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Airport Service Providers in Support of SDGs

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Abstract: This pilot study investigates the contributions of an airport service provider from Romania specializing in ground handling, operations, and passenger services towards achieving the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Recognizing the critical role of service providers in the aviation ecosystem, this research focuses on how operational practices can be optimized to support sustainability objectives. It also reveals how businesses can leverage achievements and internal policies that would fit under, and support, SDGs. The study covers the operations of an airport service provider at several airports across the country. Through a series of qualitative questionnaires and interviews with employees, the research identifies best practices and challenges in aligning airport services with the SDGs. The study underscores the importance of collaboration between service providers, airport authorities, and regulatory bodies to achieve sustainable outcomes. By providing practical recommendations and a framework for sustainable operations, this pilot study aims to guide airport service providers in contributing to the global sustainability agenda, demonstrating the potential for meaningful impact in the aviation sector.

Keywords: SDGs; services industry; aviation and the environment; sustainable human resources management; airport services

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1. Introduction

In 2015, the United Nations proposed the 2030 Agenda, which, with its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), calls on all 193 UN member states to take appropriate action by 2030 [1]. The 17 SDGs were developed considering the three main dimensions of sustainable development, namely the social, economic, and environmental [2]. These dimensions are called the triple bottom line of sustainable development (SD), a concept proposed in the early 1980s [3]. Thus, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development integrates the three dimensions of SD around people, planet, prosperity, peace, and partnership [4]. The 17 SDGs are: no poverty; zero hunger; good health and well-being; quality education; gender equality; clean water and sanitation; affordable and clean energy; decent work and economic growth; industry, innovation, and infrastructure; reduced inequalities; sustainable cities and communities; responsible consumption and production; climate action; life underwater and life on land; peace, justice, and strong institutions; and partnership for the goals [5].

With respect to aviation, we note that the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) as the UN aviation agency links 15 out of the 17 SGD to the strategic objectives of the organization. Out of these 15 SDGs, environment and economic development are common to all but one objective. This highlights the strong link between aviation and the global economy, while addressing the impact on climate change and the relevant mitigation measures.

ICAO is also the agency responsible for the global indicator 9.1.2, which covers passenger and freight volumes by mode of transport as part of the 2030 Agenda, and is an

official observer in the Inter-agency and Expert Group on Sustainable Development Goal Indicators. As such, ICAO makes consistent contributions to the monitoring efforts of the 2030 Agenda [6].

The United Nations 2030 Agenda naturally provides a common language for all participating countries, but at the same time it is also a guide for action at sector level as well as for companies and non-governmental organizations [7].

Prior to the adoption of the 2030 Agenda, the European Union's Directive 2014/95/EU required that non-financial statements be added to the annual reports of EU companies, relating to the companies' policies on social and environmental impacts as well as respect for human rights, diversity on the company's board and anti-corruption and anti-bribery measures [8]. The updated Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (2022/2464) also included requirements on the United Nations SDGs, which prescribe reporting on quantitative indicators on progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals and concrete strategies on environmental, social and governance (ESG) [9].

Some studies show that companies are increasingly aware of the positive impact of their contribution to more sustainable socio-economic systems [10] and that they are looking for the most effective ways to engage in sustainability and environmental and social progress [11].

In this context, the role of companies' human resources in achieving sustainable development goals is increasingly being researched [12] In recent years, there has been increasing talk of "sustainable human resources management (HRM)" [13]. The proliferation of research on sustainable HRM in the last decade has shown that the term "sustainability" can be used to describe various aspects of the HRM practices relevant to it.

The practical relevance of the SDGs for companies and HRM is becoming increasingly clear. The International Labor Organization (ILO) has developed the concept of "people-centered" HRM to support the achievement of the SDGs [14], such as SDG 8 (sustainable economic growth and decent work for all). This concept is based on the argument that concern for human well-being, social justice and dialog directly contribute to achieving long-term competitiveness, economic prosperity and building a sustainable future. Therefore, linking HR practices to the SDGs is increasingly common in the business world [15]. For example, many companies report on their efforts to increase the proportion of women in leadership positions and link this to SDG 5 "Gender Equality". However, most studies examine management efforts to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals, including in the area of human resources, and not the direct relationship between employees and the SDGs.

We are addressing via this study and our questionnaire the employees' awareness of the SDGs together with their perception of the effectiveness of the various measures that the company has undertaken in this regard. Our approach provides a unique opportunity to test also whether measures taken by company that were not qualified per se as being in support of SDGs are in fact perceived by the employees as positive steps in that direction. The environment, social and governance (ESG) variables used in the questionnaire are presented in Appendix A.

Consequently, the present study has the following research questions: RQ1—To what extent are employees aware of the aims proposed by SDGs and, if aware, what is their relationship with these goals? RQ2—How do employees perceive the company's efforts towards the SDGs?

This paper is organized into five sections. In the next section, we discuss the relationship between sustainability and employee engagement, looking into how employees relate to ESG goals. We also present an overview of sustainability in the aviation industry, highlighting the efforts of airlines to contribute to SDGs, which makes the transition to airports and airport service providers' efforts towards sustainable development. This section covers the methodology and data collection elements, including an explanation regarding the qualitative and quantitative dimensions explored. The observations are discussed under the third section—results—which covers the data collection and the employee

survey outcome. The fourth section provides a discussion about the alignment between the company's sustainability initiatives and the targeted SDGs along the three directions observed, namely environment, social, and governance. Finally, we conclude by showing what is done well, what are the main challenges, and what are some of the measures the airport service provider could undertake to further its commitment and contribution to SDGs in the fifth section.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Sustainability and Employee Engagement: The Key to ESG Success

The inclusion of the social dimension alongside the environmental and economic dimensions represented a significant development of the concept of sustainability that was first introduced. The seminal Brundtland Report [16] outlined the basic principles of sustainable development and emphasized the central role of human capital development in improving economic efforts and promoting the longevity of organizations and communities. Subsequently, interest in exploring the links between sustainability and human resources (HR) grew [17]. Thus, HR can play a central role in the sustainability of organizations, referring to the contribution that employees can make to organizations. It is argued that employees play a role in creating and maintaining a sustainable competitive edge [18]. Furthermore, the voluntary behaviors of organizational members can promote the global integration of sustainable practices into day-to-day operations, thus improving the company's sustainability performance [19].

For the purposes of this article, it is of interest to examine how employees relate to the ESG goals (environmental, social and governance) that the company pursues. To this end, in Appendix A we have mapped the questions from the employee questionnaire to each one of the three ESG dimensions.

Companies face increasing pressure to integrate ESG practices to comply with regulations, attract investments, deliver expected benefits and meet the demands of shareholders, customers and other stakeholders. ESG management requires significant allocation of resources and substantial organizational change [20]. ESG is also introduced as a critical element that should be considered by investors in their investment decisions, particularly as non-financial aspects that could impact financial performance [21]. The 'E' component, which stands for environment, refers to how organizations impact the natural environment during their operational activities. This includes resources, energy consumption, waste management, greenhouse gas emissions, carbon footprint and recycling of resources. The 'S' aspect, which focuses on society, assesses a company's effectiveness in fulfilling its social responsibilities. This includes aspects such as human rights, community engagement, labor practices, employment conditions and consumer safety and protection. Finally, the 'G' element, which stands for governance, refers to the degree of transparency of management practices [22]. Employees should have the ability and resources to influence ESG policy [23]. In this way, employees can play an important role in driving companies toward socially responsible efforts [24]. In addition, companies that adopt improved ESG practices may be perceived as more attractive to potential and current employees [25]. Understanding how ESG initiatives change a company's ethical environment and influence employee attitudes and behavior within an ESG-driven ethical framework is of paramount importance for all companies [26]. Employee engagement plays a crucial role in the successful implementation of ESG initiatives. The active involvement of employees is essential for achieving significant advancements in these endeavors. Accordingly, it is imperative to accurately assess the level of employee engagement as a key component of leaders' strategic overview. ESG encompasses more than mere aspirations; it entails the development of a concrete and actionable strategy that drives tangible outcomes [23].

2.2. Sustainability and the Airline Industry

Despite the decline caused by the pandemic, the airline industry is making a strong comeback, according to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals report of 28 June 2024 [27].

According to the report, airlines recorded losses of 370 billion dollars as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic after the number of international passengers fell by sixty per cent in 2020. Moreover, 115 billion dollars were lost to airports and 13 billion dollars to air navigation service providers.

The year 2022 marked the beginning of a robust recovery, when the number of passengers reached 73% and revenue 87% of 2019 levels. In the period from 2021 to 2022, airlines' annual passenger revenue increased by a remarkable 44%. The airline industry is expected to surpass the 2019 level in 2024, marking a full recovery and re-entering the growth path it had experienced before the pandemic. Furthermore, is estimated that the aviation industry will employ 87.7 million people worldwide in 2024, creating a direct and indirect economic impact of $3.5 trillion, equivalent to 4.1% of global GDP [28].

In their study, Tanrıverdi et al. (2023) [29] analyse the sustainability of airlines by comparing the financial, operational and environmental preferences and performance of 56 international airlines. They conduct an analysis of studies conducted in the period 2008–2023 that analyse the performance of airlines. It is worth noting that in the aviation industry, airlines have been at the forefront of climate action.

Similarly, airport operators oversee an activity that has a significant economic, social and environmental impact. For this reason, the sector is strongly affected by the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the enforcement of certain regulations, such as EU Directive 2014/95. This directive requires large companies to publish a non-financial disclosure that demonstrates the increasing link between their efforts to achieve economic and financial stability and their commitment to sustainable development [30].

For at least two decades, researchers have been searching for techniques to assess the sustainability performance of airport operators. Upham and Mills (2005) [31] were pioneers in proposing a benchmarking system for airports based on a set of basic indicators to assess environmental and operational sustainability. Janic (2010) [32] proposed an initial approach to developing a methodology for assessing the sustainable development of an airport. The system he developed is based on indicators that measure the operational, economic, social and environmental performance of the airport. These indicators include the benefits associated with the airport's impact on local employment and GDP, as well as external factors such as noise, air pollution, congestion, land use and waste. Recently, some studies have developed and used specific indices to assess and compare the sustainability performance of airports. Koç and Durmaz (2015) [33] analyzed the reporting practises of 10 airports using Elkington's triple bottom line framework, which considers economic, environmental and social aspects. Kılkıs¸ and Kılkıs¸ (2016) [34] developed a composite index to examine 9 airports, while Olfat et al. (2016) [35] used data envelopment analysis to examine the sustainable development of 28 airports. Chao et al. (2017) [36] created a model to evaluate the environmental performance of 5 international airports. Lu et al. (2018) [37] introduced a sustainability-balanced scorecard, which was modified to evaluate the performance of airports and promote their sustainable development. This scorecard was introduced at three airports in Taiwan. Wang and Song (2020) [38] analysed the sustainability performance of 8 Chinese airports and 4 other representative Asian airports using the sustainability standards set by the 2021 Global Reporting Initiatives. In their study, Sreenath et al. (2021) [39] assessed the sustainability performance of 39 airport operators in Southeast Asia based on their compliance with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This study assesses the level of sustainable development achieved by the AOs by analysing their officially prepared and published reports describing the activities and results pursued and achieved.

Conversely, this paper discusses airport service providers' contributions to SDGs, a similar approach to that which the airports apply, not least because the service providers are based at the airport, hence directly concerned and influencing the overall performance of the airport industry vis-à-vis sustainable practices.

The present research harmoniously combines two research methods: (a) the case study as a qualitative method [40], which lends itself to the study of a phenomenon in its natural context [41] and allows an in-depth study of the complexity and specificities of an organization from multiple perspectives [42]; and (b) a quantitative study aimed at identifying employees' awareness of the aims proposed by the SDGs and their assessment of the extent to which the company they work for is committed to achieving the SDG goals.

For the purposes of this analysis, we focused on eight SDGs, namely no poverty (SDG#1); quality education (SDG#4); gender equality (SDG#5); affordable and clean energy (SDG#7); decent work and economic growth (SDG#8); industry, innovation, and infrastructure (SDG#9); reduced inequalities (SDG#10); climate action (SDG#13).

We decided to select the eight SDGs above after analyzing several annual reports of airports, including that of the airport of Vancouver, Canada [43] and of the airport of Munich, Germany [44]. Moreover, we looked into the correlation between airport sustainability parameters and SDGs [39] from the perspective of the relevant activities of the airport service provider, which are more specific and significantly narrower than those of the airport operator. For example, we noted that whereas in terms of environmental impact assessment there are various tools available to the airports [45], this is not the case for airport service providers or for other airport stakeholders for this matter. Conversely, at first glance, SDG #11 (Sustainable cities) should have been included in the analysis, too. However, for practical reasons, we decided against this. Whereas we completely agree that airports are important gateways to the city they serve, driving direct, indirect, induced, and catalytic economic benefits of high order to the city and between regions thanks to the route network they enable and the influx of passengers, the focus of our study is the airport service provider. The service provider represents a sub-system of the airport ecosystem of stakeholders. While the airport service provider fulfils a function that supports the airport thus indirectly SDG #11, the main driver of the development under this goal is the airport itself, and not the individual stakeholder.

From a scope perspective, we note that SDGs may be grouped into three axes: social, environmental, and governance (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Representation by Barta et al. (2023) [46], based on Rockstroem (2017).

The 2024 UN General Assembly paper by the Economic and Social Council presents a status update on the implementation of the SDGs from a global perspective. Whereas the scope of the present study provides insights from a specific company and sector and might not capture broader systemic issues highlighted at the macro level, it is important to note what is the current situation world-wide when discussing the level of implementation of the SDGs.

We should stress that macro improvement is a sum of micro developments in the right direction by the many economic actors. Therefore, we will present first the big picture and subsequently analyze how one airport service provider, as an exponent of the economic ecosystem, can contribute to the well-being of the many.

Similarly, if all economic actors were to undertake appropriate action, however little, it is only then that we could globally reach the objectives of the SDGs within the very short time frame remaining until 2030. We must acknowledge that some measures depend directly on government action, yet this aspect is not covered by our study. We would like nonetheless to mention that, as pointed out by Glass, L.M. & Newig, J. (2019) [47], governance remains a controversial topic and there is no unitary view on what it would, or should, entail. Although with the limitation that it applies to OECD and rich EU countries, the study by the authors above shows a positive relationship with goal achievement and SDG #4, SDG#5, SDG #7, SDG #9 and SDG #10 we have analysed in this study, and further demonstrates that GDP per capita is a very good predictor showing that economic power strongly correlates with the achievement of several of the goals. UN itself acknowledges that "multi-stakeholder partnerships as important vehicles for mobilizing and sharing knowledge, expertise, technologies and financial resources to support the achievement of the SDGs in all countries, particularly developing countries" [48].

The following is a global analysis of the three axes mentioned above—social, environmental, and governance—contained to aspects relevant to, or under the direct control of, a service provider. This is not an exhaustive overview of each axis since it would fall outside the scope of the current paper, which is an applied study.

Regarding the social axis, we note that the global outlook is rather bleak. This is due to insufficient resources and systemic challenges in vulnerable regions, coupled with a slow pace of implementation and marginal improvements due inter alia to insufficient investments in active measures and policies and a lack of professional development opportunities.

The environmental axis does not fare much better. Despite some reductions in greenhouse gas emissions in developed countries, global emissions remain high, and progress towards mitigating climate change remains insufficient. There is an urgent need for enhanced global efforts to transition to net-zero emissions and implement climate-resilient practices. Current initiatives are falling short, and accelerated action is required to meet the targets set for 2030.

Regarding the governance axis, income inequalities within and among countries have widened over the recent years, with the gap between richest and poorest continuing to grow. Addressing inequalities requires investment in education and skills development, and strong social protection measures.

Finally, as highlighted by López-Pérez et al. (2018) [49], by evaluating the company's effectiveness in implementing measures that support the SDGs and clearly communicating to stakeholders how the company's mission, vision, and values align with these goals and corporate social responsibility (CSR), the company's perception and awareness of sustainability can be significantly enhanced. The alignment of the appropriate SDGs to the company's mission and goals is what will provide the utmost benefits to the company, whether directly or indirectly, via stakeholder perception [45]. This is also the reason we have selected the eight most relevant SDGs for our case study.

In terms of methodological aspects of the case study method, the case study shed light on a specific topic (awareness and commitment to the SDGs) in order to provide a detailed explanation. Most case studies are inductive [50], so this study was also designed based

on interviews, observations and document analysis. In this way, the case study method is used to investigate the SDG practices in an aviation services company.

Regarding sampling size and data saturation, a smaller sample is generally used in qualitative studies than in quantitative research [50]. The purpose of sampling is to collect information that is useful for understanding the complexity of a process or possible difficulties or other in-depth aspects that are more difficult to identify with a quantitative approach. The generally recommended standard for qualitative research is to collect data until the saturation point is reached [51].

There is no consensus regarding the number of participants in qualitative research. Some researchers recommend less than 20 participants [52] or even 10 for homogeneous participants [53]. The case study we conducted involved interviewing the management team. The 7 interviews conducted considered the total number of managers in the company of 9, and the aim to reach saturation, i.e., reaching the point where no more new information is generated. Therefore, data saturation is considered the unanimously accepted standard for the validity of qualitative research [54].

Our data collection took advantage of triangulation by conducting interviews in person, online and by telephone [55]. The interviews were semi-structured, with the researchers creating an interview guide but allowing interviewees to express themselves outside of the framework provided by the interview guide.

The interview participants and their position in the organization are listed in Table 1.

Table 1. The sample used for the qualitative research.

No.	Participant ID	Level of Responsibility	Base of Operations	Seniority in the Company (Years)	Department
1	MAN1	Middle management	HQ	10+	Operations
2	MAN2	Middle management	HQ	10+	Technic and Purchase
3	MAN3	Middle management	HQ	10+	Human resources
4	MAN4	esTop management	HQ	10+	Executive
5	MAN5	Middle management	Other	10+	Operations
6	MAN6	Middle management	HQ	10+	Administrative
7	MAN7	Middle management	HQ	10+	Operations

The data collected in the interviews was confirmed or supplemented by our own observations (study of the company's website and the behavior of employees) and by studying official documents or press articles.

The study employed a mixed-methods approach, utilizing both quantitative and qualitative data collection techniques to gather comprehensive insights into the sustainability practices of the company, and included a structured questionnaire. This questionnaire was administered to employees across various departments, including ramp operations, passenger services and operational support, at multiple airport locations, as well as at the HQ. The questionnaire consisted of 29 questions, segmented into three primary categories: environmental, social, and governance (ESG). Each question was designed to align with specific Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), such as SDG 1 (No poverty), SDG 4 (Quality education), SDG 5 (Gender equality), SDG 7 (Affordable and clean energy), SDG 8 (Decent work and economic growth), SDG 9 (Industry, innovation, and infrastructure), SDG 10 (reduced inequalities), and SDG 13 (Climate action). Responses were captured using a Likert scale ranging from "Strongly Agree" to "Strongly Disagree" and from "Extremely Important" to "Not Important at All", providing a nuanced understanding of employee perceptions and attitudes towards the company's sustainability efforts.

The results of these methods are described in the Results and Discussion section.

3. Results

The studies were conducted over a period of one week in July 2024. Analyzing the management interviews and employee survey reveals provided a mixed understanding of

the airport service provider's engagement with the SDGs. The management and employees display significant awareness of the SDGs. However, their familiarity varies across the different groups and departments and across different levels of the company. The managers recognize the efforts made by the company towards sustainability, they also highlight several challenges, especially the financial constraints, a somewhat limited collaboration with authorities, and the fact that there should be systematic approach to gathering and implementing employee initiatives. On the other hand, employees regard the airport service provider's sustainability efforts rather positively. They appear to link much of this success to existing procedures and regulations, although these are not explicitly identified as SDGs.

This understanding is explained by the repeated exposure of personnel to SDG-related informational materials and training sessions over the past several months, emerging from both the organization and airport internal policies and procedures. These policies and procedures have been brought to the attention of all employees as per national and international regulations in place and the industry's need to comply with trends in regard to the environmental, social and governance axes.

Despite the optimistic outlook shared by both groups regarding the future of sustainability at the company, several areas for improvement have been identified, with the following two standing out. First, there is a need to enhance communication for a better alignment of the airport service provider's efforts vis-a-vis SDGs and to make the link to SDGs more explicit to employees. Second, since both managers and employees saw opportunities in adopting green technologies, increasing energy efficiency, and promoting recycling policies, the company could translate this optimism into actionable strategies by addressing the financial and resource limitations both groups pointed out to, and through continuous education and an active engagement of staff around sustainability, which would enhance the company culture around this topic. If the airport service provider decides to proceed this way, it would achieve two key results, namely it would strengthen its commitment to SDGs, and it would drive more impactful sustainability initiatives, too.

3.1. Data Collection

3.1.1. Management Interviews

As part of the qualitative analysis of our study, we asked the mangers of the airport service provider a series of 17 questions. Out of a total of 9 managers, 7 participated in the survey, while 2 managers were on vacation, for a management participation rate of 78%.

When analyzing the answers of the managers, we looked at: awareness and familiarity with SDGs; perception of company's efforts; challenges and opportunities; and future sustainability efforts by the company.

- Awareness and familiarity with SDGs
  There is significant variation in the level of familiarity with the SDGs among the management team members, from moderately to very familiar, to slightly familiarity or not aware. This suggests a need for a consistent education and an aware-ness program dedicated to the management team. Regarding the importance of sustainability, some managers view it as essential, while others see it as less critical. This shows a different level of understanding and may reflect a cultural interpretation.
- Perception of company efforts
  The general consensus appears to be that additional investments and process improvements are necessary to achieve sustainability goals. Managers recognized the company's efforts towards sustainability, particularly in aligning with SDG #5 (Gender equality) and SDG #9 (Industry, innovation, and infrastructure). However, several challenges remain, including financial issues and the lack of a system to collect employee ideas and initiatives. The limited collaboration with authorities appeared as another challenge the company needs to overcome.
- Challenges and opportunities
  Three main challenges have been identified: the lack of financial resources, regulatory

compliance, and the absence of coherent initiatives. Managers noted that, while there are technologies available to improve sustainability, the high costs associated with these technologies limit their adoption. Regarding opportunities, the investments in green technologies may prove costly—yet others, such as employee education and awareness do not bear a heavy financial implication.

- Future sustainability efforts by the company
  Despite the challenges, the management team exhibited optimism about the future of sustainability at the airport service provider. This management also acknowledged that more resources, know-how, and a better-organized system for collecting and implementing employee ideas are all needed. Also, the answers showed that managers placed an important weight on the importance of creating a culture that encourages innovation and the proposal of new sustainable initiatives.

3.1.2. Employee Survey Results

From a total of 263 employees, we received 142 questionnaires or an average of 54% for the entire company, with participation by department as follows: 46% for ramp, 46% for operations, and 64% for passenger services.

The results reflect a generally positive employee opinion of the company's efforts to achieve sustainability goals, although there is room for improvement in all areas (Table 2). To evaluate the extent to which employees are aware of the goals proposed by the SDGs (RQ1) and to understand how they perceive the company's efforts toward these goals (RQ2), we used the average scores extracted from the survey responses. The data was processed from the final table containing employees' answers to various relevant questions for the SDGs.

Table 2. Employee survey interpretation.

Criteria	Total Employees	Responses Received	Response Rate
Employee participation	263	142	54%
Criteria	Ramp	Operations	Passenger Services
Department participation	46%	46%	64%
RQ1—Employee Awareness and Engagement with SDGs			
Question	Average Score	Interpretation	
To what extent do you agree that the company creates and implements plans to deal with climate change?	3.73	Moderate agreement on company's climate action plans	
To what extent do you agree that the company should participate in initiatives that help reduce pollution and carbon emissions?	4.18	Strong agreement on company's role in pollution reduction and carbon emissions	
How important is it for [company] to improve energy efficiency, reduce energy consumption and switch to green energy sources?	2.08	Low importance placed on improving energy efficiency	
To what extent do you agree that the company responsibly manages the waste generated from its activity?	4.13	Strong agreement on responsible waste management	
To what extent do you agree that the company implements specific measures to ensure a safe working environment for all its employees?	4.15	Strong agreement on workplace safety measures	
RQ2—Employee Perception of Company's Efforts Towards SDGs			
To what extent do you agree that the company implements flexible working policies to support the work-life balance of its employees?	3.73	Moderate agreement on flexible working policies	

Table 2. *Cont.*

Criteria	Total Employees	Responses Received	Response Rate
To what extent do you agree that the company remunerates its employees in line with market standards?	3.44	Moderate agreement on fair employee remuneration	
To what extent do you agree that the company cultivates a transparent communication framework between management and its own employees?	3.82	Moderate agreement on transparent communication	
To what extent do you agree that the company provides an environment where employees can actively participate in the decision-making process of the organization?	3.76	Moderate agreement on employee participation in decision-making	
To what extent do you agree that the company ensures the health and safety of all employees?	3.96	Strong agreement on health and safety measures	
Perception of Tangible Results in Sustainability			
Environment	3.67		Positive perception of environmental sustainability efforts, but room for improvement
Social	3.79		Positive perception of social sustainability efforts
Governance	3.71		Positive perception of governance sustainability efforts

We extracted data from the mentioned table, which contained individual employee responses to the survey questions. Each question had a set of answers on a Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The responses were organized in a tabular format, with each row representing an individual respondent and each column representing a survey question.

For each question, all individual responses were summed. This provided the total score for each question across all respondents. The total score for each question was then divided by the number of respondents who answered that question. This step provided the mean (average) score for each survey question.

The formula used for calculating the average score for each question is:

$$\text{Average Score} = \frac{\sum_{i=1}^{n} X_i}{n} \quad (1)$$

By calculating the average scores of responses to relevant questions, we obtained a clear picture of the level of awareness and perception of employees regarding company's efforts towards the SDGs. The average scores obtained were used to evaluate the level of awareness and the perception of employees regarding the company's efforts toward sustainability.

As highlighted above, it is noteworthy that the positive evaluation of the company's efforts by employees is largely due to the procedures and regulations in place, which are implemented at the company level without necessarily being explained as SDGs. Due to awareness campaigns and the application of existing regulations, the company tends to adhere to several SDG principles naturally and systematically.

Regarding the three directions (environmental, social and governance) of research, a Cronbach's Alpha statistical analysis was carried out. The results found in Table 3 indicate high reliability (Cronbach's Alpha > 0.7) and strong internal consistency between the questionnaire items.

Analyzing the employees' perception regarding the implementation of the SDGs within the company, several correlations were made regarding demographic data and various measures that fall under the three directions of action (environment, social and

governance). These analyzes revealed that there were statistically significant differences when demographics were considered. Thus, employees' perception of the implementation of the SDGs in the company is influenced by different socio-demographic factors.

Table 3. Cronbach's Alpha performed separately on the items of the three directions.

Cronbach's Alpha	Value
Environment	0.709
Social	0.953
Governance	0.083

Source: data from analysis.

Thus, considering the department in which the employees work, their perception of the company's implementation of measures to deal with climate change revealed that employees in the passenger service and ramp departments are more aware of the company's actions in the researched direction (Pearson Chi-square < 0.05) as can be observed in Table 4. At the same time, the results show that those who work in the passenger and ramp service department are more confident in the company's directions of action than those who work in operations.

Table 4. Perception of climate change mitigation measures by department.

	Scale	1	2	3	4	5	
Department							
	Passenger services	0	4	16	17	19	56
		0.0%	7.1%	28.6%	30.4%	33.9%	100.0%
	Operational	1	1	13	4	8	27
		3.7%	3.7%	48.1%	14.8%	29.6%	100.0%
	Ramp	0	2	16	30	11	59
		0.0%	3.4%	27.1%	50.8%	18.6%	100.0%
	Total	1	7	45	51	38	142
		0.7%	4.9%	31.7%	35.9%	26.8%	100.0%

Source: data from analysis.

Moreover, the Pearson Chi-Square (0.003) showed that the lower-level staff believe significantly more than the managers that the company implements such measures.

The second correlation analyzed whether there is a differentiation between the perception of lower-level employees and managerial staff regarding the implementation of policies related to equal opportunity and equal pay for work of similar value to employees as can be observed in Table 5. The result was statistically significant (Pearson Chi-Square < 0.05) and shows that managerial staff have a significantly higher perception than lower-level staff regarding the existence and implementation of these social measures.

The third correlation analyzed whether there is a differentiation between the perception of lower-level employees and managerial staff regarding the implementation of policies related to professional conduct and organizational culture. The result was statistically significant (Pearson Chi-Square < 0.05) and shows that the staff from both categories believe a lot and very much in a very high proportion (>80%) that such policies exist and are implemented in the company as can be observed in Table 6, but the management seems to be more convinced and to consider in an even more pronounced proportion that such policies are implemented in the company.

In conclusion, the answers correlate with the perceptions measured under RQ1 and RQ2.

Table 5. Managers' and lower-level employees' perception of company policies in relation to equal opportunities.

	Scale	1	2	3	4	5	
Level in the company	Managerial	1	1	0	1	9	12
		8.3%	8.3%	0.0%	8.3%	75.0%	100.0%
	Operational	3	7	14	58	48	130
		2.3%	5.4%	10.8%	44.6%	36.9%	100.0%
	Total	4	8	14	59	57	142
		2.8%	5.6%	9.9%	41.5%	40.1%	100.0%

Source: data from analysis.

Table 6. Managers' and lower-level employees' perception of the company's policies on professional conduct and organizational culture.

	Scale	2	3	4	5	
Level in the company	Managerial	0	1	2	9	12
		0.0%	8.3%	16.7%	75.0%	100.0%
	Operational	1	19	71	39	130
		0.8%	14.6%	54.6%	30.0%	100.0%
	Total	1	20	73	48	142
		0.7%	14.1%	51.4%	33.8%	100.0%

Source: data from analysis.

Awareness and relationship with the SDGs (RQ1): Employees are aware of the SDG goals and perceive that the company is making considerable efforts to achieve them, especially in the areas of pollution reduction and waste management.

Perception of the company's efforts (RQ2): Employees have a positive perception of the company's efforts towards the SDGs, highlighting health and safety policies, as well as transparent communication and employee participation.

4. Discussion

From an awareness perspective, the majority of the airport service provider's employees are aware of the SDGs, with varying levels of familiarity. Also, a significant proportion of the employees recognize the importance of the SDGs in their daily work, which is a positive finding. However, there is room for improvement in deepening their understanding of specific goals and their relevance to their daily work. At the same time, many employees recognize the importance of SDGs and believe that integrating them into the company strategy can lead to positive outcomes both for business and society.

If we consider the level of the current integration, there is a perception amongst employees that the company is making efforts to integrate SDGs into operations. Yet, some employees feel that these efforts could be more pronounced and visible. As is, the employees identified that the company's operations align most closely with environment and social areas, while the governance area needs improvement. This finding is a departure from what other authors found to be the case in the services industry. Barta et al. (2023) [46] identified the social and economic SGDs to be more relevant.

Rather unsurprisingly, service providers are not well represented in the studies performed with respect to SDGs. For example, of the 59 companies analyzed by Küfeoğlu (2022) [56], none is a service provider. This appears to be consistent with the degree of investments allocated towards tangible infrastructures compared to services of over 1 billion US$ per year funding required for SGD #9-related projects.

Our study found that there is a strong connection between the sustainability initiatives the company has engaged in and the SDGs we had measured these efforts against.

Regarding SDG #13 (Climate action), a majority of employees agreed that the company actively participates in initiatives to lower carbon emissions and pollution footprint. This indicates a high level of awareness and approval of the company's environmental strategies. Similarly, for SDG #7 (Affordable and clean energy), employees emphasized the importance of improving energy efficiency, reflecting the company's commitment to sustainable energy practices.

Regarding the social dimension, we noted that responses indicate the company succeeded at creating a workplace culture that is supportive and equitable at the same time, and that fosters a safe and inclusive work environment. The employees agreed that the company promotes gender equality and equal pay for similar work, which fully aligns with SDG #5-Gender equality. The employee responses also indicated their strong agreement that the company implements measures to ensure a safe working environment (SDG #8-Decent work and economic growth).

The third dimension observed was governance, and the related questions revealed that there is a positive perception of the employees regarding the company's governance, especially in terms of transparency and ethical behavior. The large agreement with the questionnaire statements about the implementation of conduct policies (SDG #10-Reduced inequalities) underscores the company's strong governance framework.

The results indicate that the company's sustainability efforts are quite aligned with the applicable SDGs, with the employees recognizing and supporting the initiatives of the company concerning sustainable development. However, the insights from the managerial interviews suggest that while the company disposes of a solid basis that supports the SDGs, further investment in resources and enhanced collaboration with external bodies are essential to overcome existing challenges and achieve greater sustainability outcomes.

5. Conclusions

This pilot study provides a unique insight into the contributions and challenges of an airport service provider in [country] when devising initiatives that support the SDGs, while integrating them in the daily operations. The conclusions are based on an extensive analysis of employee survey responses and management interviews conducted across the airport service provider locations.

Both employees and management display a high level of awareness and recognition of the importance of SDGs. Employees display appreciation and a general understanding of the company's efforts to reduce pollution, regarding waste management, and energy efficiency. Aligning closely with SDG #7 (Affordable and clean energy) and SDG #13 (Climate action), this awareness is largely associated with procedures and regulations which, although not labeled as SDG initiatives per se, promote sustainable practices effectively.

Secondly, despite the optimism displayed by employees and management about the future of sustainability and the commitment of the company to SDGs, some challenges remain, and the financial constraints were identified as the major barrier to strengthening the existing efforts. Both employees and managers identified several actions that would lead to enhancing the airport service provider's sustainability efforts. These actions, each bearing a different financial burden, consist of increased investments in green technologies, a comprehensive education program, and a structured system for collecting and implementing employee ideas on sustainability.

The positive perception of the company's initiatives aimed at promoting gender equality, ensuring safe working conditions, and fostering innovation come in support of several SDGs, namely SDG #5 (Gender equality), SDG #8 (Decent work and economic growth), and SDG #9 (Industry, innovation, and infrastructure). The actions taken regarding the governance aspect, particularly related to SDG #10 (Reduced inequalities), further enhancement is required to ensure transparency and ethical behavior efforts are upheld consistently across all levels.

Finally, we can't but commend the airport service provider's current sustainability practices, which align well with several SDGs. At the same time, our study revealed that overcoming the challenges identified would require more strategic investments and more tailored organizational processes.

Some of these actions that would enable the airport service provider to further contribute to the SDGs and foster impactful sustainability initiatives are a culture of continuous improvement and by promoting employee engagement. Further investments in technology and the strengthening of collaborations with external bodies would also add significant benefits to the efforts already undertaken.

This pilot study highlights at the same time that there is a vast potential for bringing meaningful contributions to the global sustainability agenda by airport service providers, while underscoring the importance of integrating sustainability into core business operations.

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Appendix A

The ESG variables used in the questionnaire are presented below.

	ESG Variables	Question Number	Sources
Environment	climate change	1	Busch et al., 2024 [11]
	reducing pollution and carbon emissions	2	Busch et al., 2024 [11] Perevoznic & Dragomir, 2024 [4]
	energetic efficiency	3	Perevoznic & Dragomir, 2024 [4]
	responsible waste management	4	Glavič & Lukman, 2007 [2] Panaitescu, 2020 [57]
Social	safe working environment for all employees	5	Rehman and Umar, 2024 [58]
	flexible working policies	6	Čiarnienė et al., 2018 [59]
	remuneration in line with the market	7	Ferretti et al., 2024 [60]
	transparent communication framework between management and employees	8	Tang, 2023 [61]
	employee participation in the decision-making process	9	Farooq et al., 2019 [62]
	collective bargaining for working conditions	10	Horecký and Smejkal, 2021 [63]
	Work Life Balance	11	Čiarnienė et al., 2018 [59] Tang, 2023 [61]
	health and safety of all employees	12	Farooq et al., 2019 [62]

	ESG Variables	Question Number	Sources
Social	gender equality and equal pay	13	Newell and Marzuki, 2024 [64] Guedes et al., 2024 [65]
	training and continuous skills development	14	Silva and Romaro, 2024 [66]
	employment opportunities and integration of people with disabilities	15	Zhang et al., 2024 [67]
	effective policies against workplace violence and harassment	16	Zhang et al., 2024 [67]
	diverse and friendly work environment	17	Newell and Marzuki, 2024 [64]
	privacy of personal information	18	Alam and Perez Chalico, 2022 [68]
	selection of collaborators who respect working conditions in line with international standards	19	Annesi et al., 2024 [69]
	selection of collaborators that respects equal opportunities	20	Annesi et al., 2024 [69]
	the well-being of local communities	21	Tang, 2023 [61]
	information about the company's services easily accessible and understandable	22	Camilleri, 2015 [70]
	equality in the treatment of all customers	23	Gallan et al., 2024 [71] Annesi et al., 2024 [69]
	equal access to services for all customers	24	Gallan et al., 2024 [71] Annesi et al., 2024 [69]
	customer satisfaction and quality service	25	Annesi et al., 2024 [69]
Governance	policy on professional conduct and organizational culture	26	Ferretti et al., 2024 [60]
	transparency regarding possible political engagements and lobbying activities	27	Guedes et al., 2024 [65]
	managing supplier relationships, including fair payment practices	28	Annesi et al., 2024 [69]
	strict policies to prevent and detect corruption and bribery	29	Tang, 2023 [61]

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