

“Me muess d’Lüt neh wie si sy—Anderi gits e keini”.¹ Decent Work and Sustainable Development for the 21st Century: The Case of Wyon AG in Switzerland

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1. Introduction

The question of decent work is a very complex one, especially in a world with multiple issues, discrepancies, and growing inequality. In each country, authorities aim to regulate employment in the formal sector and try to control the informal sector with different methods (SIDA 2004). Depending on the country’s political system, several consultations with citizens, economic actors, political parties, government, enterprises and trade unions may be needed. It is important to achieve a consensus on passing employment laws and regulations, and accepting or abandoning supranational non-mandatory regulations and international standards or agreements. However, International Organisations try to define decent work and propose minimum standards for all their member states. These standards should tackle issues like poverty, modern slavery, child labour, migration, and climate change or resource depletion during early globalization (DIHR 2020).

On 25 September 2015, the United Nations’ 193 member states voted to adopt the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), a set of 17 goals and 169 targets with the ambition to guide global policy-making until 2030. SDGs were meant to be “a plan of action for people, planet and prosperity” (United Nations 2015a). This Agenda was inspired by human rights discourse, and its goals have been welcomed as a result of democratic participation. Their widespread praise was in contrast with their predecessor “Millennium Development Goals”, which received criticism, being described as an “opaque” and “elitist” approach “excluding all but a ‘triad’ of powerful nations” (Rai et al. 2019; Briant-Carant 2017). In effect, Agenda 2030 aims to encourage development efforts from governments, states, corporations, institutions, International Organisations and the civil society. It also offers opportunities for the private sector to collaborate, and sustains collective action to help tackle urgent planetary issues. Despite having support from different stakeholders, this process has also received criticism, being described as a top-down operation with democratic

deficits. According to critics, the discussants were not all at the same level, with major actors having a greater influence over the discussion, and with the exclusion of marginalized people. Therefore, this Agenda reflects the mainstream ideas and interests of the most influential discussants, and the prevailing economic sentiment regarding development (Rai et al. 2019).

The definition of decent work in the International Labour Organisation's Work Agenda has four pillars: employment creation, social protection, rights at work and social dialogue. This was elaborated with the participation of governments, businesses and organized labour, a tripartite structure that reflects the structural foundation of this U.N. Agency. Even though this structure creates a unique forum in which the representatives of different parties can freely debate and elaborate international labour standards and policies, it has served for many years as a barrier to the participation of unwaged people, people in the informal economy, in volunteering, in the care economy and in private households (Rai et al. 2019). In reality, ILO marginalized unwaged labour and focused only on the waged part of the economy. However, in 2012, ILO presented a new version of the concept of decent work, accepting the participation of female movements and recognizing the need to address the informal economy that represents, in fact, a fundamental inequality within the labour market. ILO thereafter promoted "decent and productive work for women and men in conditions of freedom, equity, security, and human dignity". It also recognized that "all workers have the right to decent work, not only those working in the formal economy but also the self-employed, casual and informal economy workers, as well as those, predominantly women, working in the care economy and private households" (ILO 2012). However, this new ILO concept was still ambiguous. Its core values—dignity, equality, fair income and safe working conditions (ILO 2012)—may have different interpretations in different political, economic, societal and cultural settings, and are neither quantifiable nor measurable. Moreover, ILO links decent work to productive work and implicitly assumes the existence of a non-productive work; concepts, discussed in the classical and neoclassical political economy in the last two centuries, which influenced the approach to modern management and the discussions on economic sociology and Marxist economic analysis. These concepts also heavily influenced the national accounts. In mainstream economic theory, productivity is the key source of economic growth and competitiveness. In many cases, to remain competitive and attract foreign investments, governments decide to lower labour standards at the expense of the most vulnerable workers, and of the economy as a whole. The concept of decent work in Goal 8 follows the ILO Decent Work Agenda, and is related to economic

growth and productivity. It is one of the most important Goals, creating linkages with the ten other Goals (Le Blanc 2015), but also tensions and contradictions.

This chapter aims to challenge the idea of decent work related to productivity and economic growth, and questions the concept of decent work for the 21st century. For that purpose, it examines the business model of high-end technology Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) in Switzerland, in which ethical values, focus on human needs, and democratic decision-making process prevail over economic growth and productivity. The chapter frames this business model within the Swiss Economy and discusses SDGs, highlighting tensions between the SDGs and within Goal 8. Finally, it aims to propose a new approach to the concept of decent work, taking a human-centred perspective.

The Swiss SME ecosystem is multifaceted. Thus, this paper presents the case of Wyon AG, a company that operates in a valley of Appenzell, as an example of a long-term investment in people, planet and prosperity. Wyon AG creates a new paradigm of entrepreneurship and embedded economy, transcending existing theories of sustainability, responsibility and management.

2. Wyon AG: “Me muess d’Lüt neh wie si sy—Anderi gits e keini”

2.1. Ethical Grounds

2.1.1. Dignity

“Me muess d’Lüt neh wie si sy—Anderi gits e keini”, in Swiss German, means: “We should accept people as they are—others don’t even exist”. This motto is the ethical foundation of Wyon AG, the leading idea that the visionary owner Paul Wyser heard from his father, a Catholic carpenter in the protestant valley of Basel, where he grew up. It is also the foundation on which he and his family built the company from the ground-up twenty years ago and the most important ethical principle linking the past with the present and future generations. In this sense, the first condition of ILO—dignity—is given in the human-centred approach with which the owners developed their business: you cannot change human nature; you must accept it and make the best out of it. Human dignity is the state or quality of being honourable or respectable, and the value behind all other human values. Democracy, in particular, can only be supported on a foundation of human dignity and requires legitimacy, inclusion and accountability, values also linked to ILO’s second condition of equality. Accepting people as they are, respecting them in their existence and treating them as equals is inscribed in Article 1 of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights: “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.

They are endowed with reason and conscience and are to meet one another in a spirit of brotherhood” (UNDHR 1948). This acceptance, with dignity and equality, brings benefits to any society, organization or human activity. According to the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, moral equality is the view that equality is central to justice, that all individuals are entitled to equal respect and that all human persons are equal in fundamental value or moral status [. . .] It is a fundamental principle of most forms of democracy (SEP 2001).

2.1.2. Trust

Growing up as a member of a large family, Paul Wyser learned to trust and be trusted; in society, he learned to respect cultural differences and also endure exclusion and discrimination because of his family’s cultural/religious differences. Therefore, he learned to trust within the family and build strong relations that helped him to design the human journey of his company. Indeed, trust implies responsibility and conveys security and wellbeing, regardless of any incongruity. In Wyon AG, ethical values are materialised in their entrepreneurial acts, not only towards employees but also towards society and the environment.

Above all, the corporate structure is egalitarian. The company has a flat and lean management style, with employees sharing equal responsibility and power. The owners/managers encourage the employees to think and act like entrepreneurs and be active members of the teams in which they work. Employees work collaboratively on tasks and behave as equals. Even though owners/managers delegate responsibilities, the employee teams take part in the decision-making process, bring their development ideas forward, work together on solutions, and decide on the hiring of new employees and development of new products. After all, they know the company best. Relationships with the customers are also direct and personal, with solid ties and frequent direct collaboration.

This management structure reflects the Swiss tradition of direct democracy: employees are actively involved in the development of the company and the wellbeing of the workforce, in the same way that citizens are actively involved in the political and social process. It brings success and transforms employees by giving them appropriate space to shape the company as a joint project, and to thrive. Open dialogue, cooperation and transparency in communication are also of great benefit in creating a common ethical basis and resolving issues more openly and transparently. The assumption and acceptance of responsibility, moreover, is a crucial factor in the company’s success. In other words: The success of Wyon AG is co-designed with the employees in a long-term relationship, in which the personal pronoun “we” stands

above the pronoun “I”, as the team personality stands above the individual. This approach creates a common culture, and a basis for working together and reaching a consensus on solutions. It allows people to live and work as equals, and the company to flourish.

2.1.3. Fair Income

Wyon AG not only gives employees responsibility and decision-making power but also, under certain conditions, a part of the company’s shares, especially after Paul Wyser’s retirement and the gradual succession of management to the next generation. “How much money do you need to be happy?” Wyser asks, justifying the decision to keep only a small amount of shares for him and his wife and offer the rest to the next generation and the employees. This fact not only respects ILO’s core value of fair income, but also transforms the employees into co-owners that invest in and develop their own company, establishing tight relationships and avoiding turnover. To this end, employees are trained as apprentices from the outset, and later they mature as specialists in order to know and innovate the products, finding solutions for the company’s common advantage.

Financial independence is essential for the decision-making process, as much for the present as for the future of the company. For this reason, Paul Wyser invested his own money to start the company, and today the company invests its profits in research and development, innovation, sustainable development, and in people’s wellbeing and infrastructure. Paul Wyser and the next generation of management do not believe in “modern managers who strive for short-term profits and gains”, as he emphasises.

The modern manager’s perspective reveals a utilitarian approach to business and responds better to the question “how much money is in it for me?”. Paul Wyser’s question focuses on happiness and human values.

Wyon’s owners/managers believe in sustainability that requires long-term engagement and trustworthy relations. To sustain a company for people, the planet and prosperity, you need to have a long-term perspective, without dependencies on banks, stock exchanges or individual private investors and investment funds. Such dependencies could hinder long-term success and change the management focus from people-centred to short-term and profit-oriented, in Paul Wyser’s opinion. Independent SMEs need people with a vision of creating a safe and transparent work environment, putting people and their needs at the centre of focus and transforming the business environment into creative joy and satisfaction.

2.1.4. Cooperative Principles and Empowerment

Since the beginning of this venture, Paul Wyser wanted to “lead the company beyond money”. Therefore, personal relations with employees, customers, suppliers, the community and other stakeholders are of great importance. Humans are the most important stakeholders for Wyon AG. To this end, the company grew from a family business into a real social enterprise in only twenty years. Wyon AG is a privately owned company, not a worker cooperative. However, cooperative principles are applied to fit the company needs.

Cooperatives and worker-owned enterprises could re-imagine and re-configure the economy as a whole, because the principles of their governance differ drastically from those of the conventional hierarchical business management. During the financial crisis of 2007, the idea of democratic management in organizations and communities rose in the world and cooperative business structures surfaced as more resilient. According to ILO, “cooperatives have been more resilient to the deepening global economic and jobs crisis than other sectors” (ILO n.d.). In Switzerland, cooperatives and their principles are well known. The country has more than 9.600 cooperatives in different sectors of the economy, with over half of the population working within a cooperative business. The political system, well known as a direct democracy, needs the cooperation of people, along with the Cantons and their consensus, in advancing policy in a particular direction.

In 2012, the United Nations declared the year as the International Year of Cooperatives to highlight their contribution to social and economic development, in the creation of employment, reduction in poverty and in encouraging integration (Cheney et al. 2014). Cooperatives are people-centred enterprises, with democratic participation that aims to create sustainable businesses which generate long-term jobs and prosperity, based on common values and principles and putting fairness and equality first (Rochdale Principles 1934, ICA 2021). Human-centred principles like anti-discrimination, motivation and rewards, democratic and open participation in decision-making, equity, autonomy and independence, education, training and information, and concern for the community are some of the cooperative principles that also apply to Wyon AG. The target is to empower employees and make them active members of the teams, the company and the community. Empowerment is also given great attention in the SDGs because it is the bundle of measures that increases the degree of autonomy and self-determination of individuals and communities. Empowerment is the basis of democratic participation. It enables people to represent their interests in a self-reliant and self-determined manner. Furthermore, it motivates

people to act responsibly. The action of empowerment refers to both the process of self-empowerment and professional support for people.

As part of a certain business approach, empowerment is used in participatory management and decision-making processes. It is defined as the sharing of various organizational factors, i.e., information, reward, knowledge or power of the employees of lower grades (Bowen and Lawler 1995). As a multi-faceted approach, empowerment helps businesses to build community capacity, create social capital, ensure compliance and improve the legitimacy of the decision-making process, and offer transparency and inclusion. It enables the most effective decision-making, because larger groups of people make better decisions than small groups of experts. It also helps to resolve agreements by having a shared understanding of the business reality, building trust and confidence and receiving a licence to operate at a community level (Sharma and Varma 2011; Kao et al. 2016).

2.2. Externalization of Ethical Values

2.2.1. The Environment

Having intrinsic anthropocentric values and teamwork on equal terms, Wyon AG sets a further milestone, with the externalisation of ethical values. First of all, the very same building of Wyon AG is designed to be in harmony with nature. The company is located in Appenzell Steinegg, a small village with 1000 inhabitants in the Rüte district. The village lies at the western foot of the mountain Fährneren, about 2 km southeast of Appenzell. As a typical Swiss village, it needs environmental protection. For this reason, the 4000 m² building is not only designed to be environmentally friendly, but also to save energy and resources using the latest technologies. A heat pump provides heating with geothermal probes located in the main building. A chiller provides cooling, and the “free-cooling” energy can be buffered in the existing storage tank, and thus be used to optimise the system in terms of further energy. A mechanical ventilation method ensures a pleasant indoor climate and a very sophisticated IT system optimises energy consumption and security. The optimisation of resources and the in-house production of energy are important issues for any company. Thus, recycling and reuse of plastic and other materials is embedded in the corporate praxis, and the in-house energy production from renewable sources ensures energy sufficiency and protection of the environment. The electro-technological facility is integrated into the building structure, which creates a U-shape with an inner garden, water fountain and plants. This garden is perfectly embedded in the topography, designed to offer relaxation, peace and inspiration to the employees. The flat and lean democratic structure of the operations is also

present in the open and shared workspace, and the clean and pure production area is also symbolically painted white. The team offices are designed for individual work that requires a high degree of concentration, with short paths to production areas and always-open doors. Rooms for brakes, patios and the inner courtyard are also used for crosscutting meetings.

2.2.2. Products and Collaborations

Since people were already the most crucial element in an early stage of the company's development, products were conceived for the improvement of human health, within the range of the auricles, in diabetology, ophthalmology, gastro-enterology and orthopaedics. Wyon AG specializes in the development and production of rechargeable Li-Ion batteries in small and micro-sizes and has patented plastic technology combined with the stacking technology and micromechanic competences. The batteries are smaller, come in any custom shape and achieve the highest capacities for their volume. Recycling and control of the supply chain is also part of the company's operations in order to optimise, save resources and create a circular economy. Such micro-technological know-how is not only needed in medicine, but also in aerospace and military, industries that could generate high profits for the company. However, the human-centred approach of the owners does not allow cooperation with such industries. On the other hand, cooperating with customers in the medical field requires solid personal relationships on equal terms and a deep understanding of human needs, unison in ethical values, along with a vision for innovation, and the improvement in human life.

High-end technology and innovation are essential elements of success for an SME. Switzerland is nonetheless an expensive production location. In order to sustain long-term operations, preserve jobs and keep employment in the regions sound, the SMEs should bring niche technologies to the global market and be one step ahead of the global competition. Today, Wyon AG is a high-end technology firm with no direct competition, which exports 90% of its products to Australia, Asia and Europe. Moreover, for sustaining long-term relations, the workforce should feel welcome in the working environment and be able to be integrated into teams. To this end, Wyon AG has supported education and apprentices in the Appenzell region since 2013 through the Wyon-Foundation. This foundation reinforces and amplifies the presence of the company in the local and regional communities. The foundation also supports the very efficient Swiss technical education system and helps the region thrive, not only as a workplace but also as an innovator of products, markets and society.

With its approach, Wyon AG not only creates new working places but also new standards in business and the economy. It applies an inclusive model to benefit not only the company, but also society, the environment and human life. As Paul Wyser believes, “the world is the market” and, in it, people’s needs drive innovation and prosperity.

3. Switzerland and the Small and Medium Enterprises

3.1. Switzerland as a Hub for Technology and Innovation

Switzerland is one of the world’s leading countries in manufacturing and innovation and, according to statistics, it has one of the highest GDP per capita in the world. Despite international developments, adverse trends and de-industrialization since 1970, the country was able to maintain its leading position because of its strong focus on providing people with high standards in education and health care. Switzerland also maintained high-quality technology and production, and knowledge-based manufacturing, as well as an exceptional public infrastructure that permits the development of businesses, even in the most remote parts of the country. Political stability, a transparent legal system, efficient capital markets, medium–low corporate tax rates and extended social security (CIA 2019) are also essential for the country’s competitive advantage. According to the Competitive Industrial Performance Index 2017, the country was ranked 6th in the world, due to the high value-added per capita in the manufacturing industry, the high degree of industrialisation and the high proportion of medium- and high-tech activities (PwC 2018). According to the 2018 PwC report on Switzerland, two main factors are essential for the continuing growth of the Swiss manufacturing sector over the next four years: robust international demand, and the rise in domestic consumption. Both may boost manufacturing and innovation and place the country as one of the leaders in Industry 4.0; however, it may also cause a significant environmental impact due to production methods and the use of large quantities of natural resources.

To tackle the arising challenges, the 2013 Green Economy Action Plan (BAFU 2020) and the Sustainable Development Strategy 2016–2019 (ARE 2016) anticipate a series of various measurements, prioritizing the areas of consumption and production, waste and raw materials, and reinforcing the public dialogue in order to conserve natural resources, make consumption environmentally friendly and strengthen circular economy.

Sustainable consumption and production also require some changes in consumer behavior. It requires an increase in consumer awareness and environmentally friendly decisions when it comes to purchase and use physical goods. Thus, sustainable

industrialization is vital within the Sustainable Development Strategy 2016–2019, and in the realization of the UN Sustainable Development Goals: The federal government has declared its aim to transition to a resource-saving, sustainable economy which fulfills its responsibilities along the entire value chain (Goal 12, ARE 2016, p.18) and to build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation (Goal 9, ARE 2016, p.16).

The cooperation of the private sector is essential to achieving these targets. In particular, the industrial sector may advance the debate on sustainability, implement different Action Plans, and adopt programs of new measures and other initiatives. The Corporate Social Responsibility Position Paper and Action Plan of the Federal Council (SECO 2020), the 2016 National Action Plan for the implementation of the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (Federal Council 2016), and the 2013 Background Report on Commodities are headed towards this conclusion (Federal Council 2013), and are expected to help the industry tackle sustainability issues.

Furthermore, the Federal Policy supports and strengthens the commitment of all actors as a means to a more sustainable future and a circular economy. It is a clear expectation of the Federal Council that Swiss-based companies have to fulfil their human rights obligations and their responsibilities towards the environment in all their activities, and that the Federal Council attempts to assume a role-model function regarding its consumption patterns (PwC 2018).

3.2. The Agenda 2030 in Switzerland

The Swiss Confederation adopted the 2030 Agenda in 2015, due to its long tradition of pursuing sustainable development. According to the baseline assessment of 2017, SDGs were well-established in the legislation at multiple levels of administration. However, more efforts are needed to ensure cohesion and policy coherence, reconcile national and global perspectives and to level existing discrepancies (OECD 2020; EDA 2016, 2018, 2020). The recent results of the SDG implementation and measurements, however, attest some serious issues that also heavily impact society and the environment:

Poverty: Despite positive developments and a strong economy, the Swiss Social Statistics report of 2019 uncovers that, in 2017, income poverty increased, and around 675,000 people were affected. The poverty rate rose from 7.5% to 8.2% between 2016 and 2017, and 4.3% or 165,000 people were classed as the working poor. Long-term unemployment rose as well, and seniors were heavily impacted (BfS 2019). Despite being employed, the following groups of people are significantly affected by poverty: (a) those who work only for certain parts of the year, (b) part-time employees,

(c) self-employed people, (d) employees with a temporary contract, and (e) those employed in small businesses.

Equality: The Federal Office of Gender Equality attests that there is not equal pay for women and men, despite the Federal Constitution enshrinement of 1981 and the Gender Equality Act of 1996. Women in Switzerland earn, on average, 18% less than men, and only 56% of the pay gap can be explained by objective factors like years of service or professional status and qualifications. A total of 44% of this gap remains unexplained and the causes are potentially discriminatory, such as traditional gender roles, the choice of education and training, the gender-based division of family and domestic work as well as of paid work, gender-based distortions in the evaluation of performance or general discrimination in the labour market.

Unpaid work: According to the Federal Statistical Office (BfS 2017), unpaid work in Switzerland is worth approximately CHF 408bn and corresponds to 9.2 billion hours. Time spent on unpaid work exceeds that of paid work: on average, each person worked 1.320 hours/year and women took on 61.3% of the unpaid work volume. In contrast, men took on 61.6% of paid work volume. Housework without childcare makes up three-quarters of the total volume of unpaid work (77% of 7.1 billion hours). Care for children and adults in households can be measured at 1.5 billion hours/year (16% of the total volume). A total of 660 million hours were spent volunteering (7% of the total). More time was spent on informal volunteering (436 million hours) than on institutionalized volunteering (224 million hours).

In a society, any kind of inequality and discrimination has macroeconomic implications, as lower pay or unpaid labour harms social insurance, pensions and tax revenues. As women are not equally present in the labour market, the economy benefits from a far smaller pool of high-skilled people, and competition between companies may suffer from this distortion. Social exclusion in the market and society jeopardizes social peace (EBG 2019), and creates biases in social and economic data collection and, ultimately, in the shaping of an inclusive and egalitarian future society. However, the Federal Government encourages the labour market participation of older people and vulnerable groups, and the employment rate of women and young people is increasing, while the wage gap between women and men decreases (SDG 8.4, SDG 8.b, SDG 8.6, EDA 2016, 2018, 2020).

Switzerland's commitment to the Agenda 2030 is long-term commitment to sustainable development. On this path, questions about what we understand about sustainable development and how we can achieve sustainability on a local, regional or global level still remain open, and so does the role of the actors in this path and their responsibilities. Unfortunately, the Federal Council in the Swiss Growth

Policy 2016–2019 does not focus on the aforementioned issues. It instead focuses on increasing productivity, which creates contradictions and clashes with the very essence of the SDGs as an Agenda for the people, planet and prosperity.

3.3. Swiss SMEs: A Different Approach to Business and Development

According to the Federal Statistical Office in 2018, SMEs in Switzerland account for more than 99% of businesses in the market-driven part of the economy (BfS 2018). Out of a total of 608,952 businesses, 591,016 are SMEs and employ 3,039,326 people.

SMEs are locally embedded companies, well known in the communities in which they operate and recruit people. They understand ethical responsibilities as an inherent part of day-to-day work, and as a moral activity. Cultural context, direct democracy, subsidiarity, decency and acceptance of any kind of difference constitute the basis of their operations. Their owners are mainly families that also manage the business, maintaining strong ties with the local cultural, social and political realities. SME owners/managers have a deep awareness of the impact and the effects of their activities. Thus, they aim to operate sustainably and responsibly, and they strive to develop stable long-term relations with their communities. They do not need to formalize any Corporate Social Responsibility practice or publish social activities because their stakeholders are aware of their contributions (Stavridou 2018; Stavridou and Vangchuay 2017; Looser and Wehrmeyer 2015). Consequently, for SMEs, local embeddedness has a greater significance than it does for multinational or publicly traded companies, which operate remotely and formalise their Corporate Social Responsibility targeting to justify their activities and satisfy a much more diffuse audience.

This SME approach has a long tradition in Switzerland, starting with industrialization, which created adaptable forms of business in the community. On one hand, it created the figures of the Swiss Patriarchs, well-known pioneers with large industries, innovators and politicians, who also advanced social issues. On the other hand, it created the tradition of cooperative businesses with a lean structure and democratic decision-making process, which empower people to decide on the presence and future development of the company and assume responsibility. As of today, SME owners consider their success to be a continuum of six overlapping key drivers (Figure 1), as discussed in a paper by Looser and Wehrmeyer 2015:

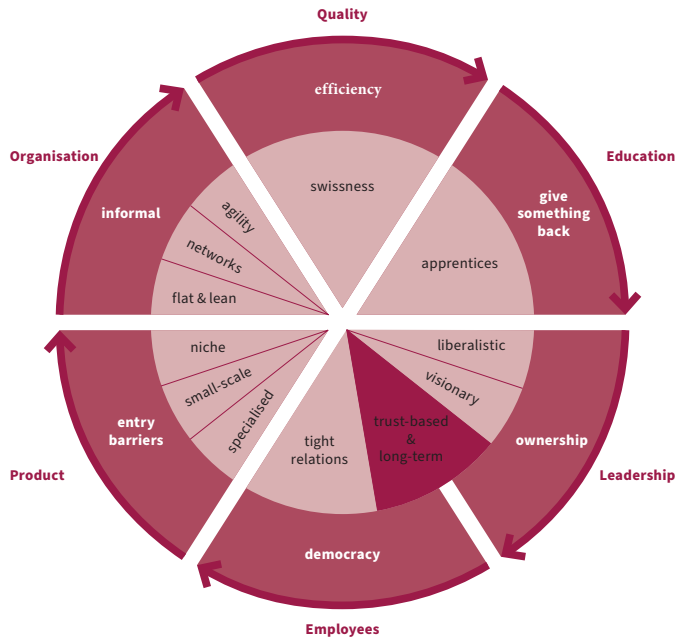


Figure 1. Key drivers to success for SMEs according to owners. Source: Graphic from Looser and Wehrmeyer 2015.

Ownership is the most important key driver. Owners are also managers of their business, leading by vision. They take a long-term perspective into account, as opposed to managers of big corporations, who are short-term, profit- and gain-driven. Financial independence is paramount for them, preferring to do business without any state intervention, regulation or other formalization. This liberalistic approach allows them to consider leadership as a personal ability and enables the assumption of responsibility for the present and future of the company. Owners/managers think in a distinguished manner, in which vision, values and task-orientation are the path to advancement and success.

This vision-driven approach to ownership leads a lot of the owners/managers to transform employees to be owner-managers themselves. Such a transformation, as well as the relationship between employees and owner-managers, is based on egalitarian principles and the democratic tradition. Democracy is the second key driver. Democratic principles help them to create real, trust-based and long-term, tight personal relationships. Still, even if there is not an absolute democratic approach deployed within the companies, a participatory approach with the owner-managers, taking the employees' opinions into account, is always in place.

Small and Medium Enterprises are highly specialized. They offer a niche product and a customised small-scale production, working very closely with their customers. They maintain excellent personal relations and adapt production to their customers' needs and desires. The agility with which companies customise products and services positions them as unique in the market and poses high entry barriers to others, making it almost impossible for competitors to enter the same market. Innovation, a niche product and high entry barriers are the third key driver to their success.

The fourth key driver is the informality with which the organization takes care of its customers' needs. The externalisation of the internal flat and lean structure, the agility in response to customer needs and the importance and drive of their networks are the traits that make the company agile enough to respond to its environment with efficiency.

Efficiency is the fifth key driver and accounts for quality. It also plays an important role in the specialization and niche products, and it is a further crucial factor for success. The quality of the organization reflects upon Swissness and its positively connoted attributes: fairness, precision, reliability, political stability, naturalness and cleanliness. SME owners/managers understand Swissness as some sort of import protection, and as a compass to follow.

To give something back to the society by educating the workforce is the final driver for success. The owner/managers put a system of apprenticeships in place, educating their workforce from the beginning. They establish ethics personally during the process of work socialization, offer adequate education for their company's advancement, and help the company gain qualified employees that understand responsible business practices.

This approach to business development is an important characteristic of Swiss middle-class capitalism. In cases like Wyon AG, cooperative structures take place and the companies become real social enterprises, focusing on human needs instead of profits, gains, or conventional growth. Switzerland is facing severe issues in the implementation of Agenda 2030, despite competitiveness and a dynamic globalized economy. A Wyon AG approach to sustainability could become a major example for a new concept of decent work, and further advance the implementation of the Agenda 2030.

4. Discussion

4.1. *The Difficult Relationship between Decent Work and Economic Growth*

Economic growth is defined as an increase in goods and services produced per capita over a period of time, measured on a national scale by taking the monetary worth of the nation's goods and services over this period into account. Conventionally, economists create statistics by measuring growth as a percentage rate of increase in real Gross Domestic Product (GDP) over a year. The amount of wealth, divided among the population (GDP per capita), acts as a metric for determining a country's economic output per each person living there. As such, it represents the basic statistical information for a country's performance assessment and its international comparison. However, these measurements are crude and do not reflect socio-economic realities outside of the stat-sheets. Arguably, the wealth of a nation is spread among far fewer people, and rich nations with smaller populations tend to have higher per capita GDP.

The United Nations action for people, planet and prosperity is a supranational program that follows a Triple Bottom Line (TBL) as a reference: social, environmental and economic factors should lead to sustainable development for the years to come. Still, the concept of decent work does not explain how the planet will be able to achieve prosperity in terms of growth and productivity, concepts developed in the 20th century that have influenced the realities and the contradictions we live in today.

Goal 8 does indeed "promote sustained inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all" (United Nations 2015b). The belief is that "Sustained and inclusive economic growth is a prerequisite for sustainable development, which can contribute to better livelihoods for people around the world. Economic growth can lead to new and improved employment opportunities and provide greater economic security for all. Moreover, rapid growth, especially among the least developed and other developing countries, can help them reduce the wage gap relative to developed countries, thereby diminishing glaring inequalities between the rich and poor" (United Nations 2015b). Goal 8 has received criticism for relating decent work to economic growth and its measurements, and for neglecting societal realities in different parts of the globe (i.e., in African countries, informal work is standardised). It has also been criticised for neglecting the impact of rapid economic growth related to industrialisation and urbanisation, which have led to extremely severe air pollution and caused increasing negative effects on human health, visibility, and climate change, as the example of China shows (Li et al. 2016).

The debate on economic growth has been ongoing throughout 19th and 20th century. Above all, the idea that the economy can infinitely grow contradicts physical

limits and boundaries, and it is not realistic (Mill 1848; Keynes 1945; Meadows et al. 1972; Jackson 2016; Raworth 2017; Chesney 2017). Major questions in the growth debate include all aspects of human life, from deprivation and poverty to climate change. Questions on how humans can end deprivation and poverty without a growing economy, how humans can end ecological degradation with a growing economy, and how it is possible to create decent work in a fast-growing economy have multiple answers that exceed the frame of this work. However, we note some general considerations that could lead us to respond to the central question of this chapter: How can we challenge the existing concept of decent work to truly fit the needs of people, planet and prosperity?

4.2. Critique on SDG 8

To begin with, economic growth cannot a priori guarantee decent work or prosperity. Even in developed economies, poverty rates are high, and human and gender inequality persists. The example of Switzerland is paramount for these features.

Secondly, the typical measurement of economic growth is the country's GDP. Nominal GDP does not capture the complexity of working reality or of working conditions. It does not reflect differences in the cost of living or the inflation rates between countries or regions. It gives no information about the production of assets, the depletion of human and environmental resources, the violations of labour rights—some of these are also prevalent across the Globe (i.e., the gender pay gap, sexual harassment, the dismissal of pregnant women)—or the impact of precarious working conditions on households and human lives (Fudge and Owens 2006). Moreover, it does not reflect on the informal economy, which forms a significant portion of the economy, ranging from less than 10% to over 40% of the GDP (IMF 2019) even in European countries. Additionally, unpaid work in general, be it volunteering, care or household maintenance, is important labour for the functioning of the economy (Sotiropoulou 2014; Wry 2015). However, even if people active in the informal sector enter the formal sector and create tangible results in the GDP, the informal sector, such as unpaid domestic work, care labour or volunteering, would still be excluded from measurements and would not be considered as work generating revenues or even as productive labour (Stiglitz et al. 2018; Rai et al. 2019).

Apart from a few countries that calculate unpaid work within a Satellite Household Account to the GDP (OECD 2018; BfS 2017), SDG 8 does not address issues of gender equality, time poverty or depletion of human resources and quality of life related to economic growth; issues that create requirements in the provisions of public

service, infrastructure, and social protection policies. A possible integration of the Satellite Account into the GDP measurement would lead the economy towards a more egalitarian approach in the 21st century, as well as the abolition of gender-segregated labour markets that depend heavily on unpaid work. SDG 8 further directly contradicts the SDG 5, which strives to address human equality, and recognizes and values unpaid care and domestic work (Agenjo-Calderón and Gálvez-Muñoz 2019; Wry 2015; Sotiropoulou 2014; Antonopoulos 2009; Branisa et al. 2013; Rai et al. 2019; BfS 2017).

Third, the annual growth of 7% in less developed countries, as promoted by Goal 8, would exceed earth's biocapacity by 50%, and accelerate global warming. Global production and consumption could also rise above current limits. Scholars believe that Goal 8 neglects the fact that UN Agenda 21 proposes to increase economic growth sustainably: "economic growth should not come at the expense of environmental degradation". Furthermore, the main idea is that governments should seek to change institutional structures "in order to enable more systematic consideration of the environment when economic decisions are made" (Briant-Carant 2017). In addition, Goal 8 fails to provide time-bound measurements and measurable targets, or account for the lack of data and other information that could be misleading in the discussion on sustainability. This is because the fundamental contradiction between resource limits and economic growth remains. Furthermore, Goal 8 is also in opposition to Goal 13, which demands urgent action to combat climate change and decarbonise the economy at breakneck speed, six times faster than any other effort in history (Hickel 2015).

Therefore, if humanity wants to combat climate change, it should abandon the blind believe in economic growth and discuss the effects of this on the planet and people. It is also important to establish a balance between developed and underdeveloped economies (Hickel 2015; UNFCCC 2015; Briant-Carant 2017; Rai et al. 2019), and policies that target economic development related to social cohesion and environmental stability (Katsoulakos and Katsoulacos 2007). A long-term perspective beyond GDP should be essential.

Goal 8 (8.2) moreover, aspires to "achieve higher levels of economic productivity through diversification, technological upgrades and innovation, including through a focus on high-value added and labour-intensive sectors" (United Nations 2015b). This implies that technological upgrading and innovation would result in social upgrading. In reality, labour-intensive industries (i.e., agriculture, mining, hospitality or food services) use social markers like gender, ethnicity, class or race to shape labour relations and do not necessarily translate gains into higher wages or the advancement

of labour rights, such as freedom of association and collective bargaining (Ruwanpura 2016; Barrientos et al. 2012). In this sense, technological upgrades do not automatically lead to either economic or social upgrades, or to human and gender equality, or to full and productive employment, decent work and equal pay for work of equal value for all women and men by 2030, as SDG 8.5 urges member states to achieve.

By relating economic growth and productivity to human labour for wages and benefits, Goal 8 neglects the role of labour in life above the need for a survival wage. The role of labour beyond existential needs is to boost creativity and innovation, and ensure and facilitate movement between jobs (World Bank 2019). Creativity and innovation are also important in the effective decoupling of all existing elements in order to create new economic models that could respect human life and nature much more than existing ones. According to the World Bank, as of today, in developing economies, 8/10 people receive no social assistance and 6/10 work without insurance. In developed economies, the payroll-based insurance model is challenged by non-standard contract working arrangements. The World Bank (2019) proposed rewriting the social contract and investing in human capital (public health and education), ensuring a livelihood with a societal minimum that provides support independently of employment. “We need new ways to invest in people and to protect them, regardless of their employment status”, and we need to rethink the social contract and adjust it to “the changing nature of work” (World Bank 2019, p. VIII).

In parallel with its emphasis on GDP per capita growth, SDG 8 (8.10) aims to “encourage and expand access to banking, insurance and financial services for all” (United Nations 2015a). Job creation should be the critical element of eradicating poverty, forced labour, slavery and human trafficking. However, Goal 8 does not reflect on the damaging effects that the lending practices of major financial institutions can have on poor people. Lending is a way to proliferate inequality and poverty, and to advance human dependencies. The risk of over-indebtedness in under-resourced segments of society is high. By promoting access to financial services, formalisation and growth of micro-entrepreneurialism as a route out of poverty (target 8.3), SDG 8 propagates the continuous financialisation of the economy in a way that obscures a possible underlying process of exploitation in the informal sectors, and the unequal division of labour. Despite the euphoria about microfinance as a development-oriented policy and as a means of lifting people out of poverty (Briant-Carant 2017), critical voices arose against microcredits and their inefficiency in formalising informal micro-, small- and medium-sized enterprises and creating higher-income possibilities. Excessive interest rates charged to borrowers, aggressive lending policies, and the coercive or even violent methods of recovery applied

by some microfinance institutions and local field officers, have led borrowers to over-indebtedness and played a role in suicides. Additionally, the lack of information and education given to borrowers sank them into a vicious cycle of debt. In many cases, borrowers used microcredits from one lender to meet the interest obligations of another lender, or became informal lenders for the same reason, complicating the relationship between formal and informal lenders (Arp 2018; Arp et al. 2017). However, even if the result of microcredits was to lift people out of poverty and, along with micro-entrepreneurship, it could become a fully-fledged solution, “it’s not enough to just assume that because a marginalised group has made advances in society, they aren’t still marginalised in deeper, more fundamental ways” (Wry 2015).

Financial capital as such has no interest in supporting livelihoods, ensuring education and jobs, creating equal opportunities, or recognizing any value in social reproduction, culture and diversity. It has no interest in democratic processes or in taking action for people, planet and prosperity, as the Agenda 2030 for sustainable development suggests. Financial capital seeks only to ensure that households become consumers of its products (Himmelweit 2017).

Finally, Goal 8 (8.a) proposes the installation of an “Aid for Trade” procedure and provision of technical assistance. Nations that receive aid should lift trade restrictions and make structural adjustments within their countries. “Aid for Trade”, as a policy, is similar to the Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) of the IMF and the World Bank that, until now, created further inequality by deregulating the labour market at the expense of women and vulnerable people and leading countries to severe austerity, with devastating results for public health and education (Sotiropoulou 2014).

A last critical point regarding all SDGs is the quality of data and measurability of advancement. The ongoing developments in the internet economy (i.e., growing centralisation, monopolisation and consolidation, threat to net neutrality, higher volumes of bot traffic or biases within the data) challenge the statistics and eventually lead to a growth in unreliable information (MacFeely 2019; Internet Society 2020).

The SDGs call on humanity to achieve harmony with nature, protect the planet from degradation, and take urgent action on tackling climate change (Goal 6, 12, 13, 14, and 15). They create tensions by calling to drive economic growth and assuming that growth-as-usual and trade-offs, in favour of growth over wellbeing and ecological viability, are feasible (Gupta and Vegelin 2016). In this context, Goal 8 contradicts several other Goals and lacks an explanation of how to end poverty (Goal 1), because its understanding of decent work remains attached to the mainstream economic paradigm and its conventional measurements.

4.3. Lessons for a New Concept of Decent Work

Twentieth-century mainstream economic thinking has influenced the United Nation's concept of decent work by relating it to economic growth. As argued, this concept has received criticism for contradicting other SDGs and focusing on GDP growth. In fact, the failure of the growth theory lies in the absence of understanding that humans are social beings that evaluate wellbeing based on what they see around them (Rogoff 2012). In the political and corporate debate that began in the early 1990s, corporate responsibility issues have gained prominence, driven by the realisation that development based solely on economic growth paradigms is not sustainable (Katsoulakos and Katsoulacos 2007). People do not rely on absolute numbers or crude measurements but on experience, life realities, education, ethics and other psychological factors.

For this reason, the 21st century requires a new concept of decent work that will be independent of the idea of economic growth; a new path for people, planet, and prosperity that relies on humans, their needs and their rights; in other words, a human-centred approach. Humans are able to create societies that prosper; therefore, businesses should integrate human values into their core interests. Fundamental human rights have already been established as indispensable norms for international peace and security in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. They were acknowledged as such by the signatory states (UNDHR 1948). For this reason, our societies need a new economic model, in which markets and the economy can work optimally. This can only happen if businesses are embedded within social rules, customs and institutions, and grounded in the theory of business in the society. Under this model, companies must learn to do things differently and move towards a human-centred perspective. Morality, art, spirituality and creativity are universal abilities and inherent to human DNA (Harari 2018). For this reason, companies should learn to have an active role in human rights protection, support freedom and equality, and become powerful forces in the discourse on the international human rights regimes (Ruggie 2008). If the central question of the twentieth century was "how much money is in it for me?" the 21st century asks, in Paul Wyser's words, "how much money do you need to be happy?" The shift in the mindset is clear: not money for the few in business, but happiness for each individual, is the central point of this approach.

In other words, the 21st century business narrative should include the alignment of business ethics with human rights and values. The human rights concepts (freedom, dignity, equality, justice and fairness) can serve as a compass to define what is right,

just and fair for the people related to business, community and the environment (Stavridou and Vangchuay 2017; Raworth 2017).

5. Conclusions

Using the example of Wyon AG, we found that a new approach to decent work should take on a human-centred perspective. Wyon AG developed its economic activities with people, for people, integrating a different set of values in business and generating a positive impact on society and the environment. In opposition to other companies, which use CSR programs as remedies to their social and environmental impact, Wyon AG generates benefits at multiple levels by investing in human creativity and innovation, accepting differences as natural, and externalising intrinsic values. This path aims to serve and innovate society and the environment. There is no striving for uninterrupted growth, but for the creation of wealth based on ethical principles, human acceptance and understanding. Even the core message, “we should accept people as they are—others don’t even exist”, is deeply humanistic and contradicts the conventional management belief that there are perfect candidates for every job.

Wyon’s business approach has an intrinsic ethical code, which benefits people, society and the environment and contributes to a much more important consideration: a vision of human life in dignity, equality and peace. It is a model for people, planet and prosperity. The approach of other ethical SMEs in Switzerland is similar. They balance the economic part of their activities with social cohesion and environmental stability, having this vision as a priority. Clearly, this approach is easier to apply in a small and medium enterprise that operates locally, sets long-term targets and has a democratic approach, than in a Multinational Corporation that operates remotely and has a short-term vision, with hierarchical structures and obligations to external shareholders.

The economy of the 21st century however, requires a new direction. The financial addiction to GDP growth is the result of the idea that humans are rational individual creatures living in a self-contained market and aiming for the maximisation of gains and profit for themselves. Such a belief accelerated the depletion of human and environmental resources, and even if statistics show a better picture for people lifted out of poverty, the fact remains that, with this approach, even in mature economies, poverty, unemployment, inequality and hunger persist at high rates. The ongoing discussion on development inherent to GDP growth and measured with crude measurements does not satisfy human needs, mainly because it follows a short-term pattern for a long-term approach. Global economic policies should set long-term

goals, and nominal GDP is a short-term indicator that does not even reflect working realities. In order to tackle issues like poverty, inequality, climate change, or resource depletion, people need to effectively understand correlations, and the socioeconomic reasons behind them. Therefore, it is crucial to find a more human pace at which to prosper, and new forms for business and the economy.

As the SDG is a global path to follow for people, planet and prosperity, this approach should be redesigned, and focused on social and environmental needs. The concept of decent work should especially be decoupled from GDP growth and linked to human rights and values. Flat cooperative structures, democratic relations, dignity, equality, fair income, a safe working place, and, finally, a circular economy form a path that effectively offers a social license to operate in the community and create resilience. Such an approach would take the pressure of growth out of development and help societies to flourish in many different ways. Sustainability and responsibility need a long-term approach, and decent work should be developed on common ethical grounds that are intrinsic to all human actions and lived in everyday life.

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