How accounting can shape a better world: framework, analysis and research agenda

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Abstract

Purpose – This article centres on the pertinence of redefining accounting for tomorrow, particularly for facilitating the attainment of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and, thereby, for shaping a better world. In aspiring for accounting to reach its full potential as a multidimensional technical, social and moral practice, this paper aims to focus on ideas, initiatives and proposals for realising accounting’s future potential and responsibilities.

Design/methodology/approach – The study deploys a further developed “strategic implementation framework”, initially proposed by Carnegie et al. (2023), with an emphasis on accounting serving “the public interest” so as “to enable the flourishing of organisations, people and nature” (Carnegie et al., 2021a, p. 69; 2021b). It depicts strategies towards the future of accounting and the world.

Findings – Significant opportunities are identified for accounting and accountants, working closely with a diversity of stakeholders, to become alert to and cognisant of the nature, roles, uses and impacts of accounting. The evidence presented notes a predominant inattention of accounting and accountants to the SDGs despite the deteriorating state of our social and natural environment.

Research limitations/implications – Whilst this article examines other articles in this special issue (SI), there is no substitute for carefully reading, reflecting on and deliberating upon these articles individually.

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Originality/value – The time for accounting to focus on creating a better world can no longer be extended. Accounting’s full potential will not be realised by remaining in a narrow and complacent, technicist state.

Keywords Accounting, Multidimensional accounting, Redefining accounting, Shaping a better world, SDGs

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

This study is concerned with accounting meeting its full potential in shaping a better world. It emphasises redefining accounting in alignment with the mission of accounting – “to serve ‘the public interest’” – as a multidimensional technical, social and moral practice (Carnegie et al., 2021a; 2021b; 2023). In doing so, it formulates and proposes a framework, described as the “Public interest framework for multidimensional accounting” and depicts it diagrammatically. This special issue (SI) is premised on the theme “Accounting as technical, social and moral practice for shaping a better world”. Our analysis undertaken of articles subsequently published is concerned with the redefinition of accounting to enhance its contribution to this end. The SI addresses the potential for accounting to actively contribute to the attainment of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), among other key initiatives. Our research agenda is broadly based on underscoring and understanding the transformative impact of accounting, which requires an accounting education to focus on the nature, roles, uses and impacts of accounting in shaping a better world. Four key strategies proposed in the Framework, identified from analysis of the other articles published herein, feature on our roadmap to the future. These are: adopting broad scope and alternative thought or theory in accounting; understanding Indigenous people, inculcating values and respecting culture; transitioning accounting education from an overemphasis on how to do accounting; learning and innovating from explorations of accounting in shaping the future.

This SI is set firmly in the accounting literature within the sociological, critical and interpretive research tradition from 1976, when Accounting Organizations and Society (AOS), the journal founded by (the late) Anthony Hopwood, first appeared in 1976. AOS was followed by the British-published, and Australian-edited, Accounting, Auditing & Accountability Journal (AAAJ) from 1988, under the Foundation and ongoing editorship of Lee Parker and James Guthrie. There followed the North American-based expatriate British edited Critical Perspectives on Accounting (CPA) in 1990, first edited by David Cooper and Tony Tinker (Carnegie et al., 2020). This genre of literature, spanning a period of almost 50 years, includes other, more recently published, journals of the genre. These are now more commonly identified as interdisciplinary accounting research journals, including Meditari Accountancy Research. That literature has pioneered and established a broader social, ethical, and contextualised approach to the accounting discipline having moved beyond the discipline’s traditional narrow, economic rationalist technical focus. Breaking out of the past assumption of a neutral accounting reflecting and reporting on its environment, this literature has recognised and examined the processes and impacts of accounting itself influencing its environment: institutional, social, political, regulatory, professional as well as economic.

The UN SDGs provide an exceptional opportunity for accounting to embrace a new agenda. According to Bebbington and Unerman (2020, p. 1657), however, “accounting scholars have been slow to engage in SDGs-motivated research”. This slow engagement has created two issues. First, accounting scholarship is less influential on the body of knowledge that is being developed on how to enact the ambitions of the SDGs. Second, accounting scholarship is not developing in a way that incorporates SDGs-related solutions to the challenges facing organisations (Bebbington and Unerman, 2020; also see Bebbington and
Moreover, environmental research in accounting journals is found “in a general fashion” compared to that appearing in non-accounting journals, which focus “on more specific topics […] and new methodologies” (Marrone et al., 2020, p. 2167). A recent SI of Accounting History appeared on “Accounting and the exploitation of the natural world” (Jack and Napier, 2023).

Drawing on this extensive accounting literature, Carnegie et al. (2021a, 2021b) proposed that accounting moves towards achieving its full potential by means of redefinition. They called for accounting to be broadly conceived and practised according to the new definition, premised on being alert to, and understanding of, the social and organisational contexts in which it operates. This definition of accounting is stated as follows:

Accounting is a technical, social and moral practice concerned with the sustainable utilisation of resources and proper accountability to stakeholders to enable the flourishing of organisations, people and nature (2021a, p. 69; 2021b).

This proposal presents accounting as multidimensional, as a practice of technical rigour, social responsibility, and moral means and purpose rather than simply as a neutral, benign, technical practice. Presently, accounting and accountants seem stuck in a narrow, technicist mindset.

This definition is operationalised by means of key questions (Carnegie et al., 2023):

- Social practice: What does accounting do? What are the impacts of accounting in the world?

This definition and framework of questions present an impetus to accounting’s future leadership in shaping SDGs-related solutions to the challenging issues facing the world.

Under this multidimensional definition of accounting, proposed for widespread application across the entire profession, accounting must be studied, regulated and evaluated in the contexts in which it operates. Whether changing or change resistant, accounting has consequences for human behaviour, for shaping organisational culture, and has implications for organisational and social functioning and development. Accounting conditions the way we think and what we do. The “we” includes professional accountants and non-accountants alike. Indeed, accounting is more influential in the world and in our lives than many people may think. A broader, clearer, more realistic and “game-changing” definition of accounting, which portrays the discipline as a globally influential social and moral practice, as well as a technical practice, is a critical and decisive step to be taken (also see Bigoni and Awais, 2024; Carnegie et al., 2022a, 2022b, 2022c; Carnegie and Napier, 2023; Hopper, 2023; Powell and McGuigan, 2023; Sidaway et al., 2023; Twyford, 2023; Twyford and Abbas, 2023; Vesty et al., 2023).

This SI aims to facilitate an emphasis on accounting’s potential consequences for the world we pass on to future generations. Contributors have responded to our challenge for reflection, discussion, debate by contributing research addressing the theme, linking this to sustainable development, particularly the SDGs. Underpinning this challenge are significant opportunities for accounting educators, researchers and practitioners to engage and collaborate. Overall, this is a bumper SI, with much to offer and at least potentially stimulate, across the global accounting profession and beyond.

Prospective contributors were invited to reimagine accounting pertaining to its broader, and untapped potential, rather than limiting themselves to repeating past technical remits
for how accounting should be done. We called contributors to ponder instead on what accounting is doing in the world and what accounting should be doing in helping to shape a better world for tomorrow. While this may be considered challenging, the impacts of accounting create obligations for accounting scholars and practitioners to evaluate the discipline’s actions and inactions and ensure that it contributes positively to organisational and social flourishing and to the protection of our natural environment: a purpose aligned with the SDGs.

Significant opportunities exist for the accounting profession and professional accountants, and the wide diversity of stakeholders, who influence or are influenced by accounting, to become fully alert to, and cognisant of, accounting’s nature, roles, uses and impacts. Arguably this moves us beyond the profession’s historical disregard for, and failure to focus on, the sustainability of our natural environment. The natural environment, which sustains all of us on planet Earth, continues to be confronted, for instance, with the effects arising from the “unearthly pursuit of endless growth” (Powell and McGuigan, 2024).

All the articles published herein are concerned with identifying ideas, proposals and initiatives, for realising the potential of accounting to shape a better world. They are concerned with implementations of forms and styles of accounting which serve the nature of accounting as a multidimensional technical, social and moral practice, as opposed to a technical practice alone. For this transition to occur, accounting, whether regulated or unregulated, needs to be reconfigured “to enable the flourishing of organisations, people and nature”.

Arguably, accounting should be fit for the wider purposes envisaged in its broader definition as a technical, social and moral practice. A key difference exists between accounting’s “fitness of purpose” and its “fitness for purpose”. For “fitness of purpose”, accounting’s orientation and objectives, must relate to the unique organisational and social contexts in which it operates. “Fitness for purpose”, however, concerns the development of strategies and the tools or instruments to effectively implement them in practice as suitable in specific organisational and social contexts (see, for instance, Kohler and Huber, 2006; Carnegie and Tuck, 2010). This study is principally concerned with fitness for purpose.

The rest of this article is structured as follows. Next, an overview of the contributors to this SI is provided. There follows, outlines of the articles relating to the theme of this SI. Then, the “strategic implementation framework” [1] is outlined, drawing upon, and extending the framework offered by Carnegie et al. (2023), now termed the “Public interest framework for multidimensional accounting”. The SI articles are then examined in connection with the following subsections: Implementing multidimensional accounting “to serve ‘the public interest’”; inculcating sustainability mindsets in accounting and accounting education, as well as key strategies identified earlier, drawn from these articles, whose authors have adopted a diversity of theoretical perspectives to inform what they have done. The final section presents concluding comments, together with a challenge related to shaping accounting’s potential.

Key characteristics of the contributors
All 17 articles published, including this article, are authored by a total of 53 authors, comprising 33 women (62.2%) and 20 men (37.8%) [2]. Of the 53 authors, seven, including six women, are co-authors of two articles each. Hence, this issue contains contributions by 46 different authors of whom 27 (59%) are women and 19 (41%) are men. Of these authors, there is a wide spread of affiliation with institutions in different countries or regions, including four European countries – Denmark, Italy, Portugal and the UK (see Figure 1). Of relevance is that the country of origin, in various cases, differs from the country of
institution [3]. This brings a diversified cultural background of the authors, which contributes to inform specificities of diverse countries such as the Solomon Islands.

While a significant proportion of the authors are in the accounting discipline, drawn from various research fields in accounting, eight of the 46 authors (17%) are non-accounting scholars. One is currently employed as an organisational ethicist, four are in the management discipline, and three authors specialise in geography and environmental studies, philosophy and gender studies, and applied philosophy, epistemology and ethics.

Concerning the academic ranks of authors, there are four Professor Emeritus (one woman), five Professors (one woman), seven Associate Professors (one male), 20 senior lecturers or assistant professors, representing 43% of authors, of whom four are men. The remainder are research professors, researchers, honorary research associate, lecturers, PhD students, master’s degree students, and an organisational ethicist, grouped as “Other” (see Figure 2). Hence, Emeritus professors and professors are predominantly men, associate professors, senior lecturers and assistant professors are mainly women. Like Carnegie et al. (2023), this study confirms the highest ranked positions are held mainly by men. Lower-ranked positions are primarily filled by women. This profile is well overdue for altering.

Of these 17 articles, two were prepared by five authors, four by four authors, five by three authors, and six by two authors. The latter were predominately prepared by women. Not a single article in this issue is sole authored. The three most prominent universities by means of scholars publishing in this SI are as follows:

(1) University of Tasmania, Australia (three articles by nine different authors);
(2) University of Wollongong, Australia (three articles by five different authors); and
(3) University of Minho, Portugal (three articles by four different authors).

In summary, the key characteristics of this SI are as follows:

- predominately written by women;
- twenty of the contributing 46 authors (43%) are located in Australia;
- most authors are employed at the levels of associate professor, senior lecturer/assistant professor and, in these positions, they are mainly women; and
- the thematic issue benefits from a diversified cultural and knowledge diversified background of the authors, with authors drawn from different geographical areas and fields besides accounting.
Outline of articles
This opening SI article introduces, discusses and analyses the articles in this issue. These were written in response to the Call of Papers for this thematic issue and accepted for publication after a rigorous double blind, peer review process. Articles accepted for publication related to redefining accounting for tomorrow as multidimensional technical, social and moral practice, with a focus on sustainable development, particularly by means of facilitating the progress towards the attainment of the UN SDGs globally, in the interest of shaping of a better world for humans and non-humans alike. The articles presented in this thematic SI are ordered according to four key themes identified by us as guest editors. These themes are summarised as follows:

(1) Philosophies and frameworks for reshaping accounting for a sustainable world;
(2) Sustainable development and First Nations people and cultural values;
(3) Potential for accounting education to be a catalyst for a better world; and
(4) Explorations in specific contexts of accounting towards a better world.

The first category comprises five articles, the next two categories comprise three articles each, and the final category includes five articles. This section outlines these articles, in turn, using these four categories each depicted as a subsection.

**Philosophies and frameworks for reshaping accounting for a sustainable world**
*Morrison et al. (2024)* adopt the notion of Western environmental philosophy as the lens they apply, as the West (or the “global North”) is acknowledged as responsible for a disproportionate amount of the world’s environmental damage; despite only supporting a relatively small proportion of the world’s citizens (see, for instance, Figuero and Mills, 2001). Their study uses a framework of environmental philosophies drawn from history, to analyse contemporary corporate environmental reporting. The study develops a nuanced understanding of the relationship between corporate activities, such as corporate financial reporting and nature which, in turn, serves to demonstrate the moral practices of accounting for nature. The authors extract three themes from an historical review of western environmental philosophy: dualism, transcendence and interconnectivity. These three
themes are applied to a sample of corporate environmental reports through discourse analysis, to illuminate obscured moral characteristics of the corporate relationship with the natural environment (Morrison, 2020; Morrison et al., 2018).

The authors build from prior work which points to the important social and moral dimensions of accounting and the effects of accounting on organisational and social functioning and development, as well as upon the natural world (Carnegie, 2022; Carnegie et al., 2021a; 2021b). They argue the importance of understanding that accounting is not just a mere technical practice, but also a social and moral practice which “expands the way the authors can interpret the outcomes of accounting”, such as corporate sustainability reports, that “can be analysed through a moral lens” (Morrison et al., 2024). Presently, the detailed explication of the relationship between the moral understanding of accounting and other corporate activities with the nature in our natural environment has, according to Morrison et al. (2024), become globally imperative.

In exploring Gross National Happiness (GNH) in Bhutan, Wangchuk et al. (2024) focus on examining the moral dimensions of accounting by means of the country’s GNH and they propose an approach to accounting that is grounded in the Buddhist principle of the Middle Path. The authors’ approach aims to promote well-being and happiness, which they show as contrasting with traditional accounting practices. The Carnegie et al. (2021a, p. 69; 2021b; Carnegie, 2022) multidimensional definition of accounting is adopted by the authors on the basis that it “supports well-being and happiness of people, society and nature” (Wangchuk et al., 2024). Indeed, the study engages with the social and moral dimensions of accounting to explore accounting and accountability drawing upon Buddhist principles, and using the exemplar of GNH, applicable as a development framework in Bhutan since 2010.

The authors explore the prospective role of accounting for “the promotion of well-being and happiness of people and other sentient beings by referring to the Buddhist teachings of the Middle Path, and its moral virtues” (Wangchuk et al., 2024). They mobilise concepts within Middle Path to pose the question “How can accounting promote the well-being and happiness of people and other sentient beings?” (2024). Moreover, they report that ethical discourses in traditional accounting and accountability are incompatible with the values of the Middle Path. To overcome this constraint, they propose introducing four “immeasurable moral virtues” of Buddhism. These virtues promote spiritual development (wisdom), which the authors advocate to replace the existing ethical strands of traditional practice to wholeheartedly promote well-being and happiness in society.

Concerned with “accounting for a better world”, and more specifically, with enabling “corporate reporting to contribute to the sustainability of the good life”, the Norreklit et al. (2024) study aims “to propose a basis upon which accounting reporting can be developed to reflect real values and the real economy” (Norreklit et al., 2024). The authors place emphasis on constructively and committedly addressing the environmental considerations of the UN SDGs. They propose a conceptual framework for measuring how “a sustainable good life” (SGL) has improved or rather the opposite (2024; emphasis in original) because of the effects of organisational activities. It outlines a system of concepts of basic and instrumental values for analysing the maintenance of a sustainable good life in real terms. This conceptual framework, in identifying measurement frameworks, is fundamentally concerned with effectiveness “in the development and control of human practices to achieve desired values” (2024).

Norreklit et al. (2024) premise their conceptual framework on the conception of accounting as a multidimensional technical, social, and moral practice (Carnegie et al., 2021a; Carnegie et al., 2023) and not a mere technical practice. The authors explain that accounting to date has, intentionally or unintentionally:
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[...] neglected to develop accounting information for decision-making and accountability that supports the achievement of the values of flourishing human beings, organisations, communities and nature, and thereby contributes to a ‘better world’ (2024).

Under their proposed conceptual framework, on application, it renders “visibility to sustainability problems” (2024). Importantly, aspirations to serve and enable a sustainable good life, require the fostering and inculcation of effective social and moral practices for the times. This itself necessitates the prioritisation by accounting of a broad and diverse range of stakeholders, hereby facilitating “the flourishing of organisations, people and nature” (Carnegie et al., 2021a, p. 69; 2021b).

Branco et al. (2024) present an institutionalist political economy (IPE) perspective on “social and environmental accounting” (SEA). In particular, the authors’ purpose is to contribute to the discussion relating to the definition of accounting articulated by Carnegie et al. (2021a, 2021b) as further elaborated upon by Carnegie et al. (2023) who proposed an informing framework, described as “Framework of the Multidimensional Nature of Accounting”. The authors adopt “an IPE approach to SEA”, rendering a “critique of the use of the notion of capital to refer to nature and people in SEA frameworks and standards” (Branco et al., 2024). These authors adapted Figure 1 of Carnegie et al. (2023, p. 12), based instead on the concepts of 1) human capabilities and 2) global commons, and proposed a modified framework for the orientation of SEA. This SEA framework “eschews any reference to the notion of capital”, building concepts and thereby permitting agents to connect with the non-financial, focussed upon “social and eco-justice perspectives” (Branco et al., 2024).

These authors argue that their study has important implications for policymakers, accounting standard setters, along with the accounting profession generally, as well as for accountants in professional practice and SEA researchers. They identify that their investigation echoes earlier research, which concluded that initiatives to inform the development of sustainability standards are primarily developed and applied under what is termed “business case framings”, which “privilege the interests, perspectives and values underpinning mainstream accounting” (Brown and Dillard, 2014, p. 1134)” (Branco et al., 2024). The authors argue that an effective SEA framework for adoption should be centred on “the concepts of human capabilities and global commons” as well as support the goals of “the preservation of the commons and the flourishing of present and future generations” (Branco et al., 2024). They emphasise the pursuit of sustainable human development with the UN SDGs capable of turning accounting into a major positive force through its “impacts on the world, expressly upon organisations, people and nature” (2024).

Castaldo et al. (2024) provide a reflection on the current state of the accounting discipline and question the future that may lie ahead for the discipline. The authors provide a perspective of the future of accounting which, they argue, is to follow what are described as “Masters of the discipline” (2024). They express this future for accounting will lead to the rediscovery of both social and moral values as well as shared value as prominent world views to underpin accounting of tomorrow. Castaldo et al. (2024) draw upon the contributions of the Italians Luca Pacioli and Benedetto Cotrugli, both Franciscan friars, considered to be the founders of the accounting discipline, and of more recent scholars, Porter and Kramer (2011), who articulated “the big idea” of creating “shared value” as key perspectives in the successful application of the UN SDGs by 2030.

The SDGs themselves pose numerous challenges for social change in many key areas and for the sustainability of the planet in the broadest sense. These challenges are argued as being of prime concern to younger generations. This keenness of these generations to act with purpose and commitment is a potential positive and vital attribute for the accounting
profession of the future. The authors envisage the need for accounting to be redefined, which they argue requires accounting and accountants to act purposely in an opportune way and urgently. Castaldo et al. (2024), reaffirm the idea that accountancy cannot operate successfully without emphasising the understanding of accounting as a social practice as well as a moral practice, aligning with the Carnegie et al. (2021a, p. 69; 2021b) redefinition of accounting. They call for accounting that effectively minimises harmful environmental impact, promotes corporate social responsibility and contributes to solving sustainability challenges.

Sustainable development and First Nations people and cultural values
Tanima et al. (2024) collectively share their accounts of journeying through Jindaola as an Indigenous way towards decolonising educators of accounting. They do this by reconceptualising and redefining accounting as a multidimensional technical, social and moral practice consistent with endeavours to reshape accounting for creating a better world as articulated by Carnegie et al. (2021a, 2021b), and extended by Carnegie et al. (2023) in Meditari Accountancy Research. In the process of their shared and collective journey through Jindaola, they found that Indigenous perspectives “provide a radical repositioning to the colonial legacies of accounting” (Tanima et al., 2024). These legacies include the impact of colonial ideologies on the practice of accounting which is a persuasive “voice” in commanding and facilitating the exploitation of natural resources.

The authors journey through Jindaola “contemplates how connecting with Country and engaging with Aboriginal ways of knowing can assist educators in meaningfully addressing the SDGs” (Tanima et al., 2024). The authors consider alternative education practices to resist these norms as a dialogic journey through a Jindaola lens. This is one of several stimulating contributions of this study, which uniquely puts down “foundations for decolonising the higher education curriculum and the consequences for addressing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)” (2024).

Mining development proposals, although aimed at economic growth and profit generation, are not always compatible with, and can be contrary to, sustainable development as embraced by the SDGs. As shown by Pupovac and Nikidehaghami (2024), mining proposals can be problematic since they can undermine First Nations values and ways of doing and being. The authors explore the tensions between economic interest and sustainable development by analysing the case of a coal mine development in Australia’s Galilee Basin, specifically Waratah vs Youth Verdict, which came before The Land Court of Queensland, a state Court that adjudicates matters relating to land and natural resources. The purpose of the authors in undertaking this investigation was to explore how accounting, when conceived as a “multidimensional practice that encompasses technical, social and moral dimensions facilitates the instigation and advancement of a culture of sustainable development” (2024). The study enables the hearing “the voices and views of those affected by accounting-based information” (2024). The authors’ analysis applies the Carnegie et al. (2021a, 2021b) multidimensional definition of accounting, augmented by the Carnegie et al. (2023) “Framework of the Multidimensional Nature of Accounting”.

Pupovac and Nikidehaghami (2024) illustrate how accounting research can be expanded and extended by fully understanding and embracing accounting’s capabilities, as depicted in the accounting definition deployed. The authors demonstrate that by embracing multidimensional dimensions of accounting, accountants can create a space for hearing and evaluating multiple voices, including Indigenous people who have been “silenced by Western accounting practices” (2024). Their study illuminates how conceiving accounting as multidimensional technical, social and moral practice “can foster a culture of sustainable
development” (2024). Pupovac and Nikidehaghani (2024) argue their study “sheds light on the intricate interconnections between the three dimensions of accounting” (2024), as espoused by Carnegie et al. (2021a, 2021b) and Carnegie et al. (2023), which the authors explain “are synergistic, mutually reinforcing and deeply interrelated” (2024).

Narayan and Oru (2024) investigate accounting practices within a non-Western (Indigenous) context and provide unique insights into alternative accounting approaches and perspectives. Set in the Solomon Islands – a small developing nation situated in the South-West Pacific Ocean – the study aims to provide an in-depth insight into the functioning of accounting in the nation’s unique cultural and social-political context, comprising six main islands and almost 1,000 smaller islands and atolls (Whalan, 2010). The country’s accounting system has been derived from Western capitalist countries, particularly the UK, USA and Australia (Hauriasi and Davey, 2009). In-depth interviews were conducted to gain insights into perceptions and meanings of accounting and accountability through two distinct cultural lenses: Western and non-Western perspectives. The study’s participants were representatives at both levels of government: the national government, and provincial governments.

The authors acknowledge that accounting is “a pivotal social and moral endeavour” and is not a mere technical practice, as typically focussed upon in accounting education (Narayan and Oru, 2024). They apply the redefinition of accounting offered by Carnegie et al. (2021a, p. 69; 2021b) which is viewed and practised “as a multifaceted discipline encompassing technical, social and moral dimensions to enable the flourishing of organisations, people and nature” (2024). Their findings provide unique insights in an Indigenous context to different interpretations of accounting and accountability through Western and non-Western cultural lenses. The study renders both “complementary and rival explanations on what accounting and accountability are doing and what accounting and accountability should be doing” (2024).

Potential for accounting education to be a catalyst for a sustainable world
The cross-national research team, based on the locations of its authors, of Twyford et al. (2024) develop the case for integrating more of the UN SDGs into accounting education, to address the pressing need for the accounting profession to evolve and meet contemporary societal and environmental challenges. The study explores how adopting SDGs in teaching intending or aspiring accountants can reshape accounting education, producing future professional accountants with a broad mindset, “who are not only technically proficient but also socially conscious change agents working towards the public interest” (Twyford et al., 2024). The authors argue for a broader view incorporating accounting’s social and moral dimensions. Teaching the roles and importance of SDGs and their implications for organisations, people and nature is not a mere curriculum addition. Rather, it is a vital step to align with global current values and expectations with an overarching aspiration of shaping a better, more sustainable world.

This study is primarily discursive, using autoethnography as the overall epistemology. Four vignettes are written in the first-person by accounting educators drawn from different geographies, presenting their embodied account of teaching practices effectively incorporating SDGs. The findings are not perceived as isolated from the authors’ reflexive pedagogy. They emphasise the imperative to re-evaluate conventional accounting, and its assumptions and limitations, and broaden its relevance in organisational and social contexts beyond economic considerations alone (Twyford et al., 2024). By means of an interdisciplinary approach, a pivotal role in accounting education can be played, particularly relating to ethical alertness and training, and promoting sustainability, equity, diversity and
inclusion. These are steps towards “a view of accounting that centres on ideas of the public interest and the betterment of society” (Twyford and Abbas, 2023, p. 187).

Powell and McGuigan (2024) present findings of their exploration of the role of individual inner dimensions in fostering sustainable mindsets and behaviours in accounting students and graduates. These personal inner dimensions, such as compassion, shape our behaviour and personal responses to sustainability challenges. Importantly, they argue “sustainability knowledge and skill development, is necessary for reshaping the accounting profession towards achieving sustainable futures” (2024). To help address existing gaps in sustainability capabilities, the authors present approaches to cultivating compassion in accounting students, for both humans and non-humans, within accounting education. Cultivating and facilitating students’ compassion for human and non-human species in accounting programs is argued to be essential due “to the unprecedented ecological crisis” (2024) underway. The authors emphasise compassion for humans and non-humans in designing and delivering accounting education to emphasise “their relevance to accounting decisions and organisational accountability” (2024).

This article follows the Powell and McGuigan (2023) published in Meditari Accountancy Research on “Responding to crises: rewilding accounting education for the Anthropocene”. In 2023, the authors supported a move away from a reliance on anthropocentric viewpoints, leading to a wider view of accounting beyond technical to encompass moral and social perspectives (Carnegie et al., 2021a; 2021b). In the current article, they state that “developing compassionate responses in accounting presents a meaningful way to operationalise the multidimensional nature of accounting, particularly its social and moral aspects” (Powell and McGuigan, 2024). They provide a first step in formulating approaches “to cultivating and facilitating compassion within accounting pedagogies and curricula design” (2024).

Othman and Ameer (2024) are concerned with accounting graduates’ perspectives on workplace demands for accounting, the gaps in accounting education, and the future of the accounting profession. The issues are addressed by means of the multidimensional definition of accounting offered (Carnegie et al., 2021a; 2021b; Carnegie et al., 2022a; Carnegie et al., 2023), which is argued to contribute to attaining the UN SDGs by means of students’ understanding of accounting’s technical, social and moral practice dimensions. The online qualitative survey developed was distributed to selected New Zealand accounting graduates to gather insights from within workplaces. The survey highlighted that the need for technical knowledge in accounting extends beyond the specifications of accounting standards. The survey also revealed a lack of emphasis on non-technical skills and on providing in-depth business knowledge, all crucial for the holistic development of the discipline as a multidimensional technical, social and moral practice.

The authors lament their finding of a notable lack of support for sustainability, which contradicts, or at least makes difficult, the development, use and teaching of accounting for sustainability. They suggest this discrepancy may relate to a perception, even a growing one, among graduates that sustainability standards are foreign to, and unconnected with traditional accounting principles. The understanding of, and engagement with, sustainability standards need accounting educators to facilitate the attainment of SDGs, to be facilitated by means of defining accounting as a collective technical, social and moral practice.

**Explorations in specific contexts of accounting towards a better world**

Based on the comprehensive redefinition of accounting proposed by Carnegie et al. (2021a, 2021b), Oliveira et al. (2024) examine, by means of their study of a Portuguese charity organisation, how visual imagery can expand and enhance accountability to a diversity of
stakeholders and allow the rendering for more human-centric accounts. Described as “Visualising accountability: nurturing trust and care”, the authors seek to provide an understanding of the use of these visual tools for depicting accountability. According to the authors, these tools “can elucidate and prompt interpretations of rhetorical features aimed at envisioning legitimacy and being perceived as accountable” (Oliveira et al., 2024).

Adopting a methodological interpretative approach, this study draws on a qualitative case study of a Portuguese charity, the Santa Casa da Misericordia do Porto, during the period 2019–2021, including the COVID-19 pandemic period, by means of analysing visual rhetoric in both annual and sustainability reports. This investigation illuminates how the rendering of “visual images interact and evoke shared cultural understandings, shaping meanings that can symbolically foster organisational legitimacy and envisions accountability” (Oliveira et al., 2024). In facilitating clearer and enhanced meaning using these symbolic and emotive elements, this form of broader and more explicit accountability captures and makes more visible, social impacts and reflects broader societal concerns.

Pujiningsih and Utami (2024) explore biodiversity and threatened species extinction in Indonesia through the reporting of 54 biodiversity indexed companies listed on the Indonesian Stock Exchange. The authors specifically examine the rhetoric of biodiversity disclosure as a practice of virtue ethics. They also explore the instances arising of the preparation and provision of emancipatory extinction accounts on the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Red List. Their research was conducted by means of a context analysis of the narrative contents of their annual and sustainability reports for 2020 with an emphasis upon discerning “the rhetoric of biodiversity disclosure as an ethical practice using Aristotle’s rhetoric (ethos, logos, and pathos)” (2024). The criteria identified by Atkins and Maroun (2018) in their framework are deployed in this study, which provides a novel approach to emancipatory accounting for the purpose of extinction prevention. The authors point out that this form of accounting draws upon “middle-ground philosophy”, which is focussed upon balancing the interests of humans and nature (Gray and Milne, 2018).

For Indonesia, Pujiningsih and Utami (2024) found that all 54 companies depicted the traits of ethos, logos, and pathos in their narrative biodiversity reporting as a virtuous practice. More specifically, companies with a low profile had a greater propensity for reporting biodiversity disclosures in comparison with high profile companies. Furthermore, the authors identified a total of 14 companies which were informing extinction accounts that were deemed to qualify as emancipatory accounts. High profile companies among these companies were found to disclose extinction more frequently than companies with a low profile. Emancipatory accounting highlighted the concerns for various species, most particularly, elephants, medicinal plants, orangutans, rhinos and turtles. According to the authors, their study constitutes “the first use of Aristotelian rhetoric and virtue to understand biodiversity disclosure as virtue rhetoric and extinction disclosure as emancipatory accounting” (2024). They observe that the study has high relevance on facing the complex and increasingly concerning threat of biodiversity loss and extinction.

Saraiva et al. (2024) examine the technical, social and moral dimensions of accounting (Carnegie et al., 2021a; 2021b), in the Portuguese water utilities sector implementation of a Balanced Scorecard (BSC) approach, addressing the purposes of UN SDG No. 6 on “Clean Water and Sanitation”. The authors apply Actor Network Theory (ANT) as the framework for informing this study’s findings. ANT emphasises the role and relevance of networks of relationships in particular settings and shows how concepts such as the BSC are just as important in structuring social practice. Interviews were conducted with stakeholders in the water utilities sector in Portugal which led to the iterative development of a context relevant
BSC proposal and associated indicators. Premised on a unique engagement of professionals and academics, this study illuminates a novel BSC architecture towards achieving UN SDG 6.

The BSC approach developed is expressly intended to augment the literature on “bridging business processes with the common good to improve life and planetary conditions” (Saraiva et al., 2024). The authors discuss how the technical aspects of accounting can be reconsidered and enhanced to respect and achieve social and moral imperatives. The authors reflect upon the limitations of broadening existing technical practices without regard for their impacts or effects on organisations, people, society and nature. Their study highlights what they envisage as a dearth of studies on how management control systems are either currently addressing, or can potentially address, the measurement and management of UN SDGs.

Masum and Parker (2024) examine how the technical logics of a World Bank (WB) led performance management reform interacted with the social, political, and historical logics within a developing country’s regulatory organisation. The authors’ examined the internal and external institutional environment to understand the experience of the performance management reform. The case study of a key regulatory organisation in Bangladesh deployed an interview-based, longitudinal, qualitative case study approach. These interviews served to identify the institutional logics at the macro-level and the associated organisational actors’ strategic responses that were key factors in modifying the implementation of a performance management system (PMS). The study’s findings, as put by the authors, “reflect historical, political, and cultural backgrounds of the case study organisation and how these contextual forces were active in shaping the meaning of reform logics” (2024).

Drawing on the Carnegie et al. (2021a, 2021b) definition of accounting, the authors provide evidence “that societal and organisational culture can influence the conception and implementation of accounting (performance management) reforms” (Masum and Parker, 2024). While the enhancement of accountability was an intention under the new PMS, it also provided challenges to the traditional organisational authority structure and culture. This resulted in adjustments instigated across time to the system, due to a combination of the influence of institutional pressures from key constituents together with the ability of the local agents, as managers, in negotiating and mediating the adoption, and interpretation in application, of the new system. These forces were active and impactful in altering the meaning of the reform logics, emphasising the importance of understanding accounting as social practice. These findings about the ongoing impacts of contextual forces illuminate for policy makers the key factors they need to be cognisant, and to evaluate in advance, concerning the design and implementation of future PMS reforms in specific contexts.

The contribution of Eager et al. (2024) demonstrates an innovative method for leveraging artificial intelligence (AI) tools to generate insights and recommendations in accounting research, focusing on the use of AI to address key sustainability issues. Situating their work amidst calls for a broader conception of accounting practice that embraces social, environmental, and ethical dimensions, the authors investigate issues pertaining to seasonal workers, connecting accounting responsibility to key sustainability concerns. Accordingly, they embrace a richer, multifaceted perspective of accounting as a technical, social and moral practice (Carnegie et al., 2021a; 2021b). The authors view the “sustainable utilisation of resources” (2024) component of this definition as embracing the SDGs of the UN and acknowledge accounting and accountants as key agents to attain a more sustainable world.

The authors demonstrate interfacing AI tools to construct a tailored knowledge base covering issues from migrant worker exploitation to policy reform. A key emphasis is placed on the constructed nature of the knowledge base, recognising that findings are
shaped by methodological choices. They highlight the efficacy of AI in swiftly generating analysis results, while also providing their audience with rich methodological insights into augmenting traditional accounting research techniques with AI. With AI emerging as a major technological force, elucidating techniques for its application in accounting research is presented as a key contribution. Potential future research could thus explore contrasting prescriptions derived using alternative knowledge bases reflecting differing philosophical paradigms.

Public interest framework for multidimensional accounting

To move towards adopting and implementing a definition of accounting as a multidimensional technical, social and moral practice, a broader understanding of accounting today needs to be operationalised, especially among the discipline’s practitioners, educators and researchers. For this to effectively occur without any undue delay, we must begin at the first levels of accounting education to impart a broad understanding of the nature, roles, uses and impacts of accounting in its operational contexts, both in organisations and societies (emphasis added). This would align accounting with the aspiration of “accounting for shaping a better world enabling the flourishing of organisations, people and nature” (Carnegie et al., 2023, Figure 1, p. 12). These authors argued that the accounting profession must understand more fully and accept greater responsibility for the nature, roles, uses and impacts that accounting will create, to move accounting’s vision, strategies, capabilities, and its inherent national and international influence, to universally strive to shape a better, more sustainable, world. This is not only aspirational; it is “consistent with a more balanced perspective on planet, people and profit” (2021a, p. 72).

Under this aspiration for accounting to shape a better, more sustainable world, acting in the public interest, necessarily extends to, and is attained when, the 1) technical, 2) social and 3) moral practices and responsibilities are all accepted as the basis of accounting. Accordingly, these elements collectively constitute and portray the essential public interest obligations to be consciously met by professional accountants (Carnegie et al., 2024). The Carnegie et al. (2021a, 2021b) definition of accounting not only specifies the nature of accounting, but it also portrays the same dimensions of accounting as prerequisites for effectively serving the fundamental public interest obligations of the accounting profession. Being a collective technical, social and moral practice, accounting’s nature and its overarching mission emphasises the prime “public interest” components and responsibilities of the profession which to date has continued to assume accounting to be a solely technical practice. The latter is in marked contrast to the argument that “accounting is not a mere neutral, benign, technical practice” (Carnegie et al., 2021a, p. 72, emphasis in the original). The study’s proposed framework is now outlined.

Adopting a strategic implementation framework and proposing key strategies

Earlier, Carnegie et al. (2023, p. 12) proposed a “Framework of the multidimensional nature of accounting” (also see Carnegie and Rose, 2023). In this study, this strategic implementation framework is extended. It is now broadened and renamed as the “Public interest framework for multidimensional accounting”. This involves a clear recognition of the mission of accounting, represented by the accounting profession nationally, regionally and globally, as being “to serve ‘the public interest’”. To serve the public interest means to continuously “act in ‘the public interest’”. This is unambiguous and is expected of our profession, and from individual professional accountants, by local, national, regional and global communities.
Our revised framework, diagrammatically exhibited in Figure 3, portrays this public interest mission of accounting as the essential means by which it is formally and informally evaluated for accountability purposes worldwide and, importantly, depicts four key strategies discerned from our analysis of the articles appearing in this thematic SI. Figure 3, therefore, is a strategic roadway for taking accounting and humans and non-humans alike to a better future.

In proposing this Framework, it is not necessary to move the global accounting profession away from the presently accepted definition of “public interest” as depicted in the International Federation of Accountants (IFAC) Policy Position Statement, No. 5, defined as follows: “IFAC defines the public interest as the net benefits derived for, and procedural rigour employed on behalf of, all society in relation to any action, decision or policy” (International Federation of Accountants, 2012, p. 1). This 2012 policy position, described as “A Definition of the public interest”, is adequately broad in approach, and “aims to present a practical definition that identifies the public interest and enables one to assess the extent to which actions, decision, or policies are made in the public interest” (2012, p. 1). Arguably, this avoids the business case based and financially self-interested appropriation and redefinition of the public interest often evident amongst corporate, consulting and professional strategy, discourse, and reporting today.

Source: Figure by authors
IFAC developed this definition to enable its own assessment of the extent to which its actions and decisions are made in the public interest. The multidimensional definition of accounting as a technical, social and moral practice with the purpose of flourishing of organisations, people and nature, provides a workable definition of the public interest for accounting. To date, has been repeatedly bereft or missing in action, despite the acceptance of the responsibility to act in the public interest as the distinguishing mark of the accounting profession, as stated in first paragraph of the International Code of Ethics for Professional Accountants (IESBA, 2023).

In this SI, authors have applied a wide variety of theoretical perspectives to inform what research they have variously done in a wide diversity of organisational and social contexts. This paper’s strategic implementation framework offers a key means for visualising broad-scope accounting and accountability for realising accounting’s full potential to shape a better, more sustainable world. Published in Meditari Accountancy Research, Carnegie et al. (2023) has been cited in 75% of the following articles in this issue, while Carnegie et al. (2021a) has been cited in all articles in this issue, in positive terms, which provides a sense of acceptance, or much interest in, their multidimensional definition of accounting. Combined with this opening SI article, articles in this issue are focused on facilitating and enabling strategic accounting change and transformation in professional practice, accounting education and accounting research. No sector of the accounting profession, and no single professional accountant has been ignored or is exempt from the proposed strategies presented in this SI. The Framework, depicted in Figure 3, is presented as a strategic implementation device or tool for guidance and use across the entire accounting profession and beyond.

Discussion and analysis – realising accounting’s potential
This section comprises six subsections. The first relates to expectations of the contributing authors on how they perceive and position accounting, represented by the accounting profession, for acting in the public interest. The second subsection addresses the perspectives of these authors on inculcating sustainability mindsets in accounting professional practice and education. The prime focus of educational systems for accounting is to serve the public interest rather than to be mainly focused on, or fixated upon, commercial interests (Hopper, 2023; Nørreklit et al., 2024).

Four broad strategies are thereafter proposed in the following subsections of the same number, based on the articles to follow in this SI, for moving accounting into its future as a multidimensional technical, social and moral practice. It expressly depicts the key ideas, initiatives and proposals presented by these authors for realising the potential of accounting to shape a better, more sustainable, world in the public interest. A “caution sign” is shown to conclude this section

The public interest
Various authors were explicit in identifying accounting as a multidimensional technical, social and moral practice. Castaldo et al. (2024) argued “we agree in assuming that accounting cannot be considered only as a set of techniques, but it certainly has a social and moral dimension”. They stated that the importance of accounting:

[...] cannot be limited to financial management and the processing of accounting data but must also extend to the protection of the public interest, professional ethics, the promotion of moral values and corporate social responsibility (2024).
Othman and Ameer (2024) are consistent with Carnegie et al. (2023) in highlighting “the evolving social and moral aspects of accounting”. They interpreted this redefinition as consistent with the advocacy by professional accounting organisations for their memberships “to uphold the responsibility of acting in the public interest and enhances the profession’s attractiveness” (2024). Nørreklit et al. (2024) emphasised “the importance of educational systems of accounting in serving the public interest rather than mainly commercial interests”. In addition, Pupovac and Nikidehaghani (2024) examined the case of Waratah Coal Pty Ltd vs Youth Verdict Ltd where the Court “acknowledged the need to overlook private financial interests for the broader public interest”.

Other contributors refer to the importance of morality. Saraiva et al. (2024) agreed with the call to broaden out accounting practices to constitute a moral compass for ensuring the public interest in various areas, including social and environmental matters. These authors stated the need to close a gap, requiring “accounting practice be broadened to be more sensitive to ethical concerns, and consider the public interest in a holistic sense beyond narrowly focusing on financial concerns”. To fulfil these aims, they deployed an approach based on Balanced Scorecard management control architecture. Twyford et al. (2024) stressed that:

[...the critical accounting research community argues that acting morally, ethically, and in the public interest should be central to accounting, whether in academia or the profession, to pursue a broader societal mission.]

Wangchuk et al. (2024) stressed “the moral legitimacy of accounting rests on acting in the public interest.

The emphasis on the ethical dimensions of accounting, especially in the context of SDGs, according to Twyford et al. (2024), “aligns with SDG 16, ‘Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions’”. According to these authors, this alignment “highlights the significance of tax avoidance on macro, micro and micro levels while allowing students to envision a future for accounting and accountants where expertise can be used not to serve multinationals but the public interest”. Further, concerning accounting students, Tanima et al. (2024) explained how our students require to be exposed to multi-layered worldviews, philosophies, discourses and viewpoints which encourages consideration of, and reflection of, taken-for-granted accounting practices. These authors argue that this approach fosters an openness to consider how accounting can better commit to and serve the public interest. They also point out that within our own teaching scholarship and in all interactions with students, “we must pay attention to the needs and concerns of wide-ranging stakeholder groups and their unique and multifaceted accountability demands” (2024).

Several authors were seeking an emphasis in accounting, and by accountants, on “broader performance”, such as Othman and Ameer. These authors explain that professional accounting organisations hold expectations to attract more individuals towards qualifications, including professional qualifications. They state the importance of “emphasizing broader performance aligned with public interest and enhancing the profession’s reputation” (2024). They also argue for extending beyond the calculation and use of key performance indicators to also “contemplate the consequences of actions and inactions that impact others”, so necessary in a more complete evaluation process (2024). More generally, Castaldo et al. (2024) explained:

Through the protection of the public interest, professional ethics, transparency and corporate social responsibility, the accountancy of the future will indeed promote social welfare and contribute to building a fairer and more sustainable economy.
Consistent, common and repeatedly reinforced themes emerge from this SI and its constituent papers. Acting in the public interest for the accounting profession is underpinned by the call for a strong moral and social responsibility remit. This is intrinsic not only to the analyses and critiques presented but is seen to be integrated within implementation frameworks and strategies. It is unacceptable to treat these issues as impression management add-ons to the “core” technical focus traditionally applied within the accounting profession and its financial stakeholders. The public interest responsibilities of accounting are imperative.

Furthermore, the studies in this issue envisage a necessity for accounting to reach a far better balance between the financial and the social and moral, between its financial stakeholders and nature and the community. This is reflected in repeated contributor calls for accounting to overtly serve the public interest rather than purely commercial, corporate self-interests. Researchers consider that the reputation, legitimacy and attractiveness of the accounting profession rest on the adoption of this orientation. To this end, we call for not only the broadening of accounting definition, scope, and attestations, but the development of a broader suite of measures, assessments and reporting routines. We also advocate the widespread acceptance, both within and beyond the profession, of the centrality of morality in accounting as well as more deliberate and overt attention to the wider set of societal stakeholders comprising humans and nonhumans alike.

In the following subsections, the first addresses inculcating sustainability mindsets in accounting professional practice and education. The next four subsections each present ideas, initiatives and proposals collectively gathered from the contributors of the articles for the constructive direction and realisation of accounting, combining ambition, enthusiasm and leadership, for shaping a better, more sustainable, world from tomorrow.

**Inculcating sustainability mindsets in accounting professional practice and education**

In recent decades, the business of accounting has grown significantly in the world. This elevation in the use and importance of accounting has occurred with little attention to the worldwide impacts of quantification in financial terms. Not to refer to this state of play is not to recognise, in any material and effective way, the impacts of increasing monitorisation in society. Expressly, accounting today adopts an instrumentalist and financial approach to valuation. This major instrument of accounting, emphasising the financial valuation of resources, is more specifically known as financial reporting and is the traditional domain of, and supports, both professional accountants and auditors worldwide. Financial valuation is a construction by humans and is a human-centred approach to financial reporting or accounting in broad terms.

For shaping a better world, there needs to be a serious, worldwide re-thinking, as argued by Powell and McGuigan (2023, 2024), of the “instrumentalist and financial approach to valuing non-human species and the natural environment”. They argue that “we need to move beyond an anthropocentric point of view to recognise humanity’s role within the context of broader ecosystems” (2024). What does this mean for accounting and accountants? In short, it means a reorientation from the human-centred approach widely adopted towards greater ecocentric approaches that recognise the intrinsic value of all life (Powell and McGuigan, 2024).

The present primary focus on an instrumentalist approach, which underpins traditional accounting, blocks recognition of the intrinsic value of life forms. More explicitly, this may suppress and marginalise noneconomic modes of valuing what are, in substance, non-financial resources from the perspective of preservation, conservation and protection (Neuteleers and Engelen, 2015; Powell and McGuigan, 2024). According to Powell and
McGuigan, this “suppresses compassion, kindness, care and connection with and towards other [non-human] species” (2024). Importantly, non-accountants who specialise in the non-financial classification and valuation resources in the contexts in which they exist and operate, such as heritage professionals, have developed approaches to non-financial valuation which accounting and accountants ignore or overlook (see, for example, Carman, 1996; Carnegie and Wolnizer, 1996; Carman et al., 1999; Ferri et al., 2021).

Four key strategies have been identified in the process of guest editing this SI. We associated the major or overriding strategy observed within each paper to one of four broad strategies for positioning accounting to face and shape the future as a multidimensional technical, social and moral practice for shaping a better, more sustainable world. The strategies are stated as follows:

1. adopting broad scope and alternative thought or theory in accounting;
2. understanding Indigenous people, inculcating values and respecting culture;
3. transitioning accounting education from an overemphasis on how to do accounting; and
4. learning and innovating from explorations of accounting in shaping the future.

These strategies, all expressly concerned with, and focused upon, serving the public interest, are now addressed in the following remaining subsections.

Adopting broad scope and alternative thought or theory in accounting
Morrison et al. (2024) argue that accounting is “at the heart of a range of environmental harms”. This portrays a key and growing concern with the state of accounting today and for the future. The authors of these SI articles are concerned about the use of accounting’s traditional tools in adopting substantive change for a more sustainable world. In so doing, they emphasise the imperative to adopt a new framework, such as the new definition of accounting. Wangchuk et al. (2024) argue that ethical discourses in traditional accounting and accountability are not compatible with the values of the Middle Path. An ethical and moral commitment under Middle Path philosophy is adopted by the “awakened mind” to release suffering of sentient beings. They advocate using the Carnegie et al. (2021a, 2021b) definition of accounting because its “virtues are positive aspects of Buddhist morality that can guide the framing of accounting practice” (Wangchuk et al., 2024).

Nørreklit et al. (2024) render a conceptual framework for guiding the measurement of how a sustainable good life has improved or deteriorated due to corporate activities. They outline a system of concepts concerning basic and instrumental values for analysing the condition of maintaining a sustainable good life in real terms for reporting to stakeholders and not merely shareholders. Colourfully, Castaldo et al. (2024) argue that:

[... ] accountancy today cannot be a corpus of cold techniques, at risk of being a blind, deaf, and autarchic discipline, as the clichés describe it; rather it must respond to the needs of business and companies, but even more so to the needs of the society and the natural environment in which these companies are embedded.

Holding similar concerns, Branco et al. (2024), propose an institutionalist political-economy perspective on social and environmental accounting (SEA). They are concerned with communicating only to investors and not effectively to all stakeholders. They foresee the proposed framework as allowing the strategic engagement of the accounting profession with well-established global initiatives articulated.
In terms of implementation in specific functional groupings, particularly 1) reporting, 2) performance measurement and control, and 3) change management, the following actions or points were variously provided by these authors. Reporting initiatives included: disclosure of technological developments in relation to their impact on long term sustainability; expanded reporting of non-financial indicators; refocusing from purely “business case” driven models and orientations to address human capability and the global good, and developing guidelines based on the experience of the difference between expected and actual action/performance and outcomes. For performance measurement and control, they advocate translating global performance/impact indicators into specific targets; broadening management control systems to incorporate SDGs and adopting more specific performance indicators. In terms of change management, the call is to enlist practitioners into championing and securing change through multiple entities, such as industry groups or associations.

These contributions relating to this strategy share much in common. The authors herein represented are typically concerned that traditional accounting thought and practices are being ostensibly but marginally adjusted to apparently respond to widespread community concerns with today’s challenging issues confronting global society. Admittedly, there are limits to how far traditional accounting tools and approaches can meet challenges of the present day and of the future. The adaptability of accounting, particularly of financial reporting, is under increasing review and mounting criticism. Moreover, the accounting profession is struggling to demonstrate relevance, and to conceal its lack of innovation in the present day. Authors focusing on sustainability philosophies and frameworks are calling for accounting to make suitable its concepts, orientations and aspirations for the future.

*Understanding Indigenous people, inculcating values and respecting culture*

*Tanima et al. (2024)* and *Pupovac and Nikidehaghani (2024)* are each concerned with examining scenarios relating to First Nations or Indigenous people in Australia. *Narayan and Oru (2024)* focus on obtaining the views of the Indigenous people of the Solomon Islands by means of interviews. Given these different settings, there are pertinent messages in each of these First Nations studies in developing a strategy for realising the potential for accounting to shape a better world premised on their research.

Ideas, initiatives and proposals relating to this strategy for shaping a better world are now summarised. *Tanima et al. (2024)* illuminate this ancient and embracing Indigenous culture as ripe and apt, in the mid-2020s, for developing SDGs into our everyday lives. Their study challenges us to not take for granted everyday accounting practice based on colonial induced relationships of power and control in ongoing processes of reconciliation and cultural understanding. *Pupovac and Nikidehaghani (2024)* depict how the Court made a judgement in favour of Indigenous people. A demonstration of building and amplifying global synergies and, effectively, a strong recognition of the intentions of the UN and of the importance of the SDGs. It is a decision for the international accounting profession to become fully acquainted with as a responsive professional community. *Narayan and Oru (2024)* call for the adoption of forms or styles of accounting, and related forms of accountability, with due respect for local Indigenous beliefs, norms and social factors in these settings. Given the importance of a nuanced understanding of context in the Solomon Islands, these authors view the *Carnegie et al. (2021a, 2021b)* definition of accounting as enabling and fostering collaborative efforts among individuals, communities, leaders and institutions.

These studies have implications for future accounting practice in Indigenous settings. These include harnessing cultural strengths through accounting as well as the continuous
development of capacity building and broad-based education in accounting, particularly culturally attuned accountants, possessing local knowledge and cultural awareness and understanding hitherto not imagined in support of Indigenous communities and learning a respect for, and love of, living in harmony with country and nature.

**Transitioning accounting education from an overemphasis on how to do accounting**

A set of contributors to this SI have focussed their attention and energies on reforming and enlightening accounting education, identified herein as a key strategy. Twyford et al. (2024, title) view the UN SDGs “as catalysts for change in accounting education and society” because these UN pronouncements “offer a promising avenue for bridging the research-teaching gap in accounting education” (Twyford et al., 2024). The authors view their study as making two key contributions: “First it ignites a transformative spark, urging accounting educators to integrate the SDGs into accounting practices and curricula. Second, it provides a framework for collective sharing and reflection through a shared autoethnographic exercise” (2024). The latter is intended to allow accounting educators to connect their practices to broader purposes and support teaching as contextualised within broader socio-environmental frameworks. Moreover, their study “contributes to a burgeoning accounting literature that also adopts the new definition” of Carnegie et al. (2021a, 2021b). The authors envisage the SDGs as empowering future professional accountants to advocate effectively for sustainable development and, therefore, become positive change agents.

Powell and McGuigan (2023, 2024) emphasise the cultivation of compassion for humans and nonhumans in accounting education as part of their proposal to a move beyond an anthropocentric point of view towards ecocentric approaches. This requires accounting educators themselves to embark on a re-education program; they need “to journey on this reflective inner transformation so that they can equally facilitate its integration and development with others” (2024). The authors specify that this occurs through formal and informal programs for developing knowledge and skills on sustainability, including developing awareness and understanding of the SDGs. It also calls for entering and facilitating interdisciplinary forums, conversations, interactions and engagement. In concluding, the authors propose, initiating a reversal away from accounting as the so-called “enemy of sustainability (Adams, 2022)” and moving towards “accounting that shapes a better world for the benefit of both humans and nonhumans (Carnegie, 2022)” (2024). The operationalisation of accounting as multidimensional technical, social and moral practice, along with developing sustainability capabilities in accounting students, are critical mindset changes for creating sustainable futures.

Using the Carnegie et al. (2021a, 2021b) definition of accounting as a multidimensional technical, social and moral practice, Othman and Ameer (2024) proposed that the education goal to be achieved is “AE [accounting education] centred on the SDGs”. This major proposal is supported because:

> [...] the SDGs aspire to a universally shared vision of a safe, just and sustainable world, prioritizing moral principles and advocating for inclusive participation, with the 2030 Agenda underscoring the transformative impact of universal values in combating discrimination and inequality (2024).

They call for the accounting profession, to highlight “the importance of engagement with SDG-related narratives [...] [and] to stimulate the teaching and practice of accounting to potentially and practically enable achievement of SDGs” (2024). This is a major and pressing issue for the accounting profession in the mid-2020s, which to date, has shown little
leadership in connecting accounting practice, concepts and standards to SDGs and related accounting innovation in help make this achievable.

Learning and innovating from explorations of accounting in shaping the future
Various authors in this SI have given key and fresh insights to what can be done or at least investigation for adoption. Oliveira et al. (2024), based on their study on a Portuguese organisation, and argue for the effective use of visual images within reporting processes. This is proposed for two key purposes. First, as a means of enriching our understanding of accounting as a multidimensional technical, social, and moral practice. Second, for simultaneously expanding the scope of accountability and promoting a more human-centred approach to accounting. Pujiningsih and Utami (2024) argue the necessity for accounting and the accountants to contribute more to biodiversity and extinction reporting, especially as sustainability accounting and reporting have historically been commonly undertaken by non-accountants. While the disclosure provided on biodiversity and extinction by Indonesian companies is a step forward towards the prospects of enhanced sustainability in future, there remains a complex, if not alarming, reality facing society and our natural environment about what does such disclosure achieve, in material ways, to reverse biodiversity losses into gains.

By means of a unique engagement between academics, contributing to this SI, and professionals occurring in Portugal, a novel BSC architecture to achieve UN SDG 6 emerged. Saraiva et al. (2024) in collaboration with professionals in the water sector, focussed on developing a BSC framework, to both contribute to bridging business processes with the common good to improve life and planetary conditions. They showed that the process of developing a BSC is a means of translating the SDGs into the core activities of water organisations and perceived the BSC proposal as a form of explanation for water entities. Masum and Parker (2024) reveal how a developing country regulatory reform, led by the World Bank, can be undermined by national culture and traditional organisational practices, otherwise in-country determinants of social and organisational practices. The authors demonstrate, in Bangladesh, that although strong pressures existed from the institutional environment to reform the PMS, the application of the system and intended impacts were seen as a form of “ceremonial compliance” (2024). In aspiring for the universal application of SDGs, this is a major consideration for advocates of SDGs to have cognisance.

Eager et al. (2024) emphasise the importance of AI as at the forefront of accounting developments across the accounting profession, to be widely applied in research and innovation, teaching and learning, and a multitude of professional activities. They argue for both a broader role for accounting “embracing a rich perspective” of the discipline, consistent with that proposed by Carnegie et al. (2021a, 2021b). These authors illuminate a clear connection between the definition of accounting deployed in education and practice and how we perceive, and make effective use of, AI in the profession.

A “caution sign”, however, is raised at this point. Effective dialogue between “town and gown” in the accounting profession is now widely perceived as at a low and concerning level with unfavourable implications for advancing the public interest. By way of illustration, during the 1960s through to the 1980s, academic accountants regularly published in professional accounting journals. The propensity for such articles to be published therein has substantially diminished. Indeed, it is now most unusual. Major professional accounting journals now apply editorial policies permitting only select preferred journalists to write articles for members of professional bodies. There is no defensible reason for both sides of the accounting profession – the researchers/thinkers and the practitioners/doers – not to
actively engage for mutual benefit and benefit across the entire profession and, more broadly, to organisations, people, society and nature in the public interest.

**Conclusion and a challenge**

This bumper SI, comprising 17 articles in all has, in broad terms, sought to facilitate the focusing of minds around the nature, roles, uses and impacts of accounting, with the latter concerned with the effects of accounting and accountants in the world, whether such impacts are intended or unintended. While accounting can be dismissed as having narrow premises or roles, its consequences in shaping our world, organisations, people and nature, are substantial; they are not well recognised or understood. We emphasise the need to be cognisant of these consequences, both favourable and adverse, for reflection upon and decisions on what our children, grandchildren and future generations thereafter are inheriting from us.

On publication of this SI, since 1976, on first publication of *AOS*, there has been more than almost five decades of research and publication, broadly, undertaken in the sociological, interpretive and critical tradition. This growing, dynamic and important field of research is more generally known as interdisciplinary accounting research, including an emphasis on accountability and auditing. Drawing on the collective work, now of considerable significance and magnitude, Carnegie *et al.* (2021a, 2021b), co-authored by three of the five guest editors of this SI, proposed accounting move towards achieving its full potential by means of redefinition without undue delay. They called for accounting to be broadly conceived and practised according to a broad-scope, multidimensional definition, summarised as in the theme of this issue, specifically as “accounting as technical, social and moral practice”, with a focus on sustainable development, especially by means of actively attaining the UN SDGs.

All contributions to this SI, written by 46 different authors, have given attention and support to this definition, and sought to apply the definition in various organisational and social contexts. The resulting SI is ripe for reading, contemplation, discussion and debate, as well as actioning around the globe, not just in the accounting circles, but broadly in society. Why is this important and necessary? Accounting is more influential in the world, and in our lives, than many people may think. As argued by Carnegie *et al.* (2021a, p. 72, emphasis added) in broad terms: “Accounting is not a mere neutral, benign, technical practice”. Consistent with this statement, they add “understanding more fully the nature, roles, uses and impacts of accounting, we argue will help to shape a better world” (2021a, p. 72).

These concluding comments do not include a reconsideration or summary of the articles published. These have been both introduced in two paragraph summaries, and subsequently positioned according to four key strategies for realising the potential of accounting in shaping a better, more sustainable, world in the public interest. This SI is concerned with developing the widespread and effective use of this broad-scope definition across the entire profession of accounting, particularly in accounting teaching and learning, research and innovation, the world of professional accounting practice, and by law and rule makers, including entities that set and review accounting standards premised, almost exclusively on general purpose financial reporting. This latter form of regulated accounting has become close to excessive and obsessive. The world is not well served when it is narrowly represented as little more than a periodically prepared, and static, audited statement of financial position!

In this SI opening article, we emphasise the urgency for the international domain of accounting to more clearly express how the accounting profession both serves and acts in the public interest. This vital and essential expectation of the accounting domain has been, and
remains, somewhat vague and unclear, even within the accounting profession in the mid-2020s. What is argued as opportune and pertinent for adoption from today is a “Public interest framework for multidimensional accounting”, as proposed by us earlier in Figure 3 of this article, updating and extending an earlier framework of Carnegie et al. (2023), across the entire accounting profession and beyond. This is our challenge for the accounting profession!

In summary, for accounting to shape a better, more sustainable world, the notion of serving in the public interest necessarily extends to, and moves positively towards attainment, when the 1) technical, 2) social and 3) moral practice dimensions of accounting are all taught, understood, and accepted as the basis of accounting and practised in alignment with its essence. These dimensions collectively constitute and portray the essential public interest obligations to be consciously met in everyday professional accounting practice (Carnegie et al., 2024). Accounting, otherwise, continues to masquerade as a technical practice alone and accounting policy decisions appear to be the “business” of the strongly “business-minded” accounting profession. The Carnegie et al. (2021a, 2021b) definition of accounting exhibits the same dimensions of accounting as the prerequisites for effectively serving the overall public interest obligations of the discipline, concentrated upon enabling “the flourishing of organisations, people and nature” (2021a, p. 69). All encouragement is given to discuss and debate this proposal, in the public interest, with at least accounting students and recent accounting graduates of today; they are the leaders of the accounting profession from tomorrow. Sustainable development opportunities are indeed to be exploited by the profession in serving the public interest.

This journey has already started! Get a “ticket to ride”!

Notes
1. Strategic implementation framework may be abbreviated to “SIF”. This is used to signify “Seat in front”, which typically means that one’s view is not obscured, as is intended in developing and proposing this Framework.

2. The data was collected by the authors based on information known to us, premised on personal experience of the contributors and information available on websites of the affiliated institutions for all authors.

3. In addition, one author is affiliated with a UK university, residing for much of the year in Australia.

References
How accounting can shape a better world


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