



## Alternative conceptions of sustainability in a business context



Leena Lankoski <sup>a, b, \*</sup>

<sup>a</sup> University of Helsinki, Department of Economics and Management, P.O. Box 27, 00014 Helsinki, Finland

<sup>b</sup> INSEAD Social Innovation Centre, Fontainebleau, France

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### ABSTRACT

Even when restricting our observations to the business context, it is evident that the concept of sustainability is interpreted in quite different ways, which hinders the achievement of sustainability transitions. Approaching sustainability as an ‘essentially contested concept’, this paper unpacks it into three constituent, management-relevant dimensions – scope, substitutability, and goal orientation – and demonstrates how different conceptions within these dimensions result in hugely different, often incompatible, yet legitimate interpretations of sustainability, with significant consequences for management and with significant differences in their outcome promise. The end result is a novel typology for categorizing conceptions of sustainability into eight basic types. The theoretical value added of the analysis lies in the fact that it improves clarity around a key concept, adds structure to debates on sustainability in a business context, and is able to build a common frame of reference without having to select a single common definition for sustainability. The findings can help with strategic, operative, and communicational problems that practicing managers face with regard to sustainability. Researchers and managers are encouraged to be explicit about the conceptions of sustainability they themselves adhere to and show awareness of those of others. This will, in turn, improve future research on business sustainability and future management of sustainable businesses alike, thus enhancing our ability to contribute to the building of a more sustainable society.

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### 1. Introduction

Achieving sustainability is often likened to a journey (e.g., Lozano, 2015; Wagner and Svensson, 2014). But as with any journey, what exactly you enter in the navigator as the destination critically influences what kind of a journey you will embark upon. Furthermore, if you are to take this journey together with others, it makes a great difference whether all the travellers have the same address in their navigators or not. This paper examines how the concept of sustainability can be – and is – interpreted in quite different ways, even if we restrict our observations to the business context. In other words, it analyzes what kind of different addresses participants to the debate on sustainability in business may have in their ‘transition navigators’ and explores the implications of this for achieving sustainability transitions.

There are increasing calls for businesses to be sustainable; indeed, “claims of sustainability have become part of the rhetoric of

virtually every enterprise” (Connelly, 2007, p. 273). But what does ‘sustainability’ mean for businesses? Scratching beneath the surface agreement that enterprises ought to be sustainable soon reveals that the apparent consensus is accompanied by a variety of widely differing interpretations of what sustainability actually signifies in a business context. For example, it has been defined as requiring “a permanent improvement of the business’s performance in economic, ecological and social terms” (Figge et al., 2002, p. 273), “the progressive maintenance of the life-supporting capacities of the planet’s ecosystems” (Milne and Gray, 2013, p. 16), or that “corporate value is maximized and does not decline over time” (Hediger, 2010, p. 522).

That there is a variety of interpretations of sustainability is not news *per se*. In fact, a number of authors have pointed to the myriad interpretations of sustainability (e.g., Dobson, 1996; Heikkurinen and Bonnedahl, 2013; Montiel and Delgado-Ceballos, 2014). However, there is still a need to give more recognition to this point in debates on sustainability in a business context, not least because of the fundamental nature of the differences and the significant implications they have for managing a ‘sustainable firm’. As early as 1995, Jennings and Zandbergen noted that in order to study

\* University of Helsinki, Department of Economics and Management, P.O. Box 27, 00014 Helsinki, Finland.

E-mail address: [leena.lankoski@helsinki.fi](mailto:leena.lankoski@helsinki.fi).

(ecologically) sustainable organizations, there are two key questions to be answered: 1) what is (ecological) sustainability? And 2) what role do organizations play in achieving it? The latter question has subsequently received considerable attention, but the former has been seldom addressed in a business context. Research on sustainability in business has largely been approached from the angle of the role sustainability does or should play in an enterprise's objectives, or to propose models for integrating sustainability considerations into business. Where the literature is remarkably silent is on the question of the *actual meaning* of sustainability as a business concept (a notable exception is e.g. [Christen and Schmidt, 2012](#); albeit not especially in a business context).

There are nevertheless advantages to the absence of a definitive definition of sustainability. According to [Carew and Mitchell \(2008\)](#), the situation is both inevitable and healthy, because sustainability is partly value-based and focused on complex systems. To some extent, the value of the concept of sustainability may lie “in its broadness and its ability to stimulate vigorous and open discussion” and in that it “allows people with conflicting positions ... to search for common ground” ([Kajikawa et al., 2007](#), p. 222). A certain ambiguity in a concept can invite complementary perspectives and allow the concept to develop as understanding changes. Initially, vagueness can be particularly beneficial, as “[h]aving a consensus on a vague concept, rather than disagreement over a sharply defined one”, can help establish and spread a new idea ([Mebratu, 1998](#), p. 503, referring to [Daly, 1996](#)). According to [Mebratu \(1998\)](#), the Brundtland Commission's classic definition of sustainable development (a different but related concept) has received wide acceptance precisely because it allows so many different interpretations. However, later that same vagueness can become “a breeding ground for disagreement” ([Mebratu, 1998](#), p. 503, referring to [Daly, 1996](#)).

Indeed, notwithstanding these advantages, the opacity surrounding sustainability in a business context (or, “the systematic misuse, misunderstanding, and flawed application of the concept in many business settings”, as put by [Desjardins, 2016](#), p. 117) carries significant harmful consequences for achieving sustainability transitions in the real world. As sustainability science is fundamentally multi-, inter- and transdisciplinary (e.g., [Baumgartner, 2011](#); [Kajikawa et al., 2014](#)), there is a need to engage a diversity of actors. Such collaboration calls for a common ground, or at least an understanding of where the differences lie. Yet, different actors may unwittingly hold different and, to varying degrees, incompatible conceptions of sustainability – a situation that results in “parallel discourses” ([Redclift, 2005](#)) and hinders progress on several levels if not recognized.

Among academics researching sustainability in business, parallel discourses are particularly unproductive, as their proponents are fundamentally at cross purposes ([Gatto, 1995](#); [Hartman et al., 2007](#); [Okoye, 2009](#)), and thus studies are less likely to contribute towards building a common understanding. Between researchers and corporate practitioners, unidentified divergent conceptions of sustainability may also in cases result in a false perception of understanding and agreement, and consequently in complacency. Moreover, different conceptions of sustainability within a firm complicate the management's task of engaging all employees in a concerted effort towards the same goal. Mismatched conceptions of sustainability between an enterprise and its external stakeholders also make it difficult for the enterprise to determine what is expected of a ‘sustainable firm’ and how sustainability claims can be credibly communicated. A company could also take advantage of the situation knowingly, as it has been argued that the vagueness surrounding sustainability allows each party to construct and interpret sustainability in ways that align with their specific interests ([Banerjee, 2003](#); [van Marrewijk, 2003](#)). At worst, a diluted

version of sustainability could be misused to perpetuate business-as-usual ([Haigh and Hoffman, 2014](#)).

A lack of shared understanding of this key concept may thus both prevent progress ([Montiel, 2008](#)) and mask this lack of improvement ([Okoye, 2009](#)) in the field of sustainability in business, perhaps even producing a “sustainability fog” ([Hannon and Callaghan, 2011](#)). [Connelly \(2007\)](#) lists several ways to approach such problems of definitional ambiguity. The first is to ignore any opacity and present the concept as at once unproblematic as a concept but difficult to achieve in practice. A second alternative is to select a single, ‘correct’ interpretation from among the possible meanings. The third option is for researchers to make the conceptual ambiguity explicit, typically by adopting a single analytical axis along which variations of the concept are presented. Finally, the fourth alternative is to acknowledge and recognize the multiplicity of meanings and constituent dimensions behind a given concept, to appreciate the legitimacy of alternative interpretations, and to try to understand their implications.

The present paper subscribes to this last approach. It regards sustainability as an ‘essentially contested concept’ (a term introduced by [Gallie, 1956](#)), and provides a systematic examination of alternative conceptions of sustainability in a business context. While the paper does not advocate any single conception of sustainability over others, it nevertheless argues that awareness is important when using the concept. Thus, managers, researchers, and others are encouraged to be explicit about their conceptions of the nature of sustainability, be aware of those of others, and understand the potential and limitations of each conception. This is particularly important in light of recent evidence that the term is spreading and replacing other concepts both in business ([Gatti and Seele, 2014](#); [Smith and Alexander, 2013](#)) and in management research, where, for example, the annual number of articles on ‘corporate sustainability’ in the Scopus database has more than doubled in the past five years (see also [Montiel and Delgado-Ceballos, 2014](#); and for a review on corporate sustainability literature see e.g. [Amini and Bienstock, 2014](#)).

The paper is structured as follows. After this introductory section, Section 2 discusses sustainability as an essentially contested concept in business. Starting from the observation that there is great variation in the usage of the concept, it proceeds to examining this usage to identify and label three underlying constituent dimensions in conceptions of sustainability. Both the perspective of an organization and that of the wider system are present in this discussion, as activities at the organizational level produce outcomes which contribute in a positive, negative, or neutral manner to system-level sustainability. Next, section 3 discusses and describes each of the three constituent dimensions in detail as well as connects them with previous literature. Section 4 combines the three dimensions together to produce eight alternative conceptions of sustainability in a business context and reviews their differences. The concluding section discusses the theoretical contribution of the paper, its management implications, and suggestions for further research.

## 2. Sustainability as an essentially contested concept in business

In this section, the essentially contested nature of sustainability is established, distinguishing it from conceptual confusion (see [Miles, 2012](#)), and three underlying, constituent dimensions are identified for alternative conceptions of sustainability in a business context.

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