Business contributions to the sustainable development goals through community sustainability partnerships

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to understand how businesses can contribute to the achievement of the UN sustainable development goals (SDGs) by implementing Local Agenda 21 (or equivalent) plans in partnership with other organizations situated in their city. To this end, the present study examines drivers and outcomes from the perspective of business partners, as well as their relationships to the SDGs.

Design/methodology/approach – Through a mixed-methods approach this research studies 71 businesses from four large cross-sector partnerships formed to achieve local sustainability goals. Data were collected through a survey to determine why firms partner and what outcomes they obtain from partnering. Qualitative content analyses are used to determine the relationships between business drivers and outcomes from partnering for local sustainability and the SDGs.

Findings – From a resource-based view (RBV) perspective, findings show the value of local sustainability partnerships in relation to the SDGs. Many SDG targets are aligned with the top reasons why businesses join large community sustainability partnerships. Also, through the outcomes achieved by participating in the partnership businesses can further the SDGs.

Research limitations/implications – This research contributes to the literature and to practice through the understanding of businesses partnering for local sustainability, and its relationships to global sustainability. Firstly, the connections of business partners to local and global sustainability are better understood. Of note is the contribution made to the literature on sustainability-related drivers and outcomes expanding and refining RBV literature. Secondly, a positive connection has been established between

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businesses and the SDGs, proposing a virtuous model of relationship that summarizes the findings from this research. And thirdly, large cross-sector social partnerships are better understood.

Practical implications – Small- and medium-sized enterprises and large corporations with local offices can further both local and global sustainable development by engaging in local cross-sector sustainability partnerships.

Social implications – These research findings are crucial for those leading sustainability initiatives, so they can engage businesses actively in light of the important role they play in society improving their contributions and the chances for sustainability partnerships to achieve their goals.

Originality/value – This research contributes to the scale conversation by exploring community sustainability partnerships as a means to understand how business engagement in sustainability at the local level can contribute to the achievement of the SDGs and, ultimately, to global sustainability.

Introduction

The sustainable development goals (SDGs) have been called the broadest accord ever accomplished on social and environmental challenges (George *et al.*, 2016), representing a shared vision for a just, safe and sustainable future for humanity (United Nations Development Programme, 2020). As part of the United Nations 2030 Agenda, the SDGs were designed to guide sustainability decisions, influence politics and leverage financial resources to address poverty, environmental protection, social inclusion and economic growth (Gusmão Caiado *et al.*, 2018). The SDGs are global in impact and all countries and sectors are responsible for their accomplishment (Osborn *et al.*, 2015), including public, civil society and private sector organizations (Sachs, 2012). Nevertheless, despite its good intentions, the SDGs require major changes by every country (Schmidt-Traub *et al.*, 2017), as well as huge efforts for measuring and monitoring progress (Swain, 2018). Furthermore, the SDGs seem to be weak on agency, with few obligations for governments and zero for businesses or consumers (Spangenberg, 2017). The corporate sector provided great support to the development of the SDGs (Shrivastava, 2018); it was a relevant partner to the United Nations in its design (Scheyvens *et al.*, 2016). Currently, many multinational corporations have started reporting on and communicating about the relevance of their operations to the SDGs (ElAlfy *et al.*, 2020).

Businesses have progressively united organizations from different sectors to tackle sustainability challenges (George *et al.*, 2016), playing a critical role in achieving the SDGs (Rosati and Faria, 2019; Scheyvens *et al.*, 2016). The private sector has access to leading-edge technologies, worldwide reach and the capability to develop solutions at a large scale, all vital features to achieve global sustainability goals (Sachs, 2012). Businesses are possibly the most powerful organization on Earth (Davis and Marquis, 2005; Googins and Rochlin, 2000), and have become "an increasingly dominant social institution", getting engaged in economic matters, as well as in environmental and social issues (Bakan, 2004; Crane and Seitanidi, 2014, p. 3). By partnering for sustainability, they can move beyond business-as-usual (Leisinger, 2015) towards assuming a public commitment to improve society (Loza, 2004). The SDGs represent a potential opportunity to return to their fundamental responsibility and role in society, not only through principles of morality, markets and basic institutions as suggested by Hsieh (2017) but also by means of relational practices (Laasonen *et al.*, 2012) and in positive collaboration with all sectors of society (Mintzberg, 2015). That said, progress towards the SDGs has been slow (United Nations, 2019) and local businesses are poorly engaged (Verboven and Vanherck, 2016).

Cities are where "the battle for sustainable development will be won – or lost" (Eliasson, 2015, p. 1), endorsing the need for sustainability plans at local levels "in every area in which

human impacts on the environment" (UN-DESA, 2015, p. 1). This rationale was part of the discussion surrounding Agenda 21 at the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, a comprehensive plan of action for sustainable development at all levels (United Nations, 1992). Under this context, Local Agenda 21 (LA21) was proposed as "a participatory, multi-sectoral process to achieve the goals of Agenda 21 at the local level through the preparation and implementation of a long-term, a strategic action plan that addresses priority local sustainable development concerns" (ICLEI, 1997, para. II). As local governments do not always have the necessary resources or role to implement LA21s, collaborative approaches become relevant to promote common sustainability interests among stakeholders, as an adequate context for the implementation of local sustainability agendas (Barrutia *et al.*, 2007). LA21 seeks to integrate environmental and development concerns for fulfilling basic needs, improving living standards and protecting and managing ecosystems towards a safer and more prosperous future (United Nations, 1992). These challenges are aligned with the current SDGs, urging local governments to "dialogue with citizens, local organizations and private enterprises" (United Nations, 1992, para. 28.3). Since 1992, thousands of cities have implemented LA21s or their equivalent to tackle sustainability issues (Moallemi *et al.*, 2019; Rok and Kuhn, 2012), with many of them collaborating with organizations from diverse sectors in the design and implementation of their sustainability strategies (MacDonald *et al.*, 2018). While these partnerships implement sustainability strategies at the local level, they also contribute to the achievement of global sustainability (Griggs *et al.*, 2013), with public, private and civil society organizations as key actors partnering for the accomplishment of local SDGs (Clarke and MacDonald, 2019)[1].

The pressure on businesses to be socially and environmentally responsible will only increase (Hsieh, 2017; Siltaoja and Onkila, 2013) and sustainability partnerships that tackle local issues present an opportunity to respond to these pressures (Clarke and MacDonald, 2019). Local sustainability partnerships exist in thousands of communities worldwide (Moallemi *et al.*, 2019; Rok and Kuhn, 2012), and as previously highlighted, businesses are essential to realizing the SDGs. Given the challenge of considering scale (Bansal *et al.*, 2018), specifically different spatial sizes (e.g. local, national, global, etc.) (Peterson *et al.*, 1998), this article aims to understand if local sustainability partnerships can offer an opportunity for businesses to attain their organizational goals and, at the same time, contribute to the achievement of the SDGs. Specifically, the empirical research questions being answered are, namely, what drives businesses to join community sustainability partnerships? What outcomes are realized when businesses partner for local sustainability? And do business outcomes from partnering for local sustainability contribute to the achievement of global SDGs?

The present study seeks to answer the aforementioned research questions through a mixed-methods approach. Firstly, a survey on business drivers and outcomes, informed by the resource-based view (RBV) literature, was used to collect data from businesses that are partners in local sustainability partnerships. For reference, drivers are defined as the prospective resources that business partners stand to obtain from partnering for sustainability, whereas outcomes are the actual resources that partners obtain from partnering. Here the term resources are adopted from RBV and refer to any asset or capability that a firm can draw on to bolster its strategic position (Barney, 1991). The purpose of this survey was to determine: what drivers prompt business partners to join this type of partnership (Brinkerhoff, 2002) and what realized outcomes of partnering are valued most by business partners (Clarke and Fuller, 2010). Secondly, content analysis on the SDGs in light of the survey findings was performed. The aim of this qualitative analysis was to determine the degree of overlap that exists between business outcomes from partnering locally and the SDGs. Findings show sustainability, organizational and human drivers and

outcomes as the highest-rated for business with clear connections between them and the SDGs, presenting the SDGs as an opportunity for businesses to move beyond business-as-usual and assume commitments with societal challenges. Furthermore, local sustainability partnerships could help businesses gain sustainability, human and organizational resources while enabling local and global sustainability progress. While the findings from this research help sustainability leaders to improve the engagement of businesses in local sustainability partnerships and contribute to the SDGs, these results are also useful for the business community to understand the value of partnering for sustainability.

The article is structured as follows. Following the introduction, literature on business and the SDGs, partnerships for local sustainability and about business' drivers and outcomes for local sustainability is presented. Then, the methods used are explained being followed by the results, which lead to the final sections on discussion and conclusions.

Literature
This literature review focuses on business and the SDGs with a particular emphasis on sustainability partnerships and business drivers and outcomes.

Business and the sustainable development goals
On 25th September 2015, 195 countries agreed to 17 SDGs and 169 targets as part of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (United Nations Development Programme, 2020), a process in which the private sector played a key role (Scheyvens et al., 2016). However, the complexity of sustainable development (Rittel and Webber, 1973) has been a challenge for businesses to integrate into their strategies as they continue to favour short-term smaller-scale goals over long-term big picture sustainability (Montiel et al., 2020). Thus, the adoption of the SDGs could allow businesses to orient their activities and strategies using it as a framework towards specific goals (Sullivan et al., 2018).

The SDGs are integrated and indivisible, balancing the economic, environmental and social dimensions of sustainable development (United Nations, 2015a). The SDGs are also interdependent, with governance and global partnerships as key players in their success (Kolk et al., 2017). Whilst SDG#16 argues that "without peace, stability, human rights and effective governance" sustainable development cannot be accomplished, SDG#17 proposes that only through "global partnership and cooperation" the SDGs can be achieved (United Nations Development Programme, 2020, p. 1). Similarly, local partnerships are crucial for the sustainable development of cities (Clarke and Ordonez-Ponce, 2017), which as a whole can contribute to the achievement of the SDGs because of the thousands of local sustainability partnerships existing worldwide (Moallemi et al., 2019; Rok and Kuhn, 2012). However, the SDGs are also inconsistent and it is very hard to monitor them (Swain, 2018). Furthermore, their implementation is extremely complex, with what some have called "[un] realistic plans" to achieve them (Spangenberg, 2017, p. 318). For example, while economic growth has a positive effect on social issues such as the reduction of poverty (Spaiser et al., 2017), its increase has been largely considered to be incompatible with reducing our impact on climate and biodiversity (Eboli et al., 2010; Rosales, 2008).

Certainly, achieving the SDGs is a challenge and businesses have a key role to play (Sachs, 2012). While the SDGs can be considered an opportunity for businesses to demonstrate how they can help achieve sustainable development (Ordonez-Ponce and Khare, 2020), by minimizing their negative impacts and maximizing their positive contributions on people and the planet (Jones et al., 2016), they can also be relevant for the development of partnerships and strategic positioning (Sullivan et al., 2018). Moreover, the SDGs have been found to be a useful framework under which businesses can operate and

use to guide their investments, innovation and decisions (Ordonez-Ponce and Khare, 2020), with the potential of rewarding them with huge economic returns if they deliver goods and services that are needed for the achievement of the SDGs (Hsieh, 2017; Pedersen, 2018). However, for businesses to really get engaged and contribute to the SDGs, business as usual must change (Scheyvens *et al.*, 2016) and not only focus on the SDGs as a business opportunity but also assume their responsibilities to society (Hsieh, 2017; Siltaoja and Onkila, 2013).

Partnerships for community sustainability
Partnerships are considered to be a key to the achievement of sustainable development (Koontz, 2006), something that local governments have recognized towards the achievement of sustainability goals (Clarke and Fuller, 2010). Partnerships refer to a configuration of stakeholders that collaborate to reach common socio-environmental goals (Glasbergen, 2007), representing a "pluralistic approach" that involves stakeholders who contribute with their strengths towards solving societal needs (Glasbergen, 2007, p. 1). In fact, research shows that more comprehensive forms of collaboration can lead to desirable outcomes (Kalesnikaite, 2019), supporting community-wide plan implementation and goal realization (Alonso and Andrews, 2019). Nevertheless, partnerships demand important investments to be created, developed and persist in time (Googins and Rochlin, 2000; Margerum and Robinson, 2015). Furthermore, some of the challenges faced by partnerships are linked to the diverse goals of the partners, their potentially conflicting views and the lack of collaborative experience (Babiak and Thibault, 2009), all issues that can lead to fail partnerships (Googins and Rochlin, 2000; Margerum and Robinson, 2015).

Businesses form partnerships with public organizations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and/or other businesses (Glasbergen, 2007), providing them with an avenue to be socially responsible (Selsky and Parker, 2005). The partnerships that involve public, private and civil society organizations and that focus on economic, social and environmental issues concerning all the partners are called cross-sector social partnerships (CSSPs) (Crane and Seitanidi, 2014; Selsky and Parker, 2005). As expected, due to the global sustainability crisis (Griggs *et al.*, 2013; Steffen *et al.*, 2011, 2015), large CSSPs are becoming increasingly popular (Gray and Stites, 2013; MacDonald *et al.*, 2018). However, research on these partnerships, and in particular, their outcomes is nascent and so understanding of this organizational form and its capacity to realize its goals is still developing (Ordonez-Ponce and Clarke, 2020).

Some of the issues being addressed by CSSPs include education, economic development, energy, climate change, poverty alleviation, unemployment, health, water scarcity, air quality, ecological diversity, waste, corruption, organized crime, safety, transportation and food security (Clarke and Fuller, 2010; Crane and Seitanidi, 2014; MacDonald *et al.*, 2018; Ordonez-Ponce and Clarke, 2020; Selsky and Parker, 2005; Waddock, 1991). A list of local sustainability challenges that strongly matches the global SDGs (MacDonald *et al.*, 2018; Salvia *et al.*, 2019), with some minor exceptions. Local sustainability plans do not currently address gender equality, for example (MacDonald *et al.*, 2018). However, every other SDG has a related topic in local sustainability plans, and some cities are even explicitly linking their plans to the SDGs (City of Kitchener, 2019). By working within local sustainability partnerships, businesses can ensure their sustainability actions are within local and global ecological limits and aligned with science-based targets (Clarke *et al.*, 2019).

Alignment between local and global sustainability goals is a step in the right direction and helps address scale by ensuring local actions can collectively contribute to the global agenda (Goworek *et al.*, 2018; Kythreotis and Jones, 2012). Businesses in particular often

miss the big picture because they are either concentrated on minor details or omit granular understandings, as they are looking at the macro level (Bansal *et al.*, 2018). While limited resources constrain organizational capacity (Rerup, 2009), it is also a reality that businesses still struggle with long-term big picture issues such as climate change or biodiversity loss as they remain constrained by their short-term and smaller-scale goals (Montiel *et al.*, 2020). These constraints and their short-term smaller-scale goals are the ones usually being blamed for our unsustainable state (Flammer and Bansal, 2017) and which if not addressed properly, will make sustainability unreachable (Lee, 1993).

Businesses are crucial in the achievement of sustainability at the local (Clarke *et al.*, 2019; MacDonald *et al.*, 2018) and global levels (Sachs, 2012). However, even though there is research on what drives businesses to join partnerships and on their obtained outcomes from partnering (Gray and Stites, 2013; Selsky and Parker, 2005; Waddock, 1989), little is known about whether the reasons for them to join local sustainability partnerships and what they obtain from it can contribute to the achievement of the SDGs.

Business drivers for sustainability partnering

Organizations engage in sustainability partnerships for strategic reasons (Eisenhardt and Schoonhoven, 1996; Ordonez-Ponce and Clarke, 2020; Wassmer *et al.*, 2017). Partnering organizations are key actors whose performance decides the success or failure of a partnership (Ansell and Gash, 2008), aiming to obtain specific and tangible benefits (Waddock, 1989), and to achieve collaborative advantages that they could not accomplish alone (Glasbergen, 2007).

A resource perspective is one of the most used views for studying organizational engagement in partnerships (Gray and Stites, 2013; Selsky and Parker, 2005), stating that organizations join partnerships for obtaining resources they need to succeed and survive (Fombrun and Astley, 1983; Penrose, 1959). Consequently, the RBV has been largely used to study organizational drivers to partner (Branzei and Le Ber, 2014).

RBV is a powerful theory to study competitive advantage and organizational relationships (Barney *et al.*, 2011). This theory argues that businesses are heterogeneous organizations that possess management skills, capital, technical know-how and reputation as resources (Barney, 1991). According to RBV, organizations partner when they are in vulnerable strategic positions so they can gain additional resources that they need because of partnerships or when they are in comfortable positions to attract and engage other organizations (Eisenhardt and Schoonhoven, 1996). RBV clusters resources into four types of capital: human including experience and knowledge; organizational such as relationships, history and trust; physical such as technology, machines and manufacturing facilities; and financial capitals including equity, debt and earnings (Barney, 1995). Nonetheless, traditionally RBV does not identify socio-environmental drivers for organizations to partners (Barney *et al.*, 2011; Hart, 1995) such as those that focus on collective social problems (MacDonald *et al.*, 2019), the challenges and constraints placed by nature on businesses (Barney *et al.*, 2011; Hart, 1995) or society's sustainability (Kolk *et al.*, 2010). While Gray and Stites (2013) identify this type of resources calling them society-oriented, this article uses the term sustainability capital, consistent with the focus of the studied partnerships.

According to the social partnership literature, two main motives drive businesses to partner, namely, a strategic or utilitarian reason or a social or altruistic rationale (Eisenhardt and Schoonhoven, 1996; Vurro *et al.*, 2010). According to the strategic perspective, businesses join partnerships to access new markets and improve their market positions (Googins and Rochlin, 2000), to improve their image, reputation, status and legitimacy (Gray

and Stites, 2013) or to learn and gain expertise (Kolk *et al.*, 2010). Furthermore, businesses also join partnerships to control human (Kolk *et al.*, 2010), organizational (Lotia and Hardy, 2008), physical (Eisenhardt and Schoonhoven, 1996) and financial resources (Gray and Stites, 2013), to address socio-environmental pressures (Lin and Darnall, 2015) or to improve their strategic positions and gain competitive advantage (Selsky and Parker, 2005). From the social perspective, businesses join partnerships to be more environmentally and socially responsible (Kolk *et al.*, 2010), to address socio-environmental issues (Clarke and Fuller, 2010) or to improve the community's sustainability (Gray and Stites, 2013). However, this dichotomy is not that clear-cut, as some sustainability issues have been also considered strategic (Baumgartner and Ebner, 2010; Fiksel *et al.*, 2014; Wassmer *et al.*, 2017) such as the use of key natural resources that would put at risk the very survival of a company if these are not managed properly (Hart, 1995; Leisinger, 2015). Therefore, while the management literature has mainly focused on drivers related to business (human, organizational, financial and physical) from an RBV perspective, it is also important to understand how sustainability drivers influence businesses when joining local partnerships. Moreover, there is value in understanding which drivers relate to the SDGs, with the purpose of exploring if the topics of these global goals are connected to business motivations to strategically partner locally for sustainability.

Business outcomes from sustainability partnering
According to Clarke and Fuller (2010), there are six types of outcomes that can be achieved by organizations when partnering: outcomes about the issues on which the partnerships focus (plan-centric), those that would lead to changes to the partnerships' processes (process-centric), others that affect the relationships between the partnerships and their external stakeholders (outside stakeholder-centric), outcomes that are limited just to particular individuals (person-centric outcomes), outcomes that go beyond the scope of the partnerships (environmental-centric outcomes) and outcomes that alter the behaviour or structure of partner organizations (partner-centric outcomes). This article focuses on partner-centric outcomes.

Outcomes achieved by partners are grouped differently by various authors. They have been clustered according to satisfaction levels or evidence in meeting objectives, enhanced performance in developing tasks and satisfied stakeholders (Brinkerhoff, 2002). They are also grouped according to the creation of capital; the formation of new partnerships, joint actions and the implementation of agreements; and cooperation with other organizations, results and the creation of new institutions, norms and modes of discourse (Bryson *et al.*, 2006). Outcomes have also been named associational outcomes when referring to credibility and respect; transferable outcomes that are about money and skills; interaction outcomes such as trust and reputation; and synergistic outcomes, which include the creation of environmental, economic and social value (Austin and Seitanidi, 2012).

From a management perspective, outcomes are strategic resources that organizations cannot develop on their own, which generate knowledge or political resources that help to influence others (Hardy *et al.*, 2003). RBV has been used to study partner outcomes (Clarke and MacDonald, 2019; Lavie, 2006; Lin, 2012) through physical/financial capital to include identifying funding, cost savings, improving efficiency and accessing new markets (Clarke and MacDonald, 2019; Eisenhardt and Schoonhoven, 1996; Lavie, 2006); social capital to include improving reputation and influence, building relationships; organizational capital to include the increasing impact on organizational sustainability (Clarke and MacDonald, 2019; Hardy *et al.*, 2003; Seitanidi and Crane, 2009); and human capital to include gaining learning and knowledge (Clarke and MacDonald, 2019; Hardy *et al.*, 2003; Selsky and Parker, 2005).

However, despite the wide use of RBV most research has focused on business-related outcomes (human, organizational, physical and financial), with limited attention given to outcomes related to improving the conditions of society, i.e. sustainability-outcomes, which are the main purpose of the local sustainability partnerships and the SDGs. Thus, there is a need to better understand how businesses value the resources they obtain from partnering for local sustainability, and whether those resources have an impact on the achievement of the SDGs.

Methods

The study used a mixed-methods approach to answer the proposed research questions. Firstly, quantitative analyses were conducted using survey data collected from businesses that have partnered for local sustainability. The results of these analyses shed light on the business drivers that prompt firms to join local sustainability partnerships and the outcomes that these partners experience from participating in these partnerships. Secondly, a qualitative content analysis was conducted to assess the degree to which partners prioritized business drivers and realized outcomes link to the SDGs. The results of the content analysis were used to determine whether local sustainability partnerships can help businesses to contribute to the attainment of the SDGs. The section presents how cases were selected, the sample, survey and measures used and the content analysis process.

Sample and procedure
This research analysed business partners from four CSSPs.

Case selection
The CSSP cases were selected on the basis of these criteria (Eisenhardt, 1989), namely, the partnership must implement a strategic community sustainability plan with at least 100 partner organizations, the partnership must include partners from all three sectors (i.e. public, private and civil society sectors), the partners must be actively engaged in implementing the plan's goals (i.e. committing to at least one of the goals of the plan) (Waddock, 1991), the partnership must be at least 10 years old to allow for outcomes to have occurred and the partnership's activities must impact a community with a population of 1–2 million people in a developed country as these cities have more capacity to address sustainability issues (Hawkins *et al.*, 2016). These criteria were used to guide case selection enabling sufficient partners to be assessed from large CSSPs in comparable contexts (i.e. developed economies and mid-sized cities). Table 1 shows the selected CSSPs.

Partnership[2] (community and country)	Total active partners	Active business partners	Business partner responses	Partnership timeframe	Impacted population[3] (millions)
Barcelona + sustainable (Barcelona, Spain)	328	156	38	2002–2022	1.6
Bristol green capital partnership (Bristol, UK)	291	146	12	2003–2050	1.1
Gwangju council for sustainable development (Gwangju, South Korea)	111	20	9	1995–2021	1.5
Sustainable Montreal (Montreal, Canada)	280	45	12	2005–2020	1.7

Table 1.
Participating cross-sector sustainability partnerships

Barcelona + Sustainable started working on sustainability issues during the late 1990s and it is currently implementing its Public Commitment towards Sustainability based on principles of shared responsibility and citizen participation (Secretaría Barcelona+Sostenible, 2021). The initiative's current objectives are focused on 10 key areas, namely, biodiversity, public spaces and mobility, environmental quality and health, efficiency, productivity and zero emissions, rational use of resources, good governance and social responsibility, well-being, progress and development, education and citizen action and resilience and planetary responsibility (Ayuntamiento de Barcelona, 2012).

Bristol Green Capital Partnership has worked towards the sustainability of Bristol since 2007 and has committed to making Bristol a "low-carbon city with a high quality of life" (Bristol Green Capital Partnership, 2018). This CSSP is under the leadership of the Bristol City Council (Bristol Green Capital Partnership, 2018). The partnership is organized around five themes, namely, food, energy, nature, resources and transport. It is currently developing projects on crowdfunding; exclusion of minorities; health, skills and leadership; the SDGs; networking and collaboration; and the development of a resilient, prosperous, healthy and sustainable city (Bristol Green Capital Partnership, 2018).

Gwangju Council for Sustainable Development began its sustainability journey in the 1990s, although under the name Council for Green Gwangju 21 (Gwangju Council for Sustainable Development, 2016). Since then, five action plans have been in the process of implementation. The most current plan was designed under the principles of governance based on public-private cooperation and democratic settlement process in the region, and works towards implementing the SDGs (Gwangju Council for Sustainable Development, 2017). The partnership's current agenda has 17 goals across 10 topic areas, namely, clean water, air and energy, city forests, a city safe from chemicals, recycling of materials, green and social economy, urban farming, welfare, sharing, diverse, healthy and beautiful community, people-oriented traffic system, residential environments and education for sustainability (Gwangju Council for Sustainable Development, 2017).

Sustainable Montreal adopted its first strategic plan for the city in 2005 (Ville de Montréal, 2021) and it is currently working on its third Community Sustainable Development Plan (Ville de Montréal, 2016). This new plan seeks to make Montreal a low carbon, equitable and exemplary city, with four priorities areas, namely, reducing greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions and dependence on fossil fuels, adding vegetation, increasing biodiversity and ensuring the continuity of resources, ensuring access to sustainable, human-scale and healthy neighbourhoods and making the transition towards a green, circular and responsible economy (Ville de Montréal, 2016).

Sample
Data were collected with an online cross-sectional survey over a two-year timeframe. The survey was designed in English and further translated into the languages of three of the four CSSPs (French, Korean and Spanish and one in English). The surveys were translated using a source-to-target language protocol to reduce translation bias (Smith, 2010).

The study sample represents data collected from 71 business partners, representing 19% of the total active business partners from the selected CSSPs. One representative per business responded to the survey.

The sample is representative of business across all sizes and is composed of 53% very small businesses (less than 50 employees), 1% small-sized businesses (51–99 employees), 21% medium-sized businesses (100–499 employees) and 24% large companies (500+ employees). Moreover, the sample captures the duration of the business partner's involvement, where 17% of businesses report partnering for 10+ years, 18% report between

5–10 years, 50% report between 1–5 years and 15% report less than 1 year. Nearly all survey participants represent an organization that has voluntarily joined one of the partnerships (94%).

Most of the representatives who responded to the survey hold senior or managerial positions in their organization. The sample includes survey data from senior executives, including board members, chief executive officers (CEOs), senior administrators, owners and business partners (49%); and middle managers (30%). Responses were also received from junior staff (7%), external advisors (4%) and others (10%).

Survey and measures

Prior case study research on sustainability CSSPs, as well as literature review on business drivers and outcomes, informed the development of the constructs assessed for this study.

The survey consisted of four sections. The first section collected general information from the partner organizations. The second focused on partner drivers for joining the partnerships. The third on partner structural features for partnerships activity. The fourth collected data on partners' perceptions of their realized outcomes. The central analysis and findings of this study are based on the data collected in the second and fourth sections of the survey. Potential priming effect was reduced by introducing the section about structural features in between the questions on drivers and the ones about outcomes (Schwartz and Schuman, 1997; Sudman *et al.*, 1996). Moreover, introductory texts were presented before the partners responded to the respective sections, with the purpose of helping survey respondents to think about the moment when they joined the partnership when valuing drivers, and the present when valuing the realized outcomes (OECD, 2013).

The survey asked business representatives to rate on a 5-point Likert scale (from 1: most valuable to 5: least valuable) 31 drivers that prompted their organization's decisions to join a local sustainability partnership. Using the same 5-point Likert scale respondents were also asked to rate 31 realized outcomes from partnering for local sustainability. Drivers and outcomes were organized based on the five types of capital proposed by the RBV and sustainability literature, namely, human, organizational, financial, physical and sustainability. The list of 31 drivers and 31 outcomes is presented in Appendix I.

To detect potential response biases a wave analysis was completed by comparing responses from early respondents (15% who responded first) with late respondents as a proxy for non-respondents (15% who responded last) on drivers and outcomes (Lewis *et al.*, 2013). Means of survey responses were assessed using independent *t*-tests (Lankford *et al.*, 1995). The results of the *t*-tests indicate that variances between groups for drivers ($p > 0.05$) and outcomes ($p > 0.01$) can be assumed to be equal (Levene's test) as no significant differences were identified. Thus, no response bias was detected. Similar results were found among the four partnerships ($p \geq 0.05$), finding no response bias.

Methods such as eliminating the interviewer, offering anonymity (Krosnick and Presser, 2010), self-administration or a private interview setting (Tourangeau and Yan, 2007), were all used to reduce social desirability response bias. Cronbach's αs were calculated to test reliability and indicate internal consistency among constructs ($\alpha > 0.70$) (Cronbach, 1951; Litwin, 1995) (Appendix II).

Content analysis

A qualitative content analysis of the SDGs' descriptions and targets was conducted (United Nations Development Programme, 2020). The aim of this analysis was to identify whether the SDGs could be linked to the business drivers and outcomes that were assessed in our study. Drivers were conceptualized as reasons that motivated businesses to join

sustainability partnerships and outcomes as what businesses actually achieved thanks for partnering for local sustainability. Keywords were used to assess all business drivers and outcomes and connect them with the SDGs. While drivers and outcomes are represented by single phrases such as "engaging/engaged with the community" or "sharing/shared own experiences", respectively, the SDGs present a rich content that was examined to understand their purposes and how these were linked to drivers and outcomes. As an example of the content presented, SDG#1 – no poverty includes an introductory paragraph and six targets referring to the reduction of people living in poverty; the implementation of social protection systems; equal rights to resources and services; building resilience against economic, social and environmental disasters; mobilization of resources; and the creation of sound development strategies for the poor. SDG#1 and its targets were matched with the driver "engaging with the community" and the outcome "engaged with the community" using keywords such as engagement, collaboration, accord, agreement, community, association and society. This process was conducted for all business drivers and outcomes listed in each of the five categories. Coding was completed separately by two coders.

The content analysis followed a four-step protocol. Firstly, descriptions of the SDGs and their targets were analysed for their potential relationships to business drivers through the use of keywords. Secondly, a structured categorization matrix was created with business drivers organized in rows and the SDGs in columns (Elo and Kyngäs, 2008). Thirdly, when a driver emerged as a potential theme in the SDG content, the respective intersection was marked (Yin, 2014). Fourthly, a data reduction process was used, assigning found themes into one of the five capitals categories (i.e. societal, human, organizational, financial and physical) to determine potential patterns according to the capitals.

The same four-step protocol was followed to relate business outcomes to the SDGs. The descriptions of the SDGs and their targets were analysed looking for possible connections between business outcomes gained from participating in a local sustainability partnership and the SDGs, establishing intersections in a matrix by cross-referencing outcomes with the SDGs. Results were again reduced according to the five capitals.

Results
The results section is organized according to the research questions into two subsections. Firstly, the survey results are presented informing business drivers and outcomes and the second subsection presents the results obtained from the content analysis.

Survey results: Business partner drivers and outcomes
As shown in Table 2, the survey results on drivers indicate that businesses that join local sustainability partnerships are motivated to do so primarily by sustainability drivers. The drivers rated as most valuable – contributing positively to environmental challenges ($M = 1.45$, $Mode = 1$, $SD = 0.73$) and contributing positively to the sustainability of the community ($M = 1.48$, $Mode = 1$, $SD = 0.58$) – correspond to sustainability capital. Organizational capital drivers were also rated highly, indicating that business partners also join sustainability partnerships to build new relationships ($M = 1.58$, $Mode = 1$, $SD = 0.71$) and engage with the community ($M = 1.63$, $Mode = 1$, $SD = 0.87$). Conversely, indicators of financial capital, a driver that is typically associated with business, were rated as least valuable, improving financial performance ($M = 3.20$, $Mode = 3$, $SD = 1.18$) and increasing financial resources ($M = 3.23$, $Mode = 3$, $SD = 1.23$). The complete list of drivers is presented in Table 2, appearing in order from highest (1 = most valuable) to the lowest (5 = least valuable) rated.

Driver	Type of capital	M	Mode	SD
Contributing positively to environmental challenges	Sustainability	1.45	1	0.73
Contributing positively to community sustainability	Sustainability	1.48	1	0.58
Building new relationships	Organizational	1.58	1	0.71
Engaging with the community	Organizational	1.63	1	0.87
Collaborating with others	Organizational	1.73	1	0.98
Sharing own experiences	Human	1.75	2	0.79
Improving reputation	Organizational	1.77	1	0.87
Networking	Organizational	1.77	1	1.02
Contributing to the plan's sustainability goals	Sustainability	1.80	2	0.73
Contributing positively to social challenges	Sustainability	1.83	2	0.76
Gaining knowledge/learning	Human	1.92	1	0.91
Improving the organization's sustainability	Organizational	1.96	1	1.05
Gaining expertise	Human	2.06	2	0.97
Gaining legitimacy	Organizational	2.07	1	1.00
Becoming more influential	Organizational	2.08	2	1.02
Innovation capacity	Organizational	2.11	2	1.04
Improving competencies	Human	2.14	2	1.02
Contributing positively to economic challenges	Sustainability	2.15	2	0.92
Improving relationship with authorities	Organizational	2.23	2	1.04
Marketing opportunities	Organizational	2.35	1	1.27
Having access to new markets	Organizational	2.38	2	1.22
Improving relationship with NGOs	Organizational	2.49	3	1.16
Developing new products/services	Financial	2.70	2	1.28
Making new businesses	Financial	2.72	2	1.26
Reducing costs	Financial	3.00	3	1.26
Improving processes	Physical	3.01	3	1.22
Funding opportunities	Financial	3.07	3	1.26
Attracting new investors	Financial	3.13	3	1.23
Increasing resources	Physical	3.15	3	1.25
Improving financial performance	Financial	3.20	3	1.18
Increasing financial resources	Financial	3.23	3	1.23

Table 2.
List of drivers to partner from the most to least valuables as rated by business partners

When the drivers were collapsed to compose the five capital categories slightly different results emerged. While sustainability capital still received the best overall mean score (M = 1.74), human capital had a slightly better mean score (M = 1.96) than organizational capital (M = 2.01). Likewise, physical capital (M = 3.08) rather than financial capital (M = 3.01) was ranked as the least valuable overall. These results indicate that business partners are initially motivated to join sustainability partnerships because of the prospect of gaining sustainability, human and organizational capital. They also show that for business partners, physical and financial capitals are less important considerations when compared to the other capitals assessed. The results for all five capitals as drivers to partners are shown in Table 3.

Table 4 provides the list of outcomes arranged from highest (1 = most valuable) to the lowest (5 = least valuable) rated. The survey results on partnering outcomes reveal that the two outcomes most valued by businesses correspond to the organizational and human capital categories, where built new relationships (M = 1.99, SD = 0.88) and shared own experiences (M = 2.00, SD = 1.02) have the best mean scores, respectively. The outcomes contributed positively to environmental challenges (M = 2.01, SD = 1.08) and networking (M = 2.06, SD = 1.03), received similarly high mean scores. When evaluating the mode values, shared own experiences ($Mode$ = 1), contributed positively to environmental

challenges (*Mode* = 1) and networking (*Mode* = 1), were most frequently rated as *most valuable*. While the mode for built new relationships (*Mode* = 2), was most often rated as only *valuable*. Thus, by this measure, the top two outcomes are related to the sustainability and human capital categories. The outcome rated as least valuable overall was increased financial resources, remaining at the bottom of this list for outcomes (*M* = 3.67, *Mode* = 3, *SD* = 1.15) and for drivers.

Type of capital	*M*	*Mode*	*SD*
Sustainability	1.74	1	0.79
Human	1.96	2	0.93
Organizational	2.01	1	1.06
Financial	3.01	3	1.24
Physical	3.08	3	1.23

Note: Means from 1: most valuable, to 5: least valuable

Table 3.
List of drivers to partner according to the five capitals

Outcome	Type of capital	*M*	*Mode*	*SD*
Built new relationships	Organizational	1.99	2	0.88
Shared own experiences	Human	2.00	1	1.02
Contributed positively to environmental challenges	Sustainability	2.01	1	1.08
Networking	Organizational	2.06	1	1.03
Gained knowledge/learning	Human	2.09	2	0.97
Contributed positively to community sustainability	Sustainability	2.10	1	1.13
Engaged with the community	Organizational	2.12	1	1.14
Improved reputation	Organizational	2.15	2	0.96
Collaborated with others	Organizational	2.24	2	1.07
Contributed positively to social challenges	Sustainability	2.27	2	1.07
Gained expertise	Human	2.27	2	1.08
Contributed to the plan's sustainability goals	Sustainability	2.33	2	1.04
Improved the organization's sustainability	Organizational	2.37	2	1.15
Gained legitimacy	Organizational	2.43	2	1.06
Improved competencies	Human	2.45	2	1.10
Became more influential	Organizational	2.57	3	0.99
Developed innovation capacity	Organizational	2.60	2	1.09
Found marketing opportunities	Organizational	2.69	3	1.03
Improved relationship with authorities	Organizational	2.69	3	1.12
Accessed new markets	Organizational	2.70	3	1.10
Contributed positively to economic challenges	Sustainability	2.72	3	1.15
Improved relationship with NGOs	Organizational	2.85	3	1.21
Improved processes	Physical	3.30	3	1.29
Made new businesses	Financial	3.33	3	1.22
Developed new products/services	Financial	3.34	3	1.27
Reduced costs	Financial	3.42	3	1.29
Improved financial performance	Financial	3.45	3	1.13
Increased resources	Physical	3.46	3	1.27
Found funding opportunities	Financial	3.48	3	1.15
Attracted new investors	Financial	3.63	3	1.19
Increased financial resources	Financial	3.67	3	1.15

Table 4.
List of achieved outcomes from the most to least valuable as rated by business partners

As shown in Table 5, the results for outcomes by capital category show that overall outcomes linked to human capital were rated as most valuable ($M = 2.20$, $Mode = 2$, $SD = 1.05$). While indicators linked to sustainability capital were the primary drivers for businesses to join a partnership, ultimately the outcomes that businesses most values are linked to human capital. The lowest-ranked outcomes are linked to the financial capital category ($M = 3.47$, $Mode = 3$, $SD = 1.20$), whereas indicators linked to physical capital were expected to be least valuable when businesses rated their drivers for partnering.

Content analysis results: Business interests and the sustainable development goals
The results of the content analysis show that the highest-rated business drivers could be achieved by targeting the SDGs and that the realized outcomes contribute to the achievement of the SDGs. In other words, businesses can use the SDGs as a framework to guide them towards realizing their aims for joining local sustainability partnerships, while contributing to the achievement of the SDGs through the realized outcomes from partnering.

The content analysis of the SDGs in light of our survey findings on business drivers finds that contributing positively to environmental challenges, the highest-rated driver, is linked to most of the SDGs. As an example presented in Figure 1, 13 of the SDGs have environmental targets that are associated with their achievement. Likewise, the second highest-rated driver, which is also from the sustainability category (contributing positively to community sustainability) and the third (building new relationships), are linked to all the SDGs. The SDGs were also examined in relation to the drivers in their composite form. These results indicate that sustainability, organizational and human capital share the most overlap with the SDGs, respectively. A graphical representation of the relationships between the SDGs and business drivers per type of capital is shown in Figure 2.

Most importantly, with respect to the reported outcomes achieved by businesses when partnering for local sustainability, results show that they have the potential to contribute to the achievement of the SDGs. For example, one of the highest-rated outcomes, engaged with the community could – depending on the specific project or initiative for which community engagement occurred – contribute to the aims of several SDGs. For example, to sustainability goals such as SDG#1 (no poverty) through targeting the most vulnerable; SDG#5 (gender equality) by ending all forms of discrimination; and SDG#12 (sustainable production and consumption) by encouraging industries, business and consumers to recycle and reduce their waste; among other SDGs. Similarly, another of the highest-rated outcomes, contributing positively to the sustainability of the community could contribute to the achievement of SDG#6 (clean water and sanitation) providing access to drinkable water and sanitation for all; SDG#8 (decent work and economic growth) by contributing to full employment, decent work and equal pay for all; SDG#10 (reduced inequalities) ensuring equal opportunities and reducing inequalities; and SDG#11 (sustainable cities and

Type of capital	M	Mode	SD
Human	2.20	2	1.05
Sustainability	2.29	2	1.11
Organizational	2.42	2	1.09
Physical	3.38	3	1.28
Financial	3.47	3	1.20
Note: Means from 1: most valuable, to 5: least valuable			

Table 5.
List of achieved outcomes according to the five capitals

Figure 1.
Links between
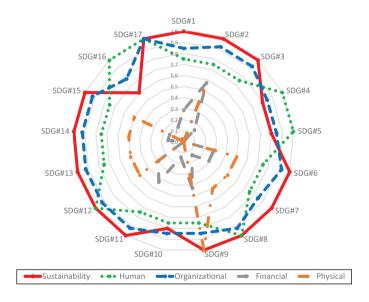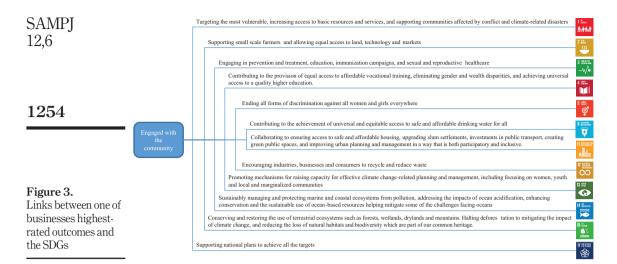businesses highest
rated driver and
the SDGs

Figure 2.
Relationships
between the SDGs
and business drivers
per capital

communities) contributing to the attainment of adequate, safe and affordable basic services and housing for all. Figure 3 shows the identified connections between the outcome engaged with the community and SDG targets. Then, when collapsed into their composite capital categories, outcomes associated with sustainability and human capital were found to have the most overlap with the SDGs. Shown in Figure 4 is a graphical representation of the relationships between the 17 SDGs and business outcomes per capital.

Going one step further, the 10 highest-rated drivers and outcomes were analysed versus their relationship with the SDGs finding a 90% match between the 10 most valuable drivers
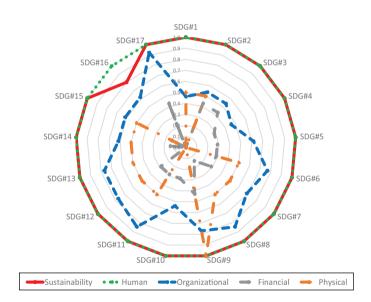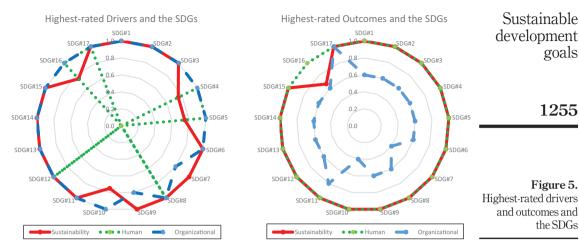
Figure 3.
Links between one of
businesses highest-
rated outcomes and
the SDGs

Figure 4.
Relationships
between business
outcomes per capital
and the SDGs

and outcomes and that sustainability, human and organizational capital have a high
connection to the global goals. Interestingly, while organizational capital are the drivers
most linked to the SDGs, these are the outcomes least linked to the SDGs, among the three
top categories. Similarly, human capital were found to be the outcomes most contributing to
the SDGs, whereas these are the drivers least linked to the SDGs. Figure 5 shows the
connections between the 10 highest-rated drivers and outcomes per category versus the
SDGs.

In sum, the survey and content analysis results indicate that sustainability, human and
organizational drivers, as well as outcomes are the highest-rated for businesses that partner

Figure 5.
Highest-rated drivers
and outcomes and
the SDGs

for local sustainability and that these have significant overlap with the SDGs. These results suggest that local sustainability partnerships can create a path towards achieving the SDGs and their targets. Furthermore, it can also be argued that the global goals could represent a motivation for engaging in local sustainability partnerships.

These findings inform the development of a conceptual model that combines businesses' drivers and outcomes with the SDGs in a positive relationship. As illustrated in Figure 6, the SDGs, which can be understood as a proxy for global sustainability, can represent a motivation and an opportunity for businesses to consider for joining local sustainability partnerships, while their outcomes from partnering at the local level can contribute to the achievement of the SDGs and global sustainability. This positive cycle could be implemented by those leading local sustainability partnerships and those promoting the SDGs by connecting the global goals as a sustainability framework, with local partnerships contributing from the local to the global level. This is especially relevant considering a large number of existing local sustainability partnerships (Moallemi *et al.*, 2019; Rok and Kuhn, 2012) and the remaining global sustainability challenges (Sachs *et al.*, 2020).

Discussion
Many scholars assert that businesses are key to the success of the SDGs (Rosati and Faria, 2019; Sachs, 2012; Scheyvens *et al.*, 2016) and, increasingly businesses are partnering with
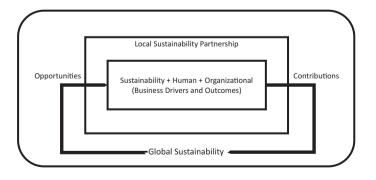

Figure 6.
Business drivers and
outcomes in relation
to global
sustainability

other organizations to address sustainability issues in the communities where they operate (George *et al.*, 2016). In doing so, businesses are assuming their fundamental responsibilities and roles within society (Hsieh, 2017). Similarly, scholars and the international community have suggested that partnerships are crucial for sustainable development (Koontz, 2006; United Nations Development Programme, 2020), and worldwide local governments pursue their community's sustainability vision in partnership with local stakeholders (Moallemi *et al.*, 2019). Furthermore, LA21 and local sustainability goals have been found to be well-aligned with the SDGs (MacDonald *et al.*, 2018; Salvia *et al.*, 2019). While all of this suggests that local sustainability partnerships create opportunities for businesses to contribute to achieving the SDGs, usual business practices must change for them to make tangible contributions to global sustainability (Scheyvens *et al.*, 2016), collectively aligning to ensure local actions lead to global progress, thus addressing issues of scale (Bansal *et al.*, 2018). The research presented in this article sought to understand whether local sustainability partnerships can help businesses to contribute to the attainment of the SDGs, and in doing so also highlighted the resources to be gained by businesses from partnering for sustainability.

Business drivers and outcomes: Support for the social motives resource perspective
Scholars who adopt a resource perspective to understand why businesses join partnerships are not in agreement about what motivates businesses to engage in this behaviour. On one hand, scholars propose that businesses are motivated by strategic ends to join partnerships (Eisenhardt and Schoonhoven, 1996), while others argue that they partner for social or altruistic reasons (Vurro *et al.*, 2010), with a clear trend of business and management scholars focusing on the former. However, as this study focuses on sustainability, a sustainability dimension was added to the rationale finding sustainability business drivers and outcomes among the highest-rated, supporting the "social motives" perspective over the purely strategic approach. This research actually shows that it is likely both social and strategic motivations. It is possible to view these findings as tautological and explained by the characteristics of the partnerships and partners (large partnerships, long-term commitment, 35% partnering for 5+ years, engaged voluntarily and largely satisfied with the outcomes), meaning that they have shown a commitment to sustainability, and are thus, likely to consider it valuable. These results show a positive sign when trying to connect businesses, local partnerships and the SDGs. Nevertheless, these also point to positive developments in terms of the ways in which the business sector is viewing local sustainability, especially when considering the drivers that prompted the businesses in this study to join a local sustainability partnership. Also, with so few small- and medium-sized enterprises engaged with the SDGs (Verboven and Vanherck, 2016), local partnerships can enable both local and global progress, regardless of if their motivations are global or local, thus addressing both scales.

Business interests and the sustainable development goals: understanding where the two connect
Our findings reveal linkages between what drives businesses to partner for local sustainability and the global SDGs, as well as business outcomes from partnering and the SDGs. When local sustainability partnerships help business partners to gain sustainability, human and organizational resources, they are also providing businesses and the partnership with a way to make positive contributions to global sustainability. These findings could be seen as a positive indication, highlighting the SDGs not only as a business opportunity but

also for businesses to move beyond business-as-usual and assume commitments to address societal challenges.

The results of our analysis that focused on the top drivers and outcomes and their overlap with the SDGs, found that the decision made by businesses to join a partnership was driven by the expectation that their involvement would contribute to sustainability capital. Indeed the drivers "contributing positively to environmental challenges" and "contributing positively to community sustainability" were expected by business partners to be most valued. These results suggest a significant overlap between business drivers to partner for sustainability and the SDGs, especially given our additional finding that the sustainability capital indicators are strongly aligned with the SDGs. However, as outcomes, the sustainability capital indicators received lower value ratings from business partners. In contrast, indicators for organizational and human capitals, which are less aligned with the SDGs, were ranked among the most valued outcomes by business partners.

There are two potential explanations for these findings. The first is that business partners overestimated the contributions that they would make to local sustainability through the partnership, and as a result of less than expected sustainability outcomes they lowered their ranking of the value of sustainability capital. The second is that business partners underestimated the value that organizational and human capital outcomes would create for their organization, and so they promoted the value of these as realized outcomes. If it is the former, then one implication could be that local sustainability partnerships need to be more proactive in creating opportunities for business partners to positively contribute to local sustainability. Alternately, it could also be that business partners need to be more ambitious with their commitments and contributions to the partnership and local sustainability (Lam *et al.*, 2020).

Local Agenda 21s and the sustainable development goals
The potential for LA21s to place greater emphasis towards their extant SDG components was a particularly interesting finding of our research. LA21s propose collaborative strategic management processes for implementing local sustainable development strategies (Clarke and Fuller, 2010), recognizing the power of local cross-sector partnerships to achieve sustainable development (United Nations, 1992). However, although they have been implemented all over the world since 1992 (Moallemi *et al.*, 2019; Rok and Kuhn, 2012), updated understandings of sustainable development have emerged through initiatives such as the New Urban Agenda (United Nations Habitat, 2016), the Paris Agreement (United Nations, 2015b) and the SDGs, providing new content for LA21s. For example, now that local communities are targeting deep decarbonization in line with the Paris Agreement (e.g. at least 80% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by 2050) incremental improvements are no longer an option. Transformational change, by local businesses and other local actors, will be needed to ensure local climate action matches global commitments. Updated LA21s (or other local sustainability plans) recognize these newer goals.

A greater focus on linking LA21 goals and outcomes to the global SDGs could revive this grassroots collaborative approach to addressing local, and thus, global social, ecological and economic issues in a holistic and integrated manner. Sustainable development enables social justice to be considered alongside climate action, for example. Also, LA21s with large cross-sector partnerships enable considerable collective action towards SDG implementation. While integrating environmental, social and economic goals through the engagement of local stakeholders (Owen and Videras, 2008), the LA21 process includes the creation of collective sustainability visions (Freeman *et al.*, 1996; Roseland and Spiliotopoulou, 2016) documented in community sustainability plans (Clarke and Fuller, 2010) that are

implemented and monitored by local stakeholders (ICLEI, 2002). While they are not perfect instruments to achieve sustainability have had limited impact on business in some places (Dentchev *et al.*, 2018), poor performance on social issues on others (Lizama-Pérez *et al.*, 2018) and some low participation of stakeholders (Kamaruddin *et al.*, 2016), its cross-sector approach could certainly help to overcome these challenges if appropriately designed (Sun *et al.*, 2020).

Replicating this local approach globally through the thousands of local partnerships addressing sustainability challenges can contribute to global sustainability and the achievement of the SDGs, bringing the strengths of local initiatives to the global scale. However, this is not just an issue of replication but also about how this relates with power that all actors transform into concrete actions to achieve global sustainability (Delaney and Leitner, 1997). While local issues are easier to manage than the global sustainability agenda through collaborative cross-sector approaches (Bowen *et al.*, 2018), local authorities and businesses can expand their local sustainability initiatives and the role that businesses play in addressing local challenges so that the SDGs can be accomplished. The four cross-sector partnerships studied here all have more than 100 active organizational partners involved, enabling considerable collective action.

While this research is exploratory and further research is certainly required, it can be argued that the potential exists, contributing to understanding the local and global impact of partnerships, an area that remains understudied (van Tulder *et al.*, 2016). Based on the number of existing partnerships (Moallemi *et al.*, 2019), how large CSSPs are increasing in numbers (MacDonald *et al.*, 2018) and that businesses are progressively joining others to contribute to sustainability (George *et al.*, 2016), some positive signs can be considered. Nevertheless, the engagement of businesses in local sustainability partnerships requires their true commitment and not to transform their participation into what has been already called "SDG-washing", a trend that the literature has started to report (van Tulder and Lucht, 2019). This is certainly a challenge, but the suggestion that local sustainability partnerships could help businesses to gain resources while contributing to global sustainability is a hopeful sign of potential progress, something certainly needed under the current challenging conditions we face. However, the issue of scale can only be addressed if there is widespread adoption, therefore these efforts can collectively impact global sustainability.

This research suggests that while the SDGs can be presented as a motivation and opportunity for businesses to gain sustainability, organizational and human resources and the outcomes they achieve when partnering for local sustainability can contribute to global sustainability. Therefore, this research recommends for businesses and those leading local sustainability partnerships to consider the SDGs as a sustainability framework that could potentially help businesses reach their highest-rated motivations (namely, sustainability-, human- and organizational-related goals) through contributing to the success of the local partnerships. Then, a virtuous cycle could materialize towards the attainment of outcomes that will contribute to global sustainability, as proposed by Figure 6.

Limitations and future directions
This research is exploratory in nature, therefore the findings should be interpreted as an indication of the potential that large cross-sector sustainability partnerships could represent to businesses from diverse sizes and industries to achieve their strategic goals and contribute to local and global sustainability while gaining sustainability, organizational and human resources. However, how these partnerships address the issues they are designed to do and whether they certainly do it are still issues pending to be deeply assessed (Clarke and

Crane, 2018). Further research is encouraged to assess the found relationships and contribute with a deeper understanding of the role that partnerships and partners can play in local and global sustainability. The role that business structures play in between drivers and outcomes is suggested for further research, understanding that structures are key in reaching strategic goals (Andrews, 1980; Ordonez-Ponce and Clarke, 2020). Finally, assessing directly from local businesses what their relationships with the SDGs are and if these are seen as opportunities to achieve their strategic goals are potential research directions.

Conclusion

Questions of scale are a challenge for management scholars (Bansal *et al.*, 2018), yet are critical to addressing grand challenges (as outlined in the SDGs) (George *et al.*, 2016). This research contributes to practice and the literature by assessing businesses partnering for local sustainability, their relationships to the SDGs and the potential that local sustainability partnerships have to contribute to global sustainability. The value for the business in partnering in local sustainability partnerships is better understood. Noteworthy is the contribution made to the literature on sustainability-related resources showing an expanded perspective of the RBV literature. Secondly, a positive connection has been made between businesses and the global goals, proposing a constructive model of relationship that encapsulates these research findings. And finally, large cross-sector partnerships are better understood.

Notes

1. Local, community and city are terms used interchangeably throughout the article.

2. Names translated into English.

3. Population does not necessarily refer to the population of the city, but that of the partnerships' geographic impact area.

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Appendix 1

Capital	Drivers/outcomes
Sustainability	S1: Contributing positively to the plan's sustainability goals
	S2: Contributing positively to environmental challenges
	S3: Contributing positively to social challenges
	S4: Contributing positively to economic challenges
	S5: Contributing positively to the sustainability of the community
Human	H6: Gaining knowledge/learning
	H7: Gaining expertise
	H8: Sharing own experience
	H9: Improving competencies
Organizational	O10: Improving the organization's sustainability
	O11: Developing innovation capacity
	O12: Building new relationships
	O13: Improving reputation
	O14: Gaining legitimacy
	O15: Becoming more influential
	O16: Having access to new markets
	O17: Marketing opportunities
	O18: Networking
	O19: Collaborating with others
	O20: Engaging with the community
	O21: Improving relationships with authorities
	O22: Improving relationships with NGOs
Financial	F23: Improving financial performance
	F24: Reducing costs
	F25: Funding opportunities
	F26: Developing new products/services
	F27: Making new businesses
	F28: Attracting new investors
	F29: Increasing financial resources
Physical	P30: Increasing physical resources
	P31: Improving processes

Table A1.
List of business
drivers and outcomes

Appendix 2

Cronbach's α	Items	Drivers	Outcomes
Sustainability capital	5	0.77	0.92
Human capital	4	0.90	0.90
Organizational capital	13	0.90	0.93
Financial capital	7	0.93	0.95
Physical capital	2	0.87	0.85

Table A2.
Cronbach's α results
for drivers and
outcomes variables