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Service, Society, and Sustainability: A New Paradigm for Lasting Peace and Prosperity

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Abstract

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Introduction

UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were designed “for peace and prosperity for people and the planet, now and into the future”, and the 17 SDGs are targeted to be achieved by 2030. The very act of designing SDGs implies that sustainability is essential before we can enjoy peace and prosperity. Supposing these goals are achieved by 2030, what will happen thereafter? Will the people on Earth live happily ever after? Only time will tell.

This paper contends that while the Sustainable Development Goals provide a crucial framework for global development, they are not, in themselves, sufficient to secure enduring peace. Achieving sustainability demands more than policy prescriptions—it requires a deep ethical commitment to caring for society (Torelli, 2021; UN Environment Programme, 1991). Such care, this paper argues, is actualized through meaningful service, a service in the truest sense. By highlighting the interdependence of service, societal well-being, and sustainability, this paper proposes a broader paradigm of service from which lasting peace and prosperity can emerge.

All 17 sustainability goals are intertwined. Activities in one area will impact others. Although all the goals cannot progress equally, no single goal can indeed be meaningfully achieved in isolation. This interconnectedness is well recognised in the global commitment of countries' willingness to help other underdeveloped countries in their pursuit of the SDGs. In other words, if one wants sustainability and

development, they must also help others. In this light, societal well-being is an overriding requirement, a society that cares for human dignity, equity, and mutual responsibility. Critically, the more important question is not merely how to achieve sustainability, but how to care for society in ways that make sustainability possible.

This article proceeds as follows. The next section discusses sustainability on the basis of United Nations Sustainable Development Goals and brings forth the importance of caring the society for sustainability. The next section shows how businesses that were intended to serve the society need to change their principle of profit maximization to take care of society which would ultimately lead to sustainability. The following section focuses on services; the section discusses how the present paradigm is unequipped to provide peace and prosperity. The section also outlines few instances to show the shortcomings of the present model of business. The final section describes businesses with no-profit-motives – a view unique to this article.

Sustainability

In 1987, the United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) published a seminal document titled *Our Common Future*, referred to as the Brundtland Report after the Commission's chairwoman, Gro Harlem Brundtland. In this report, sustainability is defined as “meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” The definition implies that sustainable development calls for an integrated approach that holistically addresses environmental stewardship, economic growth, and social well-being.

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which preceded the SDGs, met with some success in reducing world hunger and improving access to healthcare (Griggs et al., 2013). However, to achieve further success, the UN moved from the MDGs' seven goals to the SDGs' 17 goals by being more inclusive. What is noteworthy is that the SDGs include not only countries but also societal players, including civil society organisations. This amply demonstrates the importance of society or people in shaping sustainability. A closer look at the SDGs shows that four goals out of 17, i.e. about 24% (see table 1), focus on human beings or society.

Table 1 SDGs and their primary focus

Goal No.	Description	Primary focus
Goal 1.	End poverty in all its forms everywhere	Human beings
Goal 2.	End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture	Human beings
Goal 3.	Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages	Human beings

Goal 4.	Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all	Human beings
Goal 5.	Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls	gender equality
Goal 6.	Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all	water and sanitation
Goal 7.	Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all	energy
Goal 8.	Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all	employment
Goal 9.	Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation	infrastructure
Goal 10.	Reduce inequality within and among countries	inequality
Goal 11.	Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable	settlements safety
Goal 12.	Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns	consumption
Goal 13.	Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts by regulating emissions and promoting developments in renewable energy	climate change
Goal 14.	Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development	marine resources
Goal 15.	Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss	terrestrial ecosystems
Goal 16.	Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels	Promote peace
Goal 17.	Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development	Global Partnership

Source: (United Nations, 2025)

Regarding sustainability, scholars have historically focused primarily on environmental management (e.g., Klassen and McLaughlin, 1996), environmental strategies (e.g., Russo, 2003), and ecological sustainability (e.g., Shrivastava, 1995). Later, it was realised that one must also include social, economic, and ecological factors (Valente, 2012, p. 586). Hence, it is now accepted that sustainability is a three factor phenomenon based on economic integrity, social equity, and environmental concern (Bansal, 2005), which is referred to as the 3Ps approach (i.e., profit, people, planet) or the “triple bottom line” (Elkington, 1997; Hart & Milstein, 2003). Accordingly, sustainability practices are those that refrain from exerting adverse impacts on society or humanity at large. Given the foregoing considerations, it may be posited that society occupies a central role in the realisation of sustainability.

It is intuitive that society, as both the driver and beneficiary of sustainable practices, reaps what it sows. Hence, it not only shapes environmental and developmental priorities but also bears the long-term consequences of ecological degradation and resource mismanagement. This relationship necessitates fostering a broad-minded outlook of the individuals, collective responsibility, institutional process, and cultural shifts toward long-term environmental management. Hence, understanding sustainability through

a societal lens provides a comprehensive framework for assessing the ethical, economic, and ecological dimensions in tandem (Alfirević et al., 2023; Purvis et al., 2019).

Building upon the above framework, it becomes imperative to examine the mechanisms through which society and social structures influence sustainable development outcomes.

Society

Society is commonly understood as an aggregation of individuals. Formally, in sociological and anthropological terms, it refers to a group of people bound by a complex web of norms and interactions, sustained by shared interests and mutual interdependence. Society is necessary for human life to continue. It is built on trust and interdependence and thrives on organised economic interactions.

It is intuitive that for a society to sustain itself, it has to be a good and caring one. A good and caring society is one where everyone is treated with equal care and concern. According to Evelyn Nakano Glenn (2000), the definition of care as a practice has three features. First, everyone needs care, not just the weak and needy. The second aspect is that giving care is seen as creating a relationship between the caregiver and the care recipient, and the third aspect is that care can be organised in numerous ways. According to (Glenn, 2000), a caring society is one in which: (i) care is recognized as legitimate and essential labor or “real work”; (ii) care recipients are acknowledged as equal members of society; and (iii) caregivers are fully recognized and compensated for their work.

Nevertheless, this vision remains largely utopian in today's socio-economic landscape, where indifference often eclipses empathy. In a society driven by profit incentives, altruism is undervalued and charity unrewarded (Michel, 2023). Organisations and businesses bypass bona fide environmental activities and focus on profit maximisation (Sidhu & Gibbon, 2021). This is because corporate success is equated to profit, with little scope for any other ethical considerations. Supporting the above argument, Logan et al., (2023) show how organisations target vulnerable populations in the name of strategic marketing for profit maximisation. More severely, organisations fixated on profit maximisation can cause serious harm as they ignore ethical considerations for the sake of financial gains (H. H. Friedman & Clarke, 2022). This raises a critical question: if sustainability and social care are public responsibilities, do businesses bear any obligation? Given that corporations are often the source of negative externalities and ecological degradation (Montiel et al., 2021), shouldn't they play a central role in societal repair?

Besides the corporations, the rise of consumerism as a marker of personal success has led to troubling social patterns, including aggressive behaviours during competitive consumption events (Miles, 2023). This vitiates the social environment and sets in a pattern in society where social recognition is based on one's material wealth and consumption. This behaviour leads to many negative impacts on society and sustainability; some of them are listed below (History Crunch, 2014):

- Increased pollution
- Resource depletion
- Development of low-quality products by the companies

Beyond social disruption, such consumerist pressures have been linked to psychological distress and unintended mental health consequences (Muris & Ollendick, 2023).

At the heart of a sustainable society lies care ethics, which reorients societal priorities from individualism and profit maximisation to interdependence, empathy, and collective well-being (Tronto, 2020). While Schmuck and Schultz (2002) argue that “sustainable development requires an economy directed at improving the quality of life, decoupled from quantity of consumer resources” (p. 6), this paper contends that such development must also be decoupled from profit-making and reoriented toward service-driven motives.

The author understands that the above idea is utopic and radical in the modern world. Nevertheless, after all one must start somewhere and let this be a guiding principle for a better world.

Service

Contemporary management science defines service as “any act or performance one party can offer to another that is essentially intangible and does not result in the ownership of anything” (Kotler et al., 2009, p. 338). The word ‘service’ emphasises distinctly identifiable activities that meet the customer's wants without transferring ownership. Silvestro and Johnston, (1990) describe the service industry as that which “do things for you. They don't make things”.

Building on the above view, Vargo and Lusch (2004) introduced a “new dominant logic” called the “service-dominant (S-D) logic” of marketing, which re-envision service as the fundamental basis of exchange. While goods are appliances, services are the application of specialised competencies. Gummesson (1995, p. 250) stated that the traditional idea of goods and services is unsuitable and ineffective because customers buy goods for their value to them. Gronroos (2000, pp. 87–88) hypothesised that the marketing of physical goods and the marketing of services will converge, putting value creation at the centre of any economic exchange.

While these theories deepen our understanding of service in business contexts, they are limited by the economic rationale, in which value is transacted, measured, and often commodified. However, service has long been conceived differently across cultural and spiritual traditions. A parallel, though often sidelined, understanding defines service as *a selfless act aimed at protecting, aiding, and uplifting those in need—humans and animals alike—without expectation of reciprocity, recognition, or reward*. In this view, service is not an instrument of exchange but an expression of compassion and solidarity. All major religions uphold this principle as a sacred duty, and some transcend religious frameworks altogether to regard such

1 acts as the core of human decency. In Indian culture, this kind of service to others is regarded as the highest
2 religious duty and is called Seva.

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5 Reconciling these two perspectives—economic and ethical—requires a conceptual reimagining of
6 service. Rather than viewing service solely as an act exchanged for profit, it can be viewed as a continuum:
7 at one end, utilitarian transactions; at the other, altruistic commitment. In this light, service should ideally
8 be understood as a socially embedded act, where value is a by-product to ethical responsibility, mutual
9 care, and empathy.

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12 While viewing service as a profit creating activity may appear economically sound, it often leads to
13 compromises on the very ethical foundation on which it ought to stand. When the pursuit of profit, albeit
14 however small, becomes embedded in the service act or performance, the result is frequently a distortion
15 of its core purpose, leading not toward human well-being, but away from it. In such conditions, the ideals
16 of care, equity, and sustainability become less important to marketing logic. This misalignment is
17 particularly disturbing in light of the SDGs, which hinge on inclusivity and humane development. Numerous
18 instances across sectors illustrate how service, when connected to profit maximization, has failed those it
19 purported to help. A brief examination of such cases reveals the gravity of this disjunction.

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22 The consequences of gaining a competitive advantage and profit are not merely theoretical; they
23 are tragically real. Consider the case of Boeing, a company once synonymous with engineering excellence
24 and safety. Founded in 1916, Boeing revolutionized air travel with the launch of the 747 in 1969, earning
25 the moniker “Queen of the Skies.” However, in its pursuit to regain market share from Airbus, its focus
26 shifted from innovation and engineering to profit. Boeing introduced the 737 MAX - an aircraft whose
27 development was marred by cost-cutting and compromised safety protocols. The result was catastrophic:
28 two crashes within five months - Lion Air Flight 610 (October 2018) and Ethiopian Airlines Flight 302 (March
29 2019) claimed 346 lives. Investigations revealed that Boeing had concealed critical flaws in the aircraft’s
30 Manoeuvring Characteristics Augmentation System (MCAS), leading to a guilty plea for criminal fraud
31 conspiracy and a \$243.6 million fine (“Financial Impact of the Boeing 737 MAX Groundings,” 2025; Hopkins,
32 2025; Prosolvr, 2024). The root cause, as many analysts argue, was a cultural shift from engineering-led
33 decision-making (service orientation) to shareholder-driven imperatives (profit making).

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36 A similar erosion of ethical standards is evident in the case of Toyota. In 2024, the company
37 admitted to falsifying crash test data for seven vehicle models, including improper airbag and rear-seat
38 damage testing, and manipulation of engine power certification. Chairman Akio Toyoda issued a public
39 apology and suspended production of affected models (CNBC, 2024; Vigliarolo, 2024). While Toyota
40 claimed the vehicles remained safe, the breach of trust and regulatory norms underscores how even legacy
41 firms can falter when profit-making built in decision making.

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The food industry offers another sobering example. A 2024 investigation by Public Eye and IBFAN revealed that Nestlé adds significant amounts of sugar—up to 7.3 grams per serving—to its baby food products sold in lower-income countries, while marketing sugar-free versions of the same products in Europe (Eaglin, 2024; Gaberell et al., 2024; Syed, 2024). This double standard not only violates international nutritional guidelines (The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and The World Health Organization advise parents and guardians not to add sugar to complement foods for children 2 years or younger.) but also raises profound ethical concerns about targeting vulnerable populations with inferior products under the guise of service.

These kind of abuses are not limited to the above industries. It finds a parallel in healthcare too, particularly within for-profit medical systems in the United States. Here, hospitals have been documented manipulating physician records to maximize insurance reimbursements. They have been pressuring doctors to alter documentation, accelerating patient turnover, and privileging billing metrics over healing. The net result is a healthcare system where patients are treated less as individuals in need of care and more as revenue streams, with marginalised communities disproportionately affected. As Johns (2025) notes, this evolution represents a troubling shift from the ethics of healing to the economics of extraction, undermining both care quality and trust.

These cases are not isolated anomalies; they reflect a systemic pattern where the language of service masks practices that undermine public trust, safety, and well-being. When profit becomes a metric of value, the essence of service—as care, responsibility, and ethical commitment—is hollowed out. Despite many challenges posed by businesses, the extant literature hardly offers any solutions (Platzek et al., 2025).

Conclusion

Businesses play a central role in the existence and shaping of society. As Painter-Morland (2013) holds, businesses are not external to society but form part of how society organises itself and defines its values. This exacts and commits the corporates and businesses with institutional responsibilities. Supporting this argument, Hsieh (2017) adds that businesses must be seen as moral actors whose practices exert significant influence over societal well-being and justice. Recognizing businesses as social institutions, therefore, reframes their purpose not solely as profit-generating entities, in contrast to Friedman's (1970) suggestion, but as agents accountable for shaping collective futures. There are also growing number of contribution on business-for-peace (B4P) and how business can contribute towards peacebuilding beyond profit generation(Joseph et al., 2023) . Thus, the present services model of providing services is not capable of supporting peace and prosperity for people and it needs to change; it needs to change to provide fair and sustainable living (Gordon & Vink, 2024).

Presented below is a curated selection of corporations that exemplify the proposed service-society-sustainability paradigm. These firms challenge conventional growth models by subordinating profit-maximisation to ethical commitments, ecological stewardship, and societal well-being. Their practices illustrate how service, as an economic ethic, can be institutionalised without compromising viability or global relevance.

Table 2 Comparative Table: Corporations Exemplifying the Service Paradigm

Company	Ethical Focus	Service Ethic in Practice	Departure from Profit Maximization
Patagonia	Environmental integrity	Reinvests in climate activism; encourages customers to repair gear instead of replace it	Discourages overconsumption; prioritizes ecological restraint
Tata Group	Societal development and nation-building	Channels significant profits into public services via Tata Trusts	Emphasizes national service over shareholder return
Interface	Circular design and environmental stewardship	"Mission Zero" and product leasing models to reduce waste	Operates for ecological net-zero impact, not volume growth
Unilever	Social impact through sustainable branding	Embeds societal goals into core brands (e.g., Dove, Lifebuoy)	Aligns brand identity with long-term social good

1. Service through Restraint: Patagonia

Patagonia articulates a counterintuitive yet powerful philosophy: growth through restraint. By urging customers to "buy less," producing high-durability products, and allocating resources toward environmental activism, the company actively undermines the traditional consumption-profit cycle. It exemplifies service as ecological humility.

2. Service through Stewardship: Tata Group

Tata Group's business identity is inseparable from its civic mission. Through the Tata Trusts, it redistributes corporate wealth into health, education, and social infrastructure—especially in underserved Indian regions. Profit is not an end, but a means of service—a notion rooted in Indian ethical traditions of trusteeship and seva.

3. Service through Regenerative Design: Interface

Interface adopts a radical product philosophy that minimises environmental extraction. By retaining ownership of materials through leasing and committing to full recyclability, it decouples business success from linear throughput models. Here, service manifests through planetary accountability in design.

4. Service through Social Branding: Unilever

Unilever integrates service directly into brand messaging and consumer education. Campaigns promoting hygiene, gender equity, and environmental awareness turn consumption into a platform for care and responsibility, redefining success in terms of societal impact, not short-term profits.

These companies demonstrate that ethical service can be woven into the very architecture of global enterprise without sacrificing resilience or innovation. A shared thread across all examples is their active resistance to the logic of profit maximization in favor of societal well-being in some form. These firms are not exceptions but exemplars that can drive a larger narrative shift, from profit-as-goal to service-as-

purpose. Their practices offer evidence and blueprints for governments, investors, and civil society to support market ecosystems guided by service, sustainability, and societal care.

Hence, in our endeavor for peace and prosperity for people and the planet, now and into the future, businesses, which play a pivotal role in the existence of society, must modify their current model. They should refrain from making huge profits; rather than profit they should have service motives like “not-for-profit” or NFPs organisations. Businesses with no-profit-motives (BNPM) should adhere to the following two conditions:

1. Start a business only if the business can provide something substantially different from the incumbent businesses. The intention should not be to gain profit by creating something differently for the sake of being different. The new business or product should provide new benefits to customers that the existing ones do not.

2. Do not make huge profits. Price the product just enough to run the business continuously. In other words, do not price the product in a way that results in huge profits and surplus. What is the point in minting huge profits and doing philanthropy later? Profit should not be seen as an end by itself, rather it should be a means for doing service to society. The paper suggests that we build philanthropy into the price itself.

As if to underscore the importance of purpose over profit, Dhirubhai Ambani, founder of Reliance Industries Limited (RIL), once remarked—according to his son, Mukesh Ambani, Asia’s richest person—that “if you want to start a business to be a billionaire, you are an idiot; you will never get there. If you want to start a business to impact a billion people, then you have a good chance of success, and, as a byproduct, you can make a reasonable amount of money” (Fernandes, 2025). Sociologists believe that our social surroundings influence thought and action (Introsocsite, 2008). Hence, only a conscious society can sustain and safeguard itself and the planet.

Any new idea prior to its emergence, particularly in the absence data, is built on imaginative theorizing (Hasse, 2025). Admittedly, the vision outlined in this paper may appear utopian, even radical, within the prevailing norms of the modern world. Yet every transformative idea begins as a departure from convention. Let this, then, serve as a humble starting point, a conceptual seed that, with the nourishment of interdisciplinary engagement, may one day grow into a flourishing tree bearing fruits of justice, care, and collective well-being for all humanity.

May this reimagining of service and business inspire renewed conversations, conscious practices, and a collective ethos that honours not just efficiency, but the enduring values of empathy, responsibility, and shared humanity that would ensure peace and prosperity to one and all.

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