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COMMITMENT TO GRAND CHALLENGES IN FLUID FORMS OF ORGANIZING: THE ROLE OF NARRATIVES' TEMPORALITY

Iben Sandal Stjerne, Matthias Wenzel and Silviya Svejenova

ABSTRACT

Organization and management scholars are increasingly interested in understanding how “fluid” forms of organizing contribute to the tackling of grand challenges. These forms are fluid in that they bring together a dynamic range of actors with diverse purposes, expertise, and interests in a temporary and nonbinding way. Fluid forms of organizing enable flexible participation. Yet, they struggle to gain and sustain commitment. In this case study of the SDG2 Advocacy Hub, which supports the achievement of zero hunger by 2030, we explore how the temporality of narratives contributes to actors' commitment to tackling grand challenges in fluid forms of organizing. In our analysis, we identify three types of narratives – universal, situated, and bridging – and discern their different temporal horizons and temporal directions. In doing so, our study sheds light on the contributions by the temporality of narratives to fostering commitment to tackling grand challenges in fluid forms of organizing. It suggests the importance of considering “multitemporality,” i.e., the plurality of connected temporalities, rather than foregrounding either the present or the future.

Organizing for Societal Grand Challenges

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INTRODUCTION

Organization and management scholars are increasingly interested in gaining an understanding of “grand challenges,” defined as multidisciplinary “barrier(s) that, if removed, would help solve an important societal problem with a high likelihood of global impact through widespread implementation” (George, Howard-Grenville, Joshi, & Tihanyi, 2016, p. 1881). Such interest also involves the generation of insights on how the tackling of grand challenges is organized and managed across organizational boundaries, with what challenges, and with what effects. One example is the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) adopted by the United Nations (UN) in 2015, which constitute “a universal call to action to end poverty, protect the planet, and ensure that all people enjoy peace and prosperity by 2030” (UN, 2020a). What makes achieving SDGs such as “zero hunger” (SDG2), “decent work and economic growth” (SDG8), and “responsible consumption and production” (SDG12) grand challenges is their large-scale, complex, and intractable nature. The tackling of grand challenges, therefore, requires actors with different expertise and goals to commit to finding ways forward together (Mair, Wolf, & Seelos, 2016). As the UN (2020b) affirms, “to make the 2030 Agenda a reality, broad ownership of the SDGs must translate into a strong commitment.”

Promoting and sustaining commitment to tackling grand challenges is a complex organizational problem (see Kanter, 1968), as it involves transcending organizational, disciplinary, and geographical boundaries (George et al., 2016; Grodal & O’Mahony, 2017). Enabling commitment is particularly challenging in contexts involving fluid forms of organizing due to their flexible, open, and boundary-spanning nature “based on relentlessly changing templates, quick improvisation, and ad hoc responses” (Schreyögg & Sydow, 2010, p. 1251). Although fluid forms of organizing enable diverse actors to participate in tackling important issues (Seidl & Werle, 2018), such issues are often detached from actors’ core tasks (du Gay, 2005) and everyday work (e.g., Brès, Raufflet, & Boghossian, 2018) in their respective organizations, which is where commitments to the future must be made to successfully tackle grand challenges.

Examining narratives and storytelling constitutes one promising approach to understanding how commitment to tackling grand challenges can be achieved in contexts involving fluid forms of organizing. As prior research shows, narratives enable actors to find joint ways forward amid divergent understandings, expertise, and interests (e.g., Chreim, 2005; Cunliffe, Luhman, & Boje, 2004; Hernes, Hendrup, & Schäffner, 2015), especially with regard to sustainability initiatives (Haack, Schoeneborn, & Wickert, 2012). Narratives bring together actors’ different experiences and interpretations of the past, present, and future, thus contributing to strong bonds between actors within present actions (Hernes & Schultz, 2020). Yet, despite the recognized importance of narratives in driving

actors' commitment to tackling important large-scale issues, we know little about the types of narratives involved in this process or the roles of different temporalities therein. Hence, the guiding question of our study is: *How does the temporality of narratives contribute to actors' commitment to tackling grand challenges in contexts involving fluid forms of organizing?*

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Grand Challenges

Grand challenges have been a topic of academic debate for at least a century. The original aim was to spur interest in “solving” particular problems to generate breakthrough insights within specific disciplines of the natural sciences (George et al., 2016; Howard-Grenville, 2020). Organization and management scholars have begun to focus on grand challenges rather recently (Ferraro, Etzion, & Gehman, 2015; Gehman, Etzion, & Ferraro, 2022; George et al., 2016; Gümüşay, Claus, & Amis, 2020). In contrast to earlier literature, the emergent organizational literature highlights that it is difficult, if not impossible to “solve” grand challenges as if they were mathematical problems with unambiguous solutions. grand challenges are “seemingly ‘intractable puzzles’” (Howard-Grenville, 2020, p. 3) for at least two reasons.

First, although varying definitions of grand challenges exist, organization and management scholars generally view grand challenges as large-scale, complex, and intractable societal problems (e.g., Ferraro et al., 2015; Mair et al., 2016). As such, grand challenges “‘resist’ easy fixes” (Porter, Tuertscher, & Huysman, 2020, p. 248) on a local scale and “lack a clear solution” (Grodal & O’Mahony, 2017, p. 1801) that would ensure their complete disappearance. Therefore, involved actors must sustain their commitment (George et al., 2016) to “tackling” grand challenges on a continuous basis in order to counteract repercussions that may emerge along the way.

Second, the large-scale, complex, and intractable nature of grand challenges emerges partly because these problems typically affect and are produced by multiple groups of actors with heterogeneous interests (Mair et al., 2016). This plurality implies that grand challenges defy unidimensional and unilateral approaches, and “require collaborations across multiple parties” (Schad & Smith, 2019, p. 56). Such collaborations involve “working across [organizational] boundaries” (Martí, 2018, p. 969), bringing together actors with different backgrounds, expertise, and interests, and enabling the creation of shared understandings of a specific grand challenge (Seidl & Werle, 2018). Such shared understandings enable actors to envision, articulate, and potentially commit to joint paths forward because they “build on and apply knowledge generated in multiple disciplines” (Mair et al., 2016, p. 2023).

The multidisciplinary, heterogeneous, and boundary-spanning nature of tackling grand challenges raises questions about how such efforts can be organized effectively and how commitment to shared courses of action can be achieved (Kaufmann & Danner-Schröder, 2022). Conventional forms of organizing,

characterized by hierarchical and entrenched structures and processes, and guided by self-referential strategic goals (see [Puranam, Alexy, & Reitzig, 2014](#)) are potentially unproductive for tackling grand challenges due to two interdependent reasons. First, these forms of organizing are partly responsible for producing and sustaining grand challenges, as they often continue to rely on unsustainable managerial and organizational practices ([George et al., 2016](#)). Second, the primacy of self-referential strategic goals that permeate conventional forms of organizing implies that it is difficult, if not impossible to engage in and generate commitment to shared interests and boundary-spanning activities if such activities do not contribute to achieving these goals ([Grodal & O'Mahony, 2017](#)).

Fluid Forms of Organizing

A recent yet growing literature delves into the nature, dynamics, and possibilities of fluid forms of organizing, shedding light on promising alternatives for organizing multidisciplinary, heterogeneous, and boundary-spanning efforts directed toward tackling grand challenges. Fluid forms of organizing circumscribe ways of coordinating activities that have been loosely referred to as “new” ([Palmer, Benveniste, & Dunford, 2007](#)), “postbureaucratic” ([Ashcraft, 2005](#)), and “unconventional” ([Brès et al., 2018](#)), among others. The identified array of and notions associated with such forms of organizing are broad. Among others, these forms of organizing relate to the coordination of activities in social collectives that defy common definitions of “organization,” such as hacker collectives ([Dobusch & Schoeneborn, 2015](#)), digital work platforms ([Gegenhuber, Ellmer, & Schüßler, 2021](#); [Gegenhuber, Schüßler, Reischauer, & Thäter, 2022](#)), terrorist groups ([Schoeneborn & Scherer, 2012](#)), and grassroots initiatives ([Daskalaki, Fotaki, & Sotiropoulou, 2019](#)).

Despite their empirical plurality and diverse labels, fluid forms of organizing have a shared conceptual core that sets them apart from conventional forms of organizing. Specifically, whereas fluid forms of organizing may partly involve governance structures and/or roles, the majority of their participants or contributors are not bound to them through formal commitment mechanisms, such as contracts or hierarchies ([Brès et al., 2018](#)). This conceptual core of fluid forms of organizing manifests in at least four important ways.

First, unlike the rigid, entrenched, hierarchy-based nature of conventional forms of organizing, fluid forms of organizing are more flexible in character ([Schreyögg & Sydow, 2010](#)). This flexibility is carried out by more distributed ways of coordinating work that are rarely aligned with hierarchy-based coordination and control. Hence, instead of focusing attention on formal position and status, fluid forms of organizing typically put actors' expertise in the coordination of activities center stage ([Kornberger, 2017](#)).

Second, fluid forms of organizing typically transcend organizational boundaries. This is enabled by greater openness ([Dobusch, Dobusch, & Müller-Seitz, 2019](#)). That is, fluid forms of organizing typically allow actors to participate even if they are not formal members ([Dobusch & Schoeneborn, 2015](#)). In doing so, they provide the means for bringing together actors with different disciplinary backgrounds and expertise, even across organizational boundaries, to accomplish common goals and objectives.

Third, fluid forms of organizing are not bound exclusively to the achievement of unidimensional, self-referential goals and objectives. Instead, they are often driven by social (Arciniegas Pradilla, Bento da Silva, & Reinecke, 2022), religious (Gümüşay, 2015), and ecological purposes (Schüßler, Rüling, & Wittneben, 2014), among others, many of which extend beyond the realms of conventional organizations. This does not mean that goals and objectives pursued through fluid forms of organizing may not partly be self-referential, especially when oriented toward achieving greater flexibility for the production and distribution of innovations (e.g., Carroll & Morris, 2015). However, the flexibility and openness of fluid forms of organizing imply that actors can pursue various interests, many of which extend beyond those driven by their organizations' specific strategic goals.

Fourth, in contrast to their conventional counterparts, fluid forms of organizing at best incentivize, but do not obligate participants to contribute to collective activities. Hence, organizational fluidity also comes into being through the nonbinding nature of actors' participation (Schreyögg & Sydow, 2010). Thus, the ongoing renewal of actors' commitment becomes a critical coordination task when fluid forms of organizing dominate.

Enabling Commitment Through Narratives

In tackling grand challenges, fluid forms of organizing experience a tension. On one hand, they can make important contributions to coordinating activities aimed at tackling grand challenges. In contrast to conventional forms of organizing, fluidity makes it possible to cross organizational boundaries to bring together a shifting heterogeneous set of actors with different areas of disciplinary expertise and varied interests. This fluid coming together enables ongoing collective sense-making of what grand challenges mean and what addressing them entails, and the envisioning of joint courses of action.

On the other hand, fluid forms of organizing may partially undermine efforts to tackle grand challenges. In contrast to conventional forms of organizing, actors' participation in activities coordinated via fluid forms of organizing is non-binding. Tackling grand challenges, however, is a process that requires ongoing commitment from actors to participate in finding and maintaining sustainable ways forward. Fluid forms of organizing thus face an important difficulty in enabling and sustaining commitment among actors with diverse interests and flexible participation.

Commitment is defined as "the willingness of social actors to give their energy and loyalty to social systems" and as a "process through which individual interests become attached to the carrying out of socially organized patterns of behavior which are seen as fulfilling those interests" (Kanter, 1968, p. 499). Commitment to collective action involves engagement in consistent lines of activity (Becker, 1960). In the context of voluntary associations, commitment has been found to increase with communication and involvement in decision-making (Knoke, 1981). As Salancik (1977, p. 63) explained,

behavior is what is being committed, because behavior is a visible indicator of what we are and what we intend to do. Our behavior leads to expectations about what we will do in the future.

As prior research shows, narratives play an important role in gaining and sustaining such commitment (e.g., Barry & Elmes, 1997; Hernes et al., 2015; Sonenshein, 2010), especially when implementing sustainability initiatives (Arciniegas Pradilla et al., 2022; Haack et al., 2012; Kroeger, Siebold, Günzel-Jensen, Saade, & Heikkilä, 2022; Schoeneborn, Väsques, & Cornelissen, 2022). Narratives are “temporal, discursive constructions that provide a means for individual, social, and organizational sensemaking and sensegiving” (Vaara, Sonenshein, & Boje, 2016, p. 496). They support the gaining and sustaining of commitment due to their built-in temporality, i.e., their often implicit references to and connections between the past, present, and future (Polletta, 1998). The temporal orientation of narratives enables actors to construct interpretations (Meretoja, 2017) and joint paths forward amid plural understandings and interests (e.g., Chreim, 2005; Cunliffe et al., 2004; Kaplan & Orlowski, 2013), thereby enabling them to “respond to questions pertaining to the very meaning of acting together” (Hernes et al., 2015, p. 127).

In the collective meaning-making processes underlying sustainability initiatives, narratives foregrounding the future are often essential for generating commitment, yet are worked with in different ways (Wenzel, Krämer, Koch, & Reckwitz, 2020). Specifically, actors may shorten the time horizons by referring to the present and near future; or they may reach out into the distant future (Hernes & Schultz, 2020). Relatedly, actors may formulate and project a shared future goal that guides, motivates, and legitimizes action in the present, or they may work toward a shared future goal (Crilly, 2017). The main difference between these approaches is, again, temporal in nature. That is, narratives make connections in two directions: backward, thereby linking the future with concerns of the present; and forward, thereby linking the present with projections of the future. As Reinecke and Ansari (2015) showed, such temporalities collide at times, and suggested the notion of “ambitemporality” to denote actors’ efforts to work through conflicts between temporalities.

Actors make sense of these temporal dynamics through storytelling activities in the present (Hernes & Schultz, 2020). Yet, despite the importance of these dynamics in sustainability initiatives in particular, and in organizing more generally (e.g., Haack et al., 2012; Hernes et al., 2015), we still know little about the role that the temporality of narratives plays in fostering actors’ commitment in fluid forms of organizing. Thus, the guiding question for our paper is: *How does the temporality of narratives contribute to actors’ commitment to tackling grand challenges in fluid forms of organizing?*

METHODS

The setting for our case study was the SDG2 Advocacy Hub, which seeks to bring together and amplify the work of diverse key actors such as NGO representatives, advocacy groups, civil society, private sector, and UN agencies to support the achievement of zero hunger by 2030. The hub provides a platform that enables actors to meet, share expertise and ideas, and collaborate on campaigns. In this

sense, the SDG2 Advocacy Hub is characterized as a fluid form of organizing given the characteristics elaborated above: (1) with only three permanent employees, a lack of hierarchy-based forms of governance and control, and a reliance on distributed ways of coordinating work, the hub is flexible in nature; (2) the bulk of actors involved as “hub members” work for and are driven by goals and interests of other organizations; (3) in doing so, these actors engage in jointly pursuing a plurality of goals and interests; and (4) engagement in the hub’s activities is voluntary and nonbinding, thus requiring continual efforts to gain and sustain the hub members’ commitment. Finding ways to gain and sustain these diverse actors’ commitment to tackling the food challenge is a difficult task. Therefore, according to a “new game plan” (Hub Website, July 2020), the main task of the hub was to build commitment to tackling SDG2.

Our interest in the role of the temporality of narratives arose in the field. Specifically, we were intrigued by the observation that, despite the flexibility and nonbinding nature of the hub’s activities, the hub members displayed continuity concerning their participation in these activities. Among others, this manifested in many hub members’ reappearance in the hub’s monthly meetings with active contributions to tackling SDG2 as joint overarching interest. Thus, they displayed commitment in [Kanter’s \(1968, p. 499\)](#) sense, namely, as “socially organized pattern [...] of behavior which [is] seen as fulfilling those interests.” Importantly, the hub’s members focused almost exclusively on creating, sharing, and disseminating future-oriented narratives that sought to ensure and amplify diverse actors’ commitment. Given the lack of plausible rival explanations, we became interested in the activities of the SDG2 Advocacy Hub as a revelatory case that renders salient the role of the temporality of narratives in gaining and sustaining actors’ commitment to tackling grand challenges.

Background: SDG2 “Zero Hunger” – For a Better Food Future

As part of a broader vision to create “peace and prosperity for people and the planet, now and into the future” ([UN, 2020b](#)), one of the key goals that the UN member states aim to achieve by 2030 is SDG2: Zero Hunger. The aim is to “end hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition, and promote sustainable agriculture” by ([UN, 2020c](#)): (2.1) providing safe, nutritious, and sufficient food for all people on a continuous basis; (2.2) ending all forms of malnutrition; (2.3) doubling agricultural productivity and income of small-scale food producers; (2.4) ensuring sustainable food production systems and implementing resilient agricultural practices; and (2.5) maintaining genetic diversity of seeds, cultivated plants, and farmed and domesticated animals and their related wild species. Each of these five targets is addressed by different sets of actors from diverse organizations, including: advocates from humanitarian aid organizations (SDG2.1); representatives from the United Nations System Standing Committee on Nutrition (UNSCN), Harvest Plus, the International Fund for Agricultural Development, Power of Nutrition, and other nutrition-oriented foundations (SDG2.2); members of research collectives on agriculture, humanitarian aid, and CEO sustainability, and representatives of various foundations (SDGs 2.3 and 2.4); and

policymakers who regulate food systems such as the EAT Lancet Commission on Food, Planet, Health; The Food Forever Initiative; and Integrated Seed Sector Development (SDG2.5).

Setting: SDG2 Advocacy Hub

The origins of the SDG2 Advocacy Hub date back to 2016 when several service firms explored the viability of a hub for addressing issues of hunger in informal back-and-forth dialogues. They secured funding for a research report which, together with a landscape analysis, was developed in consultancy with What World Strategies and Vision Campaign Works, two experienced professional service firms specialized in designing and driving policy campaigns. Because this report was commissioned as “a project for” the UN branch organization World Food Program (WFP), we refer to it as the WFP report in the remainder of the text. The 2016 WFP report revealed an overcrowded hunger and nutrition sector, with over 20 global networks already in place and little space for additional initiatives organized through conventional workshops and meetings; the report also highlighted a need for a new approach, quoting one interviewee as saying: “Please no, not another workshop!”

In the recollections of the Director of the SDG2 Hub Secretariat, establishing the hub was “like setting up a start-up” and in 2017, it involved incubation at the WFP. By the nature of its mandate on food, the WFP agreed to hold the hub

in trust for a bigger group of people, which represented civil society, private sector, UN, ... because you need to have some organizing entity to start with ... especially if donor funds are involved. (interview)

The WFP provided some initial funding to manage the SDG2 Advocacy Hub, but subsequent funding sources remained anonymous, as part of the hub’s strategy was to remain unbranded in order to provide “neutral ground” for engagement of diverse actors. The hub leader, who worked as a consultant to the WFP communications team during the incubation period, began coordinating digital and public engagement for SDG2 advocacy. In 2018, the SDG2 Advocacy Hub became an independent entity managed by its own secretariat and a governance body with advisory competences on strategy and resource allocation, referred to as “the Bridge.” Currently, the Bridge consists of 12 organizations, including WFP, EAT, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Save the Children, etc., and takes a long-term view of advocacy, working with a 10-year time horizon. Importantly, the hub director does not have formal power to obtain and sustain relevant actors’ commitment; he needs to persuade and inspire additional actors to participate in an initiative that is worth realizing.

Data Collection

During a one-year study of the SDG2 Advocacy Hub’s initiatives, we collected data through participant-observation of live and online events, as well as from relevant documents.

Participant-observation. Our primary data source consisted of observations recorded while participating in events organized by the SDG2 Advocacy Hub.

The hub leader and the so-called “SDG2 hub advocates,” i.e., members who, by signing up, implicitly agreed to support and amplify actions toward achieving SDG2 goals in their respective fields, initiated these events to bring together different organizational agendas in order to create a shared narrative for SDG2 and formulate a strategy for the year to come. In August 2018, the first and third authors of this paper negotiated field access by participating in an event related to SDG2.5. We conducted an interview with the hub leader, which was recorded. In this interview, we asked to follow other important events. Among others, he recommended that we participate in an SDG2 strategy event in Washington, DC in the spring of 2019 to gain insights into how the hub is organized.

The first author participated in the Washington, DC event as well as other key events suggested in the interview. In addition, she participated in follow-up events in 2019 to develop strategies based on agreements negotiated during live events. Observations were recorded in extensive field notes, which detailed actors’ conversations and behaviors throughout the events, as well as impressions formed during informal interviews with advocates during breaks. In these nine recorded interviews, she asked about their backgrounds, why they were part of the hub, what they gained from it, and what they thought about the event in which they were participating. Through these informal interviews, we gained an in-depth understanding of participants’ expertise and interests, the hub’s challenges and opportunities, and, most importantly, the ways in which the hub leader fostered participants’ commitment to tackle the grand challenge despite the fluid, non-binding nature of this form of organizing. Overall, we collected detailed field notes from five live events and four online events, amounting to 10 full days of participant-observation.

Documents. We supplemented our participant-observation data with documents from SDG2 and the hub websites. These documents included reports detailing initiatives and successes, videos from global meetings, SDG2 promotion materials, invitations, and pictures. In addition, we collected the hub’s newsletters, promotion videos, meeting notes, and initiative statements. From February 2019 to February 2020, we also downloaded the hub’s online calendar, which was shared with all actors to coordinate their activities. Overall, we gathered 172 documents.

Data Analysis

We simultaneously engaged in data collection and analysis, following an abductive process of shifting back and forth between data and theory. At the first event we attended, the underlying politics of participants representing different interests attracted our attention. This initial point of access led us to note differences between participants’ behaviors. Whereas the hub leader’s speeches seemed rehearsed and the materials that were distributed seemed professional, other participants voiced a desire to enact change in presentations that were relatively unrefined. As a result, several themes stood out in this initial phase: the “advocacy hub” itself and how it was organized, hunger issues, as well as “the need to fix the broken food system,” “amplify change,” and the hub’s motto “act now.”

Participating in the event in Washington, DC enabled us to develop additional insights into the hub’s political realities as well as the broader context and

complexity of SDG2. The most prominent theme that emerged when analyzing field notes and documents was the importance of advocacy, narratives, and communicative spaces, and the need to unite the diverse actors operating in the SDG2 field. Given the prevalence of narratives, we decided to explore these further. Revisiting prior literature (Vaara et al., 2016), we came to appreciate the temporal aspects inherent in narratives. Overall, “the intertwinement of the past, present, and future – in different forms – is germane to all narratives” (Meretoja, 2017, p. 50). Of particular relevance for change-directed collective efforts, such as mobilization for tackling grand challenges, is their “temporally configurative capacity ... to integrate past, present, and future events” (Polletta, 1998, p. 139). Examining the narratives and their underlying temporalities, we identified three main types of narratives – universal, situated, and bridging – that differed in terms of their temporal horizon and direction.

In analyzing the data further, we focused on the commitment to tackling hunger issues constructed in relation to the temporal directions of these narratives. Hence, we interpreted commitment and narrative creation as co-constitutive. Similar to others (Vaara et al., 2016), we view narratives as actions, rather than mere words that do not commit actors to future actions. From this perspective, commitment to narratives occurs through their influence on our understandings; simultaneously, actors co-construct narratives’ social, ethical, or temporal boundaries (Dittrich, 2022; Hernes et al., 2015; Meretoja, 2017). Based on this understanding of narratives and commitment, we zoomed in on how the identified narratives contributed to actors’ commitment to tackling SDG2.

FINDINGS

The Importance of Narratives for Commitment

The SDG2 Advocacy Hub brought together actors that, except for sporadic overlaps of interests, took part in different networks and lacked longer-term commitment for coordination:

For example, most groups working on nutrition are also working on hunger, however not all those working on hunger are active on nutrition [and] ... many of the hunger-focused groups are more likely to be involved in networks around poverty and climate change, than nutrition networks. (WFP report)

The working groups for specific targets were somewhat profession-bound, further complicating the achievement of coordinated efforts toward achieving SDG2, despite tremendous expertise. The WFP report detailed these coordination problems in light of the profusion of networks and initiatives:

There is not one specific campaigning messaging or narrative taking hold in the sector at the moment ... and in particular the communication space that covers global hunger and malnutrition is not as high as it could be despite a growing interest and funding for this grand challenge.

The discussions related to envisioning the SDG2 Advocacy Hub concluded that, in order to make an impact on policymakers, it would be essential to unite the polyphony of expertise and interests inherent in the fluid character of the

hub to establish a joint and enduring commitment for tackling SDG2 as a grand challenge. It was agreed that the establishment of shared narratives could constitute such commitment. A discussion paper which included a landscape analysis defined the overarching goal and opportunity for the SDG2 Advocacy Hub: “The right messaging could find fertile ground in one of a number of forthcoming political opportunities.” Therefore, for all initiatives aimed at achieving the five SDG2 targets, the hub organized its activities around the creation and dissemination of narratives, seeking to “amplify and share messages” (SDG2.1) and to “develop a narrative and toolkit for advocates [to] support ... mobilization efforts” (SDGs 2.3 and 2.4).

Two firms, What World Strategies and Vision Campaign Works, provided professional support in working with narratives, such as expertise and training. They advised the advocates to focus language on the “crowded communication space” and to develop a “combined narrative and messaging.” The intention of this narrative strategy was to “weave together a top-line message that combines the policy objectives of the broader networks.” The WFP report concluded that

adapting the Zero Hunger Challenge would be enough of a policy platform for the initiative and would allow it to have boundaries to its focus while not excluding partners or getting bogged down in detailed policy debates.

In collaboration with experienced consultants from the two agencies, the SDG2 Advocacy Hub leader involved various actors of the SDG2 field, seeking to build a framework that could bring together the loosely connected field actors’ narratives into broader narratives that would resonate with the SDG2 goal of zero hunger. During an interview, he explained: “part of the value of this [SDG2 hub] process is building a framework ... [that] actually helps them connect to these kinds of broader narratives and conversations.”

Hence, the hub’s activities were organized around “the power of narrative” (interview) – the collective creation and dissemination of stories that would continually bring people together and gain their commitment for tackling SDG2 across organizations. Some of the central participating organizations that later became SDG2 advocates include the Alliance to End Hunger, AGRA, Save the Children, Global Citizen, the Eleanor Cook Foundation, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, World Vision, Scaling Up Nutrition, IFAD, the EAT Foundation, 1,000 Days, and the International Fund for Agricultural Development.

In our analysis, we identified three narratives and their underlying temporalities – universal, situated, and bridging – which together contributed to the commitment of a heterogeneous set of actors to work toward achieving SDG2. [Table 1](#) provides an overview these narratives, their temporal horizon and direction, and their contributions to commitment to tackling grand challenges. Next, we elaborate on each of these narratives.

Commitment Through Universal Narratives

Universal narratives are stories about grand challenges and their widespread impact that construct the future as “coming upon us.” The temporal direction of universal narratives thus brings a longer time horizon of a distant future back

Table 1. Narratives, Temporality, and Commitment to Grand Challenges in Fluid Forms of Organizing.

	Universal Narratives	Situated Narratives	Bridging Narratives
Type	Grand stories that describe and reflect a grand challenge and its widespread impact	Stories that describe and reflect actors' lived experiences with the grand challenge, as well as their specific local initiatives	Stories that span universal and situated narratives
Temporal horizon	Distant future: A centrally-defined, large-scale future target	Present and near future: The here-and-now carries the present forward into the future	Multi-temporality: Connections between present and near future as well as the distant future
Temporal direction	"Coming upon us": Backward, from the distant future into the present	"Us moving forward": Forward, from the present into the future	"Moving toward what's coming upon us": Both forward and backward
Contribution to commitment	Articulate a universal call to act that is difficult to ignore	Create a collective sense of change being under way by demonstrating distributed local efforts	Give meaning to local initiatives by embedding them in broader campaigns for tackling the grand challenge
Potential challenges	Detachment of distant future from the experienced present	Bringing together the present and near future with the distant future	Sustaining commitment by continually connecting temporalities

into the present. Specifically, universal narratives build on all-encompassing future goals and projections, such as doomsday scenarios and paradisiac visions. They disseminate a universal call to act in the present that all actors would find difficult to ignore. Hence, by articulating grand challenges as a “future coming upon us,” universal narratives constitute a call to participate in collective action as a way of committing actors to tackling grand challenges.

As all the actors working to achieve zero hunger had different foci and goals and no shared history to draw on, the starting point for driving commitment to tackling SDG2 was to bring a shared distant future into the present. With professional support from consultants, universal narratives were developed for the SDG2 Advocacy Hub as an umbrella for diverse actors’ initiatives in relation to hunger. These narratives centered on SDG2’s goals for a sustainable future in 2030 as part of the overall SDG narrative legitimized by a document signed by 193 states. This legitimacy is reinforced on the website:

Adopted by all countries on September 25th 2015, the Sustainable Development Goals, otherwise known as the Global Goals, are a universal call to end poverty, protect the planet and ensure that all people enjoy peace and prosperity. For the goals to be reached, everyone needs to do their part: governments, the private sector and civil society. ... The SDG2 Advocacy Hub coordinates global campaigning and advocacy to achieve Sustainable Development Goal 2: To end hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition, and promote sustainable agriculture by 2030.

As illustrated here, the universal narratives that the hub members developed and shared highlighted the *all-encompassing status* of the SDGs (“Global Goals”), stating that everyone’s *commitment* is mandatory if the overarching purpose is to be achieved. They, thus, issued “universal[s] call to act” that were *difficult to ignore*. These narratives drew a both hopeful (“end hunger,” “food security,” etc.) and daunting (e.g., needs for “protect[ing] the planet”) big picture of the *distant future* (“2030”), one that comes upon humanity (e.g., “sustainable agriculture by 2030”) and requires everyone “to do their part.”

The CEO of Save the Children reinforced this message:

Ending hunger, and achieving food security and better nutrition, is one of the most important building blocks of a world in which every child can survive, learn and be safe. The 2030 food and hunger targets can be reached, but only if governments, civil society and the private sector work together to drive proven solutions, and create accountability for results. (SDG2 Advocacy Hub website)

Given their all-encompassing status, the developed universal narratives deliberately avoided addressing specific sectors, brands, or localities, which could impede or prevent actors from seeing connections between themselves and a universal narrative. As the hub director explained:

Our role was to see how do we convene all the different brands. And so, in order to do that, you’ve got to be unbranded. But the challenge of that is that it’s harder to raise money or it’s harder to do sometimes those sorts of things [events] because you are unbranded. (interview)

To enable different sectors and localities to participate in the SDG2 Advocacy Hub, the universal narratives avoided the specificity of idiosyncratic pasts or local challenges. Therefore, universal narratives around the SDG2 Advocacy Hub instantiated a big picture of the distant future that was to invoke commitment to action in the present. For example, the hub leader articulated the importance of distancing from the past and committing to sustainability as a goal to be reached in the distant future: “If we continue to do what we are doing now, we are going to be in big, big trouble” (field note). In doing so, universal narratives contributed to actors’ commitment to tackling SDG2 by articulating a universal call to act that is difficult to ignore.

Nevertheless, universal narratives carried a potential to spur resistance to commit to SDG2. These narratives were abstract and, as such, detached from actors’ idiosyncratic local challenges, interests, and goals. Consequently, it was *difficult* for some hub members *to attach the distant future* conveyed through universal narratives *to the experienced present* in their day-to-day activities. Therefore, the hub leader highlighted that telling these grand stories alone is not enough for generating commitment to tackling SDG2. As he argued, achieving sustainable future can only happen:

if we [also] align our goals and combine our expertise ... partner in new ways within and outside of our sectors ... campaign effectively, engage a wider community and advocate for governments to commit to policy decisions, funding, and actions that will provide a measurable impact. (SDG2 Advocacy Hub website)

This created need for sharing situated narratives, which we turn to next.

Commitment through Situated Narratives

Situated narratives are fragmented stories about actors' manifold lived experiences with, and local initiatives to tackle a grand challenge that construct the future as "us moving forward." The temporal direction of situated narratives thus brings the present forward into the future. Compared to universal narratives, these stories have a shorter time horizon, focusing attention on the present and near future of actors' idiosyncratic local initiatives. Hence, through the articulation of local initiatives and here-and-now experiences as "moving us forward" into the future, situated narratives contribute to actors' commitment to tackling a grand challenge by accomplishing a collective sense of change being under way thanks to a distributed actors' local engagement.

The mobilizing potential of universal narratives spurred great hopes to have an impact concerning the achievement of SDG2. However, uniting the manifold experiences of actors under the umbrella of SDG2 was a great challenge, as discussing them using the language in the UN document did not help local actors connect to the goals in any meaningful way. The hub director explained:

How do we create ways for them to understand more what they can contribute, and how they can contribute, and what that looks like? So, the idea [the role of the advocacy hub] there is to host participation ... [to provide a platform that enables them] to describe what they're doing. (interview)

Therefore, an important function of the SDG2 Advocacy Hub's events and shared materials was to provide a forum for participants to share situated narratives. Specifically, the hub members reflected their lived present and near future in their respective organizations and local initiatives by highlighting actions being taken, events taking place, reports being launched, and other resources being put to use while working on hunger issues.

The SDG2 Advocacy hub website regularly disseminated situated narratives in which actors from various fields described their local initiatives and more recent achievements, adding up to approximately 150 local narratives in two years. For example, hub members would share their story about their local initiatives under the compelling heading "1 in 3 children are under-nourished or overweight." Another situated narrative displayed on the hub's website highlighted specific change efforts at a forthcoming event in Stockholm:

Save our food. Invest in female farmers. Right now. Stockholm is the place to be for anyone interested in solving one of the biggest challenges of our time: How do we transform our food system so that it nurtures both human health and our environment? This week, thousands of leaders and innovators are gathering for the annual EAT Food Forum. With ideas as varied as lab-grown meat, climate-smart agriculture and innovative financing, participants will tackle the question of how to transform our food system to accomplish both goals.

As illustrated here, the fragmented, situated narratives generated by different actors affiliated with the hub provided examples of *local initiatives* ("EAT Food Forum") with limited to the present and near future ("this week") time horizons that aimed at *moving toward a sustainable future* (e.g., "accomplish both goals" of nurturing "both human health and our environment"). In doing so, they reinforced calls to *commit to tackling the grand challenge* ("Save our food. ... Right

now”) by *showcasing the breadth of support* for extant work on SDG2 (“thousands of leaders and innovators”).

However, the situated narratives were highly pluralistic, given that they shared insights into idiosyncratic local efforts. This “create[d] a very flexible and fluid kind of conversation” (Interview). This fluidity made it difficult for actors involved in the hub’s events weave the narratives together as in a unified effort that is directed toward achieving SDG2. It, thus, constantly sowed seeds for actors’ commitment to break down, as they lost sense of the contributions that local initiatives could make for a sustainable future to arise.

Commitment through Bridging Narratives

The hub had to find a way to bring together the universal and situated narratives to establish a collective, shared commitment to tackling SDG2. To that end, the hub developed and shared bridging narratives, i.e., stories that interweave universal and situated narratives. Bridging narratives thus relate the focus of the local initiatives on the present and near future to the distant future of the overarching SDG2 2030 time horizon. Consequently, bridging narratives are “multitemporal” in that they bring together the present and near future as well as the distant future; and they are both forward- and backward-oriented in that they connect the local initiatives that “move humanity toward” reaching the future that is “coming upon humanity.” In doing so, bridging narratives contribute to actors’ commitment to tackling a grand challenge by giving meaning to local initiatives as important components of broader efforts aimed at achieving sustainable development.

The hub members created bridging narratives based on several critical questions:

Given these goals are here, what does that look like on the ground? [Who] are the people doing great work? How do we connect and highlight what they’re doing? How do we bring that together? ... Let’s think how we can do that so that we can bring a conversation that connects the two. (interview)

Making such connections was a challenge, as it meant working through multiple, complementary, and partially contradicting temporal dimensions at once. Bringing together actors’ local experiences of the present and near future with a broader distant future was essential to ensuring the relevance and effectiveness of the hub’s advocacy by solidifying participants’ commitment to tackling the grand challenge.

The hub, therefore, constituted a space for the negotiation of temporalities between universal and situated narratives. For example, the hub’s website served as a key platform for presenting bridging narratives and making them visible. The following bridging narrative on 1,000 Days, published on the website in 2019, serves as a paradigmatic example. This narrative described the organization as driving:

greater action and investment to improve nutrition for women and children in the U.S. and around the world. 1,000 Days serves as the Secretariat of the International Coalition for Advocacy on Nutrition (ICAN). ... ICAN includes a broad range of international NGOs, advocacy organizations, and foundations all working around the shared goal of ending hunger and malnutrition in all its forms by 2030. Through ICAN, organizations collaborate on

advocacy efforts focused on securing political and financial commitments to end malnutrition in all its forms everywhere ... To build on the success of the 2013 N4G, 1,000 Days will be leading ICAN in its global advocacy efforts as we work towards the 2020 Nutrition for Growth Summit, which will be hosted by the Government of Japan in Tokyo. Not only will many of the commitments made in 2013 be running out, but 2020 will mark the start of the final decade to reach SDG 2. The 2020 N4G Summit will be crucial to mobilize new SMART commitments in response to the ongoing global need, bringing us closer to achieving SDG2 by 2030.

This bridging narrative interweaves a *situated narrative* about 1,000 Day's local initiatives ("serves as the Secretariat of...") and a *universal narrative* about SDG2 ("shared goal of ending hunger and malnutrition in all its forms"). Hence, the bridging narrative is "*multitemporal*," as it brings together the *present and near future* of the organization's local initiatives ("the 2020 Nutrition for Growth Summit") with the *distant future* attached to SDG2 ("2030"). Furthermore, the narrative is *forward-oriented* by positioning the organization's local initiatives as moving humanity forward ("bringing us closer to achieving SDG2 by 2030"); and it is *backward-oriented* by referring to the future that is coming upon humanity ("ending hunger [...] by 2030"). Consequently, the bridging narrative contributes to actors' *commitment* by *giving sense* to 1,000 Day's local initiatives as important components of collective efforts aimed at tackling SDG2.

Despite these contributions to actors' commitment, doubts remained if actors' individual and collaborative efforts will suffice for reaching the goal and the positive future it captured. The continual emergence of local initiatives under the umbrella of SDG2 created an *ongoing need for connecting and reconnecting local and situated* narratives so as to gain and sustain hub members' commitment. In response, the hub launched an online event calendar. In this calendar, the hub members shared and described their local initiatives. Users of the calendar could learn about these initiatives based on categorization functions, which grouped initiatives around their contributions to SDG2's sub-goals. Thus, the calendar became a central (and highly visible) connecting point for weaving together situated narratives about local SDG2 initiatives at specific points in time with the big picture, universal narratives about SDG2.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Our findings from a case study of the SDG2 Advocacy Hub reflect the importance of crafting and disseminating narratives in gaining and sustaining commitment for tackling grand challenges. Narratives have the power to continually attract and engage actors with varied expertise and interests across organizational boundaries, thereby promoting collective sensemaking and way-finding. In doing so, they contribute to continually (re)gaining actors' commitment to tackle the grand challenge in a context of fluid participation.

Based on our analysis, we identified three types of narratives with distinct temporalities through which commitment to tackling grand challenges through fluid forms of organizing is constituted: universal, situated, and bridging. *Universal narratives* refer to grand stories that describe and reflect a grand challenge and its widespread impact. Inherent in these stories are distant futures, i.e., anticipated

large-scale events with a longer time horizon. These distant futures cast a shadow on the present in that they “come upon humanity,” i.e., they gleam backward from the distant future into the present. Because universal narratives depict the universal impact of a grand challenge on social life, they contribute to actors’ commitment to tackling the grand challenge by issuing a call to act that is difficult to resist. However, they also instill potentials for resisting commitment in that abstract stories about events happening in the distant future remain largely detached from the experienced present.

Situated narratives are partially fragmented stories that describe and reflect actors’ lived experiences of the grand challenge, as well as their own initiatives, which are bound to their specific local situations. These stories build on actors’ experienced present and the near future by instantiating locally shared, in-the-moment understandings of the yet-to-come, as well as small-scale initiatives that aim to move humanity toward overcoming the grand challenge. Therefore, they have a forward-oriented “present toward the future” framing of tackling grand challenges. Situated narratives thus contribute to actors’ commitment to tackling the grand challenge by conveying widespread efforts to move forward as each local actor attempts to provide idiosyncratic solutions. However, they also spur doubts concerning the extent to which these situated efforts are sufficient to tackle the grand challenge as a complex, large-scale challenge, given that their experienced present and near future appear rather disconnected from the distant future produced in universal narratives. Therefore, such stories may potentially undermine actors’ commitment.

Bridging narratives are stories that interweave universal and situated narratives. In doing so, these stories are “multitemporal,” i.e., they reflect, reproduce, and connect actors’ experienced present with near and distant futures. As a result, bridging narratives are both backward- and forward-oriented. They are backward-oriented when the aimed future is brought toward and accounted for in the present activities and forward-oriented when the present activities are aimed toward future. The back-and-forth connection points to how the different efforts to “move humanity toward” the overcoming of the grand challenge contributes to tackling, and thereby modifying, “what is coming upon humanity.” Bridging narratives thus contribute to actors’ commitment to tackling a grand challenge by giving sense to their local efforts by embedding these within broader efforts, and by imbuing grand challenges with local meanings. However, these stories are effortful in that they must be (re)told so as to underline connections between temporalities. Therefore, a key challenge is to sustain commitment through an ongoing sharing of bridging narratives.

Our findings make several contributions at the intersection of grand challenges and fluid forms of organizing. Next, we elaborate on these contributions.

Temporality of Narratives and Commitment to Grand Challenges in Fluid Forms of Organizing

Prior research on grand challenges highlights the limits of conventional forms of organizing as ways to coordinate efforts to tackle these complex, large-scale, and

intractable societal problems (e.g., [George et al., 2016](#); [Grodal & O'Mahony, 2017](#)). In doing so, this literature directs our attention to fluid forms of organizing (e.g., [Brès et al., 2018](#); [Schreyögg & Sydow, 2010](#)) aimed at bringing together heterogeneous sets of actors with diverse expertise and interests to foster a shared understanding of grand challenges and to collectively find ways forward. However, juxtaposing grand challenges and fluid forms of organizing also reveals a challenge: whereas their nonbinding nature enables these important preconditions for tackling grand challenges, it may also undermine such efforts due to a lack of commitment.

Our paper shows how the temporality of narratives produced actors' commitment to tackling grand challenges in a hub as a fluid form of organizing. Specifically, our findings unveil the important role of future-oriented stories in mobilizing actors' "movement toward" addressing grand challenges that are "coming upon us." Universal, situated, and bridging narratives attract actors to collective efforts to address grand challenges, embed actors' situated efforts in a broader stream of activities, and give sense to continuing these efforts. In doing so, narratives foster and reinforce actors' commitment without compromising the fluidity required to tackle these large-scale problems through local initiatives.

These observations are important because they provide insights into an essential component for tackling grand challenges through fluid forms of organizing. Left unaddressed, the fluidity inherent in less conventional forms of organizing can undermine the commitment needed for collective efforts to tackle grand challenges. By surfacing the important role of narratives for gaining and sustaining commitment in fluid forms of organizing, our findings enable a better understanding of how fluid forms of organizing can contribute to tackle grand challenges.

These insights have significant implications for organization and management research more generally. Specifically, they indicate ways forward concerning the relevance of our discipline. That is, if organization and management researchers want to contribute to tackling grand challenges by identifying ways to coordinate such efforts ([George et al., 2016](#)), and if fluid forms of organizing are promising candidates in this regard (see [Brès et al., 2018](#); [Grodal & O'Mahony, 2017](#)), it follows that we should explore more fully the dilemmas, challenges, and paradoxes that surface around more fluid forms of organizing in change processes. Drawing on [Meretoja's \(2017, p. 50\)](#) assertion that "narratives are inevitably ethically and politically charged," and as such, "do not merely open up, ... [but] also close down possibilities," our findings invite reflection on the two-sided power effects of narratives in organizing commitment to change, not just for grand challenges, but also for other problematic causes and ideas. As powerful tools for spanning temporal differences across diverse actors, narratives are not neutral: they provide "certain evaluative, affectively colored perspectives to the world" ([Meretoja, 2017, p. 50](#)). We encourage researchers to examine these power dynamics in greater detail in future research.

The Temporality of Narratives in Tackling Grand Challenges

Extant research on grand challenges has begun to unravel the temporality involved in tackling these problems, yet has produced inconclusive findings. On one hand,

this research largely relates to the SDGs, which direct attention toward grand challenges by establishing large-scale targets for the achievement of sustainable futures in 2030 (George et al., 2016). On the other hand, nascent work highlights small-scale orientations toward the present as important contributors to the tackling of grand challenges, given that they vividly direct attention toward grand challenges as a matter of actors' lived day-to-day experiences (Kim, Bansal, & Haugh, 2019).

Our findings suggest that the tackling of grand challenges requires both large-scale future targets *and* here-and-now, in-the-moment experiences. Specifically, our findings unveil the complementarity in creating narratives of "distant futures" that highlight large-scale goals and events that are "coming upon us" to attract widespread attention to and participation in tackling grand challenges, as well as narratives of "situated futures" that highlight locally shared understandings and enactments of the yet-to-come that "move us toward" overcoming grand challenges by acting in the present. Yet, our findings also indicate that, despite their complementarity, these temporal dimensions alone may be insufficient for tackling grand challenges because local initiatives that are embedded in the present and near future may remain largely disconnected from universal visions based on distant futures. This disconnect may cause actors to attach a fatalist sense of meaninglessness to these initiatives, thereby undermining their commitment to tackling the grand challenge.

These observations are important, because they point to a critical but underappreciated task involved in tackling grand challenges: connecting multiple temporalities through various forms of organizing. As our findings show, tackling grand challenges involves considering both the future and the present through universal and situated narratives, and linking them through bridging narratives. Thus, our findings extend burgeoning work on the temporality of tackling grand challenges (e.g., George et al., 2016; Kim et al., 2019) by highlighting the complementarity of partly competing temporalities involved in this process as well as the importance of connecting these temporalities.

These insights imply that researchers who are interested in the temporality of tackling grand challenges should consider "multitemporality," i.e., the plurality of connected temporalities, rather than foregrounding either the present or the future. Prior work has referred to "ambitemporality" to denote efforts to work through conflicts between competing temporalities (Reinecke & Ansari, 2015). In contrast, our paper shows how narratives allow connecting competing temporalities in ways that give sense to both locally relevant and broader cross organizational aims to tackle grand challenges. Hence, narratives enable the bringing together of competing temporalities into a coherent multitemporal whole, as in our case, without conflicts arising. In this sense, the notion of multitemporality extends understanding of how temporalities unfold in the tackling of grand challenges. We hope that future research will reveal additional, perhaps not only discursive or narrative, but also visual, material, spatial, bodily, and other multimodal practices (Höllerer et al., 2019) that connect temporalities, thereby facilitating commitment to the tackling of grand challenges in fluid forms of organizing.

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