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Collaboration mechanisms for sustainable innovation

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Title page

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to advance research on sustainable innovation through a business model (hereafter, BM) perspective. We consider the BM as a boundary-spanning system that encompasses various firms, in which value is created, exchanged and captured. More specifically, we look at the changes called for by the imperative of sustainable development, through the perspective of the BM. When companies coalesce around well-entrenched BMs, sunk costs and lock-in effects emerge as formidable barriers for sustainable innovation. We posit that the multiple dimensions in which sustainable innovation creates value for BM participants have not been adequately studied. In this article, we seek to address that gap by exploring the following research questions: What mechanisms enable transactions in boundary-spanning BMs that seek to bring about sustainable innovation? Are there synergies or otherwise meaningful connections between the different collaboration mechanisms? Are there enabling mechanisms that may facilitate or hinder those mechanisms? We look at the BM of three green innovators: new entrants that created a niche in their industries with clear social and environmental advantages over imperfect substitutes. Our main contributions to the literature on sustainable innovation are: (1) the integration of social and environmental collaboration mechanisms in addition to the economic ones used by extant studies; (2) the identification of the connections among these social, economic and environmental collaboration mechanisms; and (3) the identification of a set of enabling conditions within the focal firms that facilitate collaboration at the BM level. We close with

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