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Highlights

- We propose a more inclusive systemic perspective.
- There is a need to speed up the application of ‘inclusive’ corporate sustainability.
- The current practice has a strong focus on the physical dynamics in companies.
- In many cases the three dimensions of issues, time and place are only addressed partially.
- Transformative learning requires more than repeated plan-do-check-act loops
- The scholarly field needs to strengthen attention to the social intervention dynamics.

Abstract

This article argues for greater attention to be paid to the dual and embedded nature of business. We propose that a more inclusive systemic perspective is needed for the challenge of speeding up the application of ‘inclusive’ corporate sustainability. The key question is how an on-going upward dynamic of transformative learning cycles can be achieved in practice. The current practice of implementing sustainability management systems, identifying key performance indicators, reporting on sustainability policies and outcomes has a strong focus on the physical dynamics in companies and (in the good cases) in their value chain. In many cases the three dimensions of issues, time and place are only addressed partially. We argue that the academic community needs to pay greater retro- and prospective attention to the social intervention dynamics, introducing checks on the assumed effects of social interventions. In order to achieve a more balanced and inclusive corporate sustainability we need to link levels of the achievement of corporate sustainability goals more strongly with (self-) assessment of the social dynamics in firms and their societal system.

1. Introduction

Over the last three decades of pioneering, constructive and critical-evaluative scientific work, many scholars in the field of sustainable production and consumption and especially corporate sustainability have greatly contributed to the adoption of more sustainable practices in business. However, progress is slowing down, while the need for greater and faster steps is growing. The key question is how the academic community can further support companies which are already on the road to sustainability, but want to jump to ‘all-inclusive’ corporate sustainability. Such support may also benefit those companies that are currently stepping on the bandwagon.

In the past, progress was possible with smaller adaptations to regular ways of production and consumption. More recently it has increasingly been argued that more fundamental changes in the modes of production and the way of doing business are needed. Such critical thinking about the role of businesses in society has a long history.

Adam Smith is often presented as one of the classical thinkers, promoting in “*The Wealth of Nations*” the fundamental belief in the invisible hand of the market and the assumption that producers and consumers acting in self-interest are the best for the common wealth. However, Adam Smith himself stressed the need for morally reasonable behaviour in his other classical book “*The theory of moral sentiment*” (Smith, 1759; Hunt and Lautzenheiser, 2011; Doorman, 2012;). In the 18th and 19th century other scholars, like Lauderdale and Rae, were opposed to the belief in unrestricted selfish wealth creation as the best recipe for economic progress (Haney, 1920, pp. 294–302).

From the start of the 20th century scholars have been stressing the need for companies to go beyond merely making profit, by contributing to societal progress in their communities. As did Henry Ford in 1917, defending the reinvestment of profits in plant expansion, arguing the purpose of his company this way: ‘To do as much as possible for everybody concerned, to make money and use it, give employment, and send out the car where the people can use it ... and incidentally to make money ... Business is a service, not a bonanza’ (Lee, 2008, p. 54). While the discipline of economics developed mostly into a dominant main route of neo-liberal economics and

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