

Learning to navigate a volatile world

What Belgian organizations are learning from working
with the SDGs in practice

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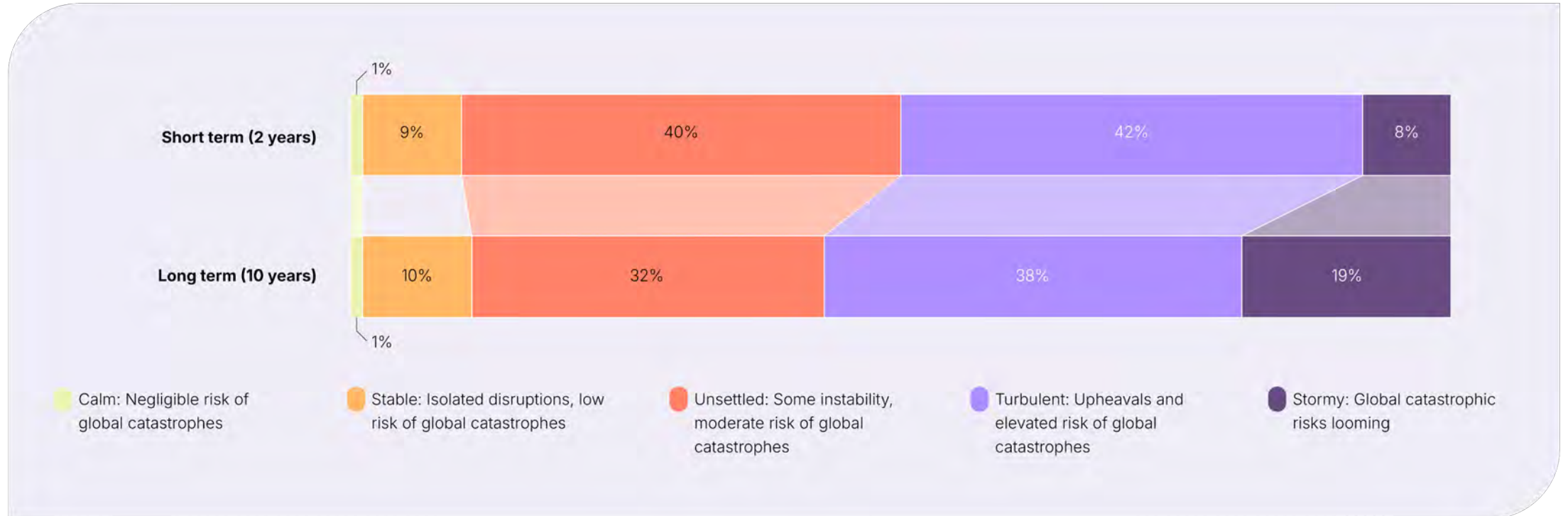


Context



The context has changed

Short-term and long-term global outlook



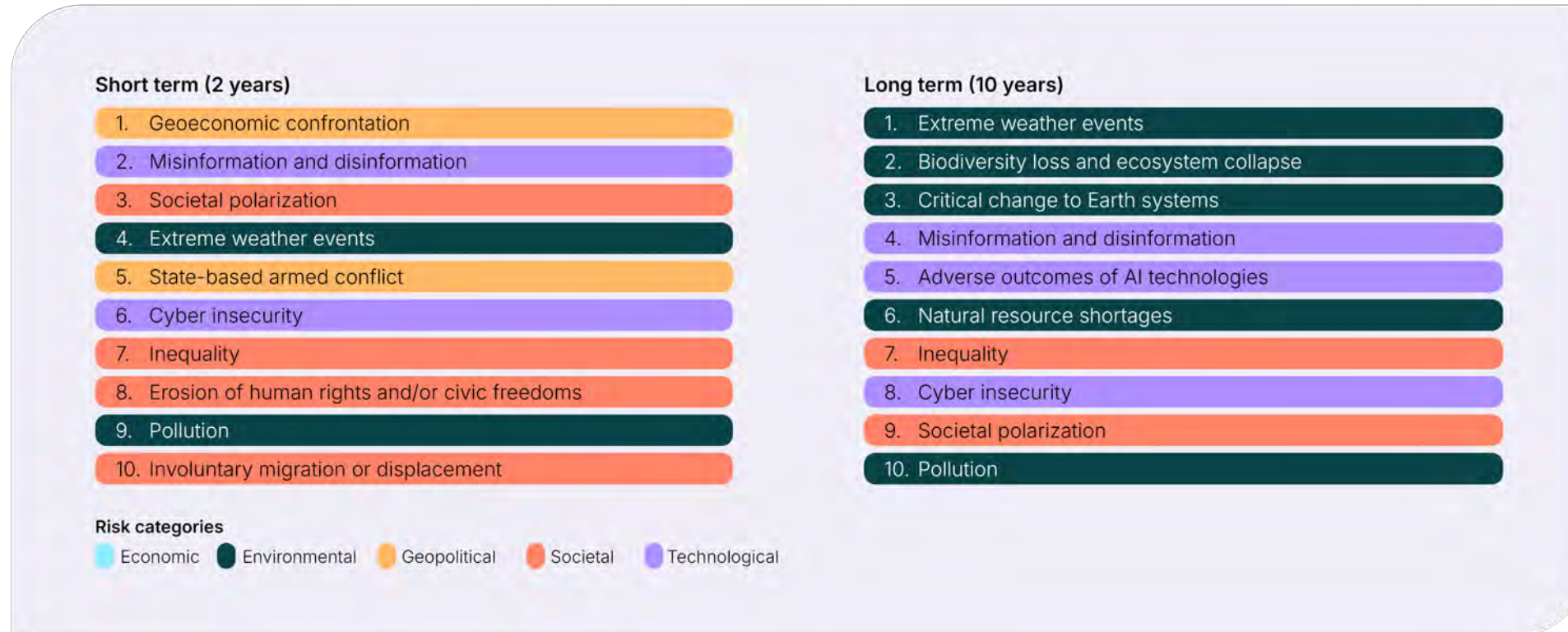
Source: WEF (2026: 7)

Sustainability is no longer pursued in a stable environment.
It has become part of navigating instability itself.



Risk perceptions change

Ranking of global risk severity over the long term



Source: WEF (2026: 9)

Ecological pressures and challenges related to new technologies will dominate the risk landscape.



Progress remains far off-track

World SDG global dashboard 2025



Source: Sachs et al. (2025: 11)

2030 is getting closer. The SDGs are not.



Are organizations working with the SDGs?

(earlier SDG Barometers)

*What happens when they actually try to
work with the SDGs?*

(this SDG Barometer)





Methodology



Case-based reasoning

- What do organizations actually do?
- Where are they struggling?
- What changes over time?
- What appears to be working?
- What can be learned cross-case?



The empirical base

- 20 Belgian organizations
 - 14 for-profit, 6 non-profit
 - 11 from Flanders, 9 from Wallonia
 - 7 small / 8 medium / 5 large
- Not representative for Belgium, but aimed at analytical depth and comparison

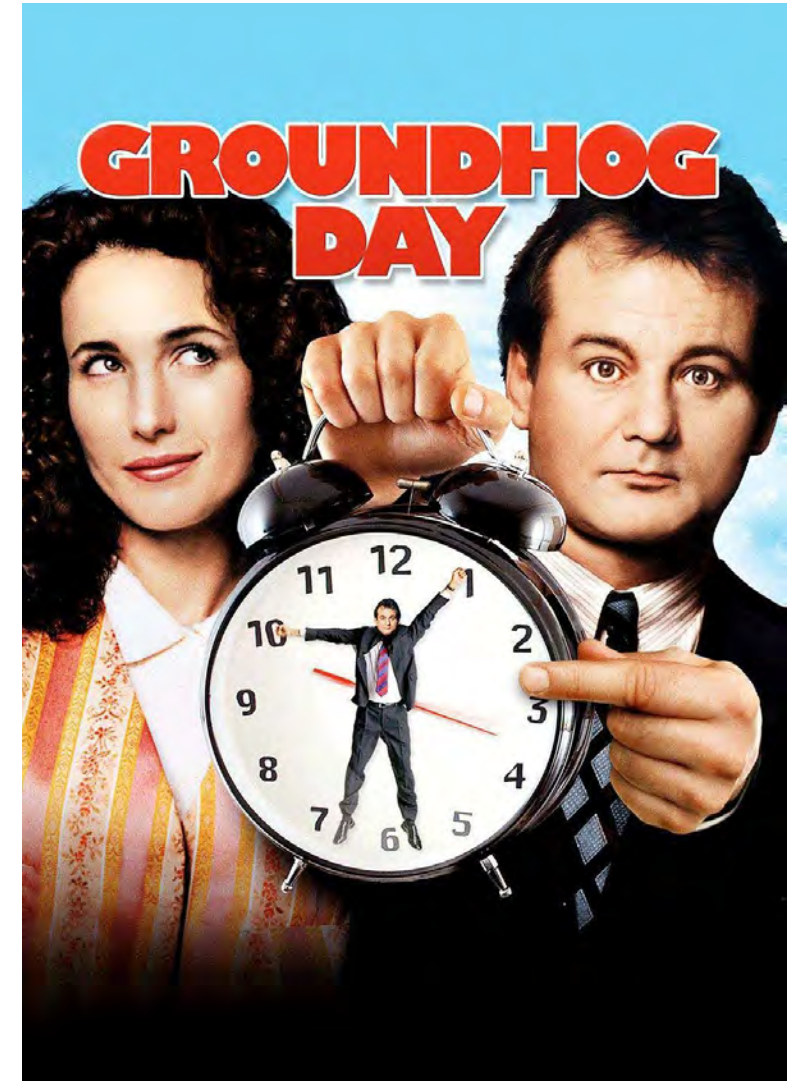
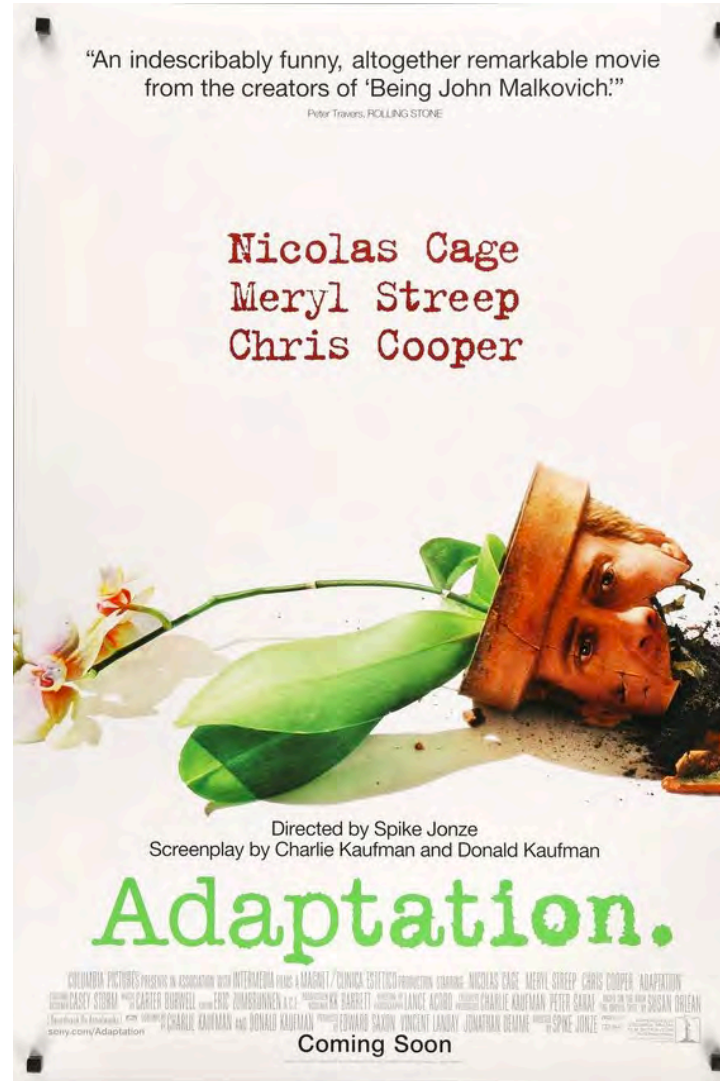




What we were looking for

- Priority-setting
- Strategy & governance
- Implementation
- Capabilities
- Measurement
- Communication
- Learning







Results



From mapping everything...

...to choosing what matters

- Not “Which SDGs are relevant to us?”
- But “Where can we make a material contribution – and where must we make difficult choices?”
- Maturity starts when sustainability stops being a list of good intentions and becomes a process of choosing



“In the beginning we tried to link everything we did to the SDGs. Now we focus on the areas where we can actually make a difference.”



Functions of the SDGs within organizations



From SDG visibility...

...to organizational integration

- SDGs do not need to be visible in order to have an impact
- In more mature organizations SDGs are part and parcel of investment decisions, procurement, innovation, risk processes, KPIs, strategy cycles, operational routines
- Integration is not an end-state – it is something an organization repeatedly does
- Sustainability becomes consequential when it enters the routines through which organizations allocate attention, money, and responsibility



“We don't talk about the SDGs in every meeting anymore, but sustainability is now part of how we make decisions.”



From ambition...

...to implementation friction

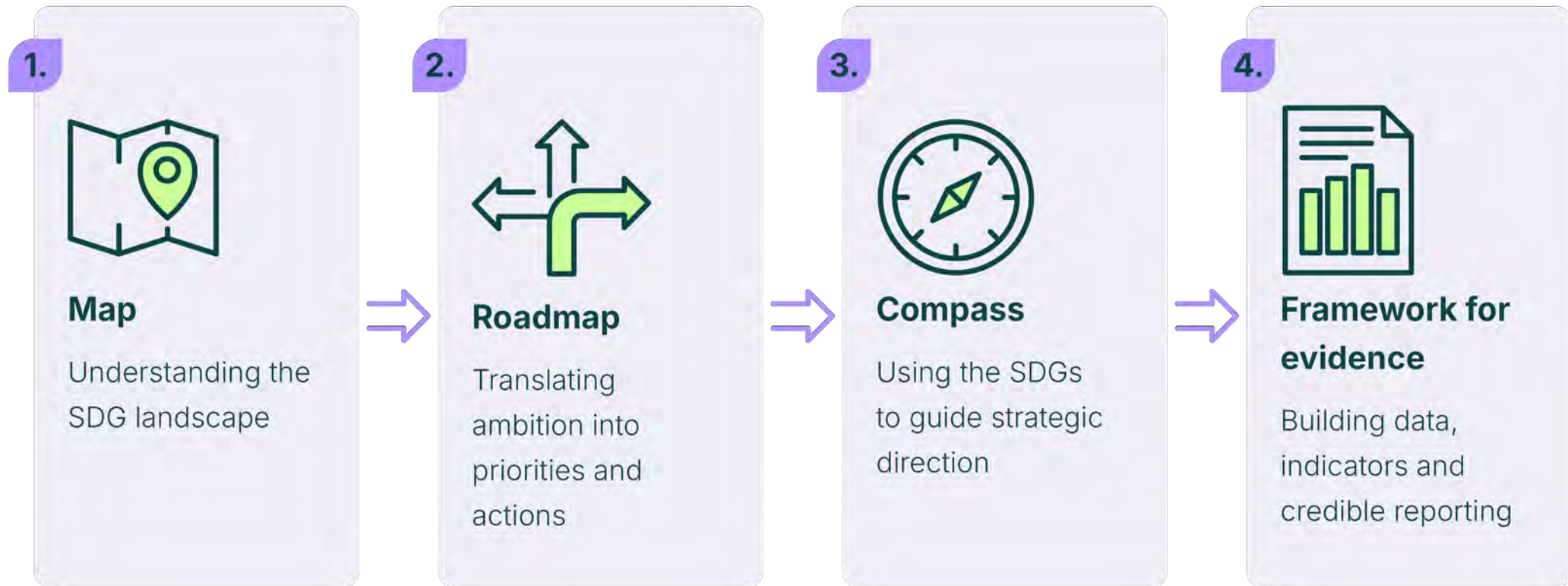
- There is no shortage in sustainability/SDG ambitions
- Problems arise with execution (ownership, data, budgets, management attention)
- Not “Do we believe sustainability matters?”
- But “Can the organization actually deliver it?”



“The problem isn't convincing people that sustainability matters. The problem is finding the time, ownership and data to actually do it.”



The SDG learning curve



From reporting...

...to evidence

- Organizations themselves are scrutinizing their own claims
- Not just communicating what is done, but activity → output
→ outcome → impact
- More credible communication requires proof
- Not “We want to tell a sustainability story”
- But “We want to be able to substantiate one”



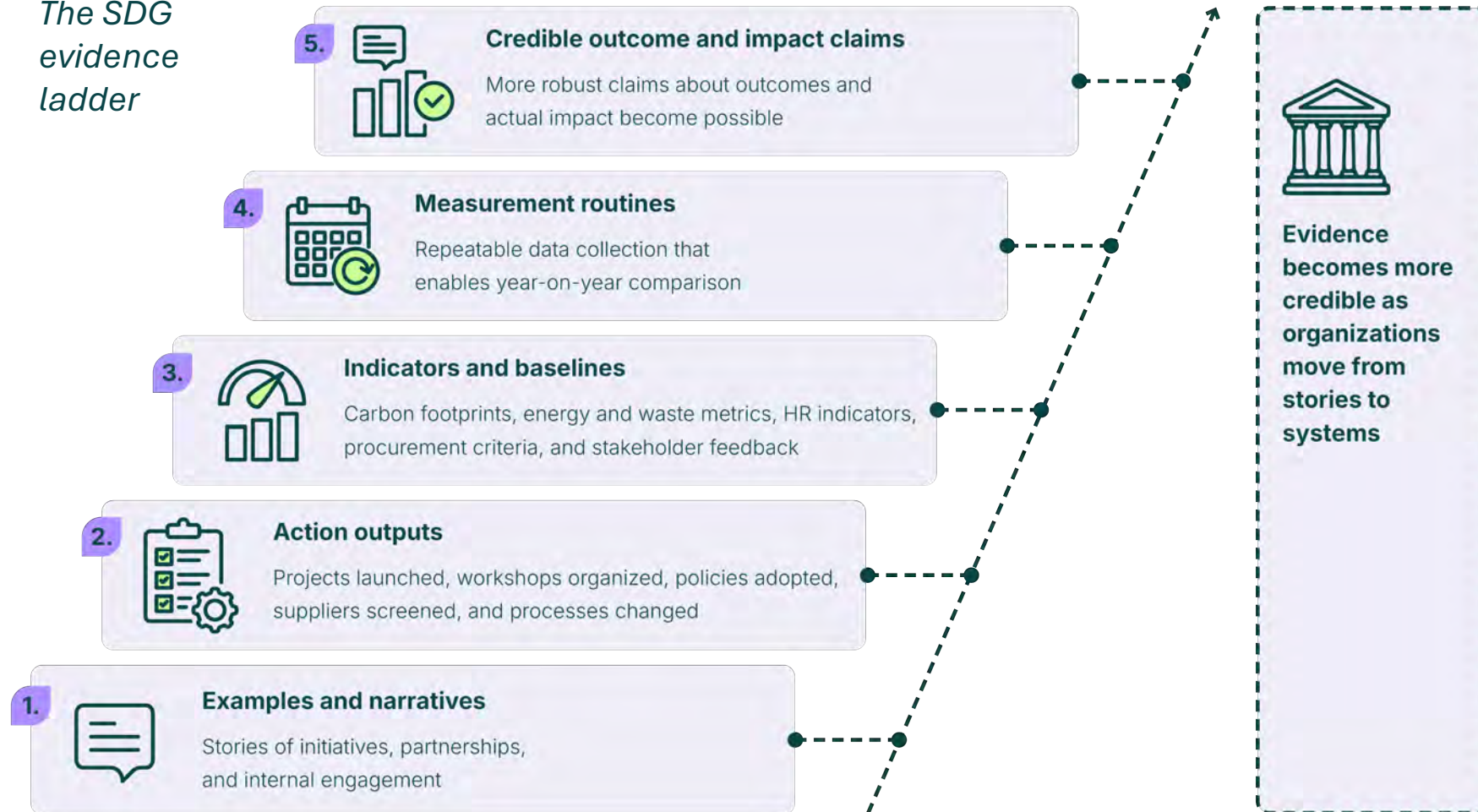
- Sustainability communication is becoming more difficult (and more important)
- Regulatory complexity, scrutiny of claims, greenwashing concerns, polarization, stakeholder expectations
- Not “We adhere to SDGs 8, 12, and 13”
- But more audience-specific, evidence-based communication



**“The more we know, the more
careful we have become about what
we claim.”**



The SDG evidence ladder



From projects...

...to transition portfolios

- A portfolio of projects is not yet a transition strategy
- A transition portfolio requires connected short-term improvements, experiments, scaling initiatives, phasing out unsustainable activities
- Need for transition capacity



“We have lots of sustainability initiatives. The challenge is making them part of one coherent direction.”



SDG personas

1.



Sustainability scouts

Map broad societal relevance and connect many SDGs to organizational activities and impacts

2.



Operational translators

Translate sustainability into concrete processes, routines, and indicators

3.



Mission-driven organizations

Use the SDGs as a strong expression of identity, purpose, and mission

4.



Credible communicators

Use the SDGs carefully, with attention to evidence, trust, and credibility

5.



Strategic value-seekers

Connect the SDGs to innovation, risk, partnerships, business models, and long-term positioning



Conclusions



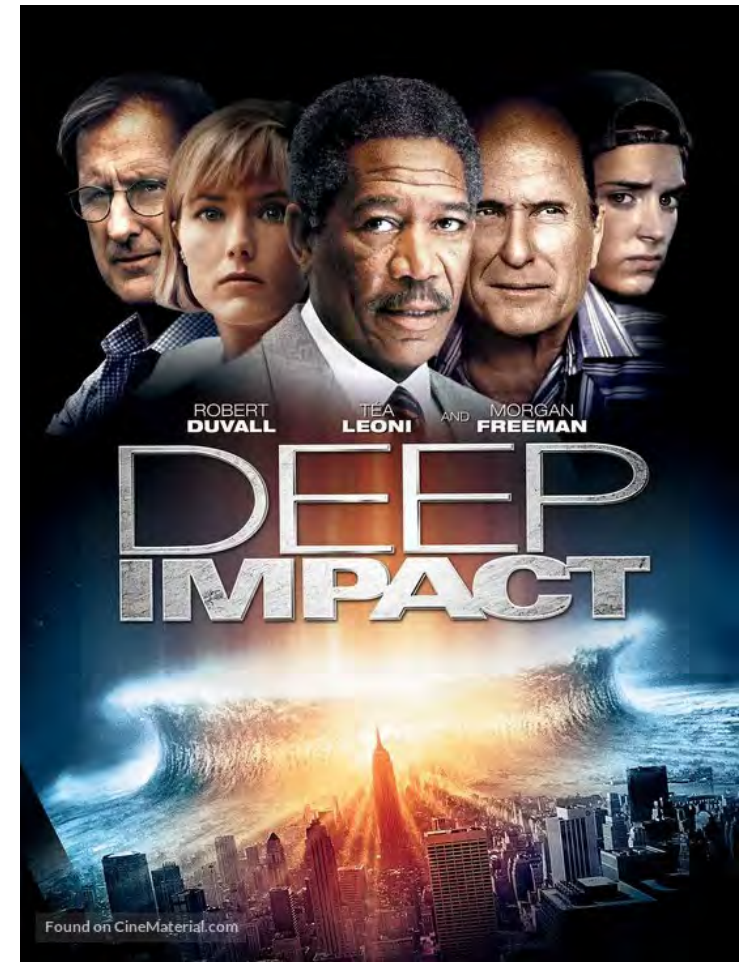
SDG fatigue = translation fatigue

The challenge for organizations is no longer understanding the goals. It is making them fit for practice and not to get lost in translation.



The paradox of SDG maturity

The paradox of maturity is that the SDGs may become less visible precisely when their consequences become more visible.



Less visible, more consequential

Organizations are moving (and need to move) from displaying the SDGs to embedding it and achieving impact.



What maturity requires

- Prioritization
- Routine integration
- Evidence-based communication
- Transition portfolios



The next phase of SDG practice

The next phase of SDG practice is not about adopting the goals, but about making sure they arrive where they matter: in decisions, routines, impact, and transition capacity.





Recommendations



For organizations working with the SDGs

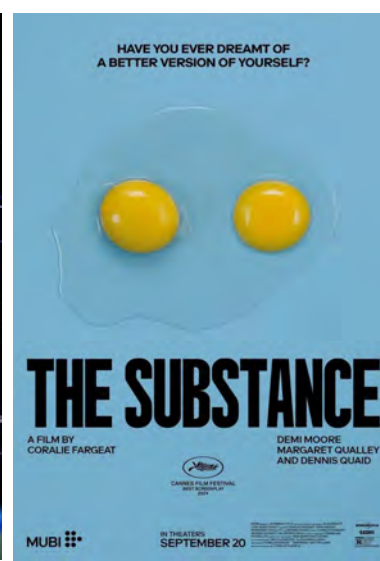
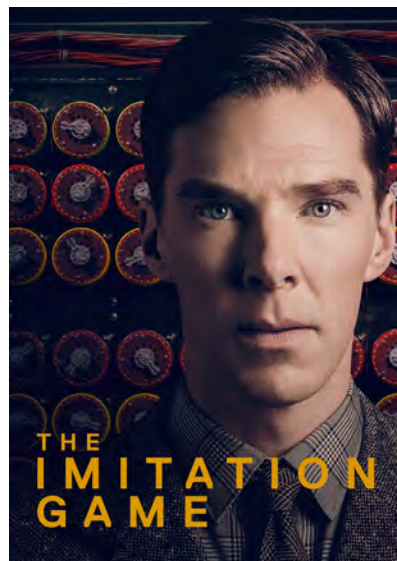
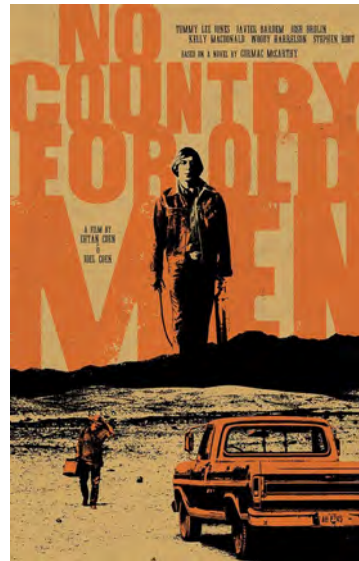
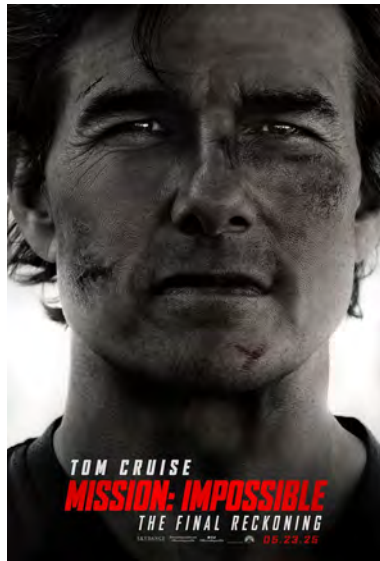
- Move from SDG alignment to SDG consequences
- Develop SDG translators inside the organization
- Build an evidence ladder before making strong impact claims
- Turn action portfolios into transition portfolios



For policy-makers and intermediaries

- Strengthen the impact capacity of SDG practice
- Support sector-based SDG learning labs
- Build a living SDG case library
- Reward credible (not only positive) communication







Thank you

