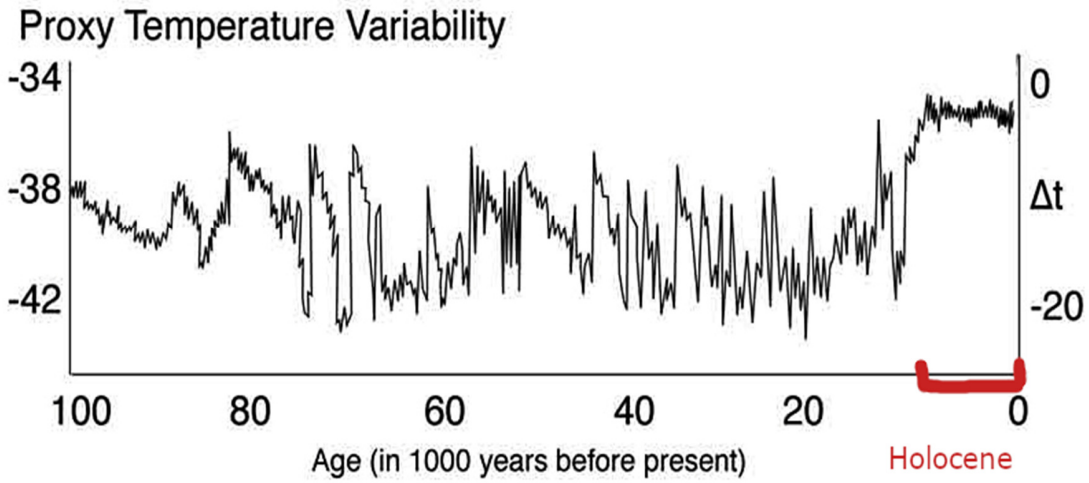
What follows, is an introduction of the recent geological history of the planet through a review of the abovementioned theories as *a specific* scientific understanding of its functioning, which portrays the origin of the perspectives and moral stances, as well as the ideals of a possible pathway for change that the Sustainable Development Goals represent.

A Human Planet?

The existence of humankind fills a relatively limited period of geological time but, nevertheless, one which has seen the arousal of humans to proliferation and, eventually, to play a central role in the geological and ecological development of the planet (Crutzen 2002; Steffen et al. 2007; Steffen et al. 2004).

From this point of view, the latest interval of geologic time, the Holocene Epoch, deserves particular attention (Agenbroad & Fairbridge 2018). The Holocene (‘Recent Whole’) has spanned for approximately 11.600 years of the Earth’s history, since the last glaciation and until now.

While humans, as a species, has existed for many thousands of years, the Holocene epoch, also labelled the ‘warm period of the past 10–12 millennia’, is of great importance for the development of humanity, since it marks a relatively stable and accommodating state of the Earth's geology and biosphere. A state of the ‘planetary machinery’ which, from a geological and biochemical perspective, has been argued to be the only one that is known for certain to be able to support contemporary human civilisation (Crutzen 2002; Bauer & Bhan 2018; Steffen et al. 2004; Steffen et al. 2011). (*Picture show how the Holocene is a stable period in regard to temperature fluctuations*)



Indeed, the Holocene is a geological epoch that coincides with the start of the period during which the influence of humanity eventually becomes of an extent and of such a profoundness, that - already back in the start of the 19th century - brought the renowned Scottish geologist, Charles Lyell to define it as “*the era that has elapsed since the earth has been tenanted by man*” (Lyell 1833:52).

The Anthropocene epoch

About 10.000 years ago, near the onset of the Holocene, the development of agriculture marked the shift from predominantly hunter-gatherer societies towards a more sedentary lifestyle in Eurasia, including India and China, but gradually spreading to the mediterranean, central and

northern Europe and also to Northern Africa and central/southern America during the following millennia (Ruddiman 2003). The advent of sedentarism and agriculture eventually triggered the development of villages, cities and complex civilisations which caused, among other things, an anthropogenic transformation of the natural environment. With sedentarism, the land, and consequently the earth and the environment, became something manageable and in need of management or care. A shift which, from the perspective of environmental ethics, assigns instrumental value to nature, while depriving it of its intrinsic value.

While it is clear that humans, just like any other creature or being on the planet, have impacted the environment for as long as they have existed, just by the fact of being alive and breathing, what becomes interesting with the advent of sedentarism, though, is the increasing *scale* of such impact (Steffen et al. 2004; Steffen et al. 2011; Bauer & Ellis 2018; Crutzen 2002).

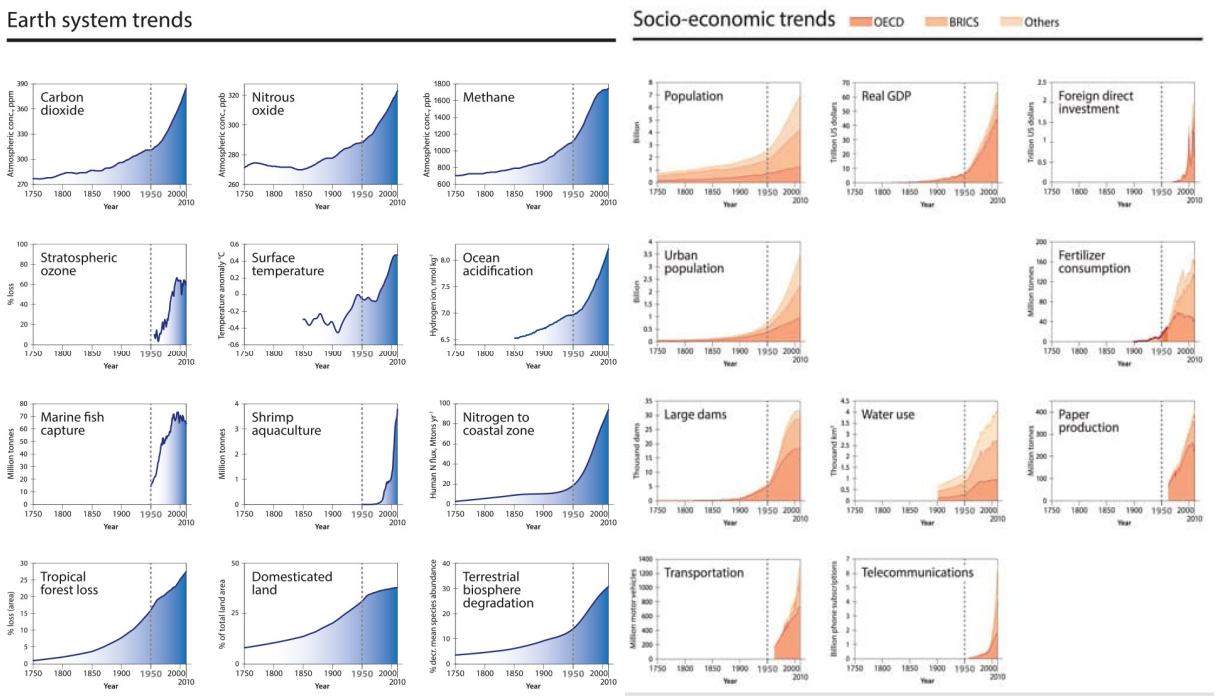
The advent of sedentarism marks the beginning of an accelerating series of inventions, innovations and effectivizations, targeted towards a systematic use of natural resources and engineering of the environment to the advantage of human development. A process that brought forth the onset of industrialisation around year 1800 AD.

Referred to as one of the three or four most decisive transitions in the history of humankind, industrialisation is argued to be a central event for humanity, because of the exponential growth of the amount of energy production (and consumption), unlocked for the industrialised societies through the use of fossil fuels, allowing for an enormous expansion of engineering capabilities and the establishment of the current economic system (e.g Steffen et al. 2007:616). An interpretation which, tacitly, emphasises a conception of development and growth as core to human well-being.

It is the transition to such a high-energy society that has allowed for the massive expansion, development and innovation of human activities on Earth (despite mainly affecting the contemporary OECD countries), that laid the ground to what has been reported as the post-1950 ‘Great Acceleration’ (Hibbard et al. 2006).

The Great Acceleration and the Earth System

The Great Acceleration Graphs appeared for the first time in the International Geosphere-Biosphere Programme (IGBP) synthesis book (Steffen et al. 2004), reporting the Results of the IGBP synthesis project that was undertaken between the years 1999 and 2003.



The intention of the synthesis was to generate a better understanding of the structure and functioning of what was defined as the *Earth System*, understood as the relation between the current environmental trends and the human-driven changes affecting them, aimed at mediating a projection of the threats posed by anthropogenic pressures on the 'System' for human well-being on Earth (Steffen et al. 2015:82; Steffen et al. 2004:7) (*Fig. Acceleration graphs*).

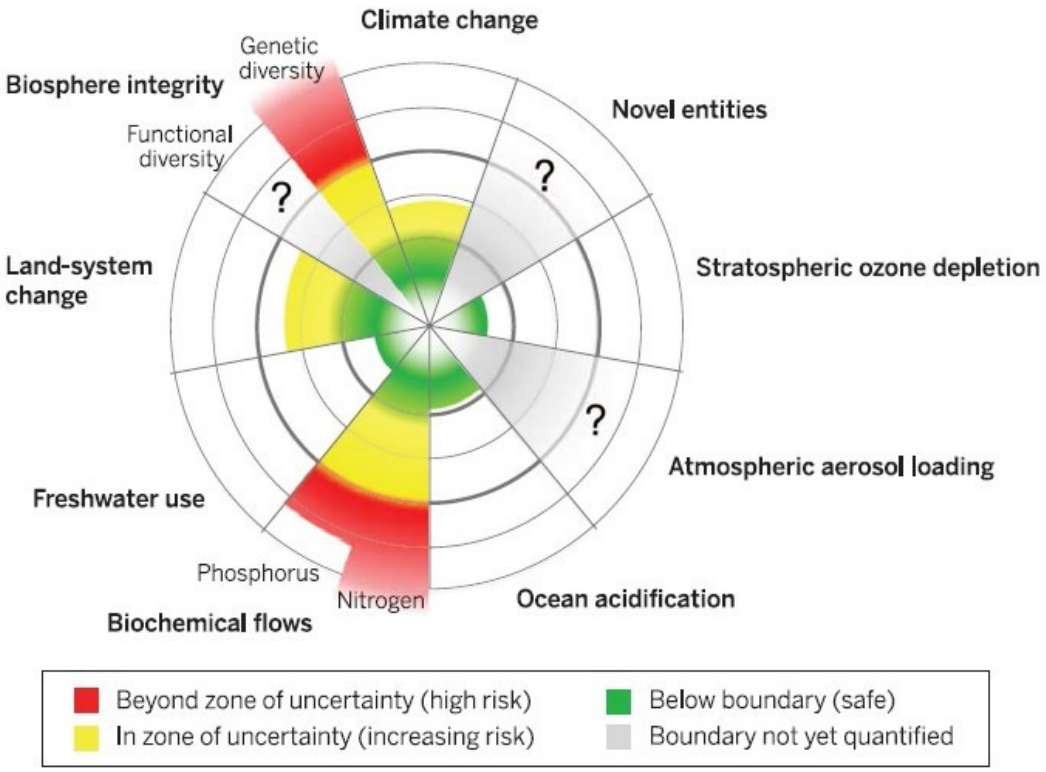
The Great Acceleration graphs highlight how the world's population has doubled since 1960, tripled since 1930 and is projected to rise to over 9 billion by 2050, how the global economy is increasing drastically, together with a dramatic increase in global inequality, and generally how a number of Earth System-trends are connected to socio-economic trends.

Indeed, the graphs clearly illustrate the unequivocal correlation of global socio-economic trends

and what has been termed as Earth System trends from 1750 to 2010, clearly suggesting a correlation between e.g. the increasing global GDP, global population and consumption on the one side and the increasing ocean acidification, the increasing quantity of atmospheric carbon dioxide and methane, on the other. At the same time, they also depict the uneven distribution of the socio-economic trends among, e.g. the OECD countries and the so-called 'developing countries'. In such a way, the J-curves of the Great Acceleration Graphs do not only mediate a representation of how the promise of endless (economic) growth on a limited planet of modern capitalism has led to environmental decline and climatic change, they also emphasise the great inequalities connected to the current understanding of development and economic growth and, thus, shedding light on how environmental and social challenges are inherently connected.
Indeed, what the studies of the Earth System do enlighten is that the biogeophysical conditions of the Holocene epoch present simultaneously the conditions for an enormous human and technological development and wealth, while the selfsame period has coincidentally also seen the arousal of massive rates of inequality, poverty and environmental degradation. Understanding the world as an integrated Earth System, means thus to highlight the inherent connection between human and inhuman pressures on the planet, which cannot avoid to present the need for radical systemic change, in order to address the current anthropogenic global challenges.

Planetary Boundaries

Recent studies concerning anthropogenic pressures on the Earth System have focused on defining a 'safe space' for human development: what has been termed as a "*planetary playing field for humanity if we want to be sure of avoiding major human-induced environmental change on a global scale*" (Rockstrom et al. 2009; Steffen et al. 2018).
With these intentions in mind, led by professor in environmental science and global sustainability, Johan Rockström (et al. 2009), nine 'planetary boundaries' have been identified, concerning issues related to climate change, ocean acidification, stratospheric ozone reduction, the biogeochemical nitrogen cycle and phosphorus cycle, global freshwater use, land system change, the rate at which biological diversity is lost, chemical pollution and atmospheric aerosol loading.



Within this framework, the concept of planetary boundaries focuses on delimiting "*the non-negotiable planetary preconditions that humanity needs to respect in order to avoid the risk of deleterious or even catastrophic environmental change at continental to global scales*" (Rockstrom et al. 2009).

Research on planetary boundaries suggests the interdependency of the boundaries, considering that "*transgressing one may both shift the position of other boundaries or cause them to be transgressed*" (*ibid.*).

In line with the concept of the Earth System - by seeing the current planetary challenges as integrated with human activities - defining a safe operating space for human development on this planet, inherently involves, on the one hand, that human induced global changes *will* eventually have variable social and environmental impacts, according to the socio–ecological resilience of the affected societies, but also, on the other hand, that human action is required in order to readdress the course of the Earth System to stay within Planetary Boundaries.

Complexity in the time of uncertainty

Amongst the factors that increase the complexity of dealing with the concept of planetary boundaries, is the recognition that people around the globe (and throughout time) have (had) unequal impacts on the Earth System - which arguably distributes the responsibility of the current global challenges (and also the responsibility for taking action) unequally. Moreover, it has been argued that the current issues of poverty and inequality also imply unequal capabilities to alter future trajectories of systemic change. Indeed, it is well documented that humans have not, e.g. produced greenhouse gases and climate change as a homogenous network of 'humanity'. On the contrary: "*a significant chunk of humanity is not party to the fossil economy at all*" (Malm & Hornberg 2014:65).

And yet, the concept of planetary boundaries and of the Earth System, seems to fail at addressing such inequality, thus silencing the kaleidoscopic social relationships and ways of life that constitute the 'anthropos' (Sayre 2012), by considering humanity as *one* geophysical force (Bauer & Ellis 2018).

In a politically explicit vein, geographer Nahan F. Sayre argues that the Anthropocene idea should not lead to an assumption of a transhistorical 'anthropos' with no attention to the uneven distribution of Anthropocene responsibilities and impacts. Therefore, the Anthropocene necessitates questions of 'socio-environmental justice' (Sayre 2012: 67 in Moore 2016:34).

In agreement with such a perspective, recent scholarly research has sought to complement the concept of the Anthropocene by critically addressing the heterogeneity and inequality of the social and the processes that are related to contemporary global change, with concepts such as the *Capitalocene* (Moore 2015) or the *Plantationocene* (Haraway et al. 2016), which aim at nuancing the idea of an Anthropocene epoch.

Moreover, by disregarding the wide variety and processual nature of human-environment understandings and perceptions, the concept of the Anthropocene is also argued to have grown out of "*a particular view of the world that is hegemonically Western*" (Haraway et al. 2016:547), from a Western legacy and thus highlighting a Western logic.

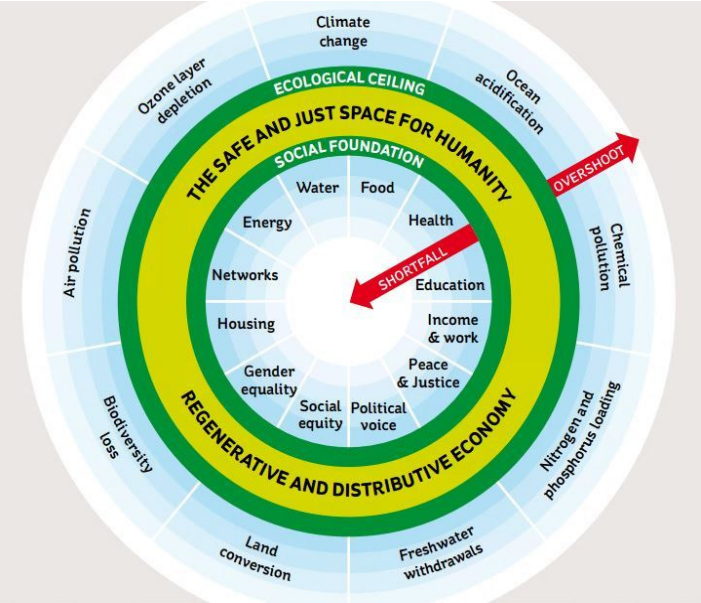
Such a perspective, as argued by Bauer & Bhan (2018), feeds into a narrative that continues to speak of nature as something other, and thus maintaining the same ontological standpoint and

upholding the same narratives that support the view of climate (and nature) as something other than society (and culture). In other words, the anthropocene narrative and its underlying worldview faces the risk of supporting the argument of e.g. climate-skeptics instead of undermining it, and of supporting business as usual instead of encouraging action and transformative change.

The observations made above highlight how understanding the world through concepts such as the Anthropocene "*calls needed attention to humans as agents of contemporary climate change"* (Bauer & Bhan 2016:66), which is indeed starting to affect decision-making and policymaking at the time of writing. Nevertheless, the critical scholarship on the Anthropocene enlightens how such worldview runs the risk of obfuscating social differences, inequalities and the varied entanglements of understandings of human-environmental relationships, in the quest of keeping the Earth System within the boundaries of 'the safe operating space' of an interglacial, holocene-like state.

To sum up, the model of Planetary Boundaries and the Great Acceleration Graphs represent the Earth as a system of interconnected parts, highlighting how socio-environmental challenges are inherently connected to patterns of consumption, production and growth. It is, in other words, a holistic view that has given rise to a logic that has the potential to defy the inherently (western) capitalistic notion of a possibility for perpetual (economic) growth as the source of human well-being. Yet, as we have shown, while clearly portraying the necessity of radical change of the economic system in order to fully address the current global socio-environmental challenges, the Anthropocene narrative does not seem to make up with a mechanistic and managerial perspective on nature that started with the onset of the holocene epoch and the advent of sedentarism, nor does it appear to induce transformative change by itself. As will be discussed later in this thesis, this struggle with igniting change and agency is one that, just as the contradictions inherent in the concept of sustainable development, is embedded in the conception of the Sustainable Development Goals.

The Doughnut Economy



With the concept of planetary boundaries and the Earth System, a picture has been drawn, representing the *material* limits of our planet, which are predicted to allow for a safe 'operating space' for humanity. But the conception of planetary boundaries has been criticised for disregarding considerations on social equity (Richardson et al. 2011). In the attempt of addressing this issue, economist Kate Raworth (2012) provides an overarching framework for global sustainability, by combining the planetary boundaries framework with a set of social justice goals required to ensure an adequate level of well-being for all humans, hence framing what she defines as a safe *and just* operating space for humanity. This perspective, presented as the 'doughnut economy' (*Fig. Doughnut*) inspired by the research on planetary boundaries, lays the ground for a perspective on Earth, economy, sustainability and humanity as forming a system of interlocking processes upon which human wellbeing depends. A perspective that somehow attempts to embrace all the issues highlighted by the Great Acceleration Graphs. Pointing at the possibility of a symbiotic relation between development and environment, Raworth argues for the necessity to develop an economic system that aims at subverting the structural dependency of the global economy on GDP-growth, to instead meet the needs of all people to thrive in balance within the social and environmental boundaries of our planet. Arguably, this conception of "*combining social equity considerations with the management of the biophysical planetary boundaries may constitute a necessary — and perhaps even sufficient — condition for achieving global sustainability, and is thus crucial for the development of new, truly integrated and universal Sustainable Development Goals*" (Steffen & Smith 2013:407).

We will turn back to the implications of the structural dependency of GDP growth for the conception of sustainable development later in this thesis. But for now, having depicted the historicity of the concept of sustainable development and the scientific ground and motivators, the academic perceptions of the 'state' of the Earth and its inhabitants, i.e. the driving engine behind the understanding of environmental processes, anthropogenic change, economy and sustainability that has ignited the mechanism through which the Sustainable Development Goals have risen within the conceptual framework of the United Nations, it is now time to reconstruct the 2030 Agenda from a holistic perspective.

Reconstructing the 2030 Agenda

In the previous paragraphs, we have deconstructed the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, in order to highlight the meaning embedded in the representation of the current global challenges presented by the Agenda. But we have also listed and elucidated the functioning of an array of representative tools, aimed at communicating such perspective. As mediating tools, representations such as the 'Great Acceleration Graphs', the conception of 'Planetary Boundaries' and of the 'Doughnut Economy' are, in other words, models or graphs: mediations of a certain perspective on the current state of the Earth and of its inhabitants. A consideration which highlights the socio-material character of the discourse surrounding the communication of the meaning embedded in the Sustainable Development Goals - and its implications on agency.

A model of- and for sustainable development

Understood as symbols, the Sustainable Development Goals entail meaning: they are thus concrete embodiments of ideas, attitudes, judgements, longings and beliefs, but also of cognitions, affections and conations (Geertz 1973:91). From this perspective, as a set of symbols, the Sustainable Development Goals can be interpreted as a *model* themselves, defined as a simplified and typically compact representation of a concept (Capra & Luisi 2014:82). A central characteristic of models is the use of abstraction, whereby various levels of details are removed from the original empirical phenomena in order to create a compact schema of the object under

consideration. By encapsulating otherwise unbearable amounts of information and considerations, if taken in all of its complexity, the Sustainable Development Goals symbolise a perception of the current state of the planet, the environment and humanity, by presenting a structured and simplified representation, which can easily be communicated. In such a way, they also propose a synthesized pathway for a possible future, which addresses the challenges that they portray. They are, thus, to paraphrase Clifford Geertz (1973:92-93), *models of* sustainable development, in the sense that they imitate or simulate a perception of the current global challenges - as to render their complexity apprehensible through symbolic representation - just like an engineer might understand how a dam works by looking at a technical drawing. But, at the same time, they are also *models for* sustainable development, since they have the power to actually 'model' relations among entities, with their environment and with other systems, just like a dam can be constructed through the conclusions drawn from a technical drawing. What is stressed in this latter trait of a model, is the fact that, when perceived and interpreted, its meaning bears the potential of manipulating agency and the material - the nonsymbolic - in terms of the relationship expressed in the symbolic. Beyond being a communicative tool, the Sustainable Development Goals are, from this perspective, a technology, with the potential of affecting and changing reality. They are sources of information, in the sense that "*they provide a blueprint or template in terms of which processes external to themselves can be given a definite form*" (ibid.:92).

From this perspective, the history and meaning of sustainable development and of the Sustainable Development Goals, just as the history of climate science (Knox 2014:410), is as much a history of computer modeling, simulations, of representations and interpretations and of fact-making, as it is a history of experimental science, economy and social work. Making the Sustainable Development Goals a political, corporate and public reality has, therefore, partly "*depended on the capacity of models to build increasingly fortified webs of evidence*" (ibid.).
But experience from studies of climate action, has proven how modelling in itself does not necessarily evoke agency (Knox 2014), which we have argued to be the case also with the phenomenon of 'modelling sustainable development', so to say.

The modelling of the nexus of nature-culture-society and their inherent interrelation is, with those considerations in mind, criticisable through the philosophical question of 'human alienation', presented by Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno (Horkheimer and Adorno 1969) of the neo-Marxist Frankfurt School of critical theory. At the root of this alienation is a conception of rationality as an instrument for pursuing progress, power and technological control. One that "*takes observation, measurement and the application of purely quantitative methods to be capable of solving all problems*" (Brennan & Lo 2016:20), and one that is argued to disenchant nature (and, likewise, human beings — since they too can be studied and manipulated) of its intrinsic, emotional value by turning it into something to be managed through the act of modelling. An action, which entails the risk of "*elaborating a crude mechanics of desire which hardly does justice to the range and complexity of human sensibility*" (Crapanzano 2004:14). According to Horkheimer and Adorno, the remedy to such alienation is to replace such instrumentalist model of rationality with a more humanistic one, in which the "*values of the aesthetic, moral, sensuous and expressive aspects of human life play a central part*" (ibid.:21). Indeed, current movements such as the one started by Greta Thunberg, the climate girl, and the practice of environmental and social NGOs (Thomas 2018; Amnesty International 2016), strongly appeal to emotions and values as clues to engage citizens and civil society in thinking and acting sustainably. Those phenomena have certainly contributed to the transformation of hypotheses about the interconnectedness of anthropogenic climate change, economic growth, inequality and the responsibility for action from marginalised theories to the basis for international policy, corporate strategies and municipal plans through the engagement with the Sustainable Development Goals.

But, while the Sustainable Development Goals, as a policy, symbolise a systemic, global agreement of a pathway for human and environmental well-being, their meaning is necessarily filtered through local interpretative frameworks, in order to be put into practice.

With these observations in mind, what follows will therefore shift the attention towards how the conceptual meaning surrounding the discourse of sustainable development through the 2030 Agenda is related to local agency.

Chapter 3: Global policies gone local

Our journey will involve Governments as well as parliaments, the United Nations system and other international institutions, local authorities, indigenous peoples, civil society, business and the private sector, the scientific and academic community – and all people. Millions have already engaged with, and will own, this Agenda. It is an Agenda of the people, by the people and for the people – and this, we believe, will ensure its success.

(UN 2015:12 par. 52)

A call for action

When the 193 state members of the UN General Assembly signed and adopted a set of 17 Sustainable Development Goals in order to achieve nothing less than the ambitious vision of 'transforming our world' (to the better) by 2030, they basically agreed on the grave socio-ecological conditions of the planet, and acknowledged the impact of human induced pressures on Earth.

But it was also a commitment to a shared vision and a set of Goals through which to change the direction of the current environmental and social crisis. Progressing towards the achievement of the 2030 Agenda is proposed as a collective journey through the slogan 'leave no one behind' - along with the headline 'transforming our world'. A call to action that addresses every layer of the global society, including multinational and large enterprises, small and medium-sized enterprises (SME's), Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), utilities, local governments and the public sector, but also civil society at large. The 2030 Agenda acknowledges, in other words, the necessity of involving every institution of the global society - including the private and public sector - in the mission for the structural transformation through which the "lives of all will be profoundly improved and our world will be transformed for the better" (UN 2015:2).

As a policy, the 2030 Agenda is, in fact, nothing *less* than a commitment to contribute to transforming the current reality of how things are, to venture towards an alternative pathway, leading to possible, and better, future by 2030. Understood as representation of global aspirations, the 2030 is, nevertheless, *only* a voluntary agreement, rather than a binding treaty.

One could thus argue that it is also nothing *more* than, well, an agreement. For what constitutes such commitment?

The power of United Nations lies within the nations

"The U.N. is like your conscience. It can't make you do the right thing, but it can help you make the right decision"
(Margareth Huang, Executive Director of Amnesty International U.S.A., in *The New York Times* Sept 17th 2017)

Despite it being a political institution, the United Nations does not possess the constitution nor the organisatory power to implement the Sustainable Development Goals or to hold governments legally accountable for the promises they have made when agreeing to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development back in 2015 (Dossani 2015). Especially for this reason, each nation, including all its variety of institutions, must acknowledge that any change and any initiative put into action must come from within.
The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development has been criticised for failing in concretely addressing a strategy to achieve a transformative change that includes all the goals in an integrated fashion, and very little is said in the Agenda about how to link the vision to its implementation on a local plan (Harders et al. 2018:10).
But the lack of concrete means of implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals is, according to the UN itself, intentional: "*regional and subregional frameworks can facilitate the effective translation of sustainable development policies into concrete action at the national level*" (UN 2015:6-7 par. 21).
The UN Agenda for Sustainable Development thus places great responsibility on the shoulders of the world's countries, regions, municipalities, local politicians, cities, authorities, officials, administrations, private companies, NGOs and civil society at large, since it is largely within the nexus of their merging interests that the spark of transformative change is intended to be implemented, according to the vision of the Agenda.
The Sustainable Development Goals can thus only be considered as a common ground, a shared language or framework for sustainability and sustainable development. A vision of joint

responsibility, where the goals are to function as igniters of a catalytic process towards the establishment of a collective, cross-sectoral effort that engages organisations, individuals and policymakers in implementing the goals in their strategies and plans for action, in terms of their own local, contextual premises, while being supported by legislations and policies taken on national, regional and local levels to foster transformational change. While raising awareness for a common vision and reaching an international agreement around these goals was the primary entrypoint for the joint effort, the outcome of such agreement - the way in which the goals are implemented locally - is crucial for the achievement of the goals.

But such a corporate, public and political interest in sustainability does not come out of a vacuum. We have already shown how the current debate around global climate-related challenges and the so-called 'Scandinavian SDG-hype' nurtures a clear political incentive for using the Sustainable Development Goals as drivers for 'green growth' in the nordic region. This is also highlighted by how, during the past few years, sustainability and the Sustainable Development Goals have made their broad entry into the halls of local municipalities, administrations and political entities in Denmark (Deloitte 2018; Jens Reiermann 2018; Gassen, Penje & Slätmo 2018; Københavns Kommune 2017). The Sustainable Development Goals are thus already affecting the agenda of private, non-governmental and public organisations and they are, progressively, also starting to influence decision-making at a societal level (Gregersen 2018, Hildebrandt 2018).

But more than that, as we will show in the following, the period between 2015 and 2018 has also marked the introduction of the Sustainable Development Goals as a clear statement, a catching and involving brick in the strategic branding, Corporate Social Responsibility-agendas and development puzzles of a variety of visionary Danish businesses, public institutions, organisations and semi-private institutions such as the water sector. Many institutions are already clearly influenced by the Sustainable Development Goals in their strategic assessments and choices, using them as objects of external communication, or even rooting them (and sustainability) in their vision and mission statements.

Nevertheless, according to ph.d. and professor emeritus in leadership and organisational research, Steen Hildebrandt, that process is going far too slowly, and in the wrong direction, also in Denmark (Hildebrandt 2018:4-5).

Implementation or appropriation?

As a *model for* sustainable development, the 2030 Agenda entails intentionality. It is a technology, an expression of practical knowledge, aiming at creating specific changes in the realm of human life (Jöhncke, Svendsen & Whyte 2004:390) to 'improve the lives of all and transform our world to the better' (UN 2015:2). As we have seen, a central question surrounding the 2030 Agenda as a solution-model for sustainable development, concerns the values and ideologies, the social norms and cultural models, materialities and ideals that are embedded in the Sustainable Development Goals. As we will see, as a policy for sustainable development, the Agenda is to be understood as a productive, performative and continually contested phenomenon which finds expression through "*sequences of events, new social and semantic spaces, new sets of relations, new political subjects and new webs of meaning*" (Shore, Wright & Peró 2011:1). As such, the 2030 Agenda can be argued to provide the rationale for 'regime change' and the subversion of an established order.

From this perspective, the meaning and intentionality embedded in the 2030 Agenda requires a process of reification in order to be translated into action.

But it would be naive to believe that the ideas or ideologies that lie behind the Agenda remain static, when interacting with local contexts. Indeed, a key quality of policies, is that they undergo a process of *instantiation* and *specification*, when being translated into concrete actions within specific local contexts and settings, through which "*they acquire a life of their own*" (ibid.:3), thus affecting practice in locally specific ways. This perspective opens up for considerations regarding how the meaning embedded in the 2030 Agenda is interpreted within the contextual socio-material relations through which the Agenda affects agency on a local plan. The process of translating the 2030 Agenda from global policies to local action does thus complicate the process of 'implementing' the Sustainable Development Goals.

Indeed, as highlighted by professor in leadership Steen Hildebrandt in a discussion concerning the operationalisation of the Sustainable Development Goals in Danish municipalities, such process is far from established in Denmark: "*as far as I know, there is no such institution or organisation that can say to have 'implemented the SDGs'. Actually, the opposite is rather the*

case. But there are some [municipalities] *that have started* [the process of implementation]*, such as Gladsaxe Municipality*" (e-mail correspondence with Steen Hildebrandt, April 1st 2019).

In fact, we even claim that it would be inappropriate to consider the operationalisation of the Sustainable Development Goals as a process of implementation. It should rather be conceived as a process of *appropriation*: in the attempt of recognising the "*complex and messy processes of negotiation, translation and redefinition of certain policy elements in a given situation or context*" (Nielsen 2011:81). The following paragraphs will attempt to address such complexity ethnographically, by pivoting around the socio-material interests in operationalising the Sustainable Development Goals in the local context of the Danish political scene, across local municipal engagements with the Goals and from the perspective of private companies through means of appropriation.

If we imagine a horizontal line that connects abstraction with reification, with what follows, we will therefore start moving from the abstraction of the previous chapters and on to how the Sustainable Development Goals affect local socio-material assemblages. We will thus shift our focus away from discussing the 2030 Agenda as a *model of* sustainable development, and dwell on how it *actually* acts as a *model for* sustainable development: how is the 'talk understood and walked' within a local context?

Chapter 4: Agents of Change

We acknowledge the role of the diverse private sector, ranging from micro-enterprises to cooperatives to multinationals, and that of civil society organizations and philanthropic organizations in the implementation of the new Agenda
(UN 2015:10 par. 41)

We acknowledge also the essential role of national parliaments through their enactment of legislation and adoption of budgets and their role in ensuring accountability for the effective implementation of our commitments. Governments and public institutions will also work closely on implementation with regional and local authorities, subregional institutions, international institutions, academia, philanthropic organizations, volunteer groups and others.
(UN 2015:11 par. 45)

Politicising the Goals: a glimpse at the Danish political scene

"Exactly three years ago I stood on the pulpit in UN when the 17 Sustainable Development Goals were adopted. Now 3 years later we are well on our way - Denmark is ranked second on the list of countries that has reached furthest in implementing the 17 goals. I'm happy that we take the lead on the path to a better world" (Lars Løkke Rasmussen on Twitter Sep. 25 2018).
When the current Danish government, led by the right-wing party 'Venstre', states that Denmark is well on its way on becoming sustainable, and that it, as a nation, already to a large extent had honored the deal made in 2015 with the rest of the world's countries, then a certain picture of the future is painted. We will argue that it is a romanticised picture. A picture, drawn with the intention of showing a glamorous path of growth and prosperity to an end called sustainability 'made in Denmark'. And a picture that connects a notion of sustainable development with that of national development and an infinitely growing GDP.
Denmark played quite an active and significant role in the process of the UN negotiations that led to the creation of the 2030 Agenda up until September 15th 2015, when it was signed and adopted. And it played just as significant a role in the first years after its adoption. The former

Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mogens Lykketoft had been chosen as President of the UN General Assembly, and it was Lars Løkke Rasmussen, Prime Minister of Denmark who finally declared the official adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals from a podium at the following UN General Assembly, in front of all nations, uttering a very strong statement on behalf of Denmark: "*we must live up to our common obligation. Denmark is prepared to do its part to reach the Sustainable Development Goals. History will judge us harshly if we don't*"
(Lars Løkke Rasmussen as quoted by Mette Holm & Mogens Lykketoft).

(Picture of *Lars Løkke Rasmussen at the opening of the 70th UN General Assembly 28 September 2015 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark*)

To follow up on the agreement and signing of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, each country had committed to prepare concrete, foreign and domestic, action plans. This resulted, for Denmark, in the development of two separate plans in 2017.
The first plan was the *Development policy strategy*, which defined the Danish humanitarian strategy and was formulated in the document "*Verden 2030: Danmarks udviklingspolitiske og humanitære strategi*" (DANIDA 2017). With this strategy, the government had chosen a path that changed a historical focus on subsidies, to emphasising on a development-oriented, cooperation strategy, concentrating on investments. This strategy was meant to address the Danish *international* contribution to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals. Taking the forceful words of the Prime Minister on the United Nations' pulpit into account, it is, however, remarkable that the government has decided to continue its cut in foreign development support: "*We said very honestly that we would lower the development assistance, instead to use the money other places e.g on the domestic healthcare system, and that is exactly what we have*

done"

(Development rapporteur for Venstre, Michael Aastrup Jensen, to Berlingske Feb.18. 2019).

The second plan which all nations have committed to develop is a national implementation strategy. For Denmark, this is formulated in the 'National Action Plan' (The Danish Government 2017a). This plan is the core of the government's strategy for the implementation and use of the 17 Goals in a Danish context and is devised under the phrase "*A free, rich and safe Denmark*" (ibid.:7). The narrative and focal points of this national strategy document are of utmost relevance in terms of understanding how the Danish government interprets the 2030 Agenda from a local, national-political context, and the future imaginaries that are connected to the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals.

The National Action Plan (The Danish Government 2017a:7) is built around 4 priorities, under which the intended strategy is meant implemented: 1) Growth and prosperity; 2) People; 3) The environment and the climate; 4) Peaceful and secure societies.

The 4 priorities are clearly inspired by the slogan of the 2030 Agenda: "for People, Planet, Prosperity and Peace" (UN 2015:1), but the phrasing in the action plan is changed slightly to fit the government's current agenda. For instance, it is noticeable how 'prosperity' is perceived as (economic) 'growth' (and has a first priority).

In fact "*growth and prosperity*" are framed as the overall premise for "*passing a freer, richer and safer Denmark on to our children*" (The Danish Government 2017a:7).

"*The Sustainable Development Goals can be seen as pointers for a progression where expectations to local and global responsibility and sustainability increasingly will affect the potential for growth for companies, and where it may be expected that new market- and business opportunities will arise. The government believes that the corporate sector and investors will have an interest in working strategically with the Sustainable Development Goals, since they hold a potential for new partnerships*" (ibid:9).

Like "Prosperity" is perceived as (economic) growth, also the word "Peace" has been converted to "Peaceful" in the government's plan, obviously referring to the agenda of the government's legal policy: "*Security and legal certainty must go hand in hand. Efforts towards the safety of*

Denmark and citizens must continue to go hand in hand with protection of the legal certainty" (ibid:18).

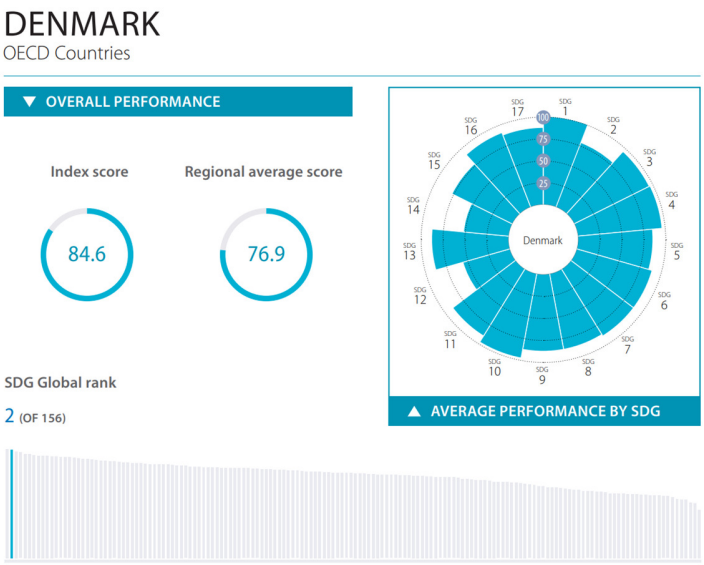
Thus, the 4 priorities generally reflect and represent the policy of the current government, wherein a clear emphasis is laid on perceiving the world's challenges not only as problems that have to be dealt with, but also, and mainly, as opportunities for the Danish market and its economic growth. A focus that, on the one hand, acknowledges interdependencies between the 17 focus areas and accept its logic. A logic that we have argued, defies a rationale of perpetual growth. The current Danish Government seems in this way to align itself with the vision behind the Earth System Theory.

Nevertheless, the National Action Plan for the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (The Danish Government 2017a), seems to tell a different story.

The formulations chosen by the government and the thoughts behind them, clearly reflect an agenda that contains the same contradictions present in the conception of sustainable development and in the anthropocene idea, which we have elucidated in the previous chapters. Somehow ignoring the clear connection between socio-environmental degradation and the current economic development in countries like Denmark, clearly depicted by the Great Acceleration Graphs (Steffen et al. 2004), the Sustainable Development Goals are thus somehow adapted to the political ideology of the current Danish Government in the process of being translated into a strategic action plan in a Danish context.

The National Action Plan and the government, we argue, lack, therefore, to take on the responsibility that is both needed and to which they committed when signing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development 1,5 years prior to the writing of the Action Plan. There is little or no focus in the plan on the specific challenges that Denmark faces, such as the fact that "*2.8 planets would be needed if everyone consumed at the rate of the average EU resident*" (BBC News 2019). Instead the plan strongly highlights how *relatively* well Denmark is doing compared to other countries, by referring to the latest SDG-Index on the progressing work with the Global Goals developed by the UN (Sachs et al. 2018:170-171). (*fig. Denmark.)*

In this model, Denmark's performance with the Sustainable Development Goals is portrayed as second in the world, as pioneering, by numbering the effects of Denmark's work with the Goals in a very specific way. In fact, the fact-making process initiated by the materiality of the numbers and graphs represented in the SDG-Index, participate in producing a 'social' through the specific way in which they are given a specific meaning by the current Danish Government (Latour 2005). In other words, the data presented is read into a specific political agenda, which reflects a set of beliefs and thus affects how the 2030 Agenda is interpreted.



The Danish Government seems to translate the results of the SDG-Index report into an argument to promote the supposed efficiency, in terms of sustainability, of a liberal and political agenda focused on economic growth. The argument is clearly illustrated by the current Ministry of Finance:

"*In 2017, Danmark had an index value of 84,2 pct., while in 2018 this has increased to 84,6 pct. This means that Denmark is about 85 pct. on its way to achieve the best possible outcome across the 17 goals. Only Sweden is ahead of Denmark with implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals*" (Finance Ministry 09.25.2018).

From this perspective, models such as the SDG-Index cannot be conceived as static, factual knowledge. On the contrary, as socio-material assemblages, both the Index and the Danish Government are continuously co-produced through their relations. In its appropriation of the 2030 Agenda as the basis for the National Action Plan, as highlighted by the quote above, the Danish Government seems to stress a notion of development and competition, over one of sustainability and collaboration. An interpretation of the Agenda which, in other words hinges to

its focus on economic development, rather than on its overall transformative vision.

Unfortunately, as we will argue in the following paragraphs, the fetishistic disavowal embedded in the action promoted by the Danish Government through the National Action Plan, and the allocation of economic growth as the premise for engaging with the Sustainable Development Goals, constrains the potential efforts in taking "*bold and transformative steps which are urgently needed to shift the world onto a sustainable and resilient path*" (UN 2015:1) among the Danish public institutions and private organisations.

From the global to the mundane: Local administrations and Global Goals

I think they [the Sustainable Development Goals] are very important. As far as I am concerned, the Agenda that they represent will come to us one way or another. Right now we are in a position where we can make some changes by our own choice, instead of having to change later when we are compelled to do it, either to follow all the other municipalities or to adapt to new policies and/or restrictions. And then why shouldn't we try to be in front of our future challenges in Randers Municipality, for once?"
(Ethnographic conversation with the manager of the Department of Planning, Infrastructure and constructions at Randers Municipality, March 27th 2019).

Denmark, as a country, is divided into three different authorities: the state, the regions and the municipalities. Among the duties of the state is the task to determine the overall framework and economy that municipalities and regions have to work with. The most important task of the regions is to run the Danish health service - the hospitals and psychiatry - in addition to managing the regional development. It is within this latter aspect that the Sustainable Development Goals hold a place within the Danish Regions, as shown by the character of the development strategy for the Central Denmark Region (Region Midtjylland) the vision of which is "*to create an attractive and sustainable region for all"* through the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals (Region Midtjylland 2019).
All in all, decisions taken on a local level in a municipality originate from directives given from the state, functioning as guidelines and visions, before they are filtered through local politicians

and the various officials of the region, finally becoming local agendas after landing on the desk of the project managers of the Danish municipalities, whose task it is to translate the agendas into concrete action plans, strategies and projects. As argued in a previous project by the authors of this thesis (Jessen, Lolk & Paulsen 2019:36-37), it is thus impossible to discern the work which is done at the municipal level from both local, regional and national policies, but, ultimately, also from international policies and directives such as the ones originating from the United Nations. The 98 Danish municipalities are, in other words, where citizens and businesses engage directly with local authorities.

Therefore, the Danish government considers the municipalities as central partners in achieving the 2030 Agenda, since they are closest to local citizens and businesses (The Danish Government 2017a; Deloitte 2018; KL 2018). Moreover, Danish municipalities and regions are considered to be responsible for most of the public services, and they are accounted for around 70% of the public expenses, thus playing a central role in managing the Danish public sector (The Danish Government 2017b:55; KL 2018:3).

This specific role of the municipality in the Danish administrative landscape, as an institution, may explain the large number of Danish local authorities that are already working on translating the 2030 Agenda into the municipal strategy in one way or another. Indeed, Danish local politicians have been identified as being particularly supportive of working with the 2030 Agenda (Deloitte 2018), specifically by putting a strong emphasis on engaging the population in their work with the 2030 Agenda and by using the Goals as a framework to communicate their work on sustainability (NORDREGIO 2018).

Behind this local engagement with the 2030 Agenda is also 'Local Government Denmark' (Kommunernes Landsforening), an interest organisation for the Danish municipalities, the overall mission of which is to safeguard the interests of the municipalities nationally and internationally. Moreover, it helps to develop and maintain a strong local democracy by voicing the shared interests of the Danish municipalities in negotiations and as a knowledge center and forum for joint initiatives and decisions.

Local Government Denmark (from now on KL), has lately invested in the promotion of the Sustainable Development Goals as a collective framework for the municipal efforts in Denmark (KL 2018), the aim of which being the creation of a framework for synergistic and impactful

sustainable development at a local level, since it is argued that it is in a local context, within the municipalities (as the primary public service institutions in Denmark), that "*the Sustainable Development Goals can be translated to concrete solutions and efforts*" (KL 2018:3).
Moreover, KL highlights the responsibility of the municipalities to take action in terms of sustainable development. A responsibility which, they argue, needs to push the Danish municipalities to further improve their work with the Sustainable Development Goals, despite the fact that the efforts of the municipalities already now goes beyond the juridical requirements of the Danish law.
The intentionality behind such choices shines through the vision of KL: "*international rankings show that Denmark is second in the world in terms of fulfilling the Goals, and we have two choices. Either we can rest on our laurels or we can choose to keep on being in the front. In KL we have chosen the latter*" (ibid.).
While the primary responsibility of KL lies in ensuring that the engagement with the 2030 Agenda does not become an excessive expense for the municipal economy (KL 2018:6), many factors do also pull in the direction of promoting the municipal engagement with the Sustainable Development Goals.
For example, because of the political adoption of the National Action Plan for implementing the Sustainable Development Goals (The Danish Government 2017a), the coming political bills, proposed by local politicians, will be evaluated in terms of their contribution to the Action Plan itself. It is thus of strategic importance for the municipalities to think future political propositions in terms of the Global Goals. The same considerations also concern the economic perspective, since the coming budget-period of the EU will be centred around the Sustainable Development Goals as a framework for evaluating local initiatives and the dispensations of monetary funding. Hence, the interest in working with the 2030 Agenda from a municipal perspective is inherent in the structural dispositions of the institutions that they are related to, despite the fact that they are not obliged by any law to address the Goals.
The vision of KL does, in other words, reflect the inherent relation that connects global policies such as the UN 2030 Agenda, translated into a European perspective, filtered through the political visions of the current Danish Government and ultimately interpreted by the local authorities in the Danish sociopolitical framework, before affecting concrete action at the

municipal level in projects, local efforts and, as we will see, in various ways also affecting the work of small and medium-sized private companies.
But staying within a political framework, for now, it should be clear that the directives of KL are somehow a result of how the 2030 Agenda is interpreted by the Danish Government (The Danish Government 2017a), the implications of which have been discussed in the section above.

Nevertheless, the facultative responsibility of the municipalities' engagement with the Sustainable Development Goals has brought forth more than one, official way of implementing the Global Goals locally: a plethora of different approaches, interpretations and operationalisation of the Goals, stretching from what could be called an inclusive and holistic approach of municipalities such as Gladsaxe, Copenhagen and Skanderborg, which have extensively included the Goals as a framework for their municipal development strategy, and onto a more targeted approach, as in the interpretation of Aarhus Municipality. Common to both strategies, and even among the vast majority of the Danish municipalities, disregarding the degree to which they engage with the 2030 Agenda, is the acknowledgement of the importance of the Goals and that they will inevitably affect the administration of local affairs in the years to come (Deloitte 2018; The Danish Government 2017b), which is arguably one of the main incentives for engaging with them in the first place.
But how are the policies and guidelines of the Danish Government and of KL interpreted by the project managers of the Danish municipalities and operationalised in their daily activities?
With the following ethnographic material, we wish to highlight the implications and considerations, in terms of future imaginaries, surrounding the strategies adopted by various municipalities in regard to their socio-material appropriation of Sustainable Development Goals in the context of their daily practice.

Inclusive, holistic approaches

"We have a dream. A dream of letting our citizens feel that Gladsaxe Municipality is a SDG-municipality"
(Bo Rasmussen, Municipal Director of Gladsaxe Municipality in Reiermann 2018)

What does the 'dream' of an 'SDG-municipality' actually look like, and how is it interpreted and envisioned in the locality of a specific municipality?

What could be considered a holistic approach to the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals within municipal activities in the current Danish administrative landscape, consists mainly in the municipality acting as a facilitator, communicator and policymaker. As a catalyst for change, aiming at creating an enabling environment for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda among local actors. The starting point of such an approach seems to be widely acknowledged as consisting in a description or mapping of the current policies and initiatives of the specific municipalities in terms of how they already contribute to the 2030 Agenda. That is the approach of Skanderborg Municipality:

> "*Two years ago we made a development strategy for the whole municipality, but we did not mention the Sustainable Development Goals at all. I guess our mayor thought that it was nothing but 'hot air' at the time. But in 2018 also the mayor and the officials realised what a pity it was that we hadn't included them in the strategy! So in occasion of New Year we made an arrangement where all departments of the Municipality had to present what they were working with at the time, and how it relates to the Global Goals. And that is how the 2030 Agenda started to become the agenda of all the departments in Skanderborg Municipality as well*"
>
> (Interview, Climate coordinator - Skanderborg Municipality, April 11th 2019).

It is interesting to notice the sense of appropriation embedded in those words. Indeed, a central issue for the Danish municipalities appears to be the effective reconfiguration, or translation, of the Global Goals in terms of areas of impact that are commonly addressed by the municipalities, so that the 2030 Agenda can become the 'agenda of all the departments of Skanderborg Municipality'.

But the description of how the local authority's ongoing policies and initiatives already contribute to the 2030 Agenda, seems not only to function as the premise to define locally relevant areas of action and the necessary initiatives to be taken in order to improve them. It also functions as a communicative tool, placing a strong emphasis on ensuring the involvement and engagement of the citizens and the communication of local activities and solutions. In

Skanderborg Municipality, appropriating the Sustainable Development Goals and adopting them in the strategic development of the Municipality aligns its vision with that of the Government, facilitating the development of a shared language and improving the chances of obtaining funding from e.g. the UN and the EU, which is seen as one of the great advantages of the 2030 Agenda:

> "*I think that the Global Goals make a difference in terms of how we understand sustainability. They facilitate an understanding of how things are interconnected and that our local actions here in Skanderborg do have consequences on a global plan. Moreover they provide us with a shared framework from which we can communicate globally. And from this framework we can see that we are doing well, and we have to show that to the world, but also that there is still much that we can do better*"
> (Interview - Climate coordinator - Skanderborg Municipality, April 11th 2019).

Non-compulsive incentives for addressing the Goals in municipal action plans and city planning strategies consist, thus, not only in addressing the pressuring global challenges highlighted by the 2030 Agenda, but they also represent a chance of establishing new international relations and partnerships for economic purposes. The cases of holistic approaches to the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals from the municipalities of Copenhagen, Skanderborg and Gladsaxe all highlight a strong focus on a thorough process of mapping of current municipal activities and review of the new policies through the lense of the Goals (City of Copenhagen 2018:8-9; Reiermann 2018), highlighting a shift towards a more globally-oriented and aware mindset, but yet filtered through the instantiation and specification of the Global Goals in terms of its local, contextual interpretation. Moreover, the strong focus on communication highlights not only the branding potential of the Global Goals (which will be one of the focal areas of the following chapter), but also their potential as communicative platforms to raise awareness on the cause and potential solutions to the challenges presented through the Sustainable Development Goals, locally.

Materialising Global Goals

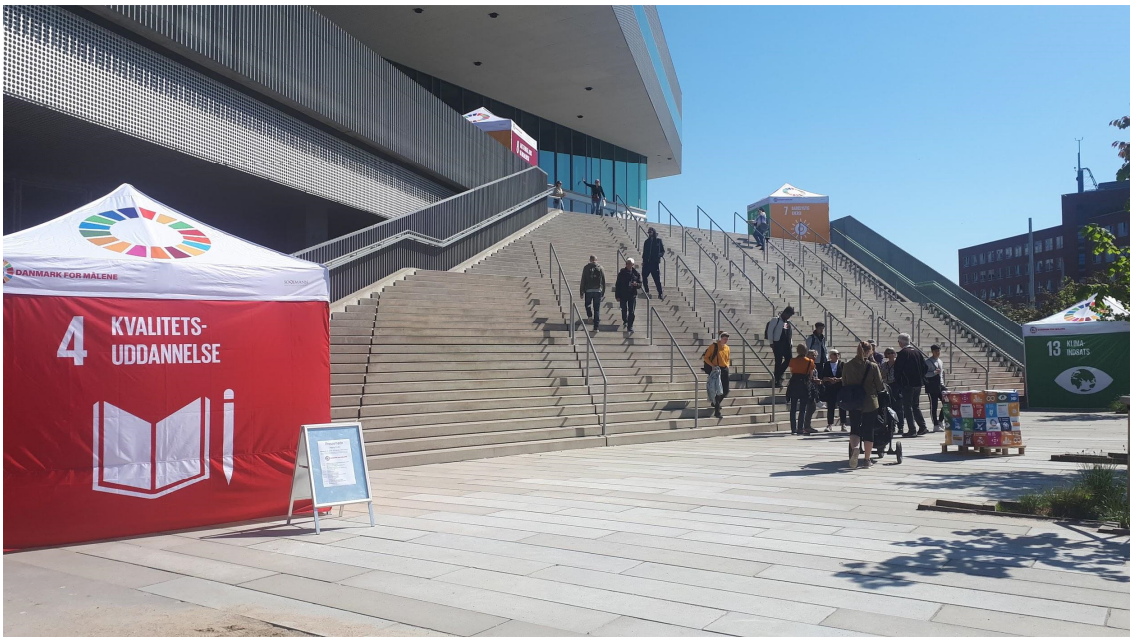
The role of the municipalities in communicating the Sustainable Development Goals to civil society, and rising awareness for the 2030 Agenda has taken various forms. One of them is in the

collaboration of 48 Danish cities with the organisation Denmark for the Goals (Danmark for Målene), arranging the so-called 'Global Goals Tour' (Denmark for the Goals 2019). The main goal of the initiative consists in spreading awareness of the 2030 Agenda throughout Denmark and pulling the complexity of the Agenda 'down to Earth' and into the actions and everyday life of the Danish citizens. In other words, it aims at creating civil ownership of the Global Goals by translating them into concrete, tangible and mundane ('hverdagsmål' in Danish). Or what we have termed a process of *appropriation*.

An initiative, which falls into the interest of, amongst others, Skanderborg Municipality:

"*We have chosen to join the Global Goals Tour. They will actually come 3 times and we have even chosen to support them with some extra initiatives of our own making to complement what they are bringing to our municipality in the first place. For us it is important to show that we support the Sustainable Development Goals by involving the citizens!*"

(Interview Climate coordinator - Skanderborg Municipality, April 11th 2019)



(*Picture of Global Goals Tour in Århus*)

On its behalf, the city of Copenhagen is hosting living labs and targeted education on the Sustainable Development Goals (City of Copenhagen 2018). It is even hosting the European Global Goals World Cup (GGWCup 2019), a one day alternative football tournament, engaging

women all over the world in the fight for gender equality and choosing and creating an action plan on how to work with one of the 17 Global Goals to qualify to the tournament (and attract massive attention and coverage from both the media and the UN ambassadors).
On its own behalf, Aarhus Municipality, beyond hosting the Global Goals Tour, attempts to bring the Sustainable Development Goals close to the lives of its citizens by showing the 17 symbols of the Goals throughout the main pedestrian street of the city and centring the yearly event: 'Global Pictures' (in Danish 'Verdensbilleder'), which in 2019 is being held on May 31st, around the Sustainable Development Goals.

(*Picture of advertising of Global Pictures in central Århus*)

The event, held in collaboration with the kick-off of the performance 'United Change' of the local theatre 'Teatret Svalegangen', merges the interests of promoting the city of Aarhus commercially, with the quest of rising awareness around the cause of the Sustainable Development Goals through performance art, campaigns, music and information. Indeed, the performance of 'Teatret Svalegangen', is intended to raise awareness on the Sustainable Development Goals among civil society by appealing to feelings and emotions through artistic communication, rather than the rational essence of the traditional narrative surrounding models and graphs as a means of communication.

United change is an assemblage of 17 acts, representing the 17 Sustainable Development Goals which will be arranged in 2023, but in occasion of the event 'Global Pictures' on May 31st 2019, the theatre arranged a preview, with a climate café and a giant pile of 781 kg of waste, representing the yearly waste-production of an average Dane, on top of which a 'happy consumer' tells about her belongings and travels, while symbolically sinking into the pile of thrash (adapted from fieldnotes, May 31st 2019).

Targeted approaches

"*In the 'Secretariat for Climate and Green Transition' our main task is to help the Municipality* [of Aarhus] *achieving the target of being CO2 neutral by 2030. But you don't measure sustainability only through CO2 emissions, so we do a wide variety of efforts in the secretariat. This ambition dates back from 2007/2008, before the Sustainable Development Goals and even before COP15 in Copenhagen*"
(Interview, Responsible for local involvement and growth - Aarhus Municipality, May 9th 2019).

The current Climate Plan for 2016-2020 adopted by Aarhus Municipality is centred on six areas of effort, around which the work of the 'Secretariat for Climate and Green Transition' is focused: energy, transport, buildings, industry, City Council organisation and local engagement and growth (City of Aarhus 2016). The plan does not contain direct references to the Sustainable Development Goals because of local political insecurity surrounding the Global Goals at the

time, when the plan was developed (in 2015).
Nevertheless, the plan aims amongst other things to promote fossil-free transport by encouraging citizens to cycle, walk or by building Denmark's first electric light railway; switching to green district heating, encouraging industry to phase out fossil fuels and promote the circular economy and raise awareness of climate management among the general population (NORDREGIO:30 2018). All aims that, nevertheless, are argued to somehow fit into the 2030 Agenda:

> "*One could say that the Sustainable Development Goals fit into the areas of concern of the municipality* [of Aarhus]*, so the 2030 somehow matches quite well with the work that we are already doing, and indeed, have been doing for a while, in one way or another* [in the Secretariat for Climate and Green Transition]"
> (Interview, Responsible for local involvement and growth - Aarhus Municipality, May 9th 2019)

Hence, the targeted approach of Aarhus Municipality in regard to the Sustainable Development Goals, is an inherent consequence of a local political decision of not adopting the Sustainable Development Goals as an overall framework for the municipal development plan. Aarhus Municipality has, instead, invested its efforts in developing a brand: 'Go Green with Aarhus', managed by the Municipality itself, the aim of which is to involve institutions, organisations, individuals and corporations in the local efforts for the sustainability agenda of the Municipality. Go Green with Aarhus entails also a climate-partnership of 40 businesses, NGOs, research centers and universities, where the municipality, through its unique position as an independent platform, invites local organisations to make use of each others' knowledge and resources in an open dialogue, which is argued to promote a collective development of smart and innovative solutions to shared societal issues (Go Green with Aarhus 2018:34-36). While there is no direct economic interest in the partnership, it is clear that, for the member organisations, the catch lies in the shared ambition of co-developing innovative solutions that can be exported and scaled elsewhere, while Aarhus Municipality sees the long-term strategic advantage in promoting local green innovation. It is by those terms that Go Green with Aarhus targets its efforts on bringing businesses and other organisations on board and thus promote their sustainable work:

"*We also have a 'visitor service' which welcomes visitors from Denmark and abroad to see the green solutions that we have here in Aarhus. Next week an official from Pittsburgh will come to visit us. Pittsburgh is apparently considering a transition to renewables, and they have chosen Aarhus as a strategic partner. In occasions like these, we can showcase the solutions of our local companies and thus support their export opportunities. I mean, in the end we also do this for the so called green growth agenda. We hope that those companies will grow and hire new employees, who can bring income to the municipality through taxes fund. So in this sense it is also about economy for us*"
(Interview, Responsible for local involvement and growth - Aarhus Municipality, May 9th 2019).

Initiatives such as living labs in Copenhagen, Go Green with Aarhus and the Global Goals tour, show how the sustainability agenda is, indeed, flourishing within the Danish municipalities. Nonetheless, it does not come without challenges. The municipal employees express an insecurity in regard to the lack of concrete directives for the municipal engagement with the Sustainable Development Goals, and the lack of a concrete, shared and official understanding of how to approach the work with sustainable development from a local perspective. For this reason, both of our key informants from the municipalities of Skanderborg and Aarhus, practically voiced the same frustration: "*we are still groping for a direction, since it is yet a new and largely unexplored field* [that of working with sustainable development within a Danish municipality] *and there are so many ways of doing this*" (Interview, Responsible for local involvement and growth - Aarhus Municipality, May 9th 2019 and Climate coordinator - Skanderborg Municipality, April 11th 2019).
Local political initiative is, therefore, argued to be paramount for the appropriation of the 2030 Agenda on a local plane. Nevertheless, in their essence, the cases above highlight how the act of translating the complexity and the global essence of the Goals into a local perspective is, yet, inherently connected to a notion of economic growth.

Global goals and local business: making money on sustainability

"*Businesses have a leading role in ensuring economic growth and good jobs in terms of social and environmental impacts, and as an engine of innovation to enable the transition towards a*

more sustainable world economy. We see opportunities for business growth both nationally and internationally in the SDGs"
(The Danish Government 2017b:49).

As we have seen, with the National Action Plan for the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (The Danish Government 2017a), the current Danish Government has painted a picture that represents the connection of economic growth with the Sustainable Development Goals as advantageous and as a premise for addressing issues of sustainable development. Such a perspective highlights a pathway that embraces sustainability as (nothing more than) a strategy to unlock 'new markets and business opportunities', as the 'Global Goals gradually affect the corporate conditions for growth in line with the growing local and global expectations of responsibility and sustainability' (The Danish Government 2017a:9). An approach, which might arguably resonate with that of a free market theory.
In fact, it is estimated by the UN that achieving the Sustainable Development Goals globally opens up a minimum of US$12 trillion of market opportunities only within the four economic systems of global food and agriculture, cities, energy and materials, and health and well-being (Business and Sustainable Development Commission 2017:12).
Thinking through sustainability and the SDGs as a company and/or country comes thus, to a large extent, also from the potential economic gains related to it. In those terms, the 'market for virtue' is certainly an important motivational factor in the equation for sustainable development, especially in those years where, as we have seen, sustainable development is debated more than ever, following the so-called 'Scandinavian SDG-hype'. Indeed, for some companies it makes very much sense to center their business strategy around sustainability, and to brand themselves as promoting sustainable thinking. From such a point of view, the Sustainable Development Goals come as a gift, but that is not necessarily the case for all companies.

Privileged positions and the constraints of the 'system'

While some companies are in a position that makes it easy, economically beneficial or even a necessity, to strive for the promotion and implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals, that is definitely not the case for all industries.

Where many companies have to radically revise their current agenda or business strategy, with obvious economic drawbacks in the short term, in order to somehow address the Sustainable Development Goals, for other companies it represents a pathway for new business opportunities and economic growth.

The idea behind choosing sustainability as a core business strategy is clearly depicted by Mads Nipper, CEO of Grundfos, the World's biggest - and Danish owned - producer of water pumps:

"At the moment Grundfos is behind 10% of all the water that is moved worldwide. We are indeed the best at doing what we do. But if we were only making pumps, then the world would not miss us if we would cease to exist, since it would only take a couple of days for e.g. the Chinese industry to cover our share of the market with the same products. Therefore, we want to make something that others cannot - or do not want - to do. Water pumps account for 10% of the world's total electrical energy consumption and up to 90% of them are inefficient. That is a lot. This amount of energy can be reduced heavily already with the technology that is available today. That means that there is a huge potential here, where we can play a unique role [for the environment]. *One of the things that Grundfos wants to do, is to make partnerships in local* [low income] *communities to be able to implement our energy-saving solutions on the masses, since, otherwise, they could not afford it. That would massively scale our impact* [on worldwide energy savings]*, and then, of course, it is also good business!*"

(Nipper, M., public conference: 'Engaging Youth in building the business of tomorrow', UN City, Copenhagen, February 1st 2019)

(The Danish and world-leading pump-manufacturer, Grundfos, advertising with a SDG-banner during the IHF Handball World Championship 2019)

The example of Grundfos definitely highlights how contributing to the solution of some of the World's water and climate challenges (which coincide with Goal number 6 and 13), rather than exclusively providing water technology, is not only a value-based commitment for a company like Grundfos. It has also become its *raison d'etre* and an enormous potential source of income, not only in carving out a new potential market without changing its core product, but also in the branding potential of profiling itself as contributing to the creation of a 'better world for all'.
Indeed, without underestimating the impact of the practice of companies such as Grundfos (and the consultancy companies that we will address in what follows) and of their acting as ambassadors for the 2030 Agenda, their engagement with the Sustainable Development Goals does not necessarily reflect more than the chasing of new market opportunities.
Which raises the question: what if the engagement with the Sustainable Development Goals does not encompass an immediate, short term economic advantage?
In fact, it could be argued that the transformative change furthered by the 2030 Agenda, necessitates that all companies take on responsibility of their socio-environmental impact: also those for whom the adoption of the 2030 Agenda does not entail a direct economic advantage.

In fact, as elucidated in a discussion with CSR Senior, Pia Odgaard, from *Dansk Fashion og Textil*, which is an employers' association for the Danish fashion and textile companies, "*it would require a great additional effort to engage with the Sustainable Development Goals within the textile industry, potentially compromising the existence of many small- and medium sized enterprises*"(from fieldnotes, workshop about MYLIUS at Orbicon, Taastrup, March 21st 2019). This situation is strongly connected to the fast production and short life-cycle of the products of the fashion industry itself which, by definition does not go hand in hand with a sustainable agenda (Springer Nature 2018). These perspectives highlight the cultural and systemic nature of the constraints experienced by some companies on engaging in transformative change in practice. From this perspective it can be argued that the most common argument for engaging with the Sustainable Development Goals among the Danish private sector, but also for not engaging with them, does not come strictly as as consequence of their environmental and social importance or a desire for contributing positively to a common good but, rather, from economic incentives.

Consultancy companies as 'translators'

We are owned by shareholders. And they, of course, are concerned of the bottom line, so it hasn't been an easy task to start an agenda about the SDGs at Envidan. The first time that I proposed it to the owners of the company, they said no. But pretty soon after that, they actually started to talk with me about them [the SDGs]*, because they also started to feel the exploding interest for the 2030 Agenda that started in 2018. And then suddenly it was also interesting to them! They told me that we should not only consider them for our tenders, we even had to implement them as part of our everyday life. Because, as they told me, if we don't, we risk that other companies will take our share of the market simply because we haven't integrated the SDGs in our business strategy.* (CEO of Envidan, 'Verdensmål i Vandbranchen, Feb. 19th 2019, from fieldnotes).

Among the companies having spent very much effort in signaling their adoption and focus on the Sustainable Development Goals, are also the consultancy companies.
Consultancy companies work mainly by providing strategic advising and creating benefits, value and innovation for their customers, rather than physical products, and these businesses tend to

extend their expertise throughout the various aspects of their area of influence, often reaching, e.g. in the case of engineering consultancy companies, throughout the various phases of a project: from preliminary studies of the biology, geology and geography of a building area and all the way till the supervision of the construction itself. The main Danish consultancy companies within the management and building industry, are thus highly involved in shaping decisions taken within the built environment, not only in Denmark but even across the world. For this reason, they have a huge impact on their industry, since they are, to a long extent, able to steer the agenda of their customers through their advice. That imbues them, in other words, with a great influencing power, affecting decision-making and the interpretation of sustainable development among their customers. According to a report by Danish Industry (DI), the turnover for the combined consultancy industry was 155 bn kr. in 2016 (DI 2017) and, consequently, the monetary value of the investments and projects completed on behalf of the provided consultancy necessarily sums up to a considerably higher amount.

Only surpassed by that of IT and with a turnover of 25,1 bn kr. (ibid.) in 2016, the construction branch of consultancy, whose main players on Danish ground include companies such as NIRAS, COWI, Rambøll and Orbicon, represents the second-largest branch of consultancy in Denmark. The four companies listed above are therefore most relevant places to look for impactful potential in the pursuit of sustainable solutions, especially considering the huge negative impact of the construction industry on the environment - at least in terms of CO2 emissions. Moreover, the construction industry is, indeed, also a sector where potential improvements in terms of sustainability are within technological and economical reach (Huang et al. 2018; UN 2017), making space for an immense market-share on sustainable consultancy within the building industry for the coming years. And the race has begun.

Indeed, the most influencing consultancy companies in Denmark have already made extensive efforts to address the Sustainable Development Goals in their work, in their consultancy or even by appropriating them as the root of their corporate strategy. As we have seen, some companies, such as Envidan, do even see their full engagement with the Sustainable Development Goals as a premise for their continued existence, since "*working with the Sustainable Development Goals has become a question of staying in the game or not*" (CEO of Envidan, 'Verdensmål i Vandbranchen, Feb. 19th 2019, from fieldnotes).

But how has that become the case?

Part of the answer comes from the experienced difficulty of the process of reification and instantiation of the 2030 Agenda: the difficulty of translating the Global Goals into a local context and concrete action: "*We experience that many organisations, also among our current customers, request for methods to get started in their work with the Sustainable Development Goals*" (Christensen 2018). These are the words of the CEO of the consultancy company Orbicon, Per Christensen, and the requests that he refers to, correspond to a necessity which has proven to be almost omnipresent during our fieldwork. Just as the municipalities appear to be 'groping for a direction', in terms of how to operationalise the Sustainable Development Goals locally, also private companies are, indeed, looking for a methodological tool to be able to embrace the global perspective of the 2030 Agenda in an attempt to align it with the specific framework of their business cases.

These observations raise questions regarding the interpretation of the Sustainable Development Goals and the extent to which its vision of transformative change should be adapted to local premises, or whether, on the contrary, it is exactly the local conceptions of the purpose and *raison d'etre* of private companies which should engage in transformative change. But they also question the nature of the transformative change addressed by the 2030 Agenda: how can a transformative agenda be implemented when even if a corporation's managers might have great personal integrity, their agency is constrained by a corporate structure that is 'devoid of all ethics' and centred on rising share prices as the very definition of success (Capra & Luisi 2014:398-399)? By those terms, the challenge of implementing the vision of the Sustainable Development Goals, unless as a strategic pathway for economic growth, lies in the design of the corporate structure. It is, in other words, a systemic problem.

Subconclusion: connecting the dots

The Sustainable Development Goals present themselves through a plethora of materialisations within the Danish political context and among local public organisations and private enterprises, through which they are (re)interpreted, contextualised and put into practice in various ways. Focusing on the socio-material assemblages of local interpretations, of appropriations and operationalizations of the 2030 Agenda among different Danish institutions, the ethnography

presented in this chapter highlights how the Sustainable Development Goals, perceived as a social technology, affect the inherent relation of power reflected in the process of implementing the Sustainable Development Goals in Denmark. Specifically, we have shown how certain mediative tools, such as the graphs, numbers and models of the SDG-Index Report are conceived through the political strategy and the solution-models of the current Danish Government. And how the way in which they are communicated through a rhetoric that supports a necessary connection between economic growth and sustainability, has framed the national engagement with the Sustainable Development Goals.

Indeed, also in the process of translating the general challenges presented by the 2030 Agenda into specific issues of operational areas of intervention within a specific institution, the measurements on the contribution to the Sustainable Development Goals within a Danish context can be seen to be more than simply a straightforward response to representations of sustainable development. As part of an ongoing socio-material process which tacks back and forth between measurements and descriptions of those measurements - and the interplay of the politics of local politicians, the Danish Government, the EU and UN - different interpretations are being mobilized and put into different practice in the locality of the single institution engaging with the 2030 Agenda (Knox 2014:419-420).

We have also highlighted the effect of the National Action Plan for the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals in configuring specific interpretations of the Sustainable Development Goals among local public institutions and private organisations in Denmark. We have dwelled on how the Danish Municipalities, while not being legally bound to work with the 2030 Agenda, are, nevertheless, increasingly engaging with the Global Goals, albeit in different ways, because of systemic pressures, ultimately stemming from the National Action Plan. A structural condition, which we have argued to have the primary consequence of conceiving the current socio-environmental awareness created by the advent of the Sustainable Development Goals in Denmark as a window for economic growth and branding. Nevertheless, the ‘lack of direction’ advocated by our key informants as a result of the unclear municipal policy concerning the engagement with the Sustainable Development Goals, has also brought forth various socio-material interactions such as the national ‘Global Goals Tour’ and the ‘United Change’ performance by ‘Teatret Svalegangen’ that contribute to nuancing the local meaning ascribed to

the Sustainable Development Goals, appealing to values and imagination among civil society, rather than economic incentives.

Finally, we have explored a corporate approach to the 2030 Agenda. While acknowledging how the Sustainable Development Goals represent a 'market for virtue' for some Danish industries, we have also stressed how the opposite can be the case. Nonetheless, both scenarios stress how the most common argument for engaging with the Sustainable Development Goals appears to stem either from strategic economic advantages (as in the case of Grundfos and the Danish Government), from systemic compulsions (as in the case of a large part of the Danish municipalities) or from the pressure of customers (as in the case of Envidan and the majority of the Danish consultancy companies). Either way, the interpretation, appropriation and operationalisation of the 2030 Agenda within the context of the cases examined in the paragraphs above, seem all to reflect the persistence of the focus on economic growth and a mechanistic and managerial perspective on nature, that we have argued to be embedded in the Sustainable Development Goals.

From those observations, we can conclude that the way in which the 2030 Agenda is translated into a Danish context by the Government, and the ways in which it is interpreted by the Danish institutions and organisations presented in this thesis does not bring forth a 'transformational change' of the economic system, nor does it encompass radical changes to the business as usual of the companies and municipalities taken into consideration.

The question of whether the current engagement with the 2030 Agenda is projected to contribute enough to the successful achievement of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals on a global plan by 2030 remains, although, unanswered. Therefore, in what follows, we will address the notion of transformation. Because indeed, what is transformative change? And what sort of transformation is necessary to successfully achieve the 2030 Agenda? Can the promotion of 'sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth' called by the Goal 8 (UN 2015:19) realistically be coupled with its targets of improving ' global resource efficiency' and 'decoupling economic growth from environmental degradation' (ibid.)?

Chapter 5: Putting transformation into practice

"Transformation does not come by itself.
It is about habits and decisions, including
political decisions in municipalities, the regions,
and at a national level; and it is about the
strategic decisions of enterprises. If the world wants
transformation, then habits and decision within
those fields need to change. Radically."
(Hildebrandt 2018:5)

What does it entail to implement a 'far-reaching and people-centred set of universal and transformative Goals and targets' (UN 2015:3)? What are the 'bold and transformative steps' that the single institution, individual and organisation need to take that lead to a sustainable and resilient path'(UN 2015:1)? What is deep transformation for people who suffer from wars, poverty, criminality, violence, inequality, racism, droughts and floods; and what is it, in comparison, to those who have only seen these challenges through their HDR screens?
Many scholars view transformation as a non-linear, abrupt and radical reaction to social-ecological change, as opposed to a linear, incremental adaptive response (e.g. Dow et al. 2013; Wilson et al. 2013), highlighting how the prior requires additional conditions like critical self-reflection and creative innovation in order to occur, compared to the latter (Filho et al. 2018:14). Moreover, transformation is arguably characterised by fundamental shifts from the previous 'balance' of a socio-ecological system, which requires the system to have "*the capacity to create a fundamentally new system when ecological, economic, or social structures make the existing system untenable*" (Walker et al. 2004:1).
Indeed, the original understanding of sustainability, as defined by the Club of Rome, emerged from the perceived need for *societal transformation* (i.e. not adaptation) to sustain the future of humanity at large (Meadows et al. 1972).
This definition of transformation, lies beyond choosing a 'resilient path' (UN 2015:1) that focuses on 'bouncing back' after a shock - and return to whatever was the pre-crisis condition

was. The idea of resilience as a pathway to sustainability diverts therefore attention from "*seeking to address the forces causing the challenge, to the ability of the victims to cope with them and continue on as they did before*" (Lewis & Brightman 2017:3).
The Sustainable Development Goals have been criticised of being fragmented in their formulation and being largely sectoral, and thus missing most of the dynamics and complexity relevant to sustainability outcome (Selomane et al. 2019). The Agenda has also been criticised for resting on specific ideological premises, designed to promote and consolidate a highly contested neo-liberal variant of capitalist development: "*a framework that privileges commercial interests over commitments to provide universal entitlements to address fundamental life-sustaining needs*" (Weber 2017:399). In what follows, we will attempt to elucidate some perspectives on how those points of critique are reflected in our fieldwork, and on the consequences they might imply.

Transformation: What it is not…

Labelling

The fact that the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have managed to break through among Danish companies, municipalities, in the Government and - to some extent - even society at large, implies that the Goals are becoming a standard point of reference in reports, assessment procedures and external communication. In their present form, the SDGs, through their 17 iconic and recognisable symbols, are intuitive, and for that reason they are arguably also applicable by most, partly because of their general and global statements. But, connected to this, because of what we have called the 'Scandinavian SDG-hype', there is also a noticeable interest in using the logos of the Sustainable Development Goals as a marketing tool (Skjoldborg 2018). As we will argue, this also implies that it has become possible to showcase an apparent contribution to issues of sustainability as an organisation, without necessarily diverging from 'business as usual'. Therefore, it becomes relevant to take a closer look at the upsides and downsides of the Goals as a communicative platform, and the obstacles it may present for the achievement of the 2030 Agenda.

(*Picture of the SDG dice that many institutions keep as value reminder and/or marketing probs*)

On a positive note, the symbols connected to the Goals, are indeed immediate in their appearance and highly recognizable: "*I see the Goals as both a tool and a language. As a shared language, so that we can talk about the same challenges concerning sustainability across barriers of culture, politics and language, the Global Goals present themselves as a huge tool to create synergies among different stakeholders for a shared agenda. And then those colours have a huge communicative potential!*"
(Interview, Responsible for local involvement and growth - Aarhus Municipality, May 9th 2019).

It is especially because of the design and form through which they present themselves, that the Sustainable Development Goals are so widely adopted within the corporate and the political contexts in Denmark. Nevertheless, the immediacy of the symbols entails also a simplification of the message they mediate, allowing for a wide range of interpretations, as we have seen.
This characteristic, while allowing for its wide reach, nevertheless, also implies negative consequences, as elucidated by the CEO of Envidan:
"*A lot of companies stay in what may be called the 'logophase', where they simply map. They label each of their projects and efforts with the logos of the Sustainable Development Goals, but they do not adjust their agenda one single MILLIMETER from business as usual. They simply*

continue in the same direction and considering the same bottom line as they have always done, with the only difference that now they tell themselves and everyone else: 'Look at how good we are: we contribute to all the Global Goals!'"
(Fieldnotes, CEO of Envidan, 'Verdensmål i Vandbranchen', Feb. 19th 2019).

The broadness and abstract essence of the Sustainable Development Goals, and their effective branding potential, foster the increasing negative trend of using the Global Goals for greenwashing, or what has already been termed as a phenomenon of *SDG-washing* (Skjoldborg 2018). A phenomenon which basically consists in adopting the labels of the Goals, without neither directly attempting to comply with the 2030 Agenda nor considering the values that may lay behind them. An approach, which disconsiders important questions about who and what is sustained, how sustainability will be operationalised on the ground, and what short- and long-term outcomes the specific organisation work towards (Filho et al. 2018:7).
The labeling tendency is very apparent and evidence that the SDGs in fact work in animating credibility is even more apparent. The discourse in institutions regard *standards*, forms of *credibility* and *ways of production,* - all terms associated with certifications, and several times is the SDGs even compared to certifications schemes such as LEED and DGNB.
This discovery is interesting because the SDGs do not possess the credibility of a certification, they are not a buyer's guarantee. Products and companies need no independent control to use the logos of the Sustainable Development Goals, and the assessment of whether a product is- or company acts sustainably, justifying the use of the SDG logos, is entirely subjective. The risk of the Global Goals becoming nothing but a veneer with no other meaning (or just a branding purpose) underneath, is therefore eminently present in the materialisation and hype of the SDGs. A threat, which could undermine the potential impact of the 2030 Agenda in terms of sustainability.

The psychology of the 'logophase'

The problem with such an understanding of the SDGs becomes clearer by understanding the effect that labeling can have at the eye of the beholder.

From a psychological perspective, an eye-catching label is argued to be able to bypass rational, logical abilities, thus having an endorsing effect by appealing to the basic, non-analytical part of the brain, or what psychologist and receiver of the nobel prize, Daniel Kahneman, calls "system 1 thinking". According to Kahneman, "*system 1 operates automatically and quickly, with little or no effort and no sense of voluntary control*" (Kahneman 2013:21). The downside of system 1, is that it is prone to making errors and is weak towards biases and heuristics. The fast system 1, is opposed to another type of thinking: "system 2 thinking", which in contrast to system 1 is able to make decisions based on reasoning: "*system 2 allocates attention to the effortful mental activities that demand it, including complex computations"* (ibid.:22). System 1 is great for making effortless decisions and this system is used for intuition, which is argued to be an absolute necessity, in order to be able to navigate the complexity of inputs that our brains receives on a daily basis: "*humans [...] have a limited set of sensories and cognitive capabilities with which to interpret events. This limitation manifests itself in the fact that our attention is always limited, our reason is often biased and we are continually using many assumptions to take shortcuts and rapidly draw conclusions"* (Colchester 2016 0:22-0:42).

In itself this is not problematic. What presents a problem is that humans, according to Kahneman, are not aware of these biases and heuristics. In fact, he argues that humans identify themselves as purely reasonable beings that exclusively make conscious choices, instead of emotional beings that also (and primarily) act intuitively (Kahneman 2013:72). Thus, in the case of labelling it is, e.g., common to assume with confidence that the products chosen at the supermarket and, in general, the decisions taken in life are based on analytic examination, and not merely by emotions and intuition. With those considerations in mind, understanding the Sustainable Development Goals - and their symbolic value - merely through system 1 thinking, bears the risk of oversimplifying the complexity of the matter presented by them. A matter, which indeed would, instead, requires the effort of employing system 2 thinking in order to be translated into conscious action. This may undermine the value and potential of the SDGs and, in the worst case, it may become a sedative, rather than conative for putting sustainability into practice.

Economic Growth

We have already elucidated how the Sustainable Development Goals seem to reflect an the oxymoronic relation of the concept of 'sustainable development', when interpreted as an exclusively quantitative concept. Through empirical and ethnographic material, thesis also depicts a clear picture of how the examined institutions and organisations value the 2030 Agenda and how its implementation is, to high degree, driven by economic incentives. From those observations, it could be argued that the Sustainable Development Goals, by clearly highlighting the business opportunities connected to their employment (in comparison to the Millennium Development Goals), allow for an interpretation of the 2030 Agenda that matches the current operational framework of the majority of Danish businesses, public institutions and the politics of the current Danish Government. Sustainable development has, in other words, become accessible through the Sustainable Development Goals by unlocking agency and activating a *strategic behavioural adaptation* but, arguably, at the cost of hindering radical systemic transformation proposed by the 2030 Agenda itself!

This raises the question of how a clear focus on 'sustained economic growth', which is mentioned three times in the opening paragraphs of the 2030 Agenda (UN 2015), and Goal 8, which focuses on promoting 'sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth' (ibid.:19) clings with the vision of 'transforming our world'.

Decoupling as a pathway for sustainable development

It has been argued that the concept of 'decoupling' is central to the United Nations' post-2015 development agenda grounded in the Sustainable Development Goals, understood as the need to divorce economic growth from its ecological impact, by "*increasing the efficiency with which value is derived from natural resources in order to reconcile indefinite economic growth with environmental sustainability*" (Fletcher & Rammelt 2017:450). Indeed, according to the prominent economist and key advisor in the formulation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, Jeffrey Sachs, "*The end result* [of the 2030 Agenda]*, if successful, would be to 'decouple' growth and dangerous overuse of primary resources and ecosystems*" (Sachs 2015:

217). Sachs argues that the idea of unlimited economic growth can coexist with a reduction of unsustainable production and consumption and diminishing human pressures on key-resources, the environment and social inequality. But the concept of decoupling has also been heavily criticised, warning against its feasibility or as a 'myth' of the green economy agenda (Jackson 2011; Ward et al. 2016; Wanner 2015). Defined as an "*ideological instrument of the passive revolution of green economy/growth through which the predominance of economic growth over environmental sustainability is maintained and environmental realities are obfuscated*" (Wanner 2015:31), the idea of decoupling and its apparent neoliberal interpretation within the 2030 Agenda (and among the Danish companies reported in this thesis), has thus been argued to bear the risk of promoting an increasingly destructive path under the promise of success (Fletcher & Rammelt 2017:463). A perspective, which indeed seems to ignore the criticisms of the concept of 'decoupling' and part of the evidence portrayed by the Great Acceleration Graphs, portraying exactly the connection between GDP growth and the increasing global environmental and social challenges.

However the concept of decoupling might provide just the essential ideological support to the 2030 Agenda for the so-called OECD countries to engage with it. Because, indeed, in such framing, "*decoupling advocacy requires not evidence or even coherent conceptualization but merely faith in its potential—faith that cannot be dispelled until the project has been rolled out in a coherent global program*" (Fletcher & Rammelt 2017:463), but the question of whether it leads to 'a better world for all' remains doubtful.

Despite the 'transformative agenda' envisioned with the 2030 Agenda, if the principle of decoupling is seen as a premise for the achievement of the Goals, it seems that the vision is rather one of resiliencies: an attempt to cope with change through adaptation, in order to preserve the very same conditions that appear to have caused the challenges in the first place, instead of choosing a pathway that directly addresses the systemic essence of those challenges.

The contradiction of envisioning a transformative change through a resilient path, which is arguably advocated by the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development diverts, in other words, attention from the necessity, already detected back in 1972 in 'The Limits to Growth' (Meadows et al. 1972), of the need of obtaining transformative change through a shift in perception. A

contradiction that potentially inhibits and shrinks the imaginative horizons that would allow for alternative perceptions: new ways of thinking politics, community, society, leadership, integration and economy. New ways of interpreting the notion of sustainable development.
But is it possible to achieve the 2030 Agenda by 'promoting sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth', while contemporaneously striving to improve 'global resource efficiency' and 'decoupling economic growth from environmental degradation' (UN 2015:19)? And if so, what alternative pathways would possibly lead to transformational change?

… And finally, what it is!

Jorgen Randers et al. of the Stockholm Resilience Centre attempt to address the question of the supposed connection between growth and sustainable development in a report to the Club of Rome (Randers et al. 2018). The report stresses that "*meeting the SDGs in an integrated fashion based on conventional growth policies is not possible.* [...] *In other words, assuming no major changes in the way economic growth is defined and pursued, humanity would be confronted with massive trade-offs between the socio-economic and the environmental SDGs. The only way that, according to the report, will meet most of the goals by 2030 is one built on transformational change starting now*" (ibid.:6).
So, what is intended by transformational change in the 2030 Agenda, and to which potential future does it lead? To address these projections, the report frames 4 potential pathways, relating to 4 different ways of embracing the 2030 Agenda (Randers et al. 2018:15). These scenarios highlight how a focus on 'business as usual' (called 'same'), a focus on increasing the economic growth rates (called 'faster'), and even a focus on increasing the work with the Goals by managing them separately from each other (called 'harder') are not projected to succeed in achieving all the goals by 2030 and without leading to environmental degradation in the long run, even if green growth policies are strengthened, as well as (technological) innovation and international collaboration.

The fourth scenario (called 'smarter'), instead, presents the necessity of a 'paradigm shift for global development', moving away from a sectoral approach, dealing separately with social, economic and environmental issues, and on to a model of mutual leverage, reflected by a 'deep value shift' stemming from the acceptance that maximising GDP cannot be a first priority to achieve sustainable human wellbeing and freedom (Randers et al. 2018:30-31). But, as we have seen, in order to be achieved, the visions of redistribution of wealth, accelerated renewable energy growth and sustainable production, and action for subverting inequity - which are deemed to be the only realistic pathway for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030 in the report - cannot solely rely on the rational argumentation of the presented models and on economic incentives, in order to be put into practice. As concluded by the report, whatever the economic costs may be, transformations are ultimately 'debated on an ideological basis'. Therefore "*the main obstacles to the type of transformational policies that are illustrated in Smarter, are found in widespread public and political perceptions*" (ibid.:41).

A challenge, which evidences the necessity of 'insulating' the Sustainable Development Goals with incentives that are far deeper than economic or the supposed 'factuality' of models and numbers, testifying to how transformative change has to come from within. A perspective, which portrays a radical shift in values and perceptions as the main pathway for transformative change.

So, while the socio-material assemblages presented in this thesis increasingly face unprecedented changes and as effective responses to these changes often require unprecedented solutions, one might consider whether the efforts towards achieving a sustainable society are best spent in the recovery of former states of 'societal balance' based on top-down managerial pathways for resilience and quantitative growth, or on embracing the unique chance for a transformational, bottom-up, value-based, multicentric, heterogeneous and qualitative approach to sustainability.

Operationalising transformation

As we have seen, the 2030 Agenda is not merely a representation, but also a projection of a possible future. It intends to provide an aspirational description of a future world, and a blueprint to achieve it. Thus, it entails both a vision *and* a goal - 17 of them, actually!

It can sometimes be difficult to distinguish between what a vision entails in comparison to a goal, but the focus of the notion of one against the other is in fact quite different. While thinking of a vision, one might ask the question: *where do we wish to be*? A question that involves values and moral and is arguably beared by emotions. It involves a *desire* to achieve such a vision. In contrast, thinking through goals, entails material, often measurable parameters, that consider *strategies* to develop *plans* to finally achieve something in practice. A vision is thus the basis for a goal, and the latter involves *determination*, instead of desire. In aiming for a goal, it is therefore paramount not to forget what the purpose or the vision was in the first place, in order to avoid straying from the primary direction of an endeavour.

In this chapter, we have argued that transformative change is a process that, in order to be started, needs - from a Danish point of view - to involve a shift in perceptions from the main actors of the local community. Indeed, phenomena such as using the Sustainable Development Goals as labelling, as merely a new 'language' to address business as usual for branding purposes, is an undesired, yet widespread, consequence of interpreting the 2030 Agenda as a trend which can be loosely appropriated for commercial purposes. In line with that, the discussion concerning the topic of decoupling - the belief in the possibility of environmentally and socially sustainable GDP growth everywhere, all the time and indefinitely - arguably forming the ideological basis for marrying the 2030 Agenda with decidedly neoliberal economic strategies, contributes to further

muddying the picture, adding to the complexity of the matter. Those processes, we argue, might contribute to a loss of direction in comparison to the intentionality embedded in the vision of the Sustainable Development Goals.

Nevertheless, despite its inherent contradictions and the uncertainties embedded in the various interpretations of the 2030 Agenda, the call to action and pressuring character of the transformational change furthered by it is clear. As apparent throughout the paragraphs above, nevertheless, the inherent sense of urgency, which is (with good reason) mediated by the Goals as an incentive for collective action on the presented challenges is translated, instead, into an action which bears the risk of being driven by a rush for economic growth in the competition for potential shares of the market. A rush, which is embedded in the current Danish political and economic system and in the structure and *raison d'etre* of the majority of local enterprises and public institutions who, in fact, adopt an interpretation of the Global Goals as local interests, stressing a notion of development over that of sustainability and, de facto, inhibiting transformative change. It is from this perspective that the Sustainable Development Goals, as they are mediated, interpreted and put into practice in a Danish context as socio-material assemblages of branding, reporting tools, business strategies and political discourses, seem indeed to affect the transformative potential of the vision of the 2030 Agenda in a Danish context. As a social technology, the Sustainable Development Goals are, thus, imbued with an ideology of 'green growth' (Wanner 2015:31), rooted in neoliberalism, which affects not only the imaginaries possible solutions to the presented challenges, but even seems to contribute to the creation of other challenges by creating the framework through which new problems can be conceived (Jöhncke, Svendsen & Whyte 2004:386). As such, the challenge of 'labelling' and of decoupling are, so to say, a result of the solutions presented by the Sustainable Development Goals, filtered through a local perspective.

In other words, the interpretation of the Sustainable Development Goals in a Danish context which, through relations of power, ultimately stems from the meaning attributed to them by the Danish Government in the National Action Plan, contributes to the misleading belief in growth as the solution to sustainable development and to the array of the implications that we have described throughout this thesis.

Moreover, being primarily driven by a belief which cannot be proven wrong but in a potential future, the ideology of decoupling apparently "*requires not evidence, rational explanation or even coherent conceptualization, but merely faith in its potential—faith that cannot be dispelled until the project has been rolled out in a coherent global program*" (Fletcher & Rammelt 2016:463). That is, of course, *unless*, as we will argue, such perception is challenged by alternative interpretations.

Stop acting, start thinking!

"Already back in 2007/2008, before the COP15 meeting in Copenhagen, it became a trend among municipalities to aim at being carbon neutral. It was a sort of race for which municipality would set the most ambitious target. Aarhus Municipality was a little bit less ambitious than Copenhagen Municipality. We decided to aim at being carbon neutral by 2030 without really knowing how to reach that target, so we started 'building the ship while sailing'"
(Interview, Responsible for local involvement and growth - Aarhus Municipality, May 9th 2019)

We claim that transformative change is possible, not only because of its ecological, economic and scientific feasibility, but also - and very importantly - through, and in terms of, the possibility of a potential systemic shift in perceptions. A shift, which, above all, requires a conscious interpretation of the vision of the 2030 Agenda, before progressing towards putting it into practice by means of appropriation and local goal-setting.
But, we advocate, to paraphrase Slavoj Žižek, that such a shift requires, paradoxically, first and foremost to 'stop acting, and start thinking'. In a reflection on the so-called 'left-liberal humanitarian discourse on violence', Žižek refers to a pseudo-urgency for action, based on what he defines as a 'hypocritical sentiment of moral outrage', through which "*the post-industrial rich, living in their secluded virtual world, not only do not deny or ignore the harsh reality outside their area-they actively refer to it all the time*" (Žižek 2008:6-7). Translating this view to the cases elucidated above, the analogy to the phenomenon of SDG-washing, labelling and disavowal seems clear. By those terms, the urgency to act effectively addresses what we have defined as the 'system 1 thinking', that of automations and intuition, but which defies self-reflection. Against this sense of 'anti-theoretical edge', Žižek argues for the necessity of a critical analysis of the

present global constellation - "*one which offers no clear solution, no 'practical' advice on what to do, and provides no light at the end of the tunnel, since one is well aware that this light might belong to a train crashing towards us*" (ibid.:7). Indeed, the complexity of the socio-material assemblages presented by the local interpretation of the Global Goals, requires, indeed, critical reflection, since the urge to action, as we have discussed, appears to have a rebound effect in contributing to the cause of the problem. Thus, if reasonable alternatives to a growth-based approach to sustainable development have to be successfully put in place, we would argue that the concept of sustainable development needs to break free of the conceptual framework that has characterised it as a purely quantitatively measured processes. It has, instead, to encompass a multidimensional development that also entails qualitative growth, with a focus on social, ecological, cultural and spiritual dimensions. A transformational change which is, in primis, fostered through an awareness of the functioning of the system, which we have described in this thesis. To be clear, we do not suggest to stop acting in general. What we suggest, instead, as exemplified in the quote above, is that the way in which the concept of sustainable development seems to be conceived among the organisations presented in this thesis may have fostered action too quickly, thus needing the establishment of a critical awareness and sense of direction, before putting the vision into practice. An awareness, which might widen the imaginative potential unlocked by the 2030 Agenda, leading to alternative perceptions of the challenges at hand and new pathways for transformative change.

Chapter 6: Transformation - a challenge of perception

The observations and conclusions drawn throughout this thesis question the nature and relation of the three pillars of sustainable development. How are social, climatic and economic sustainability balanced within the framework of a business-driven incentive for action? Is there a difference between a sustainability driven by economic incentives and one driven by responsibility and a change in awareness and values? Can those two perspectives be successfully married? And what possible futures would that unlock, compared to the current pathway of engagement with the Sustainable Development Goals?

So far, we have elucidated how the United Nations 2030 Sustainable Development Goals can be interpreted as lying in the shadow of a 'Western legacy' of the Anthropocene idea, betwixt and between a neoliberal and modernist techno-fix-approach, disguised as radical system innovation, green economy and transformative change.
Nevertheless, it is also true that the sudden arousal of the Sustainable Development Goals among public and private institutions (and gradually also among civil society) in Denmark, speaks for the proneness of the time for embracing a new direction. As in the frank words of a consultant attending one of the conferences on the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals that we have attended: "*never before have I seen a trend literally exploding with the same speed as the Sustainable Development Goals are!*"
(Fieldnotes, 'Verdensmål i Vandbranchen', AquaGlobe, February 19th 2019).
The questions that remain are, whether they will stay a trend, dissolving as fast as they appeared in the consciousness of policymakers and professionals, or they (and the vision behind them) have come to stay, and whether they will contribute to a factual structural, and systemic change.
So far, we have largely discussed the phenomena of labelling, decoupling and the inhibitions to transformative change which we have argued to emerge from the socio-material assemblages surrounding the Sustainable Development Goals. In this final chapter, we wish, instead, to discuss the inherent potential for change which we claim to *also* have the potential to emerge

from the Sustainable Development Goals, the acknowledgement of which might unlock transformational change.

It is by those means that we wish to shift our focus towards the imaginaries connected to the Sustainable Development Goals by focusing, *in primis*, on the processuality and variety of the socio-material articulations between *Man* and the environment. The experience of climate, the perceptions of weather, place, responsibility and the politics of change.

When using the term 'Man', inspired by anthropologist Anna L. Tsing, we refer not to humans as a whole, but to "*a particular kind of being invented by Enlightenment, thought and brought into operation by modernization and state regulation and other related things. It is this 'Man' who can be said to have made the mess of the contemporary world*" (Haraway et al. 2016:541). By those means we hope to avoid eurocentrism and reductionism when discussing the responsibilities and potentials connected to our review of the Sustainable Development Goals.

In terms of levels of abstraction, what follows, is to be read as the diametrical opposite to the initial chapters of this thesis concerning the scientific and geological basis of the Earth System Theory and the rise of the Anthropocene idea. It will explore the emotional, imaginative and sensuous implications of engaging with the Sustainable Development Goals through human-material interrelations of understandings and experiences of materiality, the environment, politics, and the potential for transformative change than can emerge from it.

Of mind and matter

We have already thoroughly discussed how the complexities of the current socio-environmental challenges and estimating their exact consequences and human implications blur the boundaries of 'the known, the unknown and the unknowable' (Levin 2003), thus appealing to future imaginaries where beliefs and values seem to affect agency to an even higher degree than science and facts.

Indeed, addressing the challenges that arise from the Great Acceleration graphs and the global issues that are showing themselves while this thesis is being written, require a deep integration of a wide matrix of knowledge. An interdisciplinarity that arguably ranges from the scientific realm of biogeochemical science, through human perception, arts, social sciences and humanities on the development and functioning of human societies (Donges et al. 2017) and an understanding of

the cultural patterns and processual interplay of hope, imagination and behaviour.
Such integrated knowledge is, unsurprisingly, extremely complex, especially in light of the formidable range of timescales involved and of the heterogeneous nature of the affected communities.
From this perspective, a different understanding of sustainability might be argued to rise. Compared to a traditional conception of sustainability as bound to material resource management which might be generative of values and debated, a conception of the Sustainable Development Goals as based on the ideology of decoupling (Fletcher & Rammelt 2017), imbues it with concepts such as desire and value. As such, a notion of sustainability addresses subjective *visions* of a desirable future and *imaginations* of how to achieve it which do not necessarily rely on rationality. Sustainability becomes thus an ethical (and political) term, as in the words of the Danish philosopher, Peter Kemp, in 'Citizen of the World': "*It* [sustainability] *is about ethics insofar that ethics is a vision or a conception of good life, that everyone is creating through the livelihoods and lifestyle that they choose*" (Kemp 2013:81). By those terms, the argument of an urgent 'need for action' relies thus on an idea that someone *ought* to do something for someone (who might not even be born yet) (ibid.:86).
Attempting to unravel the complexities of the implications connected with systemic transformation, confronts us thus with an interdisciplinary challenge and a challenge of perception which inevitably concerns the areas of ethics and values, of the imaginary and belief. Of illusions, visions and hope and their iterative affect on behaviour - and vice-versa.

Anthropocene perceptions

Building on Capra & Luisi (2014), we deem it as useful to approach the imaginaries of contemporary realities and potential futures as social processes of perception which are materialised in various ways, potentially affecting the ways in which the Sustainable Development Goals are put into practice.
It is considerable, for instance, how the current rift between mundane, everyday experiences of weather and the rising awareness surrounding climate change in Denmark seems to be in the process of dramatic change, as exemplified by the experience of the warm summer of 2018.

Indeed, many people across an ordinarily sun-starved northern Europe welcomed the exceptionally warm May of 2018 as an early start to a great summer. By its end, May was considered as an exceptional month: the hottest May on record in the northern parts of Europe (NOAA 2018). But May turned out to be not quite as 'unique' as expected. The heat just continued. And not only in the temperate areas. The hottest temperature ever in Africa was recorded in Algeria in the summer of 2018, and temperature records were broken in Taiwan, Central Asia, Europe, Canada, and the Western US (Bubandt 2018:3).

The extremely hot and dry summer of 2018 and the forecast of future weather conditions, which are foreseen to be characterised by increasingly wet and stormy winters and dry summers, seem to have brought forth a shift in the perception of the weather conditions, particularly in the temperate zone of the northern hemisphere, and in the discourse surrounding climate change (and how to deal with it). The effect of climate change was, e.g., suddenly very close to the daily lives, and on the tongues and consciousness of the wider population - even in countries like Denmark. Those events supported the scientific hypotheses of the risk of the Earth entering a "hothouse" loop, having long-term, dramatic effects on human and environmental well-being (Steffen et al. 2018), seem to have brought forth a condition which was communicated as "*one of the most urgent existential questions in science*" (Watts 2018).

Indeed, as we have discussed in another project (Jessen, Lolk & Paulsen 2018), experienced climate issues are, albeit on different levels, somewhat ubiquitous - and yet, consensus on the anthropogenic origin of- and on the necessity for - climate action is still far from unanimous. Although the sceptics have diminished, especially within the academies of science where we now find 97% consensus on anthropogenic climate change (Cook et al. 2016), political- and public debates have not quite reached such consensus, and seem to be a step behind in its acceptance or at least in the realisation of the matter. Research from the *European Perception of Climate Change* in 2018 finds, interestingly, that within the populations of Germany, UK, France and Norway, only one third believes there to be such a consensus in academia (Pidgeon 2018). "*This means that if you wish to engage people with climate change, and can discuss with them the fact that scientists really do overwhelmingly agree that it is happening, that it poses significant future risk to us all, and is caused primarily by humans, then people will be more*

concerned about the issue and be more prepared to take action to do something about it."
(Pidgeon in E.S.R.C 2018)

But the consequences and possible futures, materialized in the summer heatwave of 2018, deeply affected the mundane perceptions of weather to a point that it shows signs of changing perceptions of global climate change.

What was welcomed as a wonderful gift of an unusually hot weather, suddenly became strange and unknowable. A potential threat. And this, as put by professor in anthropology, Nils Bubandt , meant something: "*after 2018, it has arguably become impossible to enjoy a sunny day without a certain frisson – an emotional shiver that is at once existential and epistemological.* [...] *In a time of global warming, weather is no longer innocent and given: from now on, weather is by necessity always-already haunted by the specter of anthropogenic climate change*" (Bubandt 2018:4).

As such, the summer of 2018 can be argued to have started a shift in perceptions and experience of weather in the future. The sum-total of the many hot days across the northern hemisphere in 2018, allowed for the local societies, the politicians and the single individuals to 'transform' the imperceptible essence of climate change into a very tangible and perceptible change of the mundane relation to weather.

Such change in perception is also clearly seen in the widespread approaches to what was considered as trivial actions until a few years ago, such as flying with airplanes and eating red meat. By those terms, actions which were once taken for granted are now reconsidered in terms of their effect on the climate, to the point of the arousal of terms such as "climate-guilt" (from Danish 'klimaskam').

"*The feeling of guilt in regard to the climate is our consciousness that starts to talk to us. Last year's summer* [the unusually warm summer of 2018] *struck us all. Together with what happens in the rest of the world with floods, cyclones and so on, it gives us a vivid feeling that climate has to be taken seriously and that we are not doing enough*"
(John Norbo 2019 in 'DR Indland', translated from Danish).

In other words, the effect of climate change has reached a point where it virtually affects everybody's life in one way or another. Whether it is actual physical security, on a socio-political plan, in terms of public awareness, feelings of guilt or in our perceptions of weather and the

environment, climate change seems to be (almost) impossible to neglect. It gradually reshapes the lenses through which the relation between the self and the environment is perceived to focus on connections rather than solely on the parts.

Typically anchored in mathematics, the study of complexity, translated onto the analysis of the networks of interconnected and interdependent human and non-human components of the Earth System, has been argued to be of an intricacy that "*defies the imagination*" (Capra & Luisi 2014:98). A consideration, which suggests the need to reconsider the worldview that has caused the contemporary challenges faced by our planet. Indeed, what is most evident when looking at the Great Acceleration graphs, is not only that the major challenges of our time - such as energy, climate change, the environment, food security, extreme poverty, but the aftermath that these challenges cannot be understood in isolation - that it is óne problem with various facets. Demographic pressure and poverty leads to depleting resources and rising inequality, accelerated by human-induced climate change. We have seen how this loop, coupled with the idea of perpetual growth on a limited planet, creates a vicious circle that impedes behavioural change and an anthropogenic reaction to the environmental depletion, collapsing governments and the social issues related to it. A central insight from systemic thinking is also, very importantly, that those challenges (and their potential solution) are ultimately and inherently just different facets of one single crisis, which is *"largely a crisis of perception*" (Capra & Luisi 2014:363).

Global change is actively affecting how we understand our present and future projections, translating mundane perceptions of being and the environment into a kaleidoscopic intricacy of imaginaries of anthropocene perceptions and visions of potential futures, inherently driven by feelings such as hope, resignation, guilt and belief.

Alongside scientific evidence, the envisage of transformative change, must thus rely on the establishment of feelings of hope and belief, in order to evoke agency. We argue that these evocative entities exist in the Sustainable Development Goals and its various socio-material assemblages, but need to be reinterpreted, in order to evoke transformative change.

On hope and desire, ...

> "*We need some imaginative stimulus, some not impossible ideal, such as may shape vague hope, and transform it into effective desire, to carry us year after year, without disgust, through the routine work which is so large a part of life*"
> (Pater 1911 in Crapanzano 2004:99-100)

Quoting Victorian aesthete, critic and novelist, Walter Pater, in his exploration of the limits and possibilities of human imagination in *Imaginative Horizons*, anthropologist Vincent Crapanzano (2004), directs attention on the relation between hope and desire.
The notion of hope opens for imaginaries of potential futures, and is intimately related to desire. While hope depends on some other agency for its fulfillment, according to Crapanzano (2004:100), desire, on the contrary, presupposes human agency.
Translating the vision behind the Sustainable Development Goals into hope and triggering desire for action is, undoubtedly, a requirement to unleash the agency required within nations and its institutions. As in the quote above, imagination can be seen as taking out a special, and important, role in laying the ground for agency. This emphasises the importance of bringing forth the vision of the 2030 Agenda, instead of focusing only (and blindly) on the implementation of a plan or strategy for its operationalisation, in order to infuse *imaginative stimulus*, attempting to shape a *vague hope* for a potential future, to prompt an *effective desire* for action, and thus promoting concrete agency.

...On imagination, …

The topic of imagination has been vastly reviewed. From the 'illusion of the real' (e.g. Schama 1995), where all perceiving, all viewing, is understood as imagining, and over to a consideration of perception and imagination as two poles apart, presupposing a chasm between the 'real' and the 'imagined' (e.g. Gibson 1979).
We wish to engage with the imaginary in a rather agency-oriented way, as a realm that is beyond the here and now, and on to the optative realm of 'imaginative possibility' (Crapanzano 2004:13-

14) in terms of its relation to hope, desire and perception on the one hand and its reciprocal connection to the here-and-now and potential for agency, on the other.

Through this relationship, we want to stress the significance of imagination not just as the powerful capacity of constructing mental representations, but also as a way of creatively interacting with the here-and-now and the potential future-to-come in the ever-changing system, we call world.

According to Crapanzano, imagination serves action by drawing a picture of the 'realisable before it can be realised', but, as he argues, it also permits fiction, fantasy and dreams. The realm of the imaginary, while being inherently connected to that of the 'real', the tangible and to perception, can therefore also remain detached from agency, in which case the anticipatory imagination may end up producing "*only an empty image of hope*" (Starobinski 1970:173-174 in Crapanzano 2004:19). With these considerations in mind, the question of whether the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development will stay an 'empty image of hope' or evoke responsible, collaborative and ethical action for the achievement of the Goals is, indeed, a question worth posing. But answering such a question requires knowledge which is not yet available and is therefore beyond the scope of this project. Hence, our take on imagination lies elsewhere: on its *potential* for igniting transformative perceptions of the social and potentials for change.

Inspired by anthropologist Tim Ingold (2012), whose work sheds light on the integrated becoming of environment, of human perception and knowledge, the way we approach the act of imagining in this thesis, does not focus on the ability to "*conjure up images of a reality 'out there', whether virtual or actual, true or false"* (Ingold 2012:3). We rather envisage imagination as an active part of shaping and igniting transformative agency: *"as to participate from within, through perception and action, in the very becoming of things*" (ibid.). In an evocative way, to imagine, as to perceive, is to participate in the ongoingness and perpetual self-making of the socio-material assemblages of the Sustainable Development Goals. In other worlds, imagination holds up the conjecture of a world that differs from the present, within which lies the possibility to affect its future trajectory.

Or, as anthropologist Sophie Haines, whose work focuses on environmental knowledge and decision-making in contexts of social and ecological change, puts it, the term 'imaginary' should "*evoke the potentiality of ideas about space, environment, and politics, in a way that relates*

strongly to memory, past experience and knowledge, yet allows for these to be made real in the present, and projected creatively into possible futures; an interaction of the concrete and abstract that is potentially very productive, rooted in experience and practice as well as discourse" (Haines 2012:98).

Highlighting the interdependency of the materiality of the world and its imaginaries and representations of possible futures, Haines argues, thus, for the existence of a continuum between the human acts of imagining and the processes shaping and transforming the material universe through both practice and discourse.

… On (displaced) belief, …

Yet, the question remains, of whether or not the Sustainable Development Goals, as a symbol that portrays a vision for an imagined, future reality, reflects the belief of an imagined community that has the potential of becoming anything but imaginary. A belief which would therefore be displaced among an ephemeral and institutionalised comradeship, embodied in the Agenda and materialised in an array of forms.

Borrowing from anthropologist Benedict Anderson's (1991:6) famous definition of the nation, we refer to an *imagined* community of the 193 countries that signed the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, since its member states, the single institutions, politicians and organisations that are intended to put the Sustainable Development Goals into practice, will most likely "*never know most of their fellow-members, hear them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion*". (Anderson 1991) Or, at least, we would argue that establishing such a feeling of community is, indeed, an important step towards the achievement of the Goals on a global scale.

According to philosopher, Slavoj Žižek, that of displaced belief is a common trait of contemporary, western, secular ideology (Žižek 2001:109-110). Belief can, so to say, be a 'belief with no believers', while nevertheless function socially, in the sense that a belief, such as that in the UN Sustainable Development Goals (and its materialisations) to be the solution to the contemporary social and environmental crisis, can afford agency even if it is not the single individual or institution that believes in them, but it rather comes from the imaginary of an abstract community. It is in this sense that we argue that the symbolic, displaced belief,

materialised in the 2030 Agenda, of an imaginary community of countries in 17 Goals and their underlying vision *can* be translated into a transformative change that can affect contemporary popular and mundane ideology in its heterogeneity. And, specifically, also to the neoliberal ideology of decoupling unlimited growth. We would argue that it is exactly in the acceptance of the mystification of everyday life, that the gap between hope, imagination, belief and agency is bridged through ideology. Because, according to Žižek (2001:126), ideology is in acting, not in what is being thought. It is in metaphysical presuppositions, embodied in agency, in practice, unlocking the potential for alternative perceptions and future imaginaries. But then again, ideology without thoughtfulness does not necessarily lead to a positive change.

..And alternative perceptions.

"It is hope [espoir] or despair [déspoir] that determines the action of the awakened dreamer's - the poet's - imagination"
(Eluard 1939:81 in Crapanzano 2004:103)

So far, we have elucidated how imagination can be seen as a way, not only to escape reality and the everyday through fantasy and mental projections, but also how "*imagining is a way of creatively participating in the ongoing self-creation of the world*" (Ingold 2012:15). An act, that of imagining, which, if translated into agency, inevitably also concerns how Man understands human social action in the context of an anthropogenetically-transformed Earth and within a specific socio-economic system.
Tim Ingold's work highlights how perception is at once material and imaginative, allocating paramount importance to the awareness of the perceiver, also when discussing anthropogenic change.
This highlights the inherent connection of practice and discourse, in terms of affecting the way in which anthropogenic change is imagined, defined and ultimately experienced and acted.
French philosopher, anthropologist and sociologist, Bruno Latour (2014a) has noted how the anthropocene ideal subverts traditional conceptions of an external objective world devoid of humans, given that human "*action is visible everywhere—in the construction of knowledge as well as in the production of the phenomena* (...) [that] *sciences are called to register*" (Latour

2014a:6). Studying such ongoingness underscores, as observed by Bauer & Ellis, the "*need to evaluate how we understand human social action in the context of an Earth transformed by humans, especially in relation to anthropological concerns for historical relationships among humans, other organisms, and the material processes and associated discourses that give shape to environments*" (Baur & Ellis 2018:209).

The question of belief becomes crucial, since it is also a dangerous one. Agency based on mere ideology faces the risk of being blindfolded of the blooming ecology of practices, collective knowing, imagining and perceiving of life. Latour warns against those who 'believe' they have the answers to the urgency of the current geopolitical challenges. Against those who are 'blinded by the habit of believing', since such a habit, he argues, inhibits agency. Rather than *believing*, it is therefore about making a *decision*, as an individual, about which perception represents our world better: "*the important point here is to realize that the facts of the matter cannot be delegated to a higher unified authority that would have done the choice in our stead*" (Latour 2014b:53). A decision, which goes beyond faith, trust or belief and allows for the realisation that decisions about the world in which we live cannot be 'outsourced', towards a politics of responsibility or, as Donna Haraway would phrase it, a cultivation of *reponse-ability* (Haraway 2016:40), or the ability to react in response of the sudden changes of a precarious world, in order to obtain a dramatic collaborative shift in perspective towards collective well-being. Considering the unequal distribution of the 'damage' of the Anthropocene and of the ways in which such damage is felt, experienced, defined and distributed across the planet (Bauer & Bhan 2016), such a shift entail an abandonment of a desire to 'escape' nature through imagined techno-fixes, cynical indifference and development-centred approaches, towards a reconsideration of the severity of the challenges facing us. A shift, which undoubtedly requires difficult and 'unrelenting work' to induce closer attention to the mindfulness of the matter, of ways to transcend the limits of bounded individualism in order to think and act across differences (Haraway 2016:6). This requires an urgent need to dwell on the ethos, politics and potentialities of interdisciplinarity and inter-,cross- and over-national collaborations. As forcefully argued by the American Anthropological Association Global Climate Change Task Force (Fiske et al. 2014), the current global changes affecting the planet, are to be understood as within the complexity of the particular perceptive assemblages of intertwined socio-political pressures,

material manifestations and their resulting imaginative horizons among different groups of people. The technical dimensions of the Anthropocene are thus indeed to be supplemented by an attention to the sociopolitical dimensions, which do both affect and shape, in a variety of different ways, people's engagement with their environs, (changing) climates and inequalities. As we have shown in this chapter, the grand scales, complexity and systemic essence of global change and of the challenges that we are facing, are not easily grasped by human experience. This is a condition of the current socio-environmental challenges, which calls for the immanent degree to which discourses surrounding global challenges mediate perception, as in the examples reviewed above. By those terms, anthropocene perceptions are inherently shaped by the narratives and discourses surrounding them e.g. inequality, climate change and economic unrest and transformative change, infusing them e.g. with anxieties, hope, despair and restlessness and igniting mobilisations and changes of perception.

Nevertheless, we have seen, as also argued by Bauer and Bhan (2018), that the high-modernist and eurocentric narrative surrounding the Anthropocene idea carries the risk of inhibiting a transition towards alternative perceptions and environmental engagements, perpetuating an imaginative split between a desirable global condition for human dwelling on Earth and an external, threatening nature. But also of how systemic understandings of well-being as economic growth are embedded in the notion of sustainable development. Such narratives bear risk of profoundly undermining "*an alternative politics of human-nonhuman relationships that does not treat humans as autonomous actors or follows the Promethean script of controlling and subduing Nature*" (Bauer and Bhan 2018:138).

So, in the midst of such complexity, it all comes back to hope. A hope for on-the-ground collectives capable of inventing new practices of imagination, resistance and repair, of dynamic materialisations and representations of change. Of living and dying well. And of a desire that reminds us that another world "*is not only urgently needed, it is possible, but not if we are ensorcelled in despair, cynicism, or optimism, and the belief/disbelief discourse of Progress*" (Haraway 2016:51). Those words, elucidate a necessity to take action, based on awareness and reflection, allowing to take considerate decisions, and to align with those lines of thought that are the best available option at the moment, not for progress, but for the planet and its inhabitants as an integrated, living whole. For what has also been called *Gaia*.

Redefining Sustainability

'Sustainability' is the dream of passing a livable earth to future generations, human and nonhuman. The term is also used to cover up destructive practices, and this use has become so prevalent that the word most often makes me laugh and cry.
(Anna Tsing in Brightman & Lewis 2017:1).

The Gaia hypothesis, originally formulated by the chemist James Lovelock and co-developed by the microbiologist Lynn Margulis in the 1970s (Lovelock & Margulis 1974), has recently been readopted and reinterpreted by philosopher Isabelle Stengers (2015) and anthropologist Bruno Latour (2017b, 2018).
The Gaia hypothesis, as developed by Latour and Stengers, allow for a radical rethinking of the human-nonhuman relationship on Earth. It is a speculative understanding of the contemporary planetary situation as an independent 'being', whose characteristics are to be understood and carefully approached by humans. According to Stengers (2015:47), Gaia is 'ticklish'. It is a new regime of intricate and unexpected agency, which is both 'hypersensitive' to human-induced pressures and 'indifferent' towards anthropogenic attempts to change course, because of which the fundamentals of geopolitics have been blasted open (Latour 2014b, 2018). Continuing, Stengers and Latour also argue that in such a time of radical change, the urgency of the situation can no longer be left to be dealt with solely by the current political and economic elite who, they argue, will not react timely to the urgency of the situation. On the contrary: "*we cannot any longer hide behind anyone else's decision to decide whom we should follow. We have finally grown up, as far as taking our destiny in our own hands is concerned*" (Latour 2014b:53). It is a situation that, in order to be addressed, requires renewed commitment both in reasoning and acting. A commitment which, even in countries like Denmark, whose politicians and businesses are renowned for, e.g., sustainability, requires a radical rethinking in terms of situated and local attempts to establish new, collective knowledges and practices that can translate the contemporary approach of climatoscepticism, understood as fetishistic disavowal, or the reluctance to act, in spite of the widely shared knowledge and belief in the consequences and risks of anthropogenic climate change. From this perspective, Gaia represents the possibility of

an alternative perception. One that surpasses the debates concerning belief/nonbelief and focuses on the establishment of new patterns of collective knowledge and intelligence, for new future imaginaries and novel ways of perceiving the present, for new ways of organising the social in sustainable and more equal ways through alternative practices. It is therefore our perception, in line with Latour (2018), that with Gaia an alternative narrative and imaginative schemata is unfolded. One that unlocks sensemaking and agency for alternative paths for sustainability, by diminishing the distance between the everyday, the mundane, and its planetary dimensions, surpassing the gap between nature and society and the 'us' and 'them'. Because, indeed, why should a definition of sustainable development focus on resilience, on perpetuating the current state of a system through models and predictions over time, when, "*apart from basic needs for fresh water, enough food, adequate shelter and the company of others, only future generations will know their own needs*"? (Brightman & Lewis 2017:12). We would therefore claim that the meaning of sustainability must embrace the uncertain and the unusual into possible futures, through a shift in perception from 'sustainable production' to 'sustainable ontologies': "*placing both human and nonhuman diversity at the centre of one's system of values, and promoting, supporting and cultivating diversity*" (ibid.:30).

Chapter 7: Final thoughts and future perspectives

"*All social change occurs when people become aware of the tension between the ideal they carry around in their head about how the system really ought to work, and the reality they see around them. And when that tension becomes too intense, they are willing to take action*"
(Robert Reich in Kornbluth 2017)

Sustainable development is not an easy exercise, nor is that of global policymaking.
As we have shown in this thesis, the difficulties expressed by Danish institutions and organisations in implementing the Sustainable Development Goals, seem to be bound to an internal conflict within the specific institution - a conflict that has risen from a perspective on sustainability which reflects a managerialist and positivist relation to nature and from what we have framed as a neoliberal ideology of decoupling, which clashes with the so-called systemic view on the interconnected essence of the 'Earth System'. By highlighting how the duality of those conflicting incentives affects the engagement of the examined Danish municipalities, private companies and the Danish Government, we have also shown how the ways in which the Sustainable Development Goals are put into practice is not projected *per se*, to lead to transformative change that will meet the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030.
We have also seen how the UN, shows signs of this internal conflict. Indeed, we have argued that embedded in the concept of sustainable development, since its first adoption in the Brundtland Report, is a contradiction in practice, beyond syntax and semantics. Which means that, if interpreted in exclusively quantitative terms - that is, if sustainability is understood as the management of the limited material resources on Earth, and development as unlimited economic growth - the concept of 'sustainable development' is in itself an oxymoron. And, despite being filtered through local socio-material assemblages, through ethnographic evidence, we have elucidated how such contradiction is inherently reflected in how the Sustainable Development Goals are put into practice in Denmark.
The Sustainable Development Goals are built on a holistic view of the human-environment-economy interaction. It is inspired by the 'Earth System Theory', and the model of 'Planetary Boundaries' and acknowledges the influence of human practice in the ever-changing emergence

of socio-material phenomena. The Sustainable Development Goals are thus built on graphs and models that illustrate the circular causality between the rise in GDP and terrestrial, atmospheric change, environmental degradation and the rising social inequality, and yet the 2030 Agenda is still founded on the premise that the primary method to reach the 17 goals is through economic growth, and the ideological belief of decoupling.

We suggest with these findings that the socio-material assembly of Danish institutions, and the Sustainable Development Goals has not succeeded in breaking the link that connects wellbeing with economic growth and the division between nature and culture.

Based on those conclusions, we have attempted to depict an alternative pathway, focused on the transformational potential of imagination.

As we have argued, all attempts of any kind that seek to reach the conative side of the human mind, must firstly succeed in creating an imaginary future in this mind - a vision. The will to make a change, and strive to reach a goal, depends on the devotion to this vision. Devotion, understood as desire, is a purely subjective matter. One that has more affinity to spirituality, than logic or rational reasoning. Or, as famously said by David Hume "*Tis not contrary to reason to prefer the destruction of the whole world to the scratching of my finger*" (Hume 2000: 200) and "*reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them*" (ibid 214).

The research presented with this thesis, highlights how the Newtonian or positivist paradigm or worldview, as we prefer to call it, and its focus on the objective of inquiry (rather than how it is perceived), on simplification (rather than complexity) and on the analysis and composition of the parts that form a whole (rather than on synthesis of the interconnection and mutual interaction that explains the behavior of the whole) is still dominant in the discourse and praxis surrounding the Sustainable Development Goals in Denmark. The positivistic approach becomes clear through the almost caricatured communication of politicians that so often consists in an analysis supported by some graphs and numbers in an attempt to make their argumentation appear to be built on reason and not on interpretations and beliefs; on facts and science instead of opinions. The positivistic paradigm withholds the holistic picture from being rendered fully, a picture of a system that is more than an assembly of individual parts, and a picture that reveals, and makes the observer consider *purpose* instead of scrutinising numbers of the component parts. It is

considering the purpose of the system that allows for imagination, visions and devotions, not the act of *ciphering.*

It is from this perspective that issues of knowledge and reasoning, as well as moral commitment and decision-making have emerged as unavoidable theoretical cornerstones for this thesis, as the necessity of challenging hegemonic ideology and practices became the clear conclusion of our work.

We have thus argued for a reconceptualisation of the concept of sustainability. One that, inspired by philosopher Peter Kemp, places urgent focus on the question of 'what future we hope for' and 'what we want to do' to get there. One that begins to converge in meaning with humanistic values based on the acknowledgement of the neglected truth that people's hopes for future prosperity can take many different forms. Cultivating this diversity, we believe entails the best chances for a sustainable future. A conception, which leaves open an array of opportunities for further research, imbuing (techno-)anthropology with a special role, not only in narrating the stories of local anthropocene perceptions, but also in taking the question of sustainability, or future liveability, seriously by utilising its perspectives to challenging established political and ethical implications beyond the current conception of sustainable development.

On this note we may return to the embryonic question of this thesis and to the movie "The Matrix". It seems as if many institutions and politicians react to the holistic picture - to the pressing socio-environmental challenges as the figure Cipher in the movie: being depressed about the reality of the real world, he asks the agents who are in control of the dreamworld called 'the Matrix', to be put him back into the matrix, and wishes his knowledge of the real world to be erased. He says: "*I don't want to remember nothing. Nothing. You understand? [pause] And I want to be rich. You know, someone important, like an actor*".

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