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**Social franchise chains operating in African countries:
Are their social goals aligned with the 2030 United Nations
Sustainable Development Goals?**

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Social franchise chains operating in African countries: Are their social goals aligned with the 2030 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals?

Abstract

Purpose - Social franchise chains have social goals rather than – or in addition to – commercial or profit-making goals. But are these social goals, disclosed by social franchisors, aligned with the SDGs and, if so, which ones?

Design/methodology/approach - We examine the disclosure of SDG-related information on websites of 69 social franchise chains operating in Africa.

Findings - Our main findings show that social goals disclosed by social franchisors are aligned with certain SDGs that are general in nature and not just sector-dependent, except in the case of education.

Originality - Our paper adds to the limited literature on SDGs and, more specifically, on the role of the private sector, in particular social franchisors, in targeting and achieving SDGs.

Practical implications - Our paper contributes to the practice by providing examples of the types and varieties of social goals social franchisors can pursue. Moreover, entrepreneurs might be encouraged to launch their franchise concept as franchisors who contribute to SDGs at an international, national, or regional level or to join franchise chains as franchisees who contribute to SDGs at the local level.

Social implications - Our findings show the potential for social franchise chains in developing countries to target and contribute to achieving SDGs.

Keywords: Social franchising, Sustainable Development Goals, Developing countries, Africa, Legitimacy

1. Introduction

In the context of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the United Nations has listed 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that address inequality (Freistein and Mahler, 2016). Replacing the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) that covered the 2000-2015 period, the SDGs are considered a “blueprint to achieve a better and more sustainable future for [everyone]. They address the global challenges [societies] face, including those related to poverty, inequality, climate change, environmental degradation, peace and justice. [...] In order to leave no one behind, it is important that [societies] achieve them all by 2030.” [1]

Africa, in particular, had made significant progress over the period 2000-2015, in link with the MDG, “including enrolling more children in primary school, particularly girls, increasing the representation of women in national parliaments, and reducing child and maternal deaths and the proportion of people infected with HIV.” African countries are now “integrating the SDGs into their national visions and plans.” [2] Nevertheless, the actions of the African governments are not enough. Cheru (2016, p. 1277) stated that “much more work remains to be done to accelerate economic growth and reduce human deprivation in Africa in the coming 15 years. [...] This will require [...] the involvement of a wide spectrum of actors from the private sector, civil society, philanthropies and governments.” This is in line with the broader discourse of Ambassador Joon, President of ECOSOC – UN, who emphasized: “Under this backdrop, the role of the private sector, particularly small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), is integral if the international community is to achieve the SDGs by their target date” (Joon, 2018, p. 6).

Despite these calls for actions from the private sector and SMEs in particular, “extant international business research hardly covers the private sector’s role in achieving international policy goals” (van Zanten and van Tulder, 2018, p. 208). In this research, we focus on a specific type of SME, social franchise chains. Indeed, recent academic papers (e.g., Aliouche and

Schlenrich, 2015; Asemota and Chahine, 2017; Crawford-Spencer, 2015; Crawford-Spencer and Cantatore, 2016; Kistruck *et al.*, 2011; Naatu and Alon, 2019; Naatu *et al.*, 2020; Perrigot, 2018, forthcoming), as well as trade papers, have addressed the emergence, development, and operations of social franchise chains, particularly in African countries (Naatu and Alon, 2019; Naatu *et al.*, 2020; Perrigot, 2018, forthcoming).

These social franchise chains have social goals rather than – or in addition to – commercial or profit-making goals (Du Toit, 2014; Smith, 2002). Social franchise chains refer to the concept of entrepreneurship for sustainable development, recently reviewed by Schaltegger *et al.* (2018) and Johnson and Schaltegger (2020). Social franchise chains rely on a collaboration, or a partnership, between the franchisor and the franchisees. This franchisor/franchisee partnership is an example of “partnerships for the goals” referred to in 17th SDG. Schaltegger *et al.* (2018, p. 132) explain that “the first 16 SDGs provide a globally agreed upon framework as to *what* the great transition towards sustainability should achieve. Moreover, the 17th SDG also indicates *how* to bring about this transition: through ‘partnerships for the goals’. The global agenda for transforming the world thus highlights the role of collaboration for sustainability.” It must be nevertheless noted that there are cases where social franchise chains are not aware that their social goals are in line with those of the UN.

Our aim in this study is to explore if and how social franchisors in Africa communicate about their activities related to certain SDGs. It is important to specify that our aim is not to explore the performance of social franchisors in Africa in achieving the SDGs, but only their SDG-related communication. More specifically, the question we investigate in this paper is the following: “Are the social goals disclosed by African social franchisors aligned with the SDGs and, if so, which ones?” Employing legitimacy theory as our theoretical background, we explore these questions by examining the disclosure of SDG-related information on 69 African social

franchisor websites. These franchisors operate their chains in the fields of agriculture, clean water and sanitation, education, energy, and healthcare sectors in various countries in Africa.

While, in terms of research, there is a growing stream of literature dealing with social franchising (e.g., Naatu and Alon, 2019; Naatu *et al.*, 2020; Perrigot, 2018, forthcoming), as far as we know, there are no papers published on the subject of SDGs in conjunction with social franchise chains. However, franchising provides a specific and relevant context with which to examine SDGs and disclosures of SDGs. First, in terms of SDGs, social franchising is an option for replicating and scaling impact and social impact (Asemota and Chahine, 2017) and, thus, for replicating and scaling social impact in terms of SDG achievement. Second, the actions undertaken to achieve SDGs take place on two levels, the chain and the stores. The impact is then higher than that of a traditional enterprise that is not organized as a chain. Third, the issue of franchisor/franchisee independence is a challenge, as both have to collaborate and work toward the aim of achieving the SDGs in order to succeed. On the other hand, in terms of disclosures of SDGs, brand image is particularly important in franchising and, by extension, in social franchising. Social franchisor communication on SDG-related information can help franchisors build and reinforce a strong brand image, as well as attract stakeholders to develop their chains (e.g., donors, partners, and franchisee candidates).

Our main findings confirm that almost all (94.20%) social franchise chains operating in Africa disclose information about at least one SDG on their websites. According to their communication, social franchisors in Africa aspire to contribute to the achievement of certain SDGs. We observed that the SDGs the majority of franchisors communicate about are quite general in nature and not just sector-dependent, except in the case of education. The SDGs include reduced inequalities, partnerships for the goals, sustainable cities and communities, good health and well-being, decent work and economic growth, poverty reduction, industry, innovation and infrastructure, quality education, and gender equality.

Our paper contributes to both the literature on franchising and the literature on SDGs. On the one hand, regarding the social franchising stream, based on franchisor disclosure on their websites, we emphasize that franchisor social goals are aligned with certain SDGs. Second, regarding the stream of literature on franchising in developing countries, franchising in Africa has not caught the attention of many researchers so far, despite its potential for development. We thus provide evidence for the development of franchise operations in the African continent. Third, regarding the stream on Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) in franchising, this paper builds on studies addressing Corporate Social Disclosure (CSD) in particular. On the other hand, our research also contributes to the limited literature stream on SDGs and, more specifically, the role of the private sector, in particular SMEs, in the achievement of SDGs.

Our paper also contributes to the practice by showing the wide application of social franchising in Africa and developing countries. It also provides examples of the types and varieties of social goals social franchisors can pursue. The findings show the potential for such franchise chains to target and achieve SDGs. Thus, entrepreneurs might be encouraged to launch their franchise concept as franchisors who target and contribute to SDGs at an international, national, or regional level or to join franchise chains as franchisees who target and contribute to SDGs at the local level.

Our paper is organized as follows. In Section 2, we review the literature on franchising in Africa, social franchising and the SDGs. Section 3 introduces our theoretical background. Section 4 described the methodology. In Sections 5 and 6, we, respectively, present and discuss the findings of our research. Section 7 concludes.

2. Literature review

2.1. Development of African economies and franchising

By 2050, according to the United Nations, the world's population will reach 9.7 billion people and more than half of this growth is expected to occur in Africa. [3] The population of sub-Saharan African countries is expected to grow from just over 600 million in 2000 to almost 3.4 billion in 2050. For example, Ethiopia, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Tanzania will be among the twelve most populous countries in 2050. [4] Nigeria's population will reach 413 million in 2050, making it the third most populous country in the world after India and China. [4] This population growth in Africa, especially in sub-Saharan African countries, will lead to an increased demand for space and natural resources, particularly drinking water and food, further straining the natural resources that are already insufficient (Dressler and Bucher, 2018). This growth requires finding solutions to ensure equal living standards and preserve the environment.

In this context, and in the quest for solutions to these issues, which are linked to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development established by the United Nations and its 17 SDGs, franchising has a key role to play in Africa. Franchising has gained popularity as a way to boost the African economies (Tyre et al., 2018). For instance, in the fast food sector, international franchisors (e.g., Domino's Pizza, Papa John's Pizza) and domestic ones (e.g., Chicken Republic, Nando's) are seizing investment opportunities in this growing market (Ige, 2013; Tyre *et al.*, 2018). However, with the exception of a few studies conducted on franchising in South Africa (e.g., Du Toit, 2003; van Wyk and De Jager, 2009), the African continent has not caught the attention of many franchising researchers, despite the development of local and foreign franchise chains in many African countries (Perrigot, 2017). Most of the limited literature on franchising in African countries, excluding South Africa, has concerned the healthcare sector. Prata *et al.* (2005), relying on data from The World Bank's Health Nutrition and Population Poverty Thematic Reports on 22 African countries, concluded that "franchising has the greatest potential for integration into large-scale programmes in Africa to address

critical illnesses of public health importance” (p. 274). Perrigot (2018) examined the franchise business model of one chain of clinics, *CFW clinics*, in Kenya. She concluded that social franchising seems to work no differently from franchising in more traditional sectors, at least in terms of know-how management, assistance, brand name, and franchisor/franchisee and franchisee/franchisee relationships. Naatu *et al.* (2020) showed, through a case study conducted on an anonymous micro-franchising chain in the healthcare sector in Rwanda, the importance of relying on a public-private partnership or having a governmental endorsement to succeed. Other papers included in this limited literature on franchising in African countries have dealt with dairy products, and more specifically the case of *Fan Milk*, which sells ice cream and yogurt in western African countries through micro-franchised street vendors in addition to supermarkets (Christensen *et al.*, 2010; Gbetchi and Perrigot, 2019), as well as drinking water with the case of the *Jibu* franchise system in eastern African countries (Perrigot, forthcoming).

2.2. Social franchising

Most franchise chains in these sectors, i.e., health, food, and drinking water, are referred to as social franchise chains. [5] Social franchising is defined as “the application of commercial franchising methods and concepts to achieve socially beneficial ends” (Temple, 2011, p. 3). Put differently, “social franchises are a new type of hybrid organisations and social enterprises that adopts franchising strategy to provide social goods and services in underserved areas” (Naatu *et al.*, 2020, p. 1). Social franchise chains also rely on the extent and richness of social relationships and communication existing in these chains, leading to a feeling of belonging to a family for their members (Perrigot, forthcoming). As such, social franchise chains are hybrid forms of scaling up social impact (Bretos *et al.*, 2020).

Social franchising, as a recent phenomenon, has been examined from broader perspectives, such as social entrepreneurship (Aliouche, 2015), social enterprises (Crawford-Spencer, 2015; Du

Toit, 2014), for profit and not for profit organizations (Crawford-Spencer and Cantatore, 2016). Social franchising can also be seen in terms of sustainable entrepreneurship, i.e., “a promising approach aiming to solve complex social, environmental, and economic problems with innovative solutions” (Schaltegger *et al.*, 2018). Lanchimba *et al.* (forthcoming), in link with sustainable entrepreneurship and through their study using panel data from 49 countries for the period 2006-2015, found that (commercial) franchising has a positive impact on economic, social, institutional and infrastructural development. Social franchising, as well, is part of sustainable entrepreneurship. For instance, social franchise chains in the energy sector have a social impact, for instance, in terms of entrepreneurial and employment opportunities, environment and the reduction of the use of kerosene, and the offer of new and affordable solar lights.

Social franchising has been shown to be a relevant and powerful means for providing access to quality healthcare services, drinking water, solar energy, or education at affordable prices to many people in developing countries (Perrigot, 2018). Moreover, social franchising provides entrepreneurial opportunities to micro-franchisees. Indeed, social franchisors often use micro-franchising, i.e., “a business model adaptation that helps low-income individuals overcome non credit-related barriers to entry in obtaining employment” (Christensen *et al.*, 2010, p. 595). More specifically, micro-franchising “provides, via sale, a vetted and replicable turnkey business to buyers [i.e., micro-franchisees] in subsistence markets who commit to follow the model” (Christensen *et al.*, 2010, p. 595).

Social franchisors have then two types of social goals, vis-à-vis both the customers (access to basic products and/or services) as well as the micro-franchisees (access to entrepreneurial opportunities), as summarized in Chart 1. Thus, customers and micro-franchisees are usually both beneficiaries of the social franchise system.

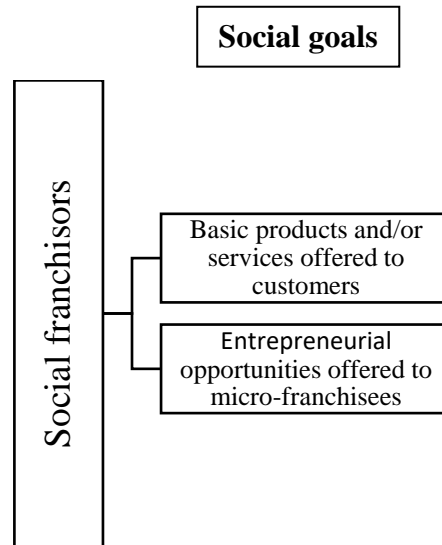


Chart 1: Social franchisors and their social goals

Naatu and Alon (2019), based on a bibliometric and theoretical review of social franchising, reported that these are mainly resource scarcity, agency, stewardship, and social network theories. Tracey and Jarvis (2007) and Naatu and Alon (2019) have called for more diversity of theories to explain the use of social franchising. These authors suggest that the existing literature can be split into three areas: motivations for social franchising (e.g., Kistruck *et al.*, 2011), operations of social franchise chains (e.g., Asemota and Chahine, 2017), and impact of social franchising (e.g., Lönnroth *et al.*, 2007).

2.3. Social franchising and SDGs

What we explore in this paper is the social goals of these social franchisors through the lens of the SDGs, which, while they have been the focus of governments and organizations in the last few years, have been largely ignored in the literature on small business management. In September 2015, in their 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the United Nations and its Member States set up a plan of action for people, the planet, and prosperity over the next 15 years. This agenda included 17 SDGs built on the United Nations' Millennium Development

Goals. These SDGs were directed toward pinpointing and carrying out essential actions at the global level (Joon, 2018). They included areas such as poverty reduction, access to education, healthcare, energy, and climate change. As the 17 SDGs are interconnected, they need to be addressed quickly and together (Sachs *et al.*, 2019; Wang *et al.*, 2019).

The United Nations has asserted that national governments and international organizations are not able to achieve these SDGs alone. They need the contributions of various stakeholders: the private sector, international institutions, academia, NGOs, among others (Joon, 2018). The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development explicitly recognizes the role of the private sector in implementing its goals, for instance SDG 8 – Decent work and economic growth; SDG 9 – Industry, innovation, and infrastructure; and SDG 17 – Partnerships for the goals. But even to achieve the other SDGs, the role of the private sector is essential. It is important to note that “different sectors and different actors have specific roles and potential contributions that need to be brought together in order to transform society as a whole. [...] Businesses provide not only products and services but can also create jobs, taxes, and knowledge” (Schaltegger *et al.*, 2018). In particular, SMEs in developing countries can play an important role. There have long been calls for “aligning the small business community alongside the United Nations on [their] work toward sustainable development” (Joon, 2018, p. 6).

The small business community includes many types of enterprises, among which are both sides of social franchising, that is, franchisee enterprises and franchisor enterprises. Franchisee enterprises are often small businesses run by franchisees or micro-franchisees who are independent entrepreneurs running their businesses under a certain brand and benefiting from the franchisor brand, know-how, and assistance. These local SMEs can be operated by franchisees or micro-franchisees working alone, in some cases, and having employees in others. The franchisor enterprises, contrary to what one might imagine, are often SMEs as well.

Usually, the franchisor employs a few staff members at the franchise chain headquarters, mainly in the development, management, and marketing departments.

3. Theoretical background

Legitimacy theory is the most widely used framework for explaining enterprise disclosures about their environmental and social behaviors and, more broadly, their CSR practices (Gray *et al.*, 1995; Hooghiemstra, 2000). Legitimacy theory has been applied when writing about enterprises in various industries, including mining, oil, mineral extraction, forestry, gas, chemicals, metals, and autos, engineering and construction, service, and food and retail (Guthrie and Parker, 1989; Adams *et al.*, 1998; Patten, 1991, 1992; Deegan *et al.*, 2002; O'Donovan, 2002). Legitimacy is defined as “a generalised perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions” (Suchman, 1995, p. 574).

A key concept of legitimacy theory is the existence of a social contract between an enterprise and the society in which it operates (Deegan, 2000; Deegan, 2002; Mathews, 1993; Patten, 1991, 1992). This social contract is used to represent the expectations society has about how an enterprise should conduct its operations (Deegan, 2000; Mathews, 1993). Enterprise survival is thus dependent on the extent that the enterprise operates “within the bounds and norms of [the] society” (Brown and Deegan, 1998, p. 22). It corresponds to the society's expectations (Deegan *et al.*, 2002) and thus benefits from the support of the society (Deegan, 2014). Put differently, the survival of an enterprise can be threatened if the society perceives that it has breached its social contract (Deegan, 2002). In more detail, according to Shocker and Sethi (1973, p. 97), “any social institution – and business is no exception – operates in society via a social contract, expressed or implied, whereby its survival and growth are based on: (1) the delivery of some

socially desirable ends to society in general; and (2) the distribution of economic, social or political benefits to groups from which it derives its power.”

CSD entails providing information, in reports and/or on corporate websites, legitimizing enterprises’ behaviors by influencing their various stakeholders’ and the society’s perceptions of these enterprises (Neu *et al.*, 1998). These enterprises expect to be considered “good corporate citizen[s]” and have their actions justify their continued existence (Campopiano and De Massis, 2015). This is particularly true for social franchisors operating in Africa when disclosing information on SDGs. Indeed, these franchisors expect to be considered “good corporate citizen[s]” when they offer products and/or services such as water, solar lamps, education, and health care of high quality at affordable prices to local customers and provide franchising and employment opportunities to local communities. The various stakeholders and the society these franchisors interact with include local governments, the partnered NGOs, donors and potential donors, franchisees and potential franchisees, employees and potential employees, and customers and potential customers.

In this paper, as mentioned in the introduction, we focus on social franchisors’ CSD on SDG-related activities. This has not been explored in the literature on small business management despite the call from the UN. We intend to fill this gap by examining the question: “Are social goals, disclosed by African social franchisors, aligned with the SDGs?” And if it is the case, “with which SDGs in particular social goals disclosed by African social franchisors are aligned?”

4. Methodology

We needed first to build our sample of social franchise chains in Africa. From such a perspective, we proceeded with a systematic search process involving Bing, Google, and

Google Scholar, and a series of combined keywords, such as “social franchis*”,¹ “social chain,” “social network,” “education and franchis*,” “energy and franchis*,” “health and franchis*,” always adding the word “Africa*.”² Then, we replaced “Africa*” with the names of the main African countries. We carried out these searches with keywords in English first and then repeated this search process in French. We needed to be certain the chains found in the search engines’ results were really franchise chains. To do so, we looked for content on each of the chains’ websites confirming that it was really a franchise chain in the social sector. For instance, we found statements such as “[Brand name] is [Country]’s first registered social franchise”; “How does social franchising work at [Brand name]?”; “[Brand name] is a Social Franchise run by [Organization name] through the support of [other organization name] in partnership with [other organization name]”; and “[Brand name] are social franchises that deliver the [Brand] model but are run and funded independently.”

Our sample included 69 social franchise chains operating in various African countries and various sectors, as described in Table 1. Though figures were not available for all chains, we noticed that these 69 franchise chains were varied in terms of experience (number of years since the start of franchising), size (number of franchised units), and organizational form (e.g., franchising only, franchising and company ownership, franchising and micro-franchising).

<< Insert Table 1 here >>

We used a content analysis technique to assess SDG-related communication of social franchisors on their websites, as other researchers did in a franchise context (e.g., Perrigot *et al.*, 2015, Le Bot *et al.*, 2022) and in other contexts (e.g., Fonseca and Carvalho, 2019; Gerged and Almontaser, 2021). On each of the 69 franchise chain websites, we searched for information

¹ * means that the search covered franchising, franchise, franchisor, and franchisee.

² * means that the search covered Africa and African.

addressing the SDGs. We included explicit information with exact references to the SDGs, as well as implicit information, for instance, with expressions such as “ability to earn a living,” “increase monthly income,” or “empowers micro-entrepreneurs to earn an income” in reference to SDG 1 – No poverty. Our first findings showed that 65 social franchise chains operating in Africa disclosed information about at least one SDG on their websites.

For each of these 65 franchise chains disclosing information about at least one SDG, relying on a codebook displaying and explaining the 17 SDGs, we copied and pasted all the information they reported concerning SDGs (e.g., a paragraph, a sentence, a part of a sentence, or several) in an Excel file. In order to be rigorous in the data collection, and to minimize subjectivity in the interpretation of SDGs-related information, we reported all steps we followed in a Word document (e.g., including all the keywords used) and were both involved in the data collection and categorization. We gathered a corpus of qualitative data with information referring to one or several of the 17 SDGs.

5. Findings

5.1. SDG information disclosure (presence or not) on social franchisor websites

According to Table 2, around three quarters of the franchisors disclosed information about reduced inequalities (79.71%), partnerships for the goals (79.71%), and sustainable cities and communities (71.01%). More than half of the franchisors provided information about good health and well-being (69.57%), decent work and economic growth (69.57%), poverty eradication (56.52%), and industry, innovation, and infrastructure (56.52%). About half of the franchisors disclosed information on quality education (49.28%) and gender equality (44.93%). The SDGs reported on by the majority of franchisors were quite general in nature and not sector-dependent, except in the case of education.

Moreover, we observed that social franchisors disclosed information on up to 13 SDGs. About 10% of the franchisors disclosed information on four SDGs (8.70%), six SDGs (8.70%), seven SDGs (11.59%), nine SDGs (10.14%), ten SDGs (11.59%), or eleven SDGs (8.70%) and about 20% of the franchisors disclosed information on about eight SDGs (17.39%). To sum up, there was no single trend in terms of communicating about SDGs among chains, but, globally, many of the social franchisors conveyed their interest in certain SDGs, underlining the alignment between franchisors' social goals and SDGs.

<< Insert Table 2 here >>

5.2. SDG information disclosure (examples of content) on social franchisor websites

Reduced inequalities and partnerships for the goals

A total of 79.71% of the chains disclosed information about SDG 10 – Reduced inequalities and SDG 17 – Partnerships for the goals on their websites.

Regarding reduced inequalities, they pointed out that they addressed the “bottom of the pyramid,” for example, the underserved, vulnerable, and marginalized communities. For instance, Chain #31 disclosed the following: “[Brand] has developed an innovative distribution network that brings life-changing products to the people who need them most, that is to say to the last-mile delivery low-income communities.” Chain #5 mentioned, “In order to expand access to vision care and eyeglasses for the BoP customer, [Brand] brings vision campaigns to rural and urban communities that have limited access to eye care services.”

Regarding inequality and location, chains often specified that they served people in remote and rural areas in addition to urban, peri-urban, sub-urban areas, and townships. For instance, we found the following comments: “Our [Brand] clinics promote the well-being of the undeserved by providing access to quality reproductive healthcare for all regardless of location or ability to

pay” [#20]; “[Group name] initiated a mobile outreach service strategy through its [Brand] social franchise clinical network to expand access to FP [Family Planning] in [Country]’s under-served rural areas” [#16]; “800 solar lamps were generously donated and distributed by [partnered organization name] as part of their project to help marginalised rural communities like the [nationality]” [#42] or “Drawing on the principles of successful franchising around the world, we are building a franchise network of agri-dealers located in rural, undeserved areas of [Country]” [#63].

There was also reference to inequality and refugees or inequality and people with disabilities. A few chains in the energy sector specifically targeted refugees as potential customers, Chain #33 specified, “In [year], we had our first opportunity to partner with Red Cross International to implement solar kiosks in one of the refugee camps in [Country].” A few chains focused on people with disabilities as potential micro-franchisees. For instance, Chain #33 mentioned that they empower “mostly women and people with disabilities using a micro franchise business model.”

Regarding partnerships for the goals, those partnering with social franchisors were of varying types: governments, NGOs, aid agencies, academic institutions, private enterprises, insurance enterprises, influencers, and donors. For instance, we found the following comments: “[Brand] works with a strong network of NGOs and governments” [#2] or “Collaboration – connecting communities, NGOs, cooperates, students, public bodies and individuals to create the best possible solutions” [#32].

These partnerships were concerned with

- innovations and the launch of new products and/or services (e.g., “This success was achieved in collaboration with a number of partners including mobile

network operators, banks, implementing partners, community leaders and influencers” [#9]);

- funding of projects (e.g., “More than 95 percent of our funding comes from governments, bilateral and multilateral international organizations, and foundations” [#58] and “[Brand] is reliant on funding (until we reach 50 Clinics in the Network) from donors [...] in order to expand the Network” [#17]);
- product distribution (e.g., “[Brand] partners with non-governmental organizations, governments, social enterprises and private businesses to distribute eyeglasses using their existing distribution channels. By leveraging existing distribution channels, as seen in our partnerships [...] we are able to greatly expand our reach into countries and areas of countries where we do not have an on-the-ground presence. This increases the distribution of eyewear to the BoP consumer while keeping costs low” [#5]).

Partnerships for the goals can be local, national, and international, as highlighted on Chain #9’s website: “Our programs have been successful as a result of active collaboration and the strengthening of partnerships with a number of public and private sector organisations, both local and international.”

Sustainable cities and communities

A total of 71.01% of the chains disclosed information on their websites concerning SDG 11 – Sustainable cities and communities. They mainly focused on contributing to sustainable communities by providing these communities with health services, education, and solar energy, as well as entrepreneurial opportunities. Chain #32, for instance, disclosed, “To help development, organisations build sustainable and independent communities.” Chain #42 indicated, “[Brand] will further strengthen communities from the inside by increasing our

support for local economies, to drive greater change, create more opportunities and generate more income for those who deliver solar energy with us.”

Good health and well-being, and decent work and economic growth

In equivalent proportions, 69.57% of the chains disclosed on their websites information about SDG 3 – Good health and well-being and SDG 8 – Decent work and economic growth.

In terms of good health and well-being, chains operating in the health sector provided access to high-quality healthcare services at affordable prices. Many of them focused on reproductive health and family planning services, others on children’s health, and a few on menstrual issues. For instance, we found the following comments: “It uses an innovative social franchise strategy under the [Brand] label to improve access, equity in reproductive health and child survival with the distribution of many products” [#13] and “We also focus on reproductive health, family planning, maternal, new born and child health, as well as prevention and control of malaria, tuberculosis and HIV/AIDS” [#60].

Moreover, some franchisors from other sectors indirectly contributed to the better health of the population by

- providing light and equipment to clinics (e.g., “[Brand] means our lights and medical equipment always function to help us to do life-saving work! For example, before, it was really hard for our maternity ward to deliver babies safely, now with our [Brand] system we are much better equipped to work 24 hours a day with the lighting we need!” [#36]);
- providing sanitation for homes (e.g., “To provide affordable top-quality mobile/portable toilets. To maintain and sustain a clearer and healthier environment” [#47]);

- by proposing products that reduce the negative impact of others on health (e.g., “Solar lighting reduces the risk of fire, lung damage, eye strain and eliminates toxic, poisonous kerosene from the home. [...] Replacing kerosene or paraffin with portable, affordable solar lights improve health, makes a home safer” [#37]).

Some franchisors also wanted to empower people in health improvement, such as indicated on Chain #7’s website: “[Brand] [Country] has a mission to empower [nationality] particularly the poor and vulnerable to lead healthier lives.”

Regarding decent work and economic growth, some franchisors aspired to provide Africans with decent jobs as either employees or franchisees or micro-franchisees. Disclosures, for instance, included, “[Brand] franchisees make money while solving their communities’ issues, generating hundreds of new local jobs and igniting a virtuous cycle of wealth generation for themselves and their communities” [#43] or “Other beneficiaries of the business will be franchise holders themselves and their staff, with over many jobs created by the franchise business in four years. Qualified veterinary personnel will be recruited as franchisees; and by including animal health technicians as well as vets...” [#50].

Social franchisors provided support and training from the perspective of capacity building, as illustrated by Chain #54: “The principals and practitioners learn new skills to implement in their communities to ensure sustainable businesses [branded name centers] and make a difference in the lives of those around them.” All these actions support economic growth.

No poverty, and industry, innovation, and infrastructure

A total of 56.52% of the chains disclosed information about SDG 1 – No poverty and SDG 9 – Industry, innovation, and infrastructure on their websites.

Concerning no poverty, some chains aimed to reduce poverty by providing the population with affordable products and/or services or benefiting them from savings acquired by lowering consumption of other types of products/services that are more expensive or less respectful of the environment. An example of this is from Chain #34's website: "[Brand] uses a network of local franchises to rent out lights for a price that is similar or even cheaper than kerosene or candles. With no upfront investments, our customers can enjoy better quality lighting."

The contribution of the franchise chains to poverty alleviation could be considered at an entrepreneurial level as well; that is, through the franchisees and the micro-franchisees. Indeed, some chains offered entrepreneurial opportunities to franchisees and micro-franchisees to help them rise above the poverty level, Chain #34, for instance, disclosed: "Whilst working for [Brand], [First name of a franchisee] saved enough money to build a house for him and his wife."

A focus on women entrepreneurship was also highlighted through social franchisors providing women with franchising opportunities, as suggested here: "To empower black women, build a sustainable network of nurse owned and operated primary healthcare clinics nationally and create permanent jobs" [#17].

Finally, at the employee level, franchising offered job opportunities for employees of franchisees and micro-franchisees to also give them the opportunity to work their way out of poverty. For instance, Chain #44 indicated, "These micro-entrepreneurs, [Brand] Operators, have created 175 jobs for neighbors who run their daily business operations."

Regarding industry, innovation, and infrastructure, most innovations concerned business models and concepts, as illustrated by these numerous examples: "It uses an innovative social franchise strategy under the [Brand] label to improve access, equity in reproductive health and child survival with the distribution of many products" [#13]; "Our technical expertise,

marketing acumen and strong relationships with franchisees has kept us on the cutting edge of healthcare innovation since the launch of our first franchise in [Country] in [year]" [#58]; "[Brand name]'s proposed innovation is to establish a micro franchise model in sub-Saharan Africa for agricultural inputs and market linkages" [#52]; or "The concept is innovative not for its technological aspects, but rather for its model of distributing electricity and energy services, with the goal of reaching the majority of the local population, particularly the most vulnerable" [#31].

Quality education

A total of 49.28% of the chains disclosed on their websites information about SDG 4 – Quality education. Those operating in the education sector provided access to education services for every child, whether in urban or rural areas, with a focus on quality (content of the courses and training of the teachers) and at affordable prices. Chain #54, for instance, disclosed, "We aim to achieve our vision through providing comprehensive quality [...] teacher training and mentoring to early childhood development centres across [Country] in rural, townships and suburban areas."

Some franchisors from other sectors not related to education contributed to bettering the education of children through the provision of electricity or equipment to schools (e.g., "[Brand] installed electricity in two schools by building a kiosk together with [partner name] and [partner name]. The kiosk combines the light rental which provides electricity to the classrooms. Kids, therefore, now enjoy proper lighting inside the classrooms and screens on which teachers can show them educational movies" [#34]). Other franchisors supplied lamps for home study (e.g., "Now that they have their own solar lamps, kids can do their homework, read, write stories, draw pictures, and help their parents with tasks in the evening" [#42]).

A few franchisors also indirectly provided better health conditions or made jobs available to parents that allowed them to pay for the education of their children. A couple franchisors focused on educating older people from the perspective of capacity building.

Gender equality

A total of 44.93% of the chains disclosed on their websites information about SDG 5 – Gender equality. Some franchisors focused on gender equity in terms of access to health services, contraception, or education. Chain #1 indicated, “When contraception use increases, states can have [...] less gender inequality.”

The goals of various chains were to empower women, e.g., “To empower black women, build a sustainable network of nurse owned and operated primary healthcare clinics nationally and create permanent jobs” [#17]. Chain #24 disclosed, “Given the historical injustices on women, [Brand] believes in working with men to stimulate gender equity and ultimately contributing to the achievement of gender equality in economic, political and cultural issues.”

Franchisors promoted gender equity in terms of employment and entrepreneurial opportunities: e.g., “Each micro-enterprise is owned and operated by groups of women. This provides full-time employment to local women [...]” [#49] and, on occasion, access to loans, e.g., “Microloans are targeted to meet the needs of women” [#60].

6. Discussion

6.1. Summary of findings

Our findings show that social goals about which social franchisors communicate are aligned with certain SDGs. The majority of franchisors communicated about SDGs that were general in nature and not just sector-dependent, except in the case of education. Indeed, as indicated in

Chart 2, the SDGs most emphasized are reduced inequalities, partnerships for the goals, sustainable cities and communities, good health and well-being, decent work and economic growth, poverty reduction, industry, innovation and infrastructure, quality education, and gender equality.

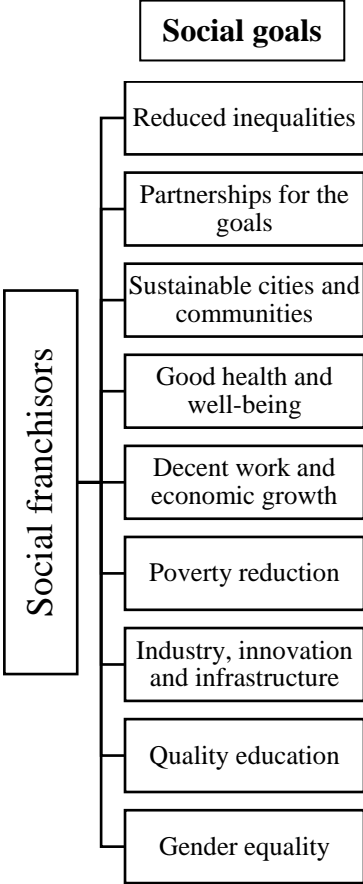


Chart 2: Social franchisors and their social goals through the lens of SDGs

6.2. Contributions to the literature

Our paper offers contributions to the literature on franchising, first, by enriching the stream on social franchising (e.g., Naatu and Alon, 2019; Naatu *et al.*, 2020; Perrigot, 2018, forthcoming). Social franchise chains have a social mission, explicit or not, that can be a source of conflicts (Tracey and Jarvis, 2007) but also source of innovation (Giudici *et al.*, 2018). We demonstrated that, in link with their social missions, social franchisors in Africa disclose SDG-related

information on their websites and thus support, or have the willingness to support, the achievement of SDGs. Their social goals correspond to certain SDGs. The existing literature on social franchising being currently focused on the healthcare sector – 87.94% of the literature according to Naatu and Alon (2019) – our multi-industry study is an added-value. Second, our research also enriches the literature on franchising in developing countries (Alon and Welsh, 2002; Kaufmann and Leibenstein, 1988; Lanfranchi *et al.*, 2021; Welsh *et al.*, 2006) that has mostly focused on Brazil (e.g., Bitti *et al.*, 2019) or China (e.g., Jeon *et al.*, 2016). Papers on franchising in Africa (e.g., Naatu *et al.*, 2020; Perrigot, 2017, 2018) remain scarce despite franchising’s potential for development. Third, this paper builds on the research dealing with CSR and CSD in franchise chains (Meiseberg and Ehrmann, 2012; Perrigot *et al.*, 2015; Le Bot *et al.*, 2022) by focusing on several dimensions of the SDGs, including, for instance, the social aspects (e.g., gender equality).

Our paper not only adds to the limited literature on SDGs but, more specifically, on the role of the private sector, in particular SMEs and franchisors, in the achievement of SDGs (Montiel *et al.*, 2021; Desta and McMaohn, 2015; Mills, 2018; Munro *et al.*, 2017). Montiel *et al.* (2021) grouped the 17 SDGs into “six categories based on whether they increase positive externalities – knowledge, wealth, or health – or reduce negative externalities – the overuse of natural resources, harm to social cohesion, or overconsumption” (p. 999). According to their categorization (p. 1002), our findings show that social franchisors in African countries communicate about SDGs that increase positive externalities in terms of knowledge (industry, innovation and infrastructure; quality education), wealth (decent work and economic growth; poverty reduction; gender equality) and health (good health and well-being). Social franchisors in African countries also communicate about some SDGs that reduce negative externalities in terms of social cohesion (reduced inequalities; partnerships for the goals; sustainable cities and communities). Furthermore, contrary to most research on SDGs that focus on only one SDG

(e.g., zero hunger in the case of Dawson *et al.* (2019) and Tura (2019) or affordable and clean energy in the case of Shen and Power (2017)), our approach covers a numbers of goals.

6.3. Contributions to the practice

Our paper contributes to the practice by, first, showing that franchising, as a business model, can be adapted to respond to the needs of populations in developing countries through the use of social franchising. The local needs met by social franchisors can include products and services related to agriculture, clean water and sanitation, education, energy, and healthcare. Our research also provides evidence of the types and varieties of SDGs social franchisors can pursue. We show the potential of such social franchise chains to contribute to the achievement of SDGs, mostly those that increase positive externalities in terms of knowledge, wealth, and health, as well as some that reduce negative externalities in terms of social cohesion. Our findings can thus encourage entrepreneurs either to launch their franchise concepts as franchisors who contribute to the achievement of SDGs at international, national, or regional levels or to join franchise chains as franchisees who contribute at the local level. Finally, this paper can help governments and public organizations in developing countries, that often only associate franchising with hospitality and retail sectors, to better understand and assess the role of franchising in achieving social goals in general, and SDGs in particular.

6.4. Limitations and tracks for future research

Our research has some limitations and offers tracks for future research. Even though our ambition was clearly specified in the introduction of our paper, the first and perhaps the main limitation of our research relies on the fact that we analyzed the disclosure of SDG-related information by social franchisors on their websites, and not the social franchisor performance in terms of achievement of the SDGs. This is a limitation often reported in research dealing with CSD on corporate websites (e.g., Axjonow *et al.*, 2018; Le Bot *et al.*, 2022; Perrigot *et al.*,

2015). In order to assess social franchisor performance in achieving SDGs, future research could rely on other methodologies, such as case studies with in-depth interviews with social franchisors and/or their franchisees, as well as access to internal data, or a questionnaire-based survey on social franchisors and/or their franchisees.

A second limitation deals with the sample and the nature of our data gathered on websites. Even though our sample is expected to be representative of the population of social franchise chains in Africa, some social franchisors do not have any websites. Moreover, we relied on data disclosed by franchisors on the Internet at a given time. Franchisors do use their websites to attract donors, partners, and franchisee candidates. They can over-sell their SDG targets in order to appear to be responsible social franchisors and to project a better image vis-à-vis their stakeholders. Signals sent to stakeholders on corporate websites do not always correspond to the reality. Furthermore, data on websites provide a snapshot at a given time and can be constantly modified. Or, conversely, website content may not be updated for years, potentially leading to a selection bias. Finally, adopting a longitudinal approach with several waves of data collection could be relevant to see if social franchisor communication on SDGs evolves over time. The comparison of disclosures and achievements after a certain period of time (a few years) through a questionnaire-based survey and/or an analysis of CSR reports, including achievements, would help toward understanding the process of achieving SDGs and not only communicating about SDGs.

A third limitation deals with our descriptive approach. In this paper, we covered the 17 SDGs. Researchers could go further in the analysis of the communication as well as the performance of social franchisors concerning some specific SDGs. An in-depth investigation of SDG 5 – Gender equality - could be, for instance, conducted in link with women entrepreneurship that has attracted significant attention in the African context (e.g., Amine and Staub, 2009).

A fourth limitation deals with the focus on Africa. Even though we covered various African countries, researchers could enlarge the research to developing countries outside Africa in order to assess if social franchisors in other areas are also communicating about SDGs.

7. Conclusion

This paper is a first attempt to demonstrate the role of social franchising and, more broadly, the role of small businesses, in promoting SDGs. Our findings show that social goals of franchisors operating in the social sector in Africa are aligned with certain SDGs that are general in nature and not just sector-dependent, except in the case of education. The goals disclosed by the franchisors included the following: 1) industry, innovation and infrastructure; quality education – increasing positive externalities in terms of knowledge; 2) decent work and economic growth; poverty reduction; gender equality – increasing positive externalities in terms of wealth; 3) good health and well-being – increasing positive externalities in terms of health, and 4) reduced inequalities; partnerships for the goals; sustainable cities and communities – reducing negative externalities in terms of social cohesion. As our study is exploratory, more research on the role of franchising in the achievement of SDGs, and more broadly on franchising as part of sustainable entrepreneurship, is needed.

Notes

[1] <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/sustainable-development-goals/>

[2] <https://www.africa.undp.org/content/rba/en/home/sustainable-development-goals.html>

[3] <https://www.un.org/development/desa/publications/world-population-prospects-the-2017-revision.html#:~:text=The%20current%20world%20population%20of,Nations%20report%20being%20launched%20today>

[4] <http://www.informationssansfrontieres.com/developpement/10.html>

[5] Some franchise chains in the health or food sectors are fully commercial and not considered social franchise chains.

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Tables

Countries in which the sampled social franchisors operated their chains	Sectors in which the sampled social franchisors operated their chains
<ul style="list-style-type: none">– Burkina-Faso– Burundi– Ethiopia– Ghana– Kenya– Malawi– Nigeria– Rwanda– South Africa– Tanzania– Togo– Uganda– Zambia– Zimbabwe	<ul style="list-style-type: none">– agriculture (8 chains)– clean water and sanitation (7 chains)– education (7 chains)– energy (17 chains)– healthcare (30 chains)

Table 1: Countries and sectors in which the sampled social franchisors operated their chains

Chain	SDGs																	Total
	1-No poverty	2-Zero hunger	3-Good health and well-being	4-Quality education	5-Gender equality	6-Clean water and sanitation	7-Affordable and clean energy	8-Decent work and economic growth	9-Industry, innovation and infrastructure	10-Reduced inequalities	11-Sustainable cities and communities	12-Responsible consumption and production	13-Climate action	14-Life below water	15-Life on land	16-Peace, justice and strong institutions	17-Partnerships for the goals	
#1	1	0	1	1	1	0	0	1	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	8
#2	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	6
#3	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	4
#4	1	1	1	1	1	0	0	1	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	9
#5	1	0	1	1	0	0	0	1	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	7
#6	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	3
#7	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	1	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	7
#8	1	0	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	11
#9	1	0	1	1	1	1	0	0	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	9
#10	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	3
#11	1	0	1	0	1	0	0	1	0	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	1	8
#12	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	1	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	10
#13	0	0	1	1	1	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	7

#14	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	3
#15	0	0	1	1	0	1	0	1	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	8
#16	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	4
#17	1	0	1	0	1	0	0	1	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	8
#18	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2
#19	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	2
#20	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2
#21	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	4
#22	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2
#23	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	5
#24	1	1	1	1	1	0	0	1	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	1	1	11
#25	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	4
#26	1	0	1	1	1	1	0	0	1	0	1	1	0	0	1	0	1	10
#27	1	0	1	1	1	0	1	1	0	1	1	1	0	0	1	0	1	11
#28	1	1	1	0	0	0	1	1	0	1	1	0	1	0	0	0	1	9
#29	1	0	0	1	1	0	1	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	8
#30	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	1	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	7
#31	1	0	1	1	1	0	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	1	0	1	13
#32	1	0	1	1	0	0	1	1	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	9
#33	1	0	1	1	1	0	1	1	1	1	1	0	1	0	0	0	1	11
#34	1	0	1	1	0	0	1	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	7
#35	1	0	1	0	1	0	1	1	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	9
#36	1	0	1	1	0	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	6

#37	1	1	1	1	0	0	1	1	0	1	1	0	1	0	0	0	1	10
#38	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	1	1	0	1	0	0	0	1	8
#39	0	0	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	1	0	1	0	1	12
#40	1	0	1	0	1	0	1	1	1	1	1	0	1	0	1	0	1	11
#41	1	0	1	0	0	0	1	1	0	1	1	0	1	0	1	0	0	8
#42	1	0	1	1	1	0	1	1	0	1	1	0	1	0	0	0	1	10
#43	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	1	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	7
#44	1	0	1	0	1	1	0	1	1	1	1	0	0	0	1	0	1	10
#45	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2
#46	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	1	1	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	10
#47	0	0	1	1	0	1	0	1	1	0	1	0	1	0	1	0	1	9
#48	1	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	4
#49	0	0	1	1	1	1	0	1	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	8
#50	1	1	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	7
#51	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	6
#52	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	7
#53	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	1	1	6
#54	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	6
#55	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	6
#56	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	4
#57	1	1	0	1	1	0	0	1	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	9
#58	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	1	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	1	1	8
#59	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	5

#60	1	1	1	1	1	0	0	1	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	10
#61	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	1	1	1	0	0	0	1	0	1	8
#62	1	0	0	1	1	0	0	1	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	8
#63	1	1	0	0	1	0	0	1	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	8
#64	1	1	1	0	1	0	0	1	1	1	1	0	0	0	1	0	1	10
#65	1	1	1	1	1	0	0	1	1	1	1	0	1	0	0	0	1	11
#66	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
#67	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
#68	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
#69	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
<i>Total</i>	<i>39</i>	<i>11</i>	<i>48</i>	<i>34</i>	<i>31</i>	<i>14</i>	<i>17</i>	<i>48</i>	<i>39</i>	<i>55</i>	<i>49</i>	<i>6</i>	<i>11</i>	<i>0</i>	<i>11</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>55</i>	<i>472</i>
<i>Percentage</i>	<i>56.52</i>	<i>15.94</i>	<i>69.57</i>	<i>49.28</i>	<i>44.93</i>	<i>20.29</i>	<i>24.64</i>	<i>69.57</i>	<i>56.52</i>	<i>79.71</i>	<i>71.01</i>	<i>8.70</i>	<i>15.94</i>	<i>0.00</i>	<i>15.94</i>	<i>5.80</i>	<i>79.71</i>	

Table 2: SDG information disclosure (presence or not) on social franchisor websites

