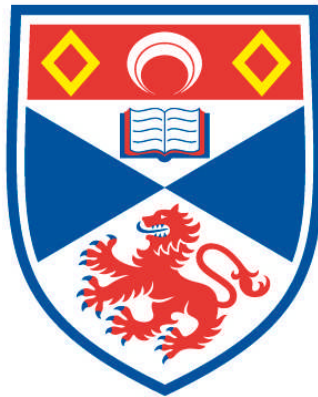


**THE POSSIBLE ROLE OF BUSINESS ORGANISATIONS IN
SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT:
APPROACHES, BOUNDARIES, FUTURE DIRECTIONS**

Aideen O'Dochartaigh

**A Thesis Submitted for the Degree of PhD
at the
University of St Andrews**



2014

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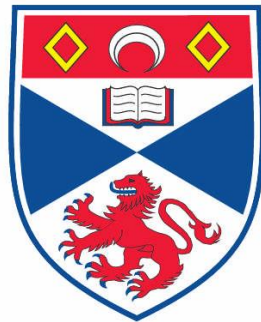
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The Possible Role of Business Organisations in
Sustainable Development:
Approaches, Boundaries, Future Directions

Aideen O'Dochartaigh



This thesis is submitted in partial fulfilment for the degree of MPhil/PhD
at the
University of St Andrews

August 2014

Abstract

It is increasingly evident that human development is proceeding in an unsustainable manner, and that large business organisations are significantly complicit in this process. In this context, the purpose of this study is to explore the possibilities by which business organisations could come to support sustainable development, with a particular focus on related barriers and how they may be overcome.

Literature on business and sustainable development is dominated by managerialist, organisation-centric perspectives, where the focus is on business profitability rather than planetary sustainability. This study seeks to challenge this mainstream literature, engaging with more critical perspectives and exploring the subtleties of the contradictory arguments presented by these two literatures.

Empirical investigation involved two major steps. First the thesis employs a) a content analysis and b) a “close reading” of corporate public utterances on sustainability. Secondly, and more substantively, the thesis comprises a series of semi-structured interviews with individuals in organisations. To obtain a range of perspectives on the sustainable development-business relationship, a number of “different types” of organisation are sampled, in the form of social enterprises, large PLCs, SMEs and co-owned businesses.

Based on the research findings, it is argued that the most significant barriers within the business-sustainable development relationship in fact concern the nature of modern international financial capitalism, and the nature of business itself. Certain characteristics, such as growth, competition and self-interest, essential to both the nature of the “system” and the nature of business, are fundamentally incompatible with sustainable development.

In recognising this dissonance, a blank canvas is created where new imaginings of “sustainable business” can begin to take place. Through detailed engagement with the critical and managerialist literatures, and drawing insight from the different types of organisations sampled, the thesis identifies a number of characteristics, such as collaboration, compromise and consideration of the common good, which may have the potential to enable an alternative, more “human”, and ultimately more “sustainable” form of business organisation.

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I, Aideen O'Dochartaigh, hereby certify that this thesis, which is approximately 80,000 words in length, has been written by me, that it is the record of work carried out by me and that it has not been submitted in any previous application for a higher degree.

I was admitted as a research student in September 2009 and as a candidate for the degree of PhD in May 2010; the higher study for which this is a record was carried out in the University of St Andrews between 2009 and 2013.

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List of Acronyms

ACCA	Association of Chartered Certified Accountants
AMR	Academy of Management Review
BCSD	Business Council for Sustainable Development
BITC	Business in the Community
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
CMS	Critical Management Studies
CSR	Corporate Social Responsibility
DSP	Dominant Social Paradigm
FMCG	Fast Moving Consumer Goods
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GRI	Global Reporting Initiative
MD	Managing Director
NEP	New Environmental Paradigm
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
ONE	Organisations and the Natural Environment
PLC	Public Limited Company
SME	Small to Medium-sized Enterprise
TBL	Triple Bottom Line
TQM	Total Quality Management
UNHDI	United Nations Human Development Index
UNMEA	United Nations Millennium Ecosystem Assessment
UNWCED	United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development
VP	Vice President
WBCSD	World Business Council for Sustainable Development
WWF	World Wildlife Fund/World Wide Fund for Nature

Chapter One

Introduction

1.1 Introduction

This research study is concerned with the relationship between sustainable development and business organisations. It is increasingly evident that human development is currently proceeding in an unsustainable manner (Jackson, 2009), and that large business organisations are significantly complicit in this process (Gray, 2006a). In this context, the principal purpose of this study is to explore how business organisations could come to support sustainable development.

For the purposes of the study, “sustainable development” refers to the idea that human development can proceed in an environmentally “sustainable” manner, reducing global inequity but protecting the environment for future generations (UNWCED, 1987). The term “business organisations” refers to private enterprises which, while not necessarily “for profit”, engage in some form of “commercial” activity (Peredo and McLean, 2006).

The research topic is approached from the perspective that, in the developed world which represents the geographical frame of reference for this study, “sustainable development” is not presently occurring (Porritt, 2005; Jackson, 2009). Global data illustrates increasing decline in natural systems (UNMEA, 2004) and rising inequality (UNHDI, 2011). Furthermore, these are issues with which business organisations are inextricably linked (Gray and Bebbington, 2000). It is argued by some that corporate activity has made and continues to make a significant contribution to environmental destruction and social injustice (e.g. Gray, 2006a; Bakan, 2004). In sharp contrast, however, it is suggested elsewhere that many business organisations have the resources required to make a significant contribution to sustainable development (Porritt, 2005; Hawken et al, 1999). It is the space between these two contradictory statements that this study aims to explore.

The purpose of Chapter One is to introduce the thesis. The chapter first offers some background to the research topic and charts its development from the broad aim above to several more focussed research objectives. Also presented is a brief justification of the study in the context of the research field, and the chapter concludes with an outline of the organisation of the thesis.

1.2 Background

It is suggested first that the topic “the possible role of business organisations in sustainable development” is a worthy focus of study. Amid growing concerns over human impact on the natural environment (WWF, 2012), flawed socio-economic structures (Lewis, 2010) and continuing inequity (UNHDI, 2011), the concept of sustainable development has been proposed as an appropriate overarching framework for a resilient, just and equitable world (e.g. HM Government, 2005). The report of the Brundtland Commission (UNWCED, 1987), which initially popularised the term, suggests that with technological and societal changes, global inequity can be reduced without threatening natural “limits to growth” (Meadows et al, 1972); human development can become “sustainable”. Since then, sustainable development has gradually become “the dominant political framework within which today’s complex dilemmas should be worked through” (Porritt, 2005), its global prominence making it a most important, if not *the* most important research issue today (Dresner, 2008).

Turning to “business organisations”, in developed capitalist economies, two of which (Ireland and the UK) this study focuses on, organisations, and in particular large corporations, have considerable power and influence (Korten, 1995). For example, the world’s top 300 corporations own an estimated 25% of the world’s productive assets (Porritt, 2005), and the top 500 account for 70% of world trade (Gray, 2012). Recent research shows that a little over 1,300 multinational companies control 80% of global operating revenues, with 40% of this controlled by only 147 organisations (Coghlan and MacKenzie, 2011). The annual revenues of companies such as Royal Dutch Shell, for example, can be more than double the GDP of many countries, including Ireland (Hoomweg et al, 2010). Many of these organisations have enormous capacity to develop ecological technologies (Hawken et al, 1999; Weisacker et al, 1997) and promote sustainable development on a global scale (Starik and Rands, 1995). It is suggested that these and other assets make business organisations well placed to support and perhaps even be the key driver of sustainable development (Porritt, 2005; Shrivastava, 1995).

However, it is also argued that large corporations in particular are, and can only be, destructive towards society and the environment (Bakan, 2004). Aggressive advertising fuels “unbridled materialism” (Porrirt, 2005), and many organisations lobby ferociously against any new environmental legislation (Beder, 2002). Chief Executive salaries in the UK are an extraordinary 81 times that of the average worker (Hutton, 2010) and large corporations are regularly guilty of tax avoidance (Syal, 2012). The argument that multinational companies are invaluable employment providers is a thin defence: despite accounting for 28% of all economic activity, the world’s top 200 companies employ only 0.25% of the world’s people (Porrirt, 2005). Furthermore, multinational companies have gradually come to dominate international political discussions on sustainable development (Levy and Egan, 2003), pushing a narrow, self-serving interpretation of the issues (Dryzek, 2005). The legal requirement that PLCs “maximise shareholder profits” leaves little room for consideration of the interests of society and the environment (Bakan, 2004).

It is against the background of this evidence that this study proceeds. It is suggested that, given that many business organisations currently seem to support *unsustainable* development, it is crucial that their tremendous resources be reoriented to support the kind of sustainable development envisaged by the Brundtland Commission (UNWCED, 1987). Therefore it is imperative that scholarly research explores how, and indeed if, this can be achieved.

1.3 Research Objectives¹

The issues identified above guided the direction of the study and the literature reviewed, and ultimately shaped the research objectives. While the study began with a broad aim – to explore the relationship between sustainable development and business organisations – as it progressed the focus narrowed, and a number of distinct research objectives gradually emerged.

¹ *It is noted that all of the research objectives rely on a range of ontological, epistemological and methodological assumptions which are not acknowledged here. These assumptions are discussed in detail in Chapter Five – Research Design, particularly in section 5.4 – Assumptions in the Current Study.*

In addition, and crucially, the development of the objectives was influenced, often unconsciously, by personal assumptions. Key to the motivation for the study was a normative worldview – an assumption that the currently “unsustainable” world *should* be transformed through sustainable development to a more “sustainable” one, in the manner proposed by UNWCED (1987). It was also assumed that business organisations *should*, *could*, and indeed *must* participate in this transformation.

However, it is noted in hindsight that these assumptions, though not fundamentally restrictive, certainly limited the scope of the study. For example, the more critical literature discussed earlier in section 1.2 raised important questions regarding the nature of capitalism and the behaviour of multinational corporations. The determinedly pragmatic worldview described above, however, does not reflect these concerns; there is no provision made for the question: *can* business organisations support sustainable development? Again while hindsight is invaluable here, the later chapters of the thesis suggest that such issues are in fact extremely pertinent.

Returning to the development of the research objectives, the normative “*could*, *should*, *must*” approach meant that a linear logic was employed when selecting the objectives; it was assumed that an “unsustainable” present *can* and *should* become a “sustainable” future. In addition, it was assumed that a number of “barriers” currently prevent the transformation of the unsustainable present into the sustainable future. The research process was therefore framed as a series of phases: explore the present, consider its problems, and imagine the future.

In this vein, three categories of objective were created: Approaches, Boundaries and Future Directions. The first category, “Approaches”, represents the exploration of the present, the “Future” category represents a normative (ostensibly “ideal”) future, and “Boundaries” relates to the putative path between.

1.3.1 Approaches

To explore the “present” meant investigating the current state of the business-sustainable development relationship. The literature review proceeded on two levels: a “macro” level, where theories on the role of business in sustainable development were examined (see Chapter Three), and a closely related but more focussed level, exploring sustainability at an organisational level (see Chapter Four).

As hinted above, existing work at the “macro” level suggested that the sustainable development-business relationship was characterised by conflicting views on the possible role of business organisations (e.g. Gray, 2010 versus Schmidheiny/BCSD, 1992). For example, it was proposed by some that business can play the key role (e.g. Shrivastava, 1995), but by others that business should not play a role (e.g. Friedman, 1970) or in fact cannot play a role in its current form (e.g. Gray, 2006a). These issues combined to precipitate the development of the first research objective (RO1):

RO1: To explore the possible roles of business organisations in sustainable development

In addition, some authors considered the potential roles for “different types” of organisation in sustainable development, such as co-owned businesses (e.g. Schumacher, 1973; Dauncey, 1989) or social enterprises (e.g. Leadbetter, 1997, Nicholls, 2006). Many of these examples were organisations which did not operate solely “for-profit”, but fulfilled social and/or environmental goals through commercial activity (Peredo and McLean, 2006). It was suggested that research was required to explore how the possible roles of these different types of organisations in sustainable development might complement or conflict (Hockerts and Wustenhagen, 2010). The second research objective thus ensued:

RO2: To examine to what extent (if any) that possible role is influenced by organisation type

Of particular note when reviewing the existing literature on the sustainable development-business relationship was that, while much of the work was characterised by casual references to

“sustainable business” or “sustainable organisations” (e.g. Bansal, 2005), contradictory research argued that it was a gross misconception to describe any organisation as “sustainable” (Gray, 2006a; Gray and Bebbington, 2000). It was suggested that it may in fact be impossible to apply the concept of sustainability at an organisational level (Gray and Milne, 2004).

Influential here was the work of Gray (2010), who discussed this issue in detail. The author argued that corporate narratives of sustainability were largely self-serving and misleading, and urged researchers to explore “alternative” narratives of sustainability at an organisational level, and to challenge corporate claims of “sustainability” (Gray, 2010). This took the literature review in the direction of searching for possible narratives of sustainability at an organisational level, for imagined models of what a “sustainable organisation” might look like (e.g. Young and Tilley, 2006; Starik and Rands, 1995). With this in mind, the third objective in this category was developed:

RO3: To examine narratives of sustainability at an organisational level

1.3.2 Boundaries

The next step was to explore the possible path between present and future. The work of Gray and Milne (2004) suggested that there could be no such thing as a “sustainable organisation”, which begged the question: why? While literature offering insight was relatively scarce, pieces of related work (e.g. Lamberton, 2000; Barter and Bebbington, 2010) indicated complex barriers within the business–sustainable development relationship. This suggested a need for further research on the barriers to the possibility of a “sustainable organisation”, and inspired the first objective in this category:

RO4: To identify the barriers to “sustainable enterprise”

A further issue which came to prominence as the literature review progressed was the dearth of existing research on conflicts and tensions within the business-sustainable development

relationship (Spence and Gray, 2007). The literature was dominated by an optimistic, “can-do” attitude, focussed on the “business case” for sustainability (e.g. Holliday et al/WBCSD, 2002). In contrast, the work which did identify barriers to “sustainable enterprise”, such as Young and Tilley (2006) or Lamberton (2000), found these barriers to be extremely challenging. This indicated that there may be aspects of sustainability which organisations *cannot* address or engage with, hence the next objective:

RO5: To investigate what organisations cannot do – the limits to their ability to contribute to sustainable development

1.3.3 Future Directions

The linear logic of the development of the objectives led finally to considering the possible “future directions” of the business-sustainable development relationship. The objectives here directly succeed the issues highlighted by the previous two categories. One objective is more specific, relating to overcoming boundaries and barriers, and the other takes a broader perspective, considering how the roles of different types of organisations may develop in the future. As follows:

RO6: To explore how limits and barriers may, if at all, be transcended in the future

RO7: To consider the possibilities by which the business–sustainable development relationship could evolve in a positive way for society and the environment

Together, these seven research objectives served to provide direction and structure to the study. It was envisaged that the findings relating to each objective would ultimately combine to offer some insight into the overriding purpose of the research: to consider how, and to what extent, business organisations could come to support sustainable development.

1.4 Justification for the Study

This section considers the potential contribution of the study to the research field. It is hoped that the findings of the study will ultimately serve to further develop existing understandings of the sustainable development-business relationship, within several specific strands of the literature.

1.4.1 Asking “Important Questions”

The dominant corporate perspective on sustainability, which also prevails at policy level (Dryzek, 2005), is the “business case”, which stresses the benefits, particularly financial, to the organisation of engaging with sustainable development (e.g. Holliday et al/WBCSD, 2002). This view also pervades in academia; research on business and sustainable development is dominated by a “managerialist” perspective, where the focus is on organisational competitive advantage rather than environmental sustainability and social justice (Gray and Bebbington, 2000).

However, there is a body of work which challenges the dominant managerialist research paradigm. Here it is suggested that business organisations must engage with more radical thinking on sustainable development (Gladwin et al, 1995), that researchers must begin to think more critically (Welford, 1998) and ask “important questions” beyond the confines of managerialism (Starik, 2006). For example, it is argued that the business case is limited, it does not allow acknowledgement of the inevitable “trade-offs” of sustainable development (Hahn et al, 2010). Furthermore, the dominance of the related discourse is such that it threatens to become hegemonic (Spence, 2007), and close off any debate on the possible role of business organisations in sustainable development, and the limits thereof (Spence and Gray, 2007).

This study aims to contribute to the work which challenges the managerialist bias in the literature, to ask the “important questions” (Starik, 2006) within the business-sustainability dynamic; such as what happens if the business case does not hold..? Therefore, in searching for narratives of sustainability at an organisational level, the focus is on narratives “beyond” the business case

(Dyllick and Hockerts, 2002), and a more “adversarial”, reflexive perspective informs the research methodology (Welford, 1998).

However, the research is not a wholly critical exercise. It is aimed rather to engage simultaneously with both the critical and managerialist literatures, and to analyse the subtleties of their contradictory narratives of “sustainable business”. In doing so, it is hoped to explore a wide range of possible narratives of sustainability at an organisational level, from “business case plus” to “beyond the business case” and more.

1.4.2 Research Gaps

The lack of existing literature on barriers and boundaries related to the sustainable development-business relationship may be due in part to the dominance of the business case. The “win-win” message creates a culture wherein researchers do not consider the possibility that there may be limits to what business can do for sustainability, and if they do, organisations do not wish to know about it (Gray and Bebbington, 2000). This leaves a gap in the literature where there is little or no honest confrontation of limits and barriers, and thus no suggestions of how they might be overcome in order to advance sustainable development (Gray and Schaltegger, 2010). This study aims to add to the literature which explores the barriers preventing organisations from doing more, and considers the nature of the limits of their involvement in sustainability (e.g. Barter and Bebbington, 2010; Spence and Gray, 2007; Banarjee, 2003). In addition, it is hoped to confront these barriers, to deconstruct the tensions therein, and ultimately explore potential resolution.

Another gap in the literature relates to “different types” of organisations (Gray et al, 2009). Although there is a growing body of literature on social enterprises (Nicholls, 2006), work remains relatively limited on small organisations (Hockerts and Wustenhagen, 2010) and very scarce on co-operatives (Mayo, 2011). It is suggested that exploring sustainability in such organisations may offer insight into the possibilities for “sustainable enterprise”, beyond the confines of more “conventional” organisations (Gray et al 2009). This study therefore seeks also to speak to the literature which has begun to consider the possible roles of different types of

organisations in sustainable development (e.g. Kearins et al, 2010), including but not limited to the field of “sustainable entrepreneurship” (e.g. Parrish, 2010; Young and Tilley, 2006).

1.5 Organisation of the Study

The study broadly follows an empirical qualitative research process, whereby the researcher formulates objectives, reviews the related literature and theory, performs empirical investigation and analyses the findings in the context of the objectives (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000). The thesis reflects this structure, presenting the study in the form of twelve chapters. Chapters Two, Three, Four and Five represent the literature review, Chapters Six to Ten inclusive the empirical work, and Chapters Eleven and Twelve the discussion and conclusions.

Chapter Two aims to develop an understanding of the term “sustainable development”. A review of its history reveals a range of possible interpretations, ultimately suggesting sustainable development to be a contested discourse rather than a clearly defined concept.

Chapter Three investigates the possibilities of a role for business in sustainable development, and explores how business has contributed to the debate and the discourse to date. A theoretical framework is constructed which contextualises a range of competing perspectives on the business-sustainable development relationship.

Chapter Four explores what sustainability might mean at an organisational level. A range of narratives drawn from the management, sustainable entrepreneurship, and sustainability accounting and reporting literatures are identified and reviewed.

Chapter Five explains the design of the research study. Underlying philosophical assumptions guiding the research are explored, and the choice of qualitative research methodology explained. The selected research methods are then introduced.

Chapter Six provides an account of the empirical work undertaken. The chapter is divided into two parts, the first devoted to the public utterances analysis and the second to the interviews. Each method is discussed separately, and the data collection, analysis and interpretation process in each case explained.

Chapter Seven outlines the findings from the content analysis of the public utterances of forty different types of organisations. Using graphs and tables to display the data, the chapter presents the results in detail, and considers the implications of the findings.

Chapter Eight presents the results of the “close reading” of the public utterances of the same forty organisations. The data here is presented in the form of the key themes and arguments drawn from the analysis. Also considered is use of metaphor and language.

Chapter Nine represents the first phase of the presentation of the data from twenty seven in-depth, semi-structured interviews, conducted with individuals in twenty seven organisations. In this chapter, the focus is on the “Approaches” element of the study, with the interviewee’s views on their organisation’s approach to and possible role in sustainable development discussed.

Chapter Ten is the second, more substantial phase of the interview data presentation, covering both Boundaries and Future Directions. This chapter presents the interviewees’ responses to questions on the barriers preventing their organisations from contributing further to sustainable development, and on the changes they believe are required to overcome these barriers.

Chapter Eleven triangulates the data from the content analysis, close reading and semi-structured interviews. The findings from each chapter are compared and similarities and contradictions identified. The results are also discussed in relation to the existing literature and a revised theoretical framework is presented.

Chapter Twelve brings the thesis to a conclusion. The principal arguments of the thesis are identified and the contribution of the study to the existing literature considered. The chapter also includes suggestions for further research and concludes, appropriately, with some final concluding remarks.

Chapter Two

What is Sustainable Development?

2.1 Introduction

Sustainable development is frequently referred to as a concept that does not lend itself to precise definition (Dryzek, 2005). It is agreed that it is a “good thing” (Gray, 2010), but what “it” might be is “contestable” (Dresner, 2008). As Daly (1996:1) remarks, “sustainable development is a term everybody likes, but nobody is sure what it means”.

This chapter sets out to develop an understanding of the term “sustainable development”. An exploration of its history, the assumptions which underlie it, and the language related to it, reveal a range of possible understandings. Sustainable development has variously been interpreted as a paradigm, a discourse, and in many other ways. A number of these approaches to understanding sustainable development are outlined below, and the chapter concludes with some thoughts on the implications of the “meaning” of sustainable development.

2.2 Origins of the Term “Sustainable Development”

The term “sustainable development” was established in global political discourse following the 1987 report by the UN Brundtland Commission, “Our Common Future”, but originated in the context of the increasing environmental awareness of the 1970s. Concern for the environment had come to prominence with the work of, among others, Carson (1962), Boulding (1966) and Hardin (1968), along with the new perspective afforded by pictures of the Earth taken from space in the late 1960s. 1972 saw the publication of “The Limits to Growth”, where Meadows et al suggested that if population growth and resource consumption continued exponentially, Earth could not support humanity for more than another hundred years or so.

Meanwhile, in “Small is Beautiful”, Schumacher (1973) argued that conventional economics was designed to exploit nature, suggesting as an alternative his “Buddhist economics”, based on local trade, “appropriate technology” and publicly-owned enterprise. Daly (1973) proposed that environmental limits implied an ultimate limit to economic growth, and advocated “steady-state

economics” to limit the physical scale of the economy. However, these views were contrary to the growing popularity in the 1980s of neoliberal, free market economic theory, which privileged capitalist enterprise and economic growth (Giddens, 1994a).

While economic growth and environmental concern were both increasing in developed countries, developing countries suffered from continuing poverty and inequity. Environmentalism was seen by individuals and organisations concerned with social development as bourgeois, “nice-to-do things for the affluent middle classes” (Porritt, 2005). “Sustainability” began to emerge as a concept which recognised both the existence of environmental limits and the desirability of economic growth in the developing world (Dresner, 2008). The key question was how to reconcile these two exigencies: the need for human development on a planet with natural limits. In 1983, the UN World Commission for Environment and Development, or “Brundtland Commission”, after its Chair, was formed with the aim of addressing this conflict.

2.3 The Brundtland Report

“Humanity has the ability to make development sustainable – to ensure that it meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. The concept of sustainable development does imply limits – not absolute limits but limitations imposed by the present state of technology and social organisation on environmental resource and the ability of the biosphere to absorb the effects of human activities. But technology and social organisation can be both managed and improved to make way for a new era of economic growth”
(UNWCED, 1987:8)

The first sentence of the above extract is perhaps the most frequently cited “definition” of sustainable development. The understanding of sustainable development proposed by the Brundtland Commission became the reference of choice for succeeding international political discussions (Dresner, 2008; Meadowcroft, 2000) and remains extremely influential today. For example, the aim of the UK Government’s Sustainable Development Strategy (2005) is to “enable

all people throughout the world to satisfy their basic needs and enjoy a better quality of life without compromising the quality of life of future generations” (HM Government, 2005:6).

Key themes of the Brundtland report are the “interdependence” of environment and economy, a call for collective action and “global co-operation”, and explicit consideration of both inter-generational (present) and “intra-generational” (future) equity. The main message of the report however, as illustrated in the extract reproduced above, is that although limits exist, economic growth need not be ultimately constrained. These limits can be overcome if “technology and social organisation” are “managed and improved” (UNCWED, 1987:8).

This idea of a “new era of economic growth”, with natural limitations circumvented by new technology and global collaboration, positioned sustainable development as a universal, “win-win” panacea for inequity and environmental degradation. The Brundtland report thus offered a concept which could potentially appeal to both the radical environmentalists of the 1970s and the free market economists of the 1980s (Meadowcroft, 2000). It acknowledged the limits of Meadows et al (1972) and Daly (1973) while simultaneously stressing the need for economic growth as privileged by such as Friedman (1962) and Solow (1956). According to the Brundtland vision of sustainable development, economic growth need not be forsaken but modified, and limits become “limitations”.

Its emphasis on economic growth notwithstanding, the Brundtland understanding of sustainable development has “great potential for radical moment” (Tinker and Gray, 2003). For instance, the Commission reports that “we became convinced that major changes were needed, both in attitudes and in the way our societies are organised” (1987: xiii); and acknowledges that “many of the development paths of the industrialised nations are clearly unsustainable”. Furthermore, it suggests that “those who are more affluent adopt life-styles within the planet’s ecological means” (1987:9). In addition, as Dryzek and Schlossberg (2005) note, the report advocates “concerted collective action (of the sort that horrifies market liberals)” (2005:257).

However, the definition of sustainable development proposed by the Brundtland Commission has been criticised for a number of reasons (e.g. see Banarjee, 2003; Carruthers, 2001). For example,

it is frequently argued that the Report is too vague; its understanding of sustainable development is too much open to interpretation (Dresner, 2008; O’Riordan, 1993). As a consequence, it is suggested, the concept has become “politically plastic” (Bebbington, 2009), and a wide range of discourse and actions subsumed under its auspices. Appropriation by a variety of actors has arguably rendered the term itself almost meaningless, merely a “slogan” (Banarjee, 2003).

In addition, and particularly relevant to this study, it is noted that the Commission highlights the role of “transnational corporations” in sustainable development, appealing to private enterprise as a key audience for the report, at times using the language of business. For example, in a discussion on intra-generational equity, scarce natural resources are described as “overdrawn environmental resource accounts” (1987:8). The report’s faith in industry as the “indispensable motor of growth” (1987:206) implies that the Commission believes that “the planet is safe in the hands of business” (Gray and Bebbington, 2000) which, as we shall see, is open to discussion.

Dresner (2008) argues that its’ “win-win” premise explains both the popularity and the criticism of the Brundtland definition. Sceptics are dubious that complex issues such as those raised by Meadows et al (1972) and Schumacher (1973) can be resolved without trade-offs or compromises, in particular in relation to reducing consumption in developed countries (Meadowcroft, 2000). While the Brundtland report does allude to compromise, in conceding that “painful choices have to be made” (1987:9), the Commission neglects to elaborate on what these painful choices might be, or how they might be made. In attempting to offer an all-encompassing, amelioratory “bridging concept” (Meadowcroft, 2000), the Brundtland Commission’s understanding of sustainable development fails to consider the complexities of the opposing arguments on either side.

2.4 Two Opposing Paradigms

Arguably more nuanced is the idea that sustainable development can be conceptualised as a distinct paradigm, whereby the underlying beliefs and values which shape an individual’s worldview are those “most likely to yield sustainable development” (Gladwin et al, 1995).

Pirages and Ehrlich (1974) introduced the idea of the “dominant social paradigm” (DSP), suggesting that the lens through which most individuals see the world is coloured by a belief in the primacy of economic growth, free markets, industry and technology. The authors argue that the values of the dominant social paradigm clash directly with a concern for the environment, the DSP being characterised by “a view of Nature as something to be subdued by mankind”. As Kilbourne et al (2002) elaborate, the DSP is particularly influential in the dominant institutions of society, meaning that it is the worldview through which most important decisions are made.

It is suggested that many of the key assumptions of the DSP are incompatible with sustainable development (Gladwin et al, 1995). For example, as Meadows et al (2004) demonstrate, exponential economic growth cannot continue indefinitely (see also Daly, 1996; Jackson, 2009). Furthermore, it is suggested that the “laissez-faire” DSP economy (Pirages and Ehrlich, 1974) is ill-suited to sustainable development, as financial markets do not recognise the value of natural resources or “natural capital” (Schumacher, 1973; Hawken et al, 1999; Daly, 1996). It is also argued that the neoliberal capitalist ideology, which fits so well with the dominant social paradigm, does not deliver optimum societal welfare, in fact perpetuating inequality and failing to maximise wellbeing (Daly and Cobb, 1990; Porritt, 2005; Jackson, 2009; Collison et al, 2011).

Building on the ideas of Pirages and Ehrlich (1974), and in light of increasing environmental awareness, Dunlap and Van Liere (1978) proposed that a new paradigm was emerging to counter the DSP, the “new environmental paradigm” (NEP). The authors went on to conceptualise the NEP as a list of values indicative of “proenvironmental orientation”. The list, which they tested for validity through a survey of US individuals, included preference for a less anthropocentric relationship with nature, recognition of limited natural resources, and concern over population growth (Dunlap et al, 2000). Perhaps the key message of Dunlap and Van Liere’s work is that humanity must redefine its relationship with nature, recognising that we are all interdependent. This articulation of “systems thinking”, whereby humans are merely a component part of an interdependent ecosystem encompassing all of nature and beyond, reflects the closely preceding work of Meadows et al (1972) and Schumacher (1973). It also touches on the principles of “deep

ecology” (Naess, 1973) wherein it is proposed that “nonhuman interests” are equally as important as human ones (Eckersly, 1992; see also Dillard, 2007).

The contrasting assumptions of both paradigms are detailed in Fig 2.1, below. With the caveat that there are many subtleties both within and around each paradigm, it could be said that the values of the DSP and the NEP serve to broadly characterise free market economists and environmentalists respectively, with the majority of individuals falling in with the dominant social paradigm (Gladwin et al, 1997).

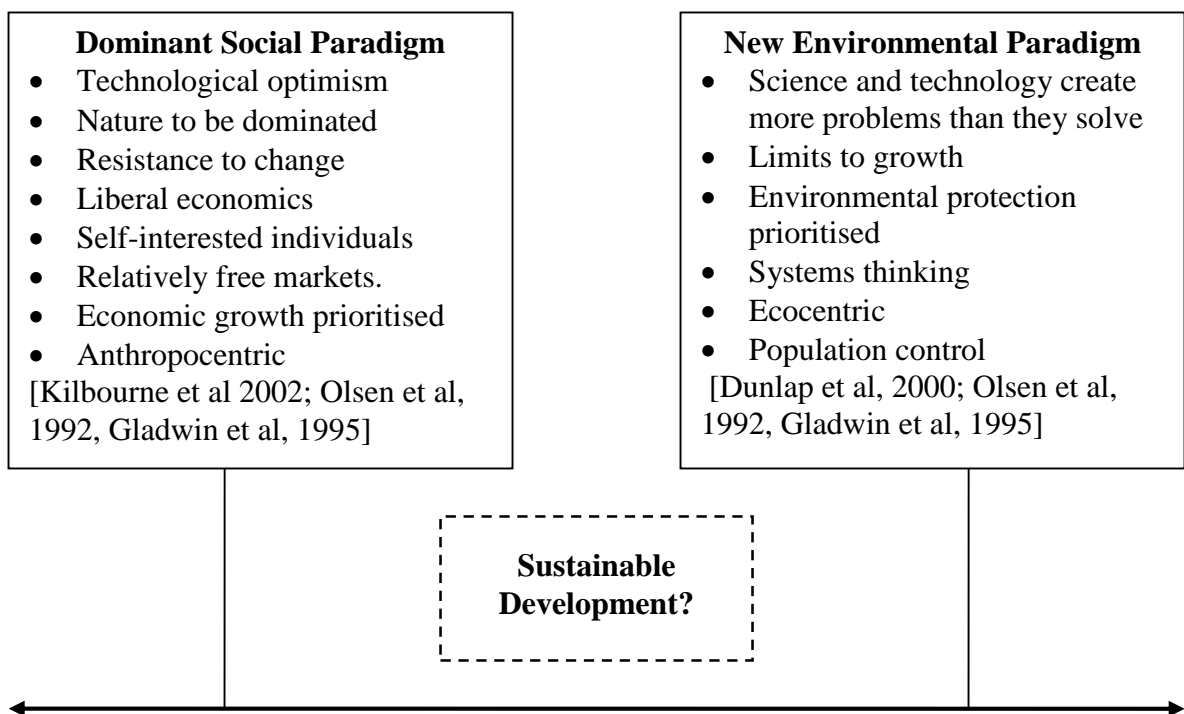


Fig 2.1: Key values of the dominant social paradigm and the new environmental paradigm

2.4.1 A Sustainable Development Paradigm

The work of Pirages and Ehrlich (1974) and Dunlap and VanLiere (1978) was published before the term “sustainable development” came to the forefront of environmental discourse following the Brundtland report (UNWCED, 1987). Those inclined towards the NEP in fact criticised the

Brundtland vision of sustainable development as anthropocentric and privileging economic growth (Meadowcroft, 2000, Dresner, 2008).

However, the concept of sustainable development, as put forward by the Brundtland Commission, is not designed to “fit” within the new environmental paradigm. As Meadowcroft (2000) notes, it is a “bridging concept”, uniting the environmental protection priorities of the NEP with the economic growth emphasis of the DSP. The new environmental paradigm is designed to be the polar opposite of the dominant social paradigm, and would require “a radically different form of society” (Milne et al, 2009). Some suggest that, in touching on the values of either paradigm, sustainable development offers the possibility of building a “bridge” between the DSP and the NEP, a platform from which to explore realistic compromise (Dryzek, 2005; Meadowcroft, 2000).

To this end, a number of authors have suggested that the two opposing paradigms could be integrated to form a “sustainable development paradigm”. For example, Olsen (1992) proposes a “sustainable development social paradigm” which includes values of “economic stability”, limited population growth and limited resources (see also Hopwood et al, 2005). Within the management literature, Gladwin et al (1995) also discuss synthesis, labelling the opposing viewpoints as “technocentric” and “ecocentric”, and suggesting compromise in the form of a “sustaincentric” paradigm (see Chapter Four for detailed discussion).

In developing their paradigm, however, Gladwin et al (1995) are clear that “a complete reconciliation of the two opposing paradigms remains elusive” (1995:890). They describe sustaincentrism as “a tentative, preanalytic step in the search for reconciliation” (1995:890) and note that integration of the paradigms may be ultimately impossible. Milne et al (2009) echo these reservations, suggesting that “the struggle and contest over environment and development is far from settled within the new context of ‘sustainable development’” (2009:1217). The authors offer some explanation as to why this may be so, suggesting that the “contested middle ground” of sustainable development does not yet lend itself a definite paradigm of distinct beliefs and values. They argue that a sustainable development paradigm could be conceptualised as many variations of the values of the DSP or the NEP, sitting at any number of different points along the broad spectrum illustrated above.

2.5 Weak and Strong Sustainability

An alternative understanding of sustainable development is offered by the idea of a distinction between “weak” and “strong” forms of sustainability. Schumacher (1973) proposed that the “natural capital” of the Earth has always been treated as income, and consumed with no regard to its value, rather than maintained as capital. Pearce et al (1989) introduced the concept of “substitutability”, whereby human-made capital can be substituted for natural capital e.g. in the form of technology overcoming resource limits. The term “critical natural capital” is given to natural capital which, once consumed, cannot be replaced (Gray, 1992).

Turner (1993) develops this theory in detail, proposing a sort of spectrum of sustainability, going from “very weak”, where natural capital is regarded as entirely substitutable with human-made forms of capital, to “very strong”, where it is not substitutable at all. Within the spectrum, Turner proposes four distinct positions, as illustrated in the table below.

Form of sustainability	Management strategies and policy instruments
Very weak sustainability	“Conventional cost-benefit approach” Infinite substitution of natural capital Elimination of “perverse subsidies” (Hawken et al, 1999)
Weak sustainability	“Modified” cost-benefit approach Valuation methods for natural capital Pollution taxes and permits
Strong sustainability	Precautionary principle Constant natural capital rule Conservation zoning “Degree of ‘decoupling’ of economy from environment”
Very strong sustainability	“Stationary state” (Daly, 1996) No cost benefit analysis Bioethics – standards and regulations

Table 2.1: Strategies for the four positions on Turner’s weak-strong sustainability spectrum

The weak-strong sustainability model explored by Turner (1993) is rooted in economic theory, which has played a key role in debates about sustainable development (Dresner, 2008). For example, Daly (1996) and Jackson (2009) use economic models to persuasive effect when putting forward their theories of sustainability. However, it is noted that these models necessarily use the language of equations and statistics, language characteristic of the dominant social paradigm; a feature which is perhaps both a strength and a weakness.

The use of economic language is an asset because it allows environmental concepts, such as natural capital, to be introduced to decision makers often unfamiliar with such ideas (Kilbourne, 2002), in a language they can understand. However, translating an idea as aspirational as sustainable development into economic language could stifle any radical potential it might have (O’Riordan, 1993). Furthermore, expressing sustainable development in the language of the dominant social paradigm could leave the discourse and the concept exposed to “capture” and dilution by self-interested institutional forces (Gray, 2010).

2.6 The Discourse of Sustainable Development

“Sustainable development refers not to any accomplishment, still less to a precise set of structures and measures to achieve collectively desirable outcomes. Rather, it is a discourse” (Dryzek, 2005:145)

Dryzek (1997, 2005) suggests that language plays a significant role in how environmental issues are interpreted and addressed, particularly politically. He thus takes a discourse approach to understanding “environmentalism” (which for him incorporates sustainable development). The term “discourse” broadly refers to how language creates shared meaning and mediates social action (Wetherell et al, 2001). Dryzek argues that the complexity of the environmental “situation” has led to a wide range of competing and complementary discourses.

Echoing the DSP-NEP polarity explored above, Dryzek suggests that “industrialism” is currently the dominant discourse, and that environmentalism purports to offer an alternative, opposing

discourse. However, he goes on to argue that environmentalism is not a “unified counter-discourse”; it in fact incorporates any number of different perspectives which conflict and concur with the dominant industrial discourse, and each other, to varying degrees. It is this analysis of the “contested middle ground” (Milne et al, 2009) which makes Dryzek’s work particularly helpful towards developing a more nuanced understanding of sustainable development.

Dryzek identifies nine environmental discourses, beginning with the opposing perspectives of “Prometheans” and “Survivalists”. The key features of some of Dryzek’s discourses are summarised in table 2.1 below.

Environmental discourse	Key values/characteristics/references
Prometheanism	Denial of the limits to growth Focus on economic growth Beckerman (1995) <i>“Prometheans have unlimited confidence in the ability of humans and their technologies to overcome any problems presented to them” (Dryzek, 1997)</i>
Survivalism	Limits to growth Environmental issues should be addressed on a global scale Population control Meadows et al (1972, 2004)
Sustainable Development	Brundtland report Strong focus on development in the Third World <i>“the leading transnational discourse of environmental concern” (Dryzek, 1997:136)</i>
Ecological Modernisation	No conflict between economic growth and environmental protection Business is the lead actor Can be “weak” or strong”

	<i>“restructuring of the capitalist political economy along more environmentally defensible lines” (Dryzek, 1997:121)</i>
Green Romanticism	Reject Enlightenment Ignore political, economic and social structures Includes deep ecologists Do not tell us how to get from here to their vision They believe in <i>“cultivation of radically different human sensibilities, involving a non-instrumental and non-dominating, more empathetic and intuitive relationship to nature” (Dryzek, 1997:158)</i>
Green Rationalism	Takes some of the Enlightenment on board (equality, rights, critical thinking, open dialogue) Offers lots of ideas for action Work with existing structures

Table 2.2: Some environmental discourses (adapted from Dryzek, 2005)

As the table shows, Dryzek identifies sustainable development as a distinct environmental discourse. He takes the Brundtland report as his starting point, but stresses that attempts to precisely define sustainable development have been unsuccessful, and that it takes on various meanings and implications depending on the context and interested parties involved. Dryzek suggests that, as sustainable development becomes the dominant environmental discourse, “astute actors recognise that its terms should be cast in terms favourable to them”, citing business groups as notable culprits. However, Dryzek cautions against exact definition of sustainable development, arguing that the breadth and plasticity of the discourse may in fact be its strong point:

“While at first glance the sheer variety of available definitions of sustainable development seems like a defect of this discourse, from the perspective of social learning it is a distinct advantage, for it does not rule out a variety of experiments in what sustainability can mean in different contexts” (Dryzek, 2005:233)

This notion of “social learning” is key to another discourse put forward by Dryzek: “ecological modernisation”. The basic premise of ecological modernisation theory is that, through clean, “green” technology, and political restructuring, economic growth can be “decoupled” from environmental degradation (Hajer, 1995). As Dresner (2008) notes, it is a “rather grand” extension of the Brundtland Commission’s strategy for a “new era of economic growth” (1987:8).

Ecological modernisation is indeed positioned by Dryzek as a possible method of operationalising the Brundtland vision of sustainable development. The theory is a pragmatic one; it requires the capitalist political economy to be reconfigured, rather than dismantled, as Survivalists and Green Romantics, or proponents of the NEP, might suggest. However, Dryzek distinguishes between “weak” and “strong” ecological modernisation, cautioning that the former would “defuse the radical potential of environmentalism” (2005:174) and fail to make the political-economic system more sustainable. Drawing from the work of Hajer (1995), Dryzek suggests that “strong” ecological modernisation would be “reflexive”, whereby modernisation proceeds in a cycle of critical self-assessment and “social learning”.

Dryzek concludes his analysis of environmental discourses by noting that, although some of the perspectives are inescapably contradictory, some incorporate complementary elements, and he urges greater “interchange” between the different discourses, in pursuit of “reconciliation”. He selects “strong”, reflexive ecological modernisation as the most “plausible strategy for transforming industrial society into a radically different and more environmentally defensible (but still capitalist) alternative” (2005:179).

2.7 Ecological Modernisation

Its increasing prominence at an environmental policy level (Orsato and Clegg, 2005) suggests that it is appropriate to discuss ecological modernisation in more detail. Ecological modernisers propose that sustainable development can be achieved through technological advances and moderate institutional reform (Hajer, 1995; Huber, 2000). Like the Brundtland Commission’s vision of sustainable development, ecological modernisation is a “positive-sum game” (Hajer,

1995). The discourse of ecological modernisation in fact positions the environmental crisis not as a problem but as an opportunity for “social, technical and economic reform” (Mol and Sonnenfeld, 2000:5). In particular, it is suggested that business organisations can use ecological issues as an opportunity to innovate and reposition for competitive advantage (Cohen, 1997).

However, the theory has been critiqued from a number of angles. For instance, Langhelle (2000) warns that it must not be “conflated” with sustainable development, as it fails to address social equity. Young (2000) elaborates that ecological modernisation “does not relate to serving needs rather than wants, nor to intragenerational equity, social justice or distributional issues” (2000: 27).

Most pertinently, it is suggested that ecological modernisation is too conservative; it is “conformist” and settles for only incremental institutional reform (Orsato and Clegg, 2005). It lacks the “potential for radical moment” (Tinker and Gray, 2003) of the Brundtland understanding of sustainable development. Ecological modernisation does not propose to challenge the dominant institutions of modernity, the “technocracy” of government and industry:

“Critics of ecological modernization theory see it as another neo-liberal ideology in green camouflage. Fundamentally, the notion of win–win scenarios does not challenge capitalism and its associated dysfunctions...Some radicalism seems necessary” (Orsato and Clegg, 2005:262)

Here ecological modernisation suffers from the same vulnerability as the sustainable development discourse: unless more radical ideas such as ultimate natural limits and a rejection of the “myth of growth” (Jackson, 2009) are considered, the concept is easily diluted into the dominant social paradigm. As we have seen, Dryzek (2005) suggests that ecological modernisation may be radicalised by incorporating a sense of “reflexivity”, the capacity of the institutions of modernity for “social learning”. The idea of “reflexive modernisation”, as developed by Beck (1994) and Giddens (1990), is that as societies become more modernised, they gain increasing capacity for “self-confrontation” and evolve i.e. modernise further, accordingly (Beck, 1994). In a reflexive ecological modernisation, the technocracy will “refute itself” and enable a more sustainable form

of development; as Hajer (1996) predicts, “the dominant institutions can learn and...their learning can produce meaningful change”.

2.8 Green and Alternative Theories of “Development”

Dresner (2002) too considers the potential of reflexive modernity for advancing sustainable development. However, he introduces a conundrum which has implications for our interpretation of both sustainability and modernity:

“The concept of sustainability has historically emerged out of a critique of modernity...yet, at the same time, the concept of sustainability is rooted in faith in human perfectibility, the possibility of reform and, perhaps most tellingly, the values of equality and solidarity” (Dresner, 2002:164)

At this point it is perhaps useful to return to the origins of sustainable development. Although the term, and the idea of “sustainability”, originated from environmental concerns, the discourse has now arguably been hijacked by the dominant institutions of modernity (Dryzek, 2005). Ironically, as Dresner points out, sustainability originated from the ideas of people fiercely opposed to such institutions.

Radical ecologists suggest that modernity will always be ecologically destructive, and propose a return to “pre-modern” ways of living (Zimmerman, 1994). Schumacher (1973) argued for local development, and a return to small-scale manufacturing with “appropriate technology”; ideas which greatly appealed to green sensibilities and influenced early discussions of sustainability (Dresner, 2008). Dryzek (1997, 2005) explores the discourse of Green radicalism, distinguishing broadly between “romantics”, who focus on changing people’s worldviews, and “rationalists”, who are more involved with green politics. He explains that the green discourse differs from sustainable development in a desire for “whole-scale structural change” and a move away from liberal capitalism (2005:225). Green rationalists are anti-globalisation, favouring “bioregional” initiatives, community development and “experiments in local grassroots democracy” (Dryzek, 2005:225).

A related point, and a criticism often put to ecological modernisers, is that modernisation is not the *only* form of development (Banarjee, 2003; Christoff, 2000). For example, Green political thought resonates with “agropolitan” development, which emphasises rural communities and decentralised “bottom up initiatives” (Parnwell, 2008). Social and co-operative enterprises often play a large role in these theories of development (Carter, 1999; Parnwell, 2008). Focus is on “empowerment of the poor” (Parnwell, 2008) through small-scale entrepreneurship and microfinance initiatives such as Grameen Bank (Dauncey, 1989; Ekins, 1992).

2.9 The Paradox of Sustainability

The “green” literature (e.g. Schumacher, 1973; Dobson, 2000; Carter, 1999; Dauncey, 1989) suggests that sustainable development requires an eschewing of modernity in favour of alternative and pre-modern forms of development. However, the paradox of sustainability is that it involves “both an abandonment of modernity and an embracing of it” (Gray, 2010). As Zimmerman (1994) explains, the radical environmentalism of the 1970s drew inspiration from information provided through the instruments of modernity, such as images of the Earth from space, and the computer modelling of Meadows et al (1972). It appears that to understand sustainable development, we require the tools of “progress”, but sustainable development may in fact involve a return to the pre-modern. Once again, as in the case of the NEP-DSP debate, it appears that a “middle ground must be cultivated; we must look for “complementarity between tradition and modernity”, as Giddens (1994b) advises.

Dryzek (2005) and Huber (2000) both suggest that ecological modernisation could be strengthened by incorporating elements of green political thought, such as recognising ultimate limits to growth, ecological justice and notions of “sufficiency” (Huber, 2000). Lash (1994) suggests that to guard against the “individualization” (Giddens, 1990) associated with modernisation, “reflexive communities” should be developed; a concept which resonates with Green ideas of community networks. It is suggested that “human beings live in harmony with themselves, with the other members of society, and with the natural system” (Dillard, 2007).

However, it is perhaps important to note at this point that, among others, Dryzek (2005) and Dresner (2008) caution against adopting wholesale the Green vision of “decentralist, community-based models of social organisation” (Eckersly, 2000). Eckersly sums up the problems with what he calls “eco-anarchism” as follows:

“Many greens (and certainly most environmental campaigners) acknowledge that local community initiatives, while important, are unlikely to stand alone as a total response to the ecological crisis – especially when set against the backdrop of the communications and transport revolutions, increasingly mobile labour and capital, the growing transboundary nature of many ecological problems and a global system made up of multinational corporations and sovereign states...indeed, local communities can often be parochial and susceptible to domination by local vested interests”. (Eckersley, 2000:235-237)

This brings us back to modernisation, and the necessity of engaging with it in order to understand and move in the direction of sustainable development in the context of a globalised, largely industrialized, neoliberal, political-economic landscape. However, as Gray (2010) notes, the danger of embracing [ecological] modernisation is that “we might engage with the organs of unsustainability and risk perpetuating the modernity at the core of our problematique” (2010).

So, how to conclude on the complex relationship between sustainability and modernity? Dresner (2008) proposes that reflexivity is key, but also counters that “reflexivity means that it is impossible to draw up a detailed blueprint of a sustainable society, or even of the route to get to it” (2008:178). More optimistically, Dryzek (2005) indicates that a radical, reflexive form of ecological modernisation may have the potential to bring about sustainable development. Another perspective is offered by Gray (2010), who suggests that we are caught in a conflict between modernity versus some ‘other’”, the “other” being the human sense of rightness and goodness which leads to a concern for sustainability. He advises in conclusion that, to understand sustainability, we must look “through a lens of the (or some) ‘other’ with, as both Latour and Leopold identify, a critical engagement with the tools of modernity” (2010:54).

2.10 Mapping Understandings of Sustainable Development

Perhaps the overriding impression of sustainable development from the above analysis is one of conflict. As Meadowcroft (2000) argues, the idea as explained by the Brundtland Commission was designed as a “bridging concept”, to offer some sort of catch all solution to conflicting concerns over the environment and global equity. Attempts to develop a deeper understanding of sustainable development continue to suggest irreconcilable differences: the dominant social versus the new environmental paradigm, Survivalists and Prometheans, pre-modern versus modernity. In all these cases, however, attempts have been made to chart a “middle ground”, somewhere (or in several places) wherein, it is proposed, sustainable development might sit.

A particularly useful attempt to map this middle ground is found in Milne et al (2009), who adapt the work of Colby (1991) and Hopwood (2005). Drawing from the work of those authors, and incorporating insights from the literature on discourses, ecological modernisation, and development, a figure is shown below which attempts to illustrate some of the possible compromises between the conflicts of “sustainable” and “development”. In this figure, the environmental limits of sustainability on the vertical axis are juxtaposed with the exigency of human development on the horizontal. Various different viewpoints (and authors), which have been touched upon during this chapter, are scattered over this figure according to their level of engagement with environmental sustainability or human development.

This figure is an attempt to contextualise some different perspectives on sustainable development and to give us an idea of how they relate. In addition, the figure seeks to add further insight to the work of Milne et al (2009) and Dryzek (2005) in mapping the “contested middle ground” of sustainable development and some of the possibilities for “reconciliation” therein.

It is noted that the diagram is not intended to be a complete portrayal of all of the possible theories and actors involved in the sustainable development debate. It is intended rather as a heuristic, which hopes to convey an idea of the extent of the gulf between the opposing worldviews of, say, Prometheans and deep ecologists, and the range of possibilities for compromise (of which only a few are illustrated) which might populate the contested middle ground.

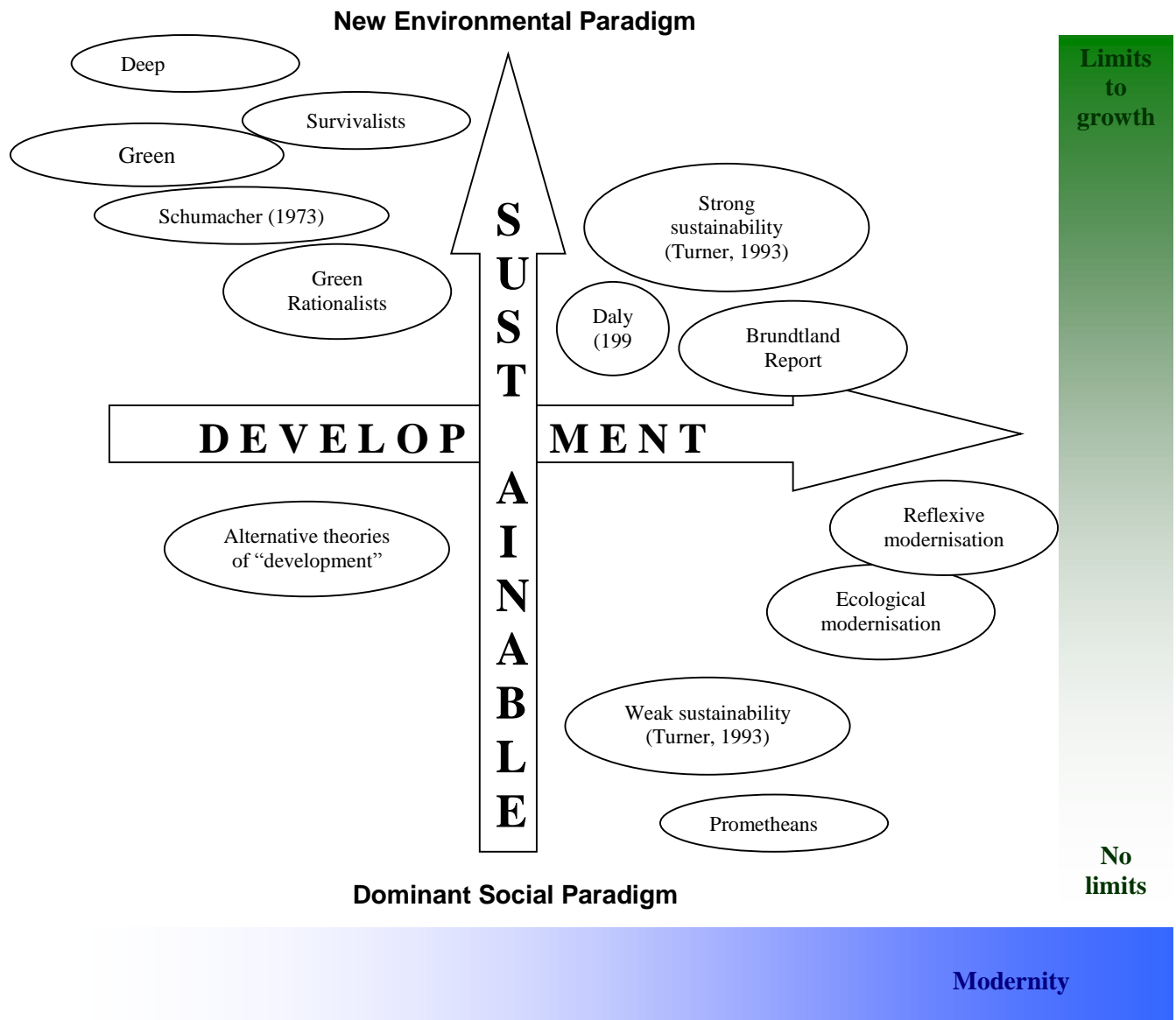


Fig 2.2: Mapping some understandings of sustainable development

2.11 Sustainable Development post-Brundtland

Before attempting to come to some conclusions, it is appropriate to briefly explain how attempts to apply sustainable development have “progressed” since it was brought to international attention in 1987. The Brundtland Commission’s report promised an international conference on the issues therein, which took the form of the 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development, or “Earth Summit”. The summit and the ensuing policy document *Agenda 21* supported the Brundtland report’s prescription for environmentally benign economic growth, as did the follow-up 2002 and 2012 summits.

These high-profile conferences are an indication of the “unanimous support” (Dresner, 2008) sustainable development has received politically, and since the publication of the Brundtland report the idea has continued to gain prominence. Along with many other countries, the UK government has a “Strategy for Sustainable Development” and, until March 2011, had a “Sustainable Development Commission”, while many business organisations (voluntarily) produce annual “Sustainability” reports.

However, despite the pervasiveness of the discourse of sustainable development, statistics indicate that environmental degradation and social injustice continue persistently. The WWF Living Planet Report (2008) warns that resource consumption will soon threaten natural limits:

“Our global footprint now exceeds the world’s capacity to regenerate by about 30 per cent. If our demands on the planet continue at the same rate, by the mid-2030s we will need the equivalent of two planets to maintain our lifestyles” (WWF, 2008:1)

Climate change also makes ecological justice an increasingly pressing issue; the UN Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (2004) highlights the “intense vulnerability” of the two billion people living in dry regions. The UN Human Development Index (2011) illustrates the “deepening inequalities” pervading many countries, and two billion people live on less than \$2 a day (Jackson, 2009). In summary, these and many other statistics suggest that, over 25 years since the

publication of the Brundtland Report, human development has not yet begun to proceed in a “sustainable” manner.

2.12 Some Conclusions

This chapter aimed to address the question “what is sustainable development?” A theme which emerged is that it is fundamentally a “bridging concept” (Meadowcroft, 2000). The idea of sustainable development, as proposed by the Brundtland Commission in 1987, reconciles, or tries to, economic growth and environmental limits; and thus aims to fit in with two opposing worldviews, the dominant social paradigm and the new environmental paradigm. However, further exploration illustrates that compromise is not straightforward. There is a “contested middle ground” of sustainable development (Milne et al, 2009), and the “meaning” of the term changes according to who is using it (Dryzek, 2005).

The introduction to sustainable development found in this chapter aims to take a nuanced, subtle approach to the concept. However, sustainable development is not always envisaged as a contested middle ground between opposing paradigms. For example, consider the vision put forward by the World Business Council for Sustainable Development (WBCSD). The WBCSD consistently stresses the importance of “sustainable” economic growth, to be achieved through eco-efficient technology and “open and competitive markets” (Schmidheiny, 1992). The overriding message is that “progress toward sustainable development makes good business sense” (Schmidheiny, 1992:xii).

The WBCSD’s understanding of sustainable development is clearly resonant of the values of the dominant social paradigm, privileging economic growth and the role of industry. It is suggested that it reflects an increasingly hegemonic discourse which allows transnational corporations to claim that they are “doing sustainable development” when they are merely appropriating the language to legitimise unsustainable “business-as-usual” (Milne et al, 2009; Gray and Bebbington, 2000; Laine, 2010).

But it is this, and the associated “win-win” language, which characterises international discussions of sustainable development, and is becoming the dominant discourse (Gray, 2010); meaning that most people now associate sustainable development with recycling and hybrid cars, rather than the radical visions of the 1970s environmentalists (e.g. see Callenbach, 1975). It is suggested that there is an intellectual disconnect here between believers in business as usual (e.g. Beckerman, 1995) and critical voices who argue for whole system change (e.g. Daly, 1996). Gladwin et al (1997) suggest that, with its current conditioning, the human mind is pathologically incapable of thinking sustainably; we are rooted in the “mechanistic” dominant social paradigm (see also Hoffman and Bazerman, 2007). “Subject”, in the Foucauldian sense, to a hegemonic discourse which views sustainability as a win-win proposition realisable through incremental ecological modernisation, we are prevented from entertaining the possibility that this may not be the case. Is it possible to become sustainable if we do not think our current system is unsustainable?

But back to Dryzek (2005), who takes a different view. He argues that “discourses are powerful, but they are not impenetrable” (2005:22). Dryzek believes that the range of environmental discourses, the complexities of the contested middle ground of sustainable development, offer possibilities for “reconciliation”. Along with the conflicts, he notes that there are complementarities between the discourses. For example, consider the parallels between the localised, community-based theories of Green Rationalists (e.g. Schumacher, 1973) and the concerns of Lash (1994) and Giddens (1990) in relation to “individualisation” and globalisation. Bring these discourses together and there is perhaps potential somewhere within for a discourse of “green” reflexive modernisation.

In summary, if indeed discourses can “constitute and reconstitute the world”, as Dryzek asserts, it may be that they can offer some possibilities for breaking down the intellectual disconnect and “bridging” the middle ground between the fundamental conflicts which characterise sustainable development.

Chapter Three

Sustainable Development and Business

3.1 Introduction

Chapter Two revealed sustainable development to be an ill-defined concept subject to many possible interpretations. Within this context, this chapter now turns to focus on the relationship between sustainable development and business.

The chapter begins in a chronological manner, exploring initial perspectives on the role of business in sustainable development following the publication of the Brundtland report. It then goes on to discuss a range of issues and perspectives related to the sustainable development-business relationship, such as “corporate social responsibility”, the “business case” for sustainability, and the argument that business is a significant driver of unsustainability. A figure is drawn up to illustrate and contextualise these conflicting perspectives.

Ultimately, the purpose of Chapter Three is to investigate the possibilities of a role for business in sustainable development, and to explore how business has contributed to the debate and the discourse to date. As the chapter comes to a conclusion, the related insights are summarised through a theoretical framework, a Framework of Sustainable Business, which illustrates the possible role(s) of business in sustainable development based on the literature discussed here and in Chapter Two.

3.2 Business and Brundtland

The idea that business could have a major role to play in sustainable development was arguably popularised by the Brundtland report (UNWCED, 1987). While the environmental concern of the 1960s and 70s had had a strong anti-corporate dimension (Zimmerman, 1994), the Brundtland Commission saw a definite and significant role for business organisations in sustainable development (Elkington, 1994). The report stressed that industry was “essential” to drive growth in developing countries, and urged companies to develop cleaner, more resource efficient technology, suggesting that this would also make them more competitive.

However, the Brundtland report also cautioned that transnational corporations must be closely regulated by international institutions, that new technology requires “careful management”, and that there must be “strict observance of environmental norms, regulations and standards” (UNWCED, 1987:217). The overall message was that business could be a powerful driver of sustainable development, but must be appropriately regulated.

3.3 The World Business Council for Sustainable Development

In 1990, one of the Brundtland Commissioners, Maurice Strong, a former oil industry Executive, invited another businessman, Stephan Schmidheiny, to set up the [now World] Business Council for Sustainable Development (BCSD)². Schmidheiny and the BCSD shortly produced a book, *Changing Course*, which opened with the words “business will play a vital role in the future health of this planet” (1992:xi). *Changing Course* echoed much of the discourse of the Brundtland Report, stressing resource efficient technology and the power of industry to drive development. The book also picked up on the Report’s link between economy and environment, going further to collate environmental protection and business success:

“Conservation of the environment and successful business development should be opposite sides of the same coin – the coin being the measure of the progress of human civilisation” (Schmidheiny/BCSD, 1992:xxiii)

This quote hints at a key theme of Schmidheiny’s book, expanded in detail in later publications (e.g. Holliday et al/WBCSD, 2002); that sustainability offers “many opportunities” for business, it “makes good business sense”. Moreover, it is a simple progression for efficient leading companies, a “natural extension” of total quality management (TQM), which many companies

² The Business Council for Sustainable Development (BCSD) became the World Business Council for Sustainable Development (WBCSD) in 1995 via a merger between the BCSD and the World Industry Council for the Environment.

had already adopted. The overriding message was that “progressing towards sustainable development” would be both easy and profitable for business (Schmidheiny/BCSD, 1992).

On the subject of regulation, however, the views of the BCSD differed from those of the Brundtland Commission. Schmidheiny called for a shift from “command and control” policies to self-regulation by business and the introduction of “economic instruments” such as emission trading permits. A theme of the book was that “open competitive markets create the most opportunities for the most people” (1992:xx).

The WBCSD’s view that business can be the leading actor in sustainable development subsequently became popular in academia (Rossi et al, 2000). For instance, Hart (1997) wrote in the *Harvard Business Review* that “corporations are the only organizations with the resources, the technology, the global reach, and, ultimately, the motivation to achieve sustainability” (see also Shrivastava, 1995). This belief in the power of business was frequently coupled with a conviction that sustainability would offer competitive advantage to the organisation (e.g. Hart and Milstein, 2003).

3.4 Corporate Social Responsibility

Early debates on the role of business in society often centred on ideas of “corporate social responsibility” (CSR) (Carroll and Shabana, 2010). While the concept evades precise definition, for the purposes of this study we will say that CSR broadly refers to the responsibility of business organisations for “some of the wider societal good” (Matten and Moon, 2008).

Mintzberg (1983) writes that “in its purest form, social responsibility is supported for its own sake because that is the noble way for corporations to behave” (1983:3). However, while this “pure” form of CSR dominated early discussion of the concept, in the 1970s an “enlightened self-interest” view of CSR, which contends that doing the right thing pays off, began to enter the discourse (Carroll and Shabana, 2010).

Early research on social responsibility inspired the concept of “social accounting” (Mathews, 1997), whereby it was suggested that, alongside their financial accountability to shareholders, organisations should also be held accountable to society for their behaviour towards it (Gray et al, 1988). The ideas of “environmental accounting” (Ullmann, 1976) and “social audit” (Medawar, 1976) also began to develop. Organisations began to report on social and environmental issues in their Annual Reports and soon progressed to stand-alone annual “accounts” (ostensibly) of their social and environmental impacts (Buhr, 2007).

3.4.1 Opposition to CSR

The most enduring critique of CSR was first put forward by Friedman (1970), in an article entitled “The Social Responsibility of Business is to Increase its Profits”. Friedman, a well-known neo-liberal economist, damned social responsibility as a “fundamentally subversive doctrine” which would undermine the free market system he championed.

Embedded in Friedman’s objections to CSR is a long tradition of economic thought which proposes that “social welfare is maximised when all firms in an economy maximise total firm value” (Jensen, 2002:239). This theory that “a rising tide of prosperity lifts all boats” (Mintzberg et al, 2002), was arguably popularised by Smith in the *Wealth of Nations* (1776), who suggested that “by pursuing his own interest [the businessman] frequently promotes that of the society” (1776:456). In very simple terms, Smith contended the role of business was largely to pursue its “self-interest”, and social welfare would be maximised through the “invisible hand” (see Collison, 2003, for a more comprehensive review of Smith’s work). In sentiments quoted by Friedman, Smith was sceptical of “those who effect to trade for the public good”, concluding famously:

“It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer or the baker, that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest” (Smith 1776:26-27)

This leads us back to Friedman and his primary concern, and most influential argument: CSR is a “misuse of shareholder funds”. The purpose of a business and its management, and the legal

obligation of a listed corporation, Friedman argued, is to maximise shareholder wealth, and any expenditure occurred for alternative purposes e.g. social good, is in fact irresponsible. For Friedman, CSR is only acceptable if in the “self-interest” of the corporation, for instance investing in local communities in order to “attract desirable employees”, in which case CSR is “entirely justified”.

Although Friedman’s arguments have since been persuasively unpicked by authors such as Mintzberg (1983) and Jacobsen (1991), his work remains extremely influential and his 1970 article is one of the most cited articles ever in the “Organisations and the Natural Environment” (ONE) field (Hoffman, 2011).

3.4.2 Corporate Social Responsibility or Sustainable Development?

Perhaps it is now time to explain, if this study is concerned with sustainable development, why we have been discussing CSR. Conceptually, they are two distinct ideas; sustainable development is a systems-level concept relating to planetary sustainability and global equity, while CSR is an entity-level articulation of an organisation’s responsibilities to society. However, the terms “sustainable development”, “sustainability” and “corporate social responsibility”, along with a variety of related expressions, are frequently conflated and “interexchanged” in both academic and corporate discourse (Montiel, 2008).

Recently, attempts have been made to combine CSR and sustainable development using the term “corporate sustainability” (e.g. Van Marrewijk, 2003; Bansal, 2005; Baumgartner and Ebner, 2010). Banarjee (2008) highlights this trend and warns that the idea of corporate sustainability “displaces the focus from global planetary sustainability to sustaining the corporation” (2008:66). He argues that this means “business, not societal or ecological, interests define the parameters of sustainability” (2008:67).

Banarjee’s warning illustrates just why it is important to consider the CSR literature when studying the role of business in sustainable development. It is probably inappropriate and

potentially counter-productive to conflate an organisation-centric, entity-level concept such as corporate social responsibility with the systems-level idea of sustainable development (Gray and Milne, 2004), yet that is what is occurring with the emergence of the discourse of “corporate sustainability”. Furthermore, closely linked with the CSR literature are two extremely influential entity-level concepts, which are now synonymous with the discourse of business and sustainable development: the “business case” and the “triple bottom line”.

3.4.3 The Triple Bottom Line

The “triple bottom line” (TBL) suggests that, alongside the traditional financial “bottom line”, organisations should equally consider environmental and social bottom lines. Elkington (1997) is usually credited with coining the term, although reservations regarding his claims to intellectual proprietorship are occasionally expressed in the literature (e.g. Norman and McDonald, 2004; Buhr, 2007) and elsewhere. The triple bottom line quickly became an extremely popular framework for corporate stand-alone reports (Norman and McDonald, 2004).

Richter (2010) suggests that “Elkington introduced the triple bottom line approach to reframe CSR, to make the concept of CSR and performance more accessible for practitioners” (2010:637). However, what started out, to an extent, as a reporting tool, drawn from the organisation-level concepts of CSR and social reporting, has been transferred seamlessly to the discourse of systems-level sustainable development (Milne and Gray, 2013). It is now extremely common in the management literature to refer to the “triple bottom line of sustainability” or the “three pillars of sustainable development” (e.g. Hart, 1995; Dyllick and Hockerts, 2002; Hart and Milstein, 2003; Bansal, 2005; Holliday et al/WBCSD, 2002). The TBL articulation of sustainable development is equally prevalent in organisational reports (Milne et al, 2006:820).

However, Norman and McDonald (2004) criticise the TBL, arguing that it does not require organisations to change their behaviour; it is merely good management practice. Gray and Milne (2004) further caution that “TBL is not the same as sustainability” (see also Milne and Gray, 2013), and also articulate perhaps the most telling critique of the concept: in “balancing” the triple

bottom line elements, the social and environmental bottom lines are inevitably outweighed by the financial. The triple bottom line will only add up if social and environmental goals are commensurate with financial ones, there must be a “business case” (Milne et al, 2006).

3.5 The Business Case

3.5.1 Basics of the Business Case

“The gates of the treasury in this world, if not those of the heavens in the next, will open to those who are socially responsible” (Mintzberg, 1983:4)

The discourse of the “win-win”, “business case” paradigm effectively dominates both the “corporate sustainability” and CSR literature (Hahn et al, 2010; Vogel, 2005). In very simple terms, the basic thesis of the business case is that engagement with what might be called “CSR” and/or “sustainability” will result in financial benefits for the organisation. As such investment will benefit both the organisation and, ostensibly, the environment or society, it is a “win-win”. As the table below illustrates, the idea has been widely influential.

Endorsement of the business case	Source
<i>“Sustainable businesses are usually more financially profitable... Managing sustainability performance can improve risk management, identify cost savings, improve reputation and aid communication with shareholders and other stakeholders”</i>	HM UK Government Strategy for Sustainable Development (2005:58)
<i>“Many opportunities for improving energy efficiency pay for themselves, while investments in renewable energy technologies are already growing in today’s market as they are becoming increasingly competitive”</i>	United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) (2011:15)

<p><i>“For businesses, finding ways of reducing the impact of their activities on nature can bring important long-term benefits, such as cutting down on materials or services that could become more expensive as they get scarcer or targeted by government regulation”</i></p>	<p>United Nations Millenium Ecosystem Assessment (UNMEA) (2004:22)</p>
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Table 3.1: The wide-ranging influence of the business case

To understand the business case, it is useful to begin with Friedman (1970). The economist proposed that investment in CSR is only responsible when it is in shareholders’ interests, an approach to CSR which became known as “enlightened self-interest” (Mintzberg, 1983). Proponents of the business case suggested that CSR could provide indirect financial benefits in the form of risk management, employee attraction and retention, and enhanced corporate reputation (Carroll and Shabana, 2010). Perhaps to “neutralise” Friedman’s argument, academics in favour of CSR began to look for a positive relationship between CSP (Corporate Social Performance) and CFP (Corporate Financial Performance) (Carroll and Shabana, 2010). However, although a large number of, overwhelmingly quantitative (Lockett et al, 2006), attempts to “prove” the business case have since been made, the empirical evidence is generally regarded as inconclusive (Barnett, 2007; Schreck, 2011).

The idea of a link between sustainability, specifically, and financial performance was popularized by the WBCSD, who identified the cost reduction potential of “eco-efficiency”:

“Corporations that achieve ever more efficiency while preventing pollution through good housekeeping, materials substitution, cleaner technologies, and cleaner products and that strive for more efficient use and recovery of resources can be called ‘eco-efficient’” (Schmidheiny/WBCSD, 1992:xii)

The WBCSD soon adopted eco-efficiency it as its guiding principle (DeSimone and Popoff/WBCSD, 1998) and later combined it with CSR to make their definitive “business case for sustainable development” (Holliday et al/WBCSD, 2002). Meanwhile, the concept gained

increasing academic attention, particularly in the growing fields of “environmental management” (Prasad and Elmes, 2005) and “environmental accounting” (Gray and Bebbington, 2000). Eco-efficiency became and remains an attractive and extremely popular idea in practice (Dyllick and Hockerts, 2002). By directly linking environmental preservation and economic (business) growth, it purports to offer an entity-level articulation of the “win-win” Brundtland vision of sustainable development (Prasad and Elmes, 2005).

3.5.2 Extending the Business Case

The possibilities of eco-efficiency were developed in detail by Weisacker et al (1997), who suggested in *Factor Four* that it was possible, through new technology and efficient production, to grow “resource productivity” fourfold, while simultaneously halving the amount of resources used and increasing standards of living. Like the WBCSD, *Factor Four* advocated market reform in the shape of eco-taxes and incentives, but unlike the WBCSD, Weisacker et al echoed Schumacher (1973) in advocating consideration of more regional trade and people’s “nonmaterial needs”, and stressed the imperative of sustainable consumption in the developed world. Some of the same authors built on *Factor Four* in *Natural Capitalism* (Hawken et al, 1999), where they suggested combining resource productivity with a “service and flow” economy, resonant of the “dematerialization” recommended by the Brundtland Commission (see also *Factor Five*, Weisacker et al, 2009).

However, Hawken et al (1999) caution against “narrowly-focused eco-efficiency”, suggesting that resource savings could be cancelled out by increased production (1999:x). Gray and Bebbington (2000) further suggest that we should rather be concerned with an organisation’s overall environmental impact, its’ “eco-effectiveness”. To mitigate the deficiencies of eco-efficiency, McDonough and Braungart (1998) advocate “cradle to cradle” manufacturing, whereby resources are recycled back into the manufacturing process rather than discarded as waste. This approach is further developed by Ayres (2002) who proposes “industrial ecology”, wherein organisations combine to form “industrial ecosystems”, using each other’s by-products and wastes as raw materials. This concept became central to ecological modernisation theory (Huber, 2000).

In the more recent business case literature (e.g. Bansal, 2005; Kleine and von Hauff, 2010) and also in practice (Pataki, 2009; Orsato and Clegg, 2005; Tilley and Young, 2009), the discourse of eco-efficiency has arguably been replaced by the “decoupling” and “industrial ecology” language of ecological modernisation. In these ideas around eco-effectiveness, industrial ecology and dematerialisation, there is perhaps potential for a more sophisticated iteration of the business case, beyond the risk-reputation focus of CSR and the simple eco-efficiency/TQM approach originally advocated by the WBCSD.

3.5.3 The Business Case Discourse: from Crisis to Opportunity

As the focus of the business case began to move away from eco-efficiency, there was a corresponding shift in the associated discourse. The cost reduction language of eco-efficiency was gradually replaced by a new focus on the business “opportunities” of sustainable development (e.g. in Hawken et al, 1999). For example, Porter and van der Linde (1995) suggest that, rather than viewing environmental regulations as a risk to be managed, the “environment-competitiveness” relationship should be reframed so environmental issues are approached as a stimulant for innovation, a “competitive opportunity” (1995:114).

From the same school of US literature come Prahalad and Hart (2002), who encourage companies to seek “*The Fortune at the Bottom of the Pyramid*”. The authors suggest that companies need to begin selling to the poor, or the “low-income markets” of the developing world, and take advantage of the “biggest potential market opportunity in the history of commerce” (Prahalad and Hart, 2002:14). Prahalad and Hart cite the emerging idea of “microfinance”, and its pioneer, Mohammed Yunus’ Grameen Bank, as an example of one of the many “business opportunities” at the bottom of the pyramid.

The shift from the discourse of risk to that of opportunity is particularly evident in the work of the WBCSD. Earlier, the organisation’s opening manifesto *Changing Course* (1992) was criticized for its unqualified faith in market solutions and its simple suggestions that addressing sustainable

development would prove easy and profitable for its members. However, compared to the more recent WBCSD work, *Changing Course* sounds positively revolutionary. While Schmidheiny suggested that the economy must “move from a situation of wasteful consumption and pollution to one of conservation” (1992:13), the 2010/11 WBCSD Annual Report states that sustainable development is “not about consuming less, it’s about consuming differently” (2011:14). Although *Changing Course* did stress corporate leadership and the business case e.g. “business leaders have special responsibilities and unusual opportunities in the global quest for sustainability”; such claims are nothing to that of the current crop of “leading global companies”, who declare:

“Companies and countries willing to deal with the changing world now, and in an open manner, are creating tremendous competitive advantage for their organizations” (WBCSD, 2011:14)

The phrase “tremendous competitive advantage” and the easy manner in which countries are described as “organizations” are telling indications of how the WBCSD discourse on sustainable development has undergone a subtle shift. From acknowledging the complexities of the “problem of sustainable development” (Schmidheiny/BCSD, 1992:11), and discussing both “obstacles and opportunities” (1992:163), the discourse has moved to one of unrestrained optimism wherein “the way ahead is clear” (WBCSD, 2011). Likewise, the power of business to play a leading role in sustainable development, always a WBCSD hobbyhorse, has become such that the role of government, or “countries”, is quite subordinate, if not as yet entirely eclipsed:

“Nations must understand the unique and valuable role business plays. Countries will ultimately determine the playing field, but they cannot achieve success without business as a partner. More than any other, this dynamic will lay the track on which the Green Race is run. The finish line, of course, is a sustainable world by 2050” (WBCSD, 2011:5)

Such language notwithstanding, the more sophisticated extensions of the business case, such as industrial ecology and microfinance, when argued thoughtfully, for example by Hawken et al (1999) and Yunus (2007) respectively, offer considerable appeal. The possibility that win-win solutions like decoupling may exist strikes a reassuring note within the arguably downbeat sustainable development discourse (e.g. Dryzek’s “Survivalists”); as the enduring popularity of

the Brundtland Commission's vision signifies. As Porritt (2005) notes, the power of Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech lay in its "inspiring, positive vision". He may not have been such a big hit with "I Have a Nightmare" (Porritt, 2005).

3.6 The Limitations of the Business Case

Although the discourse of the business case dominates the management literature (Hahn et al, 2010) and frames most corporate perspectives on sustainable development (Spence, 2007; O'Dwyer, 2003), critics from a number of perspectives argue that, even when extended, it is fundamentally limited.

3.6.1 Acknowledging Trade-offs

The idea of "trade-offs" in sustainability arguably originates from the Brundtland Commission; despite its overall win-win narrative, *Our Common Future* did acknowledge that "painful choices will have to be made" (1987:9). However, as the WBCSDs vision of sustainable development has become increasingly focussed on the business case, any discussion of "painful choices" has vanished from the discourse (Prasad and Elmes, 2005; Laine, 2010). The business case is an excellent idea when it holds, and economic, social and environmental objectives prove to be mutually reinforcing. However, what the business case does not address is "what happens if environmental and social issues do not result in growth opportunities" (Banarjee, 2003); which the literature suggests is often the case (e.g. Barnett, 2007).

Hahn et al (2010) draw attention to "trade-offs in corporate sustainability", suggesting that implicit in the "win-win paradigm" is a denial of the economic inevitability that "win-lose" situations must also rise. Spence and Gray (2007) share the concern that the business case ignores "conflicts", and use interviews with corporate managers to illustrate the implications for sustainability. The authors support what Gray and Milne (2004) hypothesise:

“It is both obvious and well established in research that any organisation facing a conflict between its financial performance... and its social or environmental performance is bound to (in all but the most extreme cases) give preference to the financial” (Gray and Milne, 2004:68)

Spence and Gray (2007) go on to relate how the managers they interviewed claimed that they managed sustainability-related conflicts, if indeed they acknowledged their existence, by “balancing” the triple bottom line elements. This is a tactic which Tregidga and Milne (2006) also identify in their case study of an organisation’s “sustainability reporting”. The authors describe how the organisation attempted to portray an image of maintaining a delicate balance between economic, social and environmental objectives, but in fact there are only “a few instances in the reports where the company appears to forgo economic expense in order to cause less disruption to the environment” (2006:230).

3.6.2 The Limits of Incrementalism

Chapter Two illustrated the intellectual disconnect between those who argue for radical system transformation (e.g. Daly, 1996) and those who believe that incremental change (e.g. Beckerman, 1995) will be enough to deliver sustainable development. Implicit in the business case is an acceptance of the incremental approach, leaving no room for the possibility that “more radical steps will be essential” (Spence and Gray, 2007; see also Orsato and Clegg, 2005). It is “damage limitation rather than transformation” (Porritt, 2005).

As we saw earlier, Holliday et al and the WBCSD (2002) likened sustainability to total quality management, while Norman and McDonald (2004) criticised the triple bottom line principle as just “good management”. Prasad and Elmes (2005) characterise the business case as a “discourse of practicality”. They argue that the discourse is one of optimism, reasonableness and pragmatism, focusing on “everyday problem-solving” and “workable solutions”. This discourse of pragmatism serves to present sustainability as “compatible with ‘business as usual’” (Tregidga and Milne, 2006). The subtext is that sustainable development will be achieved through incremental

improvements in technology and management practices, rather than any radical revision of business as usual. Business is on a gradual “journey” to sustainability (Milne et al, 2006).

Prasad and Elmes (2005) conclude that the problem with the business case is that it involves “strategies involving working within existing systems rather than opposing or dismantling them from outside” (2005:849). The work of the WBCSD reflects this; it is firmly supportive of existing systems, most notably “open and competitive markets”. However, it is argued elsewhere (e.g. Murray et al, 2005; Gray, 2006a) that the “unfettered market” (Thielemann, 2000), focussed as it is on short-term profits, serves only to drive unsustainable business behaviour. In its discourse of pragmatism and incrementalism, the business case is fundamentally too conservative to stimulate the radical institutional changes which may be necessary for sustainable development (Orsato and Clegg, 2005).

3.6.3 A Hegemonic Discourse

Perhaps the most limited aspect of the business case is its very ubiquity. Its dominance of the mainstream management literature is such that it is almost the *only* discourse on the relationship between business organisations and sustainable development (Hahn et al, 2010; Vogel, 2005). Hahn et al (2010) argue that the pervasiveness of the business case serves to exclude alternative approaches which might have “important potential for positive corporate contributions to sustainable development” (2010:218; see also Burchell and Cook, 2010).

Spence and Gray (2007) agree on the dominance of the business case but take a different view of the implications. Implicit in the win-win discourse is the belief, championed by the WBCSD, that business can lead the way to sustainable development; it is a discourse of optimism (Prasad and Elmes, 2005). However, as Spence and Gray (2007) point out, “focusing only on what business can do is an implicit denial that there is something that business cannot do”. Such unerring confidence in the validity of the business case prevents honest discussion of its limitations and ultimately, consideration of the limits of what business can do for sustainable development.

Prasad and Elmes (2005) suggest that the business case not only excludes other discourses but undermines them for lacking “its own practical thrust”. Spence (2007) echoes this theory, arguing that as the business case becomes more pervasive, “ideologies with other nodal points become increasingly marginalized” (2007:875). The author suggests that the business case has become a hegemonic discourse, to the extent that even actions taken by organisations which originally had solely social or environmental motivations, such as charitable contributions, have begun to be framed within the business case.

It is further suggested that the hegemony of the business case discourse has allowed business to construct the “myth” (Spence, 2007) that it is “doing sustainable development” (Milne et al, 2009), to damaging effect, as Milne et al (2009) summarise:

“Win-win produces legitimacy because it supplies a slogan that focuses on positive outcomes and appears to unify different interests. But it also serves as a euphemism to deflect and distract from the (almost certainly) greater win-lose situations that also exist. Ironically, then, win-win reinforces a continuing business capacity to damage the Earth” (Milne et al, 2009:1231)

3.7 Corporate Capture of Sustainable Development

The WBCSD has played a key role in global sustainable development policy discussions such as the Rio (1992) and Johannesburg (2002) summits (Dryzek, 2005). Corporate involvement in such debates is increasing to the extent that business has in fact become a leading actor in shaping sustainable development policy and discourse (Gray, 2010). However, as Prasad and Elmes (2005) note, the neo-pluralist structure of political systems is such that more powerful actors, such as multinational corporations, can “use the collaborative process to shape its outcomes in ways that are most advantageous to their own perceived interests” (2005:862).

Gray and Bebbington (2000) argue that, together with the International Chamber of Commerce (ICC), the WBCSD successfully hijacked the 1992 Rio Summit, convincing policymakers that no radical change was required, further regulation would be unnecessary, and the planet was “safe in

the hands of business” (2000:5). Since then, business has progressively “captured” the discourse of sustainable development (Banarjee, 2008; Levy, 1997), with the result that the organisation-centric, win-win language of the business case increasingly defines the boundaries of socio-political level discussions of sustainability (Levy and Egan, 2003).

Milne et al (2006, 2009) highlight the role of organisations’ “sustainability reporting” in furthering corporate capture of sustainability. The authors illustrate how organisations claim in their stand-alone reports to have adopted an enlightened yet practical approach to sustainable development, “balancing” triple bottom objectives. This discourse, Milne et al argue, successfully obfuscates the reader into believing that business is “doing sustainable development” when in fact it is merely practicing “greener business-as-usual” and a weak form of ecological modernisation (Springett, 2003).

3.8 Business as the Driver of Unsustainability

It is helpful at this point to return again to Friedman (1970). The author made the point that it is illegal for listed corporations to act other than in their shareholders interests, which he argued would in fact make CSR a crime, apart from in the event of a business case. Bakan (2004) argues that this legal structure makes listed corporations “psychopathic” by nature; designed to maximise shareholder wealth, whatever the consequences for society and the environment.

In contrast to the WBCSD view that business can drive sustainability, others argue that business is the primary driver of continuing unsustainability (Gray and Bebbington, 2000; Welford, 1997). For example, Korten (1995) and Welford (1997) discuss increasing corporate manipulation of society, while Beder (2002) describes the extensive lobbying efforts of US corporations against environmental regulations. Collison (2003) relates how corporate propaganda is used to “sell” the perception that a “rising tide lifts all boats”.

A related and broader argument suggests that “our current advanced form of international financial capitalism”, of which business is the “engine”, is incompatible with sustainable

development (Gray and Bebbington, 2007). Industry destroys the environment and a “rising tide” does not in fact lift all boats (Collison et al, 2010; Gray, 2006a; Mintzberg et al, 2002). Although opinions vary as to whether capitalism should be reinvented “as if the world matters” (Porritt, 2005) or “eschewed entirely” (Gray, 2006a), perhaps the key problem with capitalism, as with the business case, is its hegemony. By providing us with “only one view of what the ‘good life’ might look like” (Gray, 2006a), we are blinded to alternative, potentially more “sustainable”, ways of living, and of doing business.

3.9 Small is Beautiful

One of the most influential early works on sustainable development was Schumacher’s (1973) *Small is Beautiful* (Dresner, 2008). Within his vision of “economics as if people mattered”, Schumacher advocated a reform of business, away from large private sector, profit-maximising “mechanistic” organisations towards smaller, community based organisations operating for the public interest. His philosophy was that rather than maximising profit, organisations should be “eating to live, not living to eat” (1973:263). Schumacher envisioned small self-sustaining communities filled with people-centred organisations such as co-operatives and mutual societies. Dauncey (1989) provided further related insight through case studies of community-based enterprises around the world. He proposed the concept of “holistic businesses”, characterised by a “commitment to the core values of economic, human, social, ecological and planetary wholeness” (1987:155).

Although communities of the style imagined by Schumacher and still advocated by “Green Romantics” (Dryzek, 1997) had their own problems of economic sustainability (Dresner, 2008), these ideas of small local enterprises and co-ownership are valuable to the contemporary debate on business and sustainability simply because they are so different to the dominant discourse; they offer a rare alternative to the business case paradigm (Kearins et al, 2010; Davies, 2012). The literature suggests that the hegemony of the business case prevents consideration of its limitations and possible alternatives in large PLCs (Gray and Bebbington, 2000). Perhaps it is therefore from different types of organisations that alternative discourses may develop (Gray et al, 2009).

However, there is relatively little in the contemporary mainstream management literature exploring the ideas of Schumacher and Dauncey. Research on sustainability and business is largely focussed on large private companies (Hockerts and Wustenhagen, 2010). Organisations with different types of ownership structures are rarely considered, apart from the public sector (e.g. Ball and Bebbington, 2005) and some work on third sector social accounting (e.g. Dey, 2007). Gray et al (2009) do refer to the possibility of “the transformation of conventional organizations to ‘new models’” and suggest that “many of the ingredients will lie in values-based organizations and in NGOs and community businesses”. Kelly and White (2007) also call for a more sustainable “corporate design” and illustrate their argument with case studies of co-operatives, partnerships and other alternative ownership structures.

While ownership structure may be neglected, research on Schumacher’s other recommendation, smallness, is thriving in the form of two growing fields of research: “social entrepreneurship” and “sustainable entrepreneurship”. The “social enterprises” set up by social entrepreneurs can be defined as businesses with primarily social goals (Peredo and McLean, 2006), while a “sustainable enterprise” (the brainchild of a “sustainable entrepreneur”) is usually described within the literature as an organisation pursuing social, environmental and (sometimes) economic goals (Tilley and Young, 2009).

3.9.1 The Potential Role of Social and “Sustainable” Enterprises

In the social entrepreneurship literature in particular, there is a suggestion that such organisations could be a catalyst for institutional change. Emerson (2006) notes that “what we [social entrepreneurship scholars] seek to do is not to build organisations, empires or silos, but to transform the way mainstream capital markets and organisations function throughout our world” (2006:405). Some authors position social entrepreneurship as the crucial missing link between the services provided by the private and public sectors (Leadbetter, 1997; Nicholls, 2006). Social enterprises are frequently referred to as providing solutions to society’s “unmet needs”, which

“existing markets and institutions have failed to satisfy” (Seelos and Mair, 2006; see also Nicholls, 2006).

Similarly, it is suggested that sustainable entrepreneurs can also bring about institutional change through a new “green capitalism” (Gibbs, 2008). Hall et al (2010) dub this theory the “Panacea hypothesis”, whereby sustainable entrepreneurs seek to revolutionise industries by forcing large organisations to become more “sustainable” in order to compete (e.g. Hockerts and Wustenhagen, 2010). Schaltegger and Wagner (2011) outline their interpretation of the Panacea hypothesis as follows:

“Ideally, sustainable entrepreneurship pulls the whole market towards sustainability and influences the society as a whole. Sustainable entrepreneurs strive for business success through sustainability solutions for the mass market. With their innovations they are able to exert a constructive influence on society and politicians” (Schaltegger and Wagner, 2011)

3.9.2 Limitations of the Panacea Hypothesis

Given such pronouncements, however, it is perhaps not surprising that Hall et al (2010) describe the literature on the Panacea hypothesis as “overly-optimistic”. The authors note that there is little or no research on how the proposed process of transformation might actually occur (see also Tilley and Young, 2009).

In its optimism, sustainable entrepreneurship can often resemble the business case. For instance, Schaltegger and Wagner (2011), although suggesting that sustainable entrepreneurs can drive institutional change, refer to “corporate sustainability management”, which they suggest “results in first a sustainable development of the company, and second that the company contributes to the sustainable development of society as a whole”. In practice, Kearins et al (2010) found that one of the “visionary small enterprises” they studied claimed pretensions towards the radical but actually exhibited motivations and behaviour consistent with the dominant social paradigm. Sustainable entrepreneurship can also sound a lot like ecological modernisation (e.g. Schaltegger

and Wagner, 2011; Gibbs, 2008). Recognising this, Tilley and Young (2009) caution that without incorporating radical ideas, “entrepreneurial innovation can only place a ‘green gloss’ on industrial society and the modernist project” (2009:83).

Similarly, much of the social entrepreneurship literature (e.g. Leadbetter, 1997, 2007) does not suggest radical institutional change. Rather, there is often implicit endorsement of the free market and the “social justice” mechanisms of capitalism (e.g. Bansal and Hoffman, 2012; Elkington and Hartigan, 2008). As Grenier (2006) notes, “the language of social entrepreneurship certainly seems to frame it as reflecting the dominance of the market and business in society, the depoliticisation of social action, and the privileging of a business-like rationale” (2006:137).

Nicholls (2006) suggests that if social enterprises are to bring about change it is likely to be through “combining the best of progressive charities, the voluntary sector, social movements and business practice”. This partnership approach, not dissimilar to that proposed by the Brundtland report and the WBCSD, is also advocated in the sustainable entrepreneurship literature (Hockerts and Wustenhagen, 2010). It may be that sustainable development will indeed require “convergence and interaction” (Schaltegger and Wagner, 2011) between many different types and sizes of enterprises. Precisely how this could occur, however, does not appear to have as yet been explicated in the literature.

3.10 Mapping Perspectives on the Role of Business

The figure below attempts to broadly illustrate a spectrum of opinion on the role of business in sustainable development, highlighting some of the perspectives discussed in this chapter. From left to right, the spectrum runs from the view that big business is the primary cause of unsustainability (e.g. Gray and Bebbington, 2000; Welford, 1997) to the opposing perspective of the WBCSD et al (e.g. Schmidheiny/WBCSD, 1992; Hart, 1995). In the centre, although not representing any sort of resolution, there is the view that business should play little or no role, engaging with social and environmental issues only to the point where they enhance shareholder value (e.g. Friedman, 1970).

The vertical axis of the figure is less prescriptive, but serves to illustrate that some of the literature comes at the topic from a different angle, looking at the role of small rather than large organisations. This literature is loosely positioned at varying points on the spectrum. The views of Schumacher (1973), for instance, are more radical and closer to those of the authors who argue against the dominance of large corporations (e.g. Beder, 2002). The sustainable entrepreneurship literature, in contrast, has more in common with ecological modernisation and the business case (e.g. Hockerts and Wustenhagen, 2010).

Like the figure in Chapter Two illustrating positions on sustainable development, the diagram below is not an exhaustive mapping of the research field of business and sustainability. It is again a heuristic, with the primary aim of contextualising the literature discussed and illustrating that there are alternatives to the dominant discourse.

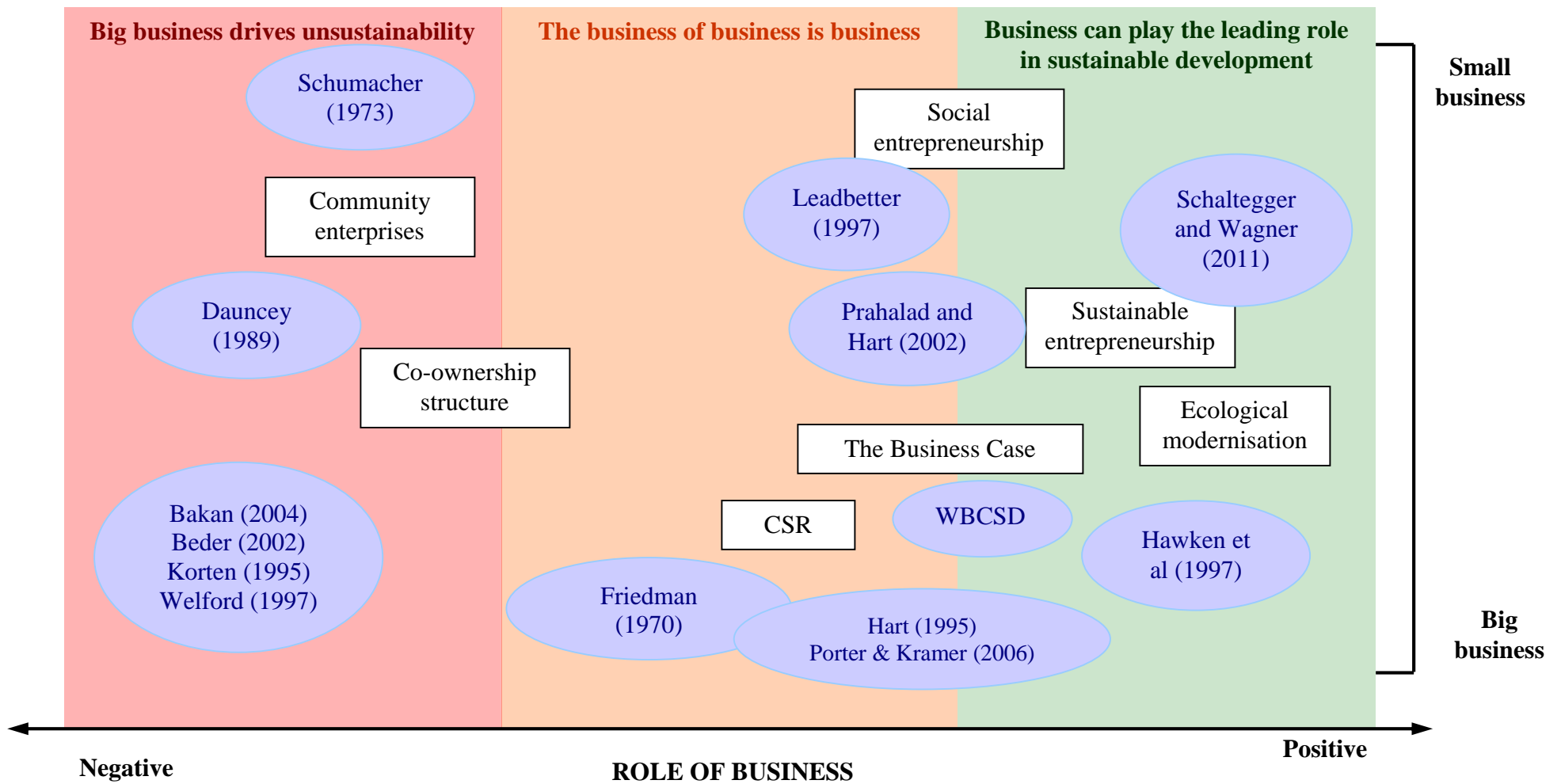


Fig 3.1: Contrasting views on the role of business in sustainable development

3.11 Theoretical Framework

The end of Chapter Two featured a figure which mapped understandings of sustainable development based on their relative affinity with the dominant social paradigm (DSP) and the new environmental paradigm (NEP) (Fig. 2.2). Blending the ideas of that diagram with those of Fig. 3.1 above, the result is the broad framework below which attempts to map a range of possible narratives of “sustainable business”.

The framework draws on the theories of a sustainable development paradigm, Dryzek’s environmental discourses (1997, 2005) and ecological modernisation; and incorporates a number of possible roles of business, from negative influence to leading actor. Again, the figure is not all-encompassing; it merely illustrates those viewpoints which emerge most clearly from the literature, while simultaneously acknowledging that an infinite number of viewpoints on or near the plotted perspectives are likely to exist. It is not a definitive encapsulation of the role of business in sustainable development, but aims to offer some structure to the discussion presented in this chapter.

Furthermore, it is noted that the categories are neither solid nor finite, as illustrated by the dashed lines dividing each perspective within the figure. At this stage the categories and their contents, along with the boundaries between them, are tentative. The Framework explicitly acknowledges and allows for the possibility of interaction, and crossover of ideas, between the broad narratives identified.

This Framework of Sustainable Business (Fig. 3.2) is the chief theoretical anchor of the thesis. As the thesis progresses it is refined further, becoming more nuanced through the literature explored in Chapter Four, and gradually developing and changing throughout the Results and Discussion sections (Chapters Seven to Eleven inclusive). Following the presentation of the figure below, each perspective is briefly explained and considered.

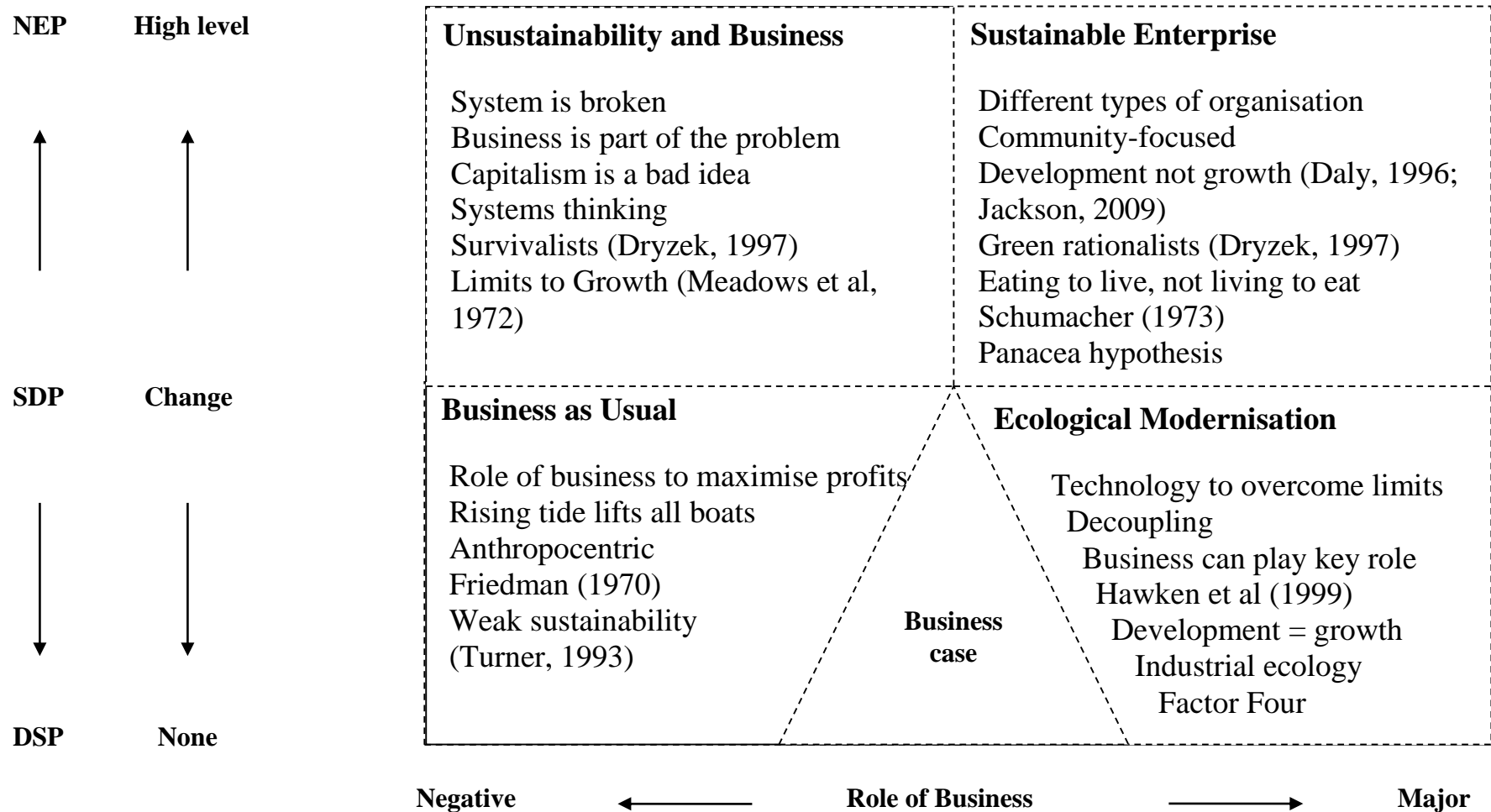


Fig 3.2: A Framework of Sustainable Business

3.11.1 Business as Usual

This position represents the “Friedmanite argument” (Collison, 2003), with acknowledgment of the business case. Business as usual incorporates what could be called a “weak” form of the business case, focussing on eco-efficiency, risk management and CSR. It does not recognise the limitations of this argument or consider the possibility that a rising tide might not lift all boats (Mintzberg et al, 2002). Although those of this perspective are not quite as stubborn as Dryzek’s Prometheans (1997) i.e. they do not deny the need for sustainable development; they do argue that little change is required at either a socio-economic or corporate level.

3.11.2 Unsustainability and Business

Here, the role of business in perpetuating unsustainability is highlighted (e.g. Gray and Bebbington, 2000). It is suggested that without radical system-level change of financial market mechanisms and capitalist values, sustainable development is unlikely (e.g. Gray, 2006a). Authors of this opinion are sceptical as to whether it is possible for “big business” to behave responsibly (e.g. Bakan, 2004). The scepticism of this perspective, although lacking the fatalism of Dryzek’s Survivalists (1997), is in direct contrast to what its proponents might consider the blind optimism of advocates of the business case and ecological modernisation.

3.11.3 Ecological Modernisation

This perspective reflects a “strong” form of the business case, incorporating ideas such as industrial ecology (Ayres, 2002) and decoupling (Huber, 2000). The approach of the WBCSD, although broadly eco-modernist, is closer to business as usual and the business case with its faith in the free market and penchant for deregulation (Holliday et al/WBCSD, 2002). In its more radical moments, this perspective argues for reform of the market such as ecological taxation policies (e.g. Hawken et al, 1999).

Although more sophisticated than the business as usual perspective, ecological modernisation still does not address the issue of inevitable trade-offs within the business case; and the discourse has been instrumental in advancing corporate capture of sustainable development (Milne et al, 2009). This perspective also fails to account for the difficulty of reconciling sustainability and modernity (e.g. Dresner, 2008) and is limited by its entrenchment in the DSP (York et al, 2003).

3.11.4 Sustainable Enterprise

While, like those of the “Unsustainability and Business” perspective, proponents of “Sustainable Enterprise” also feel that a complete change from the DSP is required, they believe in contrast that business can play a key role in this transformation. Suggested here is a different kind of business and even a different kind of economy; one focused on “development, not growth” (Daly, 1996; Jackson, 2009), on small enterprises and community development (Schumacher, 1973; Davies, 2012).

However, this perspective is in danger of slipping into the pre-modern (Gray, 2010) and neglecting the complexities of the DSP economy. Like Dryzek’s Green Romantics (1997), whom we met in Chapter Two, proponents tend to sidestep the issues of how compatible such an economy would be with capitalism, and how exactly to create such a radically different society; they and theories like the Panacea hypothesis may be “overly-optimistic” (Hall et al, 2010). In addition, as discussed above, it is sometimes a small step from sustainable and social entrepreneurship to ecological modernisation and the business case (Tilley and Young, 2009).

3.12 Some Conclusions

The complex discourse of sustainable development is increasingly shaped by business organisations, particularly large multinational PLCs (Gray, 2010; Banarjee, 2008). This discourse, which is rooted in the “mechanistic” (Gladwin et al, 1997) values of the dominant social paradigm, is characterised by an increasingly optimistic, win-win, business case approach, which defines sustainability in economic terms, privileging ecological modernisation and the free market. Through the use of language such as “corporate sustainability” and the “three pillars of

sustainability”, sustainable development is gradually becoming captured and corporatised, merging with and neutralised by the less radical, organisation-centric discourse of corporate social responsibility (Spence, 2007). Organisations are using their increasing political involvement and public communications to develop a hegemonic discourse which denies any conflict between the interests of business and those of society and the planet (Gray, 2010).

Chapter Two highlighted the implications for sustainable development of an intellectual disconnect between believers in “business as usual” and advocates of radical structural change, which prevented the recognition of alternatives to the former perspective. The range of views on the role of business in sustainable development revealed in this chapter hints that a similar disconnect travels down to the management literature. Gray and Bebbington (2000) argue that most environmental accounting research, for example, is “managerialist” in nature, where the researcher “sees the world through corporate eyes”. Adopting a managerialist research perspective allows the win-win business case discourse to dominate discussions of the role of business in sustainable development, to hegemonic effect. The fundamental limitations of the business case are ignored and alternative discourses which question the role of business sidelined (Gray and Bebbington, 2000; also Hahn and Figge, 2011). If the inevitable conflicts of the business-sustainability relationship are not recognised, how then can they be resolved?

At the end of Chapter Two, we heard from Dryzek (2005) that the very range of alternative environmental discourses may actually make it easier to resolve conflicts between them. However, the other side of this diversity is that sustainable development becomes bewildering. With its optimism, pragmatism, and familiar economic parameters, the business case offers an attractive anchor with which business can “ground” sustainable development (Porritt, 2005). However, in its hegemony, the business case closes off any debate on the role of business in sustainable development. In doing so, it perpetuates the intellectual disconnect which makes the “reconciliation” between discourses of sustainable development, which Dryzek advocates, so challenging. The alternative discourses explored above, such as ecological modernisation or “sustainable enterprise”, may therefore be helpful in breaking down the hegemony of the business case, reopening the debate on the role of business in sustainable development, and ultimately resolving some of the conflicts therein.

Chapter Four

Sustainability at an Organisational Level

4.1 Introduction

The previous chapter presented a “macro-level” discussion of the sustainable development-business relationship, outlining a range of related theoretical positions and culminating in the Framework of Sustainable Business. This chapter now takes the analysis to a more specific level: sustainability in the organisation.

An initial concern, touched on in Chapter Three, is that sustainable development is a systems-level, rather than an entity-level concept (Gray and Milne, 2004). The latter authors argue that it is inappropriate to apply sustainability at the level of an individual organisation, and to speak of “sustainable organisation”, or “sustainable business” (Gray and Milne, 2004). As Gray (2010) elaborates, it is likely that “any foreseeable sustainable state will be the result of interactions between organisations, individuals, societies and states”, rather than a collection of individual “sustainable organisations”.

Despite these reservations, however, we saw in the previous chapter that sustainability is regularly applied at an organisational level, with the term “corporate sustainability” becoming increasingly popular in the mainstream “managerialist” literature (Gray and Bebbington, 2000). It is suggested therefore that it is imperative to explore what sustainability may mean, or be taken to mean, at the level of an individual organisation.

An issue highlighted in Chapter Three was that the dominant narrative of “corporate sustainability” in the mainstream literature is the flawed concept of the “business case” for sustainability. The Framework of Sustainable Business (Fig. 3.2) illustrates, however, that this is but one of many possible interpretations of the business-sustainability relationship. As this business case becomes hegemonic (Spence, 2007), it is of growing importance to investigate “alternative” narratives of sustainability in the organisation (Gray, 2010).

The purpose of Chapter Four is therefore to explore narratives of sustainability at an organisational level, focussing on those which transcend the managerialist literature and go “beyond the business case” (Hahn et al, 2010). The chapter discusses in turn the fields of “Organisations and the Natural Environment”, sustainable entrepreneurship, and sustainability

accounting and reporting, all of which offer some “alternative” narratives of “sustainable organisation”. Chapter Four closes by considering the implications of this literature for the Framework of Sustainable Business.

It is hoped through this analysis to begin to develop an understanding of the complexities and challenges of applying sustainability at an organisational level, and to consider the possibility of a “sustainable organisation”.

4.2 Organisations and the Natural Environment

With the increase in corporate reporting and “greenwashing” in the late 1980s (Kallio and Nordberg, 2006), management scholars began to talk of “greening” organisation studies (Gladwin, 1993; Shrivastava, 1994). In 1994, an Academy of Management special interest group entitled “Organisations and the Natural Environment” (ONE) was set up, and from here some ideas around applying sustainability at an organisational level began to emerge.

The *Academy of Management Review* (AMR) in 1995 devoted a special issue to ONE research, and this is still cited as providing the theoretical foundations for the field (Kearins et al, 2010; Hahn et al, 2010). The papers in this issue are significant for two particular reasons: they considered the dominant social paradigm – new environmental paradigm debate at an organisational level (Purser et al, 1995; Gladwin et al, 1995), and introduced the idea of a “sustainable organisation” (Starik and Rands, 1995).

4.2.1 “Sustaincentrism”

In their AMR paper, Purser et al (1995) suggested that the field of organisation studies suffered from an “anthropocentric bias”. The authors argued that this was also evident in the emerging ONE research field, which was grounded in an organisation-centric, “environmental management” paradigm. Purser et al suggested that this paradigm reflected an “egocentric organizational orientation”, characterised by a narrow focus on the success of the organisation.

They called for a paradigm shift towards an “ecocentric organisation paradigm”, grounded in a broader, systems level perspective.

Echoing Purser et al’s concerns, in their paper Gladwin et al (1995) developed a “new integrative paradigm of sustaincentrism”, which they proposed would be “more fruitful in yielding sustainability when put into practice” than either the dominant “technocentric” or the opposing “ecocentric” paradigm. The authors identified thirty ontological assumptions related to sustainability, mapping the contradictory positions thereon of the technocentric and ecocentric paradigms and constructing sustaincentrism as a middle ground.

Alternative Environmental Paradigms

Key Assumptions	Technocentrism	Sustaincentrism	Ecocentrism
A. Ontological & Ethical			
1. Metaphor of earth	Vast machine	Life support system	Mother/web of life
2. Perception of earth	Dead/passive	Home/managed	Alive/sensitive
3. System composition	Atomistic/parts	Parts and wholes	Organic/wholes
4. System structure	Hierarchical	Holarchical	Heterarchical
5. Humans and nature	Disassociation	Interdependence	Indisassociation
6. Human role	Domination	Stewardship	Plain member
7. Value of nature	Anthropocentrism	Inherentism	Intrinsicism
8. Ethical grounding	Narrow homocentric	Broad homocentric	Whole earth
9. Time/space scales	Short/near	Multiscale	Indefinite
10. Logic/reason	Egoist-rational	Vision/network	Holism/spiritualism
B. Scientific & Technological			
1. Resilience of nature	Tough/robust	Varied/fragile	Highly vulnerable
2. Carrying capacity limits	No limits	Approaching	Already exceed
3. Population size	No problem	Stabilize soon	Freeze/reduce
4. Growth pattern	Exponential	Logistic	Hyperbolic
5. Severity of problems	Trivial	Consequential	Catastrophic
6. Urgency of solutions	Little/wait	Great/decades	Extraordinary/now
7. Risk orientation	Risk taking	Precaution	Risk aversion
8. Faith in technology	Optimism	Skepticism	Pessimism
9. Technological pathways	Big/centralized	Benign/decoupled	Small/decentralized
10. Human vs. natural capital	Full substitutes	Partial substitutes	Complements
C. Economic & Psychological			
1. Primary objective	Efficient allocation	Quality of life	Ecological integrity
2. The good life	Materialism	Postmaterialism	Antimaterialism
3. Human nature	Homo economicus	Homo sapient	Homo animalist
4. Economic structure	Free market	Green economy	Steady state
5. Role of growth	Good/necessary	Mixed/modify	Bad/eliminate
6. Poverty alleviation	Growth trickle	Equal opportunity	Redistribution
7. Natural capital	Exploit/convert	Conserve/maintain	Enhance/expand
8. Discount rate	High/normal	Low/complement	Zero/inappropriate
9. Trade orientation	Global	National	Bioregional
10. Political structure	Centralized	Devolved	Decentralized

Fig 4.1: Alternative environmental paradigms (Gladwin, Kennelly and Krause, 1995)

Gladwin et al's paper is grounded in some of the more radical, "green" sustainability literature; the themes and language of sustaincentrism owe much to the ideas of Daly (1973), Daly and Cobb (1990), and Meadows et al (1972). For example, as Fig 4.1 illustrates, from a sustaincentric perspective humanity is "approaching" carrying capacity limits, growth patterns are "logistic" and population size must "stabilise soon". Although not directly cited by Gladwin et al, the work of Schumacher (1973) is also echoed; technological pathways are "benign/decoupled" and trade orientation is "national" rather than global. For Gladwin et al, a sustaincentric paradigm would require a "green and equitable economy", wherein the "pursuit of purely market criteria" is tempered by regulation. This suggestion to combine a free market with "command and control" policies resonates with the ideas of the Brundtland Commission; in contrast, for example, to the deregulation approach championed by Schmidheiny and the BCSD (1992).

Gladwin et al suggest that sustaincentrism has the potential to deliver sustainability when "put into practice", but acknowledge that further research is required on its "operationalisation". However, herein lies what is arguably the significant limitation of the authors' ideas. Newton (2002) argues that the "ecocentric management" literature (including Gladwin et al's work) is too "idealistic". He suggests that such research does not consider the difficulty of engineering a paradigm shift in practice; it fails to offer a "practical program" for "how organizational and societal ecochange is to be achieved" (2002:527). In simple terms, and as will be further discussed as this thesis progresses, it is difficult to see how an organisation could translate, for example, the sustaincentric assumption "human nature – homo sapient" to practice (see also Barter and Bebbington, 2010).

Its "idealism", however, is perhaps also the strength of Gladwin et al's model. The authors seek to address significant, complex elements of the sustainable development debate, such as technology, free trade and economic structure. They present a narrative of sustainability at an organisational level which clearly goes beyond the environmental management, eco-efficiency-focus characteristic of the mainstream managerialist literature (Welford, 1998), and seeks indeed to address the "future of humanity and the planet" (Milne and Gray, 2013). However, this breadth and ambition, perhaps inevitably, comes at the expense of the degree of pragmatism likely to be required for "operationalisation" (Gladwin et al, 1995).

4.2.2 Ecologically Sustainable Organisations

Undoubtedly more pragmatic are Starik and Rands (1995), who attempt to conceptualise an “ecologically sustainable organisation”. The authors suggest that “so few organisations have begun to achieve sustainability” because doing so would require “substantial change, much of it antithetical to short-term economic self-interest” (Starik and Rands, 1995:911). They cite a lack of understanding of sustainability as the biggest barrier to its application at an organisational level, and aim to offer insight via their list of “characteristics of ecologically sustainable organisations”.

Multilevel-Relationship-Induced Characteristics of Ecologically Sustainable Organizations (ESOs)

Ecological Level

Utilization of natural resource inputs at sustainable rates
Processes designed for maximization of conservation and minimization of waste
Development of goods and services for sustainable use and disposal/recycling
Generation of only assimilable outputs, which are ecologically useful or neutral
Effective mechanisms for sensing, interpreting, and responding to natural feedback
Promotion of values of environmental protection, sensitivity, and performance
Development of principles, strategies, and practices for ecosystem viability

Individual Level

Inclusion of sustainability considerations in job design, selection, and training
Promotion of sustainability-oriented innovation by systems and structures
Reinforcement of a sustainability orientation by cultural artifacts

Organizational Level

Initiation of and involvement in environmental partnerships
Absence of targeted protests by environmental activists
Utilization of environmental conflict-resolution practices
Participation in industrial ecology and other waste-exchange arrangements
Allocation of extensive resources to interorganizational ecological cooperation

Political-Economic Level

Encouragement of pro-sustainability legislation
Promotion of market-based environmental policy approaches
Encouragement and development of full-environmental-cost accounting mechanisms
Promotion of peak organization support for sustainable public policy
Promotion of peak organization sustainability-oriented self-regulatory programs
Participation in peak organizations specializing in promoting sustainability
Opposition to anti-sustainability and/or promotion of pro-sustainability subsidies

Social-Cultural Level

Involvement with social-cultural elements to advance sustainability values
Involvement in educational institutions' environmental literacy efforts
Provision of environmental information to various media
Dissemination of sustainability information from culturally diverse stakeholders
Attention to environmental stewardship values of organizational members

Fig 4.2: Characteristics of ecologically sustainable organisations (Starik and Rands, 1995)

Much of Starik and Rands' work reflects that of Schmidheiny and the BCSD (1992). For instance, the authors recommend "market-based regulatory approaches" as opposed to "economically inefficient and ecologically suboptimal" command and control policies, and endorse the BCSD as a "peak organisation" encouraging companies to "adopt sustainability-oriented behaviours". However, some issues which Starik and Rands discuss indicate what Dunlap and VanLiere (1978) might call a more "pro-environmental orientation". They suggest focusing on "ecology" rather than "industrial" when exploring industrial ecology, and advocate organisational encouragement of employees' "spiritually based values" e.g. environmental stewardship.

Furthermore, Starik and Rands stress throughout their paper that their narrative of sustainability at the organisational level is a systems level one. The authors thus avoid Purser et al's (1995) "egocentric organisational orientation", which is so evident in other, more managerialist, narratives e.g. Shrivastava (1995) and Schmidheiny/BCSD (1992), which emphasise "sustainability as competitive advantage". For example, when Starik and Rands conclude with the implications of their work for practice, they propose "strategies" to enhance "organisational sustainability", not organisational performance.

At this point it is useful to compare the work of Starik and Rands with that of Gladwin et al. Although both offer narratives of sustainability at an organisational level, they take completely different approaches. At its simplest, the debate could be positioned as one of radicalism, or perhaps idealism, versus pragmatism. The "advantage" of Starik and Rands' narrative of sustainability at an organisational level is that it is practical; it could be adopted by an organisation seeking to make itself "ecologically sustainable" with relative ease. For instance, organisations are encouraged to include "sustainability considerations in job design, selection and training". However, what Starik and Rands gain in pragmatism they lose in radicalism. Is there "potential for radical moment" (Tinker and Gray, 2003) in "absence of targeted protests by environmental activists"? In contrast, the relative radicalism of Gladwin et al comes through in ideas like supporting poverty alleviation through "equal opportunity", rather than a "trickle down" approach; a proposition which directly challenges the assumptions of neoclassical free market economics (e.g. Friedman, 1962).

Finally, there are two key points here: the value of the work of both Gladwin et al and Starik and Rands, and the value in comparing them. As to the value of each, Gladwin et al's paper is a notable attempt to map the conceptual "middle ground" (Milne et al, 2009) between the NEP and the DSP, and grounds this debate, so key to understanding sustainable development, in the management literature. In the case of Starik and Rands, their work might seem conservative next to Gladwin et al, but such has been the theoretical (un)development of the ONE field (Kallio and Nordberg, 2006; Whiteman et al, 2013), that Starik and Rands' narrative of sustainability at an organisational level now looks almost radical. Finally, in considering both pieces of work together, we can begin to pinpoint the differences in discourse therein, with an eye to their potential for "reconciliation" (Dryzek, 2005).

4.2.3 Business as Usual

Another contribution to the aforementioned *AMR* special issue came from Hart (1995), who proposed a "natural resource-based view of the firm", encouraging companies to "adapt their competitive strategies" for the "constraints imposed by the natural environment". In contrast to the work of both Gladwin et al (1995) and Starik and Rands (1995), the focus of Hart's work was on the "organisation" rather than the "natural environment" component of ONE. Hart drew from the work of Schmidheiny and the BCSD (1992) to explain how organisations could cultivate "sustainable competitive advantage" through stakeholder engagement, "pollution prevention", TQM and partnerships.

Essentially, Hart's paper is not about sustainable development, it is about organisational strategy; it exemplifies Purser et al's (1995) "egocentric organisational orientation". The "natural resource-based view" is a twist on a conventional organisation theory, without any pretensions to a paradigm shift, as advocated by Gladwin et al (1995) and Purser et al (1995). The narrative of sustainability at an organisational level proposed by Hart is rooted in the dominant social paradigm, does not provide for win-lose situations and privileges pragmatism and ecological modernisation (Springett, 2003; Prasad and Elmes, 2005; Hahn et al, 2010).

Hart's paper is by no means a lone example of such research, but it highlights a significant point. That 1995 issue of AMR laid the theoretical foundations for the ONE field, but it was the theories of Hart, rather than those of Gladwin et al, or Starik and Rands, which became most popular with ONE scholars (Kallio and Nordberg, 2006). On the basis of citations, Hart's has been one of the most influential articles in the field, far ahead of Gladwin et al and Starik and Rands (Hoffman, 2011).

Aside from a few exceptions (e.g. Starkey and Crane, 2003; Newton, 2002; Whiteman et al, 2013), ONE research has since failed to build on the theoretical paradigmatic debate introduced by Gladwin et al and Purser et al (Hahn et al, 2010; Kallio and Nordberg, 2006). Instead, the field has become dominated by research which endorses "business as usual" (Welford, 1998). The business as usual perspective, exemplified by Hart (1995), is now reflected in the majority of papers which attempt to apply sustainability at an organisational level (Hahn et al, 2010). It is uniformly "pragmatic" (Prasad and Elmes, 2005) and managerialist (Gray and Bebbington, 2000).

For example, Bansal (2005) draws up a list of the "principles of sustainable development", with which to calculate an organisation's "corporate sustainable development" score. The list includes elements such as "worked with government officials to protect the company's interests", and "mined/manufactured products that have a less environmentally harmful impact than in previous years or than its competitors" (2005:206). Compare these suggestions for a moment with those of Gladwin et al (1995), or even Starik and Rands (1995). While Bansal wishes organisations to manufacture products which are less environmentally damaging than their competitors, Starik and Rands suggest that organisations design processes to "maximize conservation" and "minimize waste". By way of further contrast, Gladwin et al do not even refer to products, but suggest that organisations take a "stewardship" attitude to nature, a very different proposition to manufacturing products with a "less environmentally harmful impact" (Bansal, 2005). Similarly, Bansal's organisations will work with government to protect their interests, while Starik and Rands' will lobby for "pro-sustainability legislation".

4.2.4 The Limits of Business as Usual

The aim of this chapter is to understand the complexities and challenges of applying sustainability at an organisational level. Here, managerialist narratives such as Bansal's (2005) and Hart's (1995) cannot help us, and this is the key problem with such work. These narratives of sustainability at an organisational level suffer from the same fundamental limitation as the concept of the business case: by providing us with lists of elements and actions an organisation *can* do and/or address, they offer no information on what an organisation *cannot* do (Spence and Gray, 2007).

By way of contrast, the narratives proposed by Gladwin et al (1995) and Starik and Rands (1995) incorporate suggestions which most conventional organisations would find challenging to address. For example, Gladwin et al wish organisations to adopt a "logistic" growth pattern, something arguably in direct opposition to the legal requirement that PLCs "maximize shareholder wealth" (Bakan, 2004). Or there is Starik and Rands' (1995) suggestion that organisations generate "only assimilable outputs, which are ecologically useful or neutral"; it would be impossible for some industries, such as petroleum or tobacco for example, to satisfy this requirement.

Earlier the debate of Gladwin et al versus Starik and Rands was characterised as one of radicalism, or idealism, versus pragmatism. In the ONE field today, there is in fact little or no debate; pragmatism has almost entirely extinguished radicalism (Prasad and Elmes, 2005). The irony however, is that, far from the ecocentric management research appearing naïve (Newton and Harte, 1997), it is now the pragmatic business as usual research which could be accused of "idealism". Managerialist research (e.g. Dunphy et al, 2003; Elkington, 1994; Shrivastava, 1995) implies that sustainability is easy and profitable, "the way ahead is clear" (WBCSD, 2011). But can a concept as complex as sustainable development really be applied at an organisational level without some engagement with the wider paradigmatic debate (Hahn and Figge, 2011)? Can the systems-level notion of sustainability even be articulated at an organisational level at all (Gray and Milne, 2004)? These are fundamental questions which the mainstream, managerialist, business as usual research ignores. As Starik (2006) notes, researchers are failing to ask "important questions beyond managerial/incremental perspectives" (2006:433).

Disillusioned with the direction of the field, which he saw as becoming dominated by work which supported “business as usual”, Welford (1998) called for a more critical approach to ONE research:

“To more fully understand the relationships between the environment, technology and sustainable development, a more critical research agenda is needed. This agenda must be more able to identify the contradictions and tensions which exist between business, its stakeholders and environmental and social implications. It needs to provide a critique of ‘business-as-usual’ ...”
(Welford, 1998:5)

Welford suggested that “the role of researchers is to enunciate the contradictions and point to the vested interests which benefit business but which cause social and environmental damage” (1998:11). He concluded that, if necessary, researchers must be “adversarial” in their dealings with companies.

Recent literature reviews suggest that Welford’s calls for a more critical research agenda have not yet been answered (Kallio and Nordberg, 2006; Ulhoi and Madsen, 2009; Ahlstrom et al, 2009). Bar occasional examples of “adversarial” work (e.g. Crane, 2000; Banarjee, 2003, 2008; Springett, 2003), the business case, business-as-usual approach, characterised by an uncritical “egocentric organisational orientation” (Purser et al, 1995), dominates the ONE field (Kearins et al, 2010; Prasad and Elmes, 2005).

4.3 “Visionary Small Enterprises”

While the ONE literature offers little understanding of the contradictions and tensions noted by Welford (1998) and Spence and Gray (2007), useful insight may be offered by some recent work on small enterprises.

Kearins et al (2010) critique the business as usual literature, and set out to look for alternative narratives of the “business-nature” relationship. The authors conduct case studies of three

“visionary small enterprises”, which reveal that two of the organisations “prioritised nature”, while in contrast, in the third, “trade-offs against nature were made according to economic priorities” (2010:540). However, the authors find that the organisation which most reflected an ecocentric management orientation struggled financially, failing to achieve the growth which, according to the Panacea hypothesis (Hall et al, 2010), would be necessary for it to influence mainstream business practice. Also notable was that one organisation explicitly chose not to publicise its ecological orientation, for fear of “being dismissed as too alternative”. As Kearins et al observe, to remain in business, the organisation had to recognise that “the market and the infrastructure to support it may remain locked within the dominant social paradigm” (2010:540).

Similarly, Barter and Bebbington (2010) identify organisations with “ecological sustainability at the core of their mission”, and suggest, based on interviews with the founders, that these organisations offer an alternative to the conventional win-win narrative of business and sustainability. Their research reveals that, in contrast to the technocentric focus on “economy”, many of the organisations “see their businesses as being built upon three equal pillars of society, environment and the economy” (2010:5). Barter and Bebbington suggest that such organisations share a number of characteristics: they aim for a “sufficient return, as opposed to maximising profits”, “question the pursuit of growth” (2010:5) and see money as a “means to an end” rather than an “end in itself” (2010:35). The research also reveals that the challenges faced by these organisations included a lack of “green suppliers” and, more generally, the “current economic framework” (2010:30).

Addressing the sustainable entrepreneurship field, Parrish (2010) encourages researchers to “recognise that there are other ‘cases’ besides the ‘business case’”. To illustrate these “other cases”, he studies the organisational design of four “sustainability-driven entrepreneurs”. Parrish found that the organisations coped with “tensions” between “self, other people and nature” by “balancing” the three outcomes, aiming to achieve certain “thresholds” in each without maximising any, e.g. financial returns. It is noted that the entrepreneurs studied often referred to “win-win” outcomes, but these reflected an achievement of this balance rather than achieving financial ends via environmental or social means.

Parrish and Kearins et al (2010) both highlight the importance of financial stability for sustainability entrepreneurs. Conducting a “where are they now?” review of ecopreneurs from the 1990s, Holt (2011) found that, although some, such as the Body Shop and Toms of Maine, had become established brands, 33% had failed completely and a further 30% remained at the “survival stage”. Parrish (2010) suggests that the “balancing” tactic adopted by his sustainability-driven entrepreneurs may be what ensures their financial survival.

4.3.1 A Sustainable Entrepreneurship Model

This literature on small businesses also offers a useful narrative of sustainability at an organisational level, in the form of Young and Tilley’s (2006) “sustainable entrepreneurship model”. The authors highlight the limitations of the business case, and suggest that researchers look “beyond the business case”. Drawing from the work of Dyllick and Hockerts’ (2002) and McDonough and Braungart (2002), Young and Tilley develop a “model of sustainable entrepreneurship”. Their model is based on eco and socio-effectiveness and incorporates “sufficiency”, which they relate to sustainable consumption, and the Brundtland-inspired “intergenerational equity” and “futuraity”.

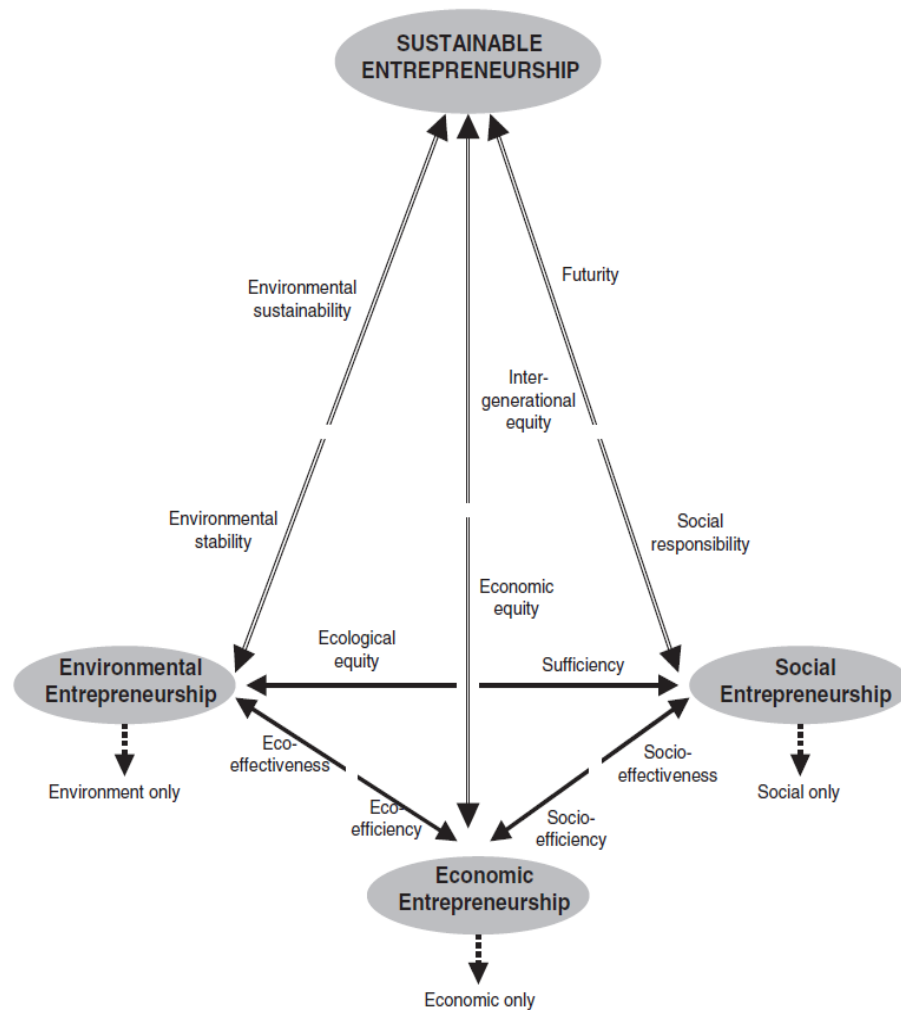


Figure 3. The sustainable entrepreneurship model

Fig 4.3: The Sustainable entrepreneurship model (Young and Tilley, 2006)

We saw above that Newton (2002) criticised the “ecocentric management” research for failing to address how these theories might be applied in practice. A strength of Young and Tilley’s work is that the authors “test” their model immediately, through a case study of a putative “sustainable entrepreneur”, the Day Chocolate Company. Their findings highlight the issue of the organisation’s ultimate product, chocolate, which conflicts with “sufficiency”. They ask “can a company ever be sustainable when it has no limit on sales and hence consumption?” (2006:414).

Another question Young and Tilley pose is “how can a company be aware of its limits to growth when other unsustainable companies will just keep growing?” (2006:414) The authors ask this

question at the end of their paper, and do not attempt to address it in depth therein. However, it is in fact unusual that they even broach the topic; a major weakness of the sustainable entrepreneurship literature is that scholars have not to date substantively addressed the question: “what if the other unsustainable companies just keep growing?” Beyond the Panacea hypothesis, which proposes that competition will result in “Greening Goliaths” (Hockerts and Wustenhagen, 2010), the literature does not suggest how large organisations, some with a tradition of unsustainable behaviour (Beder, 2002; Bakan, 2004), can (or will, or might?) become more “sustainable”.

However, this literature on “visionary small enterprises” or “sustainability entrepreneurs” is particularly useful to this chapter’s exploration of sustainability at an organisational level for two reasons. In the first instance, it approaches the topic from an alternative angle to the ONE research: it offers a conception of what an ‘ideal type’ “sustainable organisation” might look like if constructed from the ground up. The paradigmatic ecocentric – anthropocentric debate which provides the theoretical foundation for the ONE field is somewhat polarising; it takes limited account of the likelihood that there may be many possible iterations, within and without the confines of this debate, of what sustainability might mean at an organisational level (Newton, 2002). The narrative presented by Young and Tilley (2006), for instance, transcends this debate.

Furthermore, in work such as Kearins et al (2010) and Barter and Bebbington (2010) we find discussion of the tensions and challenges within the sustainability-organisation relationship; of the kind which is so conspicuously absent from the more mainstream research on “corporate sustainability” (e.g. Bansal, 2005; Dunphy et al, 2003).

4.4 Accounting for Sustainability

Further insight on the complexities of applying sustainability at an organisational level can be drawn from the sustainability accounting literature. Scholars have developed a number of models which seek to “account” for sustainability at an organisational level, such as the “sustainable cost calculation” (Bebbington and Gray, 2001), the “Sustainability Assessment Model” (Bebbington, 2007) and “sustainability gaps” (Ekins et al, 2003).

However, in reviewing this literature in detail, Gray (2010) argues that perhaps the key insight from models such as these is that, rather than accounting for organisational sustainability per se, they serve ultimately to “systematically demonstrate the *un-sustainability* of the organisation” (emphasis in original). This then becomes a key issue for the researcher, as “organisations are not pleased to discover that they are unsustainable” (Gray, 2010). The author cites a number of occasions where sustainability accounting research was discontinued because the results provided the “wrong answer” (Gray, 2010).

Along with such tensions, attempts to account for sustainability have been affected by practical problems such as cost, availability and volume of data, and how to measure “sustainability”. For example, Gray and Bebbington (2007) note that their sustainable cost calculation “hit a series of significant practical problems – not least amongst which is that ‘sustainable options’ are not available to organisations and those that are available would involve quite enormous quantities of other resources – including staff time”.

For example, some of these issues were encountered in Lamberton’s (2000) case study of a small organic farm, where the author created an “accounting model” designed to “evaluate performance in achieving the objectives of sustainable development”. The study revealed that the organisation’s operations were not “ecologically sustainable” for two main reasons: it would not be “financially viable” to be so, and the “ecologically unsustainable industrial system” would not support it.

4.5 “Sustainability” Reporting

While accounting for sustainability represents an attempt by scholars to engage with practice to develop narratives of sustainability at an organisational level, organisations also present their own narratives in what are often called “Sustainability” Reports. Tregidga and Milne (2006) suggest that these stand-alone reports are “the principal means by which managers make sense of sustainable development” (2006:219) and thereby provide a valuable “keyhole” through which researchers may explore organisational understandings of sustainability.

However, a growing body of research suggests that these reports in fact have little to do with sustainable development (Gray, 2010), instead presenting narratives of a largely business case, business as usual nature (e.g. Milne et al, 2009; Laine, 2005; Livesey, 2002). The reports are largely organisation-centric and focus on “sustaining the corporation”, with the terms “sustainable development” and “corporate social responsibility” regularly interchanged (Laine, 2010). The purpose of the reports is often “impression management”; organisations are keen to assure the reader that sustainable development is something they can understand and control (Spence, 2007; Tregidga and Milne, 2006).

Milne et al (2006) focus on the rhetorical devices used in these stand-alone reports, in particular drawing our attention to the metaphors used to obfuscate the reader. The authors argue that organisations frequently claim to be on a “journey” to sustainable development, thereby simplifying and “*deferring* sustainability, in the sense of forestalling radical change that many commentators believe is necessary for its achievement” (Milne et al, 2006:821, emphasis in original). They also note that this allows organisations to redefine sustainability “in ways that do not threaten business as usual”, and ultimately legitimise their continuing pursuit of unsustainable practices (Milne et al, 2006).

The overall impression from this work is that corporate narratives of sustainability presented in stand-alone reports are largely consistent with the mainstream managerialist narratives discussed earlier in the chapter. In particular, and crucially, it is suggested also that, through rhetorical devices, organisations are “capturing” the wider sustainable development discourse in aid of their own interests (Milne et al, 2009). We are assured that the organisation is on a “journey” to sustainable development (Milne et al, 2006) and we can trust them to “care” for society and the planet (Livesey and Kearins, 2002). The ultimate implication of this “discourse of reassurance” (Dryzek, 2005) is that, once again, attention is deflected from any contradictions and tensions which might affect the sustainability-organisation relationship.

4.6 Individuals in the Organisation

This work on “sustainability” reporting suggests that narratives of sustainability in practice are dominated by the business case; a theory which is supported by research which has explored managers’ perceptions of sustainability (Spence and Gray, 2007; Crane, 2000; Banarjee, 2001; O’Dwyer, 2003; Bebbington and Thomson, 1996).

It is suggested that organisational narratives of sustainability are heavily influenced by “individual concern” (Bansal and Roth, 2000), and that the presence of an “environmental champion” (Anderson and Bateman, 2000) is significant, particularly when that person is the CEO (Campbell, 2000). The theoretical possibility offered by such suggestions is that an environmentally and/or socially aware individual or group of individuals could have the potential to transform their organisation’s approach to sustainability.

Interviewing senior executives, O’Dwyer (2003) found that 12 of his 29 participants acknowledged conflict between what was “rational from a corporate perspective” and their own “personally led motives”. However, the interviewees adopted the corporate perspective when in the organisation, adapting their values to the organisations’ rather than the other way around. O’Dwyer (2003) suggests that “structural constraints” prevented the individuals from bringing their broader personal view of social responsibility to bear inside their organisation (see also Norris and O’Dwyer, 2004).

Further insight is offered by Crane (2000), who found that environmental champions in “conventional profit-maximising organisations” liked to take a dispassionate, pragmatic approach to the issues. His participants were particularly keen to distance themselves from “the beads and beards brigade” and avoided using words such as “ethical”, “environmental” and “sustainability”. One of Crane’s interviewees remarked:

“You have to be realistic. Things like sustainability – unless you dress them up in more business language, they are going to be resisted” (Crane, 2000:683)

Crane found that his interviewees were most comfortable when environmental issues were framed within conventional, technocentric, management paradigms, particularly the business case (also Spence and Gray, 2007). This hints at the intellectual disconnect explored in Chapters Two and Three: it is far more reassuring to position sustainability as a simple “win-win” situation (e.g. Holliday et al/WBCSD, 2002) rather than a complex set of “painful choices” (UNWCED, 1987).

In fact, Gladwin et al (1997) suggest that such cognitive dissonance may be a survival mechanism: the human mind is designed to shield itself from unsettling information i.e. the “anxieties of ecological and social sustainability”, which if dwelt on, has the potential to unhinge it (see also Hoffman and Bazerman, 2012). This may be why, as Gray (2010) points out, organisations are reluctant to embrace any narrative of sustainability other than the business case – because any such experiments invariably provide the “wrong answer”.

4.7 Putting Sustainability into Practice

As “corporate greening” progressed in the 1990s, emerging narratives of sustainability in practice were largely shaped by consulting firms and “peak organisations” (Starik and Rands, 1995) such as the WBCSD, its national offshoots, and Business in the Community (BITC) (Livesey and Kearins, 2002; Brown and Fraser, 2006). Instrumental in this early activity was the consultancy “SustainAbility”, whose founder, Elkington, popularised the triple bottom line concept. In particular Elkington’s work with Shell in the late 1990s had a significant influence on the development of corporate discourse on sustainability (Livesey, 2001).

Following the lead of the WBCSD, the narratives of sustainable development at an organisational level put forward by these increasingly prevalent organisations once again generally conform to “business as usual” and the business case (Brown and Fraser, 2006; Milne et al, 2009). For instance, BITC states that “responsible businesses do better” (Business in the Community, 2011), while consulting firm Arthur D Little suggests that businesses need to “exploit new business opportunities arising from the sustainability agenda” (Arthur D Little, 2011). SustainAbility too

privileges the business case, placing a “growing emphasis on business solutions and opportunities for value creation” (SustainAbility, 2011a).

However, within this business case focus, SustainAbility also states its intention to incite what it terms “constructive discomfort” in its clients. The aim is to “challenge and push our clients, exposing them to differing points of view” (SustainAbility, 2011b). This suggests that SustainAbility endeavours to engage with businesses through the corporate-friendly framework of the business case, while subtly nudging them towards a potentially more “sustainable” discourse. This “Trojan horse” approach (Spence, 2007) is also reflected in the work of consultancy Forum for the Future.

4.7.1 Forum for the Future

Forum for the Future states its mission as to “accelerate change to a sustainable way of life”, focusing on the role of business therein. One of the organisation’s founders is Porritt, who argues for reform of capitalism (Porritt, 2005). While much of Forum for the Future’s work does promote the business case and advocates ecological modernisation (e.g. Bent, 2011), its narrative of “sustainable business” suggests a recognition of the limitations of “business as usual”. For example:

“Even the leading companies are some way off a genuinely sustainable business model - one that is commercially successful by delivering social value within environmental limits. Our leading partners have told us that they are beginning to reach the boundaries of what they can do and if they want to go further they have to innovate their business models” (Forum for the Future, 2011)

Similar to the “characteristics of ecologically sustainable organisation” outlined by Starik and Rands (1995), Forum for the Future proposes the Five Capitals Framework, based on Porritt’s (2005) work. Drawing from the work of Daly (1973) and Hawken et al (1999), the theory of “five capitals” is founded on the idea that currently only financial capital is valued, and organisations should also “value” natural and social capital.

The Five Capitals Framework
Natural capital
Substitute naturally scarce materials with those that are more abundant.
Ensure that all mined materials are used efficiently within cyclic systems and systematically reduce dependence on fossil fuels - use renewable resources instead.
Eliminate the accumulation of manmade substances and products in nature - substitute all persistent and unnatural compounds with substances that can be easily assimilated and broken down by natural systems
Eliminate waste, reuse or recycle where possible
Protect bio-diversity and ecosystem functions
Use renewable resources only from well-managed and restorative eco-systems
Human capital
Give employees (and where possible other stakeholders) access to training, development and life long learning and capture and sharing knowledge.
Respect human rights throughout its operations and geographical regions.
Understand and respect human values and their different cultural contexts.
Ensure adequate health and safety arrangements, incorporating physical and mental wellbeing
Use health promotion and education to support a high standard of health.
Provide a reasonable living wage and fair remuneration for employees and business partners.
Create opportunities for varied and satisfying work
Allow for and enhance recreation time and support individual's active involvement in society
Social capital
Provide safe, supportive living and working conditions, including family friendly policies.
Source materials ethically and treat suppliers, customers and citizens fairly.
Respect and comply with local, national and international law.
Prompt and full payment of taxes and support of social infrastructure
Effective communication systems throughout the organisation, reflecting shared values and objectives
Minimisation of the negative social impacts of products and services [or maximisation of the positive]
Support the development of the community in which the organisation operates (including economic opportunities)
Contribute to open, transparent and fair governance systems
Manufactured capital
Using infrastructure, technologies and processes in a way that uses resources most efficiently.
Modular manufacturing systems.
Product to service shifts, for example leasing products on a continual service contract rather than a sell and forget approach.
Reverse logistics and re-use and re-manufacturing systems
Zero waste and zero-emissions production systems
Industrial ecology - looking at synergistic production systems where one organisation's waste streams are another's resources

Biomimicry - mimicing nature and natural processes in industrial processes and industrial systems design
Improvement in product systems (eco-efficiency and eco-innovation)
Sustainable construction techniques when looking at new infrastructures or offices
Financial capital
Ensure financial measures reflect the value of other capitals.
Value intangible assets such as brand and reputation.
Internalise environmental and social costs and assigning an economic value to them.
Effective management of risk and corporate governance issues.
Demonstrate a positive stance on, and management of, sustainability issues to improve access to financial capital
Ensure the wealth created is fairly distributed
Honour relationships with supplier and customers/citizens
Assess the wider economic impacts of the organisation's activities, products and services on society e.g. in creating wealth in the communities in which the organisation operates

Fig 4.4: The Five Capitals Framework, based on Poritt (2005), taken from <http://www.forumforthefuture.org/files/The%20five%20capitals%20model.pdf>

An initial reading might indicate that the Five Capitals Framework is another example of a “business as usual” narrative of sustainability at an organisational level (e.g. Bansal, 2005; Dunphy et al. 2003). Its focus on technology is eco-modernist, and it is framed, employing the language of business, in pragmatic and economic terms; it is “business almost-as-usual” (Ehrenfield and Hoffman, 2013).

However, this very use of conventional business language is also perhaps the major contribution of the Five Capitals Framework. The discourse of “business as usual” is used to articulate some more radical ideas; such as “ensure the wealth created is fairly distributed” and “eliminate the accumulation of manmade substances and products in nature”. The key here is in the subtleties of the discourse; the model uses language such as “restorative eco-systems” and “biomimicry”, words which Crane’s (2000) participants would have baulked at. What the Five Capitals Framework aims for, and achieves to an extent, is a gentle stretching of the corporate discourse on sustainable development. As Porritt (2000) notes, Forum for the Future aims to “inspire individuals”, to “help change mindsets”, and “incrementally improve performance”.

4.7.2 The Engagement Debate

In Porritt's comments, however, there are shades of what Newton and Harte (1997) describe as an "evangelical faith" in business: implicit in the remarks is the optimistic belief that 'if we can just talk to them, they will understand'. We are reminded again of the conflict between idealism and pragmatism visible in the early ONE paradigmatic debate. In placing its faith in pragmatic incremental improvement, does work such as Porritt's neglect to ask the "important questions" (Starik, 2006) instrumental to sustainable development (e.g. sustainable consumption, power of the free market, faith in technology)?

Furthermore, engagement with practice leaves the researcher vulnerable to "capture", whereby "engagement merely enables corporate management to capture and control the potentially radical or liberating aspects of their objectives" (O'Dwyer, 2003:524). Tinker et al (1991) suggest that, in engaging with practice to work towards a compromise "middle ground", researchers merely reinforce the "status quo". The authors counsel against "political quietism" and urge instead a "conflict-based" approach which exposes the underlying "structural inequalities" of capitalism (1991:30).

Gray (2002a) however, does not agree. The author concedes that developments in sustainability accounting and reporting which engage practice "will be captured to some degree", but argues that the exigencies of sustainability simply necessitate engagement:

"To bleat about engagement and the purity of the alternative/critical soul is fiddling while Rome burns - and, 'Rome' is certainly burning (Gray, 2002a:700-701)

An additional point in favour of engagement is that the literature does reveal small signs that exposure to an alternative discourse may have the potential "change mindsets" (Porritt, 2000) and modify the behaviour of the organisation. Bebbington et al (2007) suggest that the real benefit of techniques like their Sustainability Assessment Model is that they facilitate dialogue; engagement can advance discourse (see also Thomson and Bebbington, 2005). Reviewing the development of Shell's sustainable development discourse, Livesey (2002) suggests that a subtle shift took place as the company's social reporting evolved:

“Even as transformed through the commercial lens into forms of win-win environmentalism, the discourse of sustainable development deconstructed narrowly economic views of social progress and produced changes in Shell’s practice, such as its endorsement of Kyoto and its commitment to dialogue. In this respect, the new corporate discourse of sustainability and the practice of social reporting represent a concession to advocates of sustainable development and provide potential for ongoing transformation in the corporate world” (Livesey 2002:338)

In addition, Milne et al (2009) note that one organisation they studied displayed a “wider systems understanding of sustainability”, illustrating this observation with an extract from its’ report:

“[. . .] our present model is unsustainable. Sustainability reporting would more correctly be described as reporting on our unsustainability, and what we seek to do about it. In our experience, many sustainability reports describe commendable initiatives to reduce adverse impacts, but few (if any) describe the gap between the current model and what could be called truly sustainable” (Landcare Research, 2007; cited by Milne et al, 2009:1240)

It is noted that the above extracts come from the report of an organisation with a history of engagement with academic research (Bebbington and Tan, 1996, 1997; Bebbington and Gray, 2001). This suggests therefore that perhaps engagement “informed by critical perspectives” (Brown and Fraser, 2006), or “adversarial” engagement with practice, can facilitate a certain “stretching” of corporate discourse, perhaps even leading to an acknowledgement of the inherent contradictions and tensions in the business-society-environment relationship (see also Mitchell et al, 2012). Or for instance, as in the case of Landcare Research, above, an acknowledgement that the organisation is not in fact “sustainable”, and what it might begin to do about this.

4.8 Sustainability at an Organisational Level in Context

Chapter Three concluded with a broad theoretical framework illustrating a range of perspectives on the possible role of business organisations in sustainable development (Fig 3.2). This chapter has allowed deeper exploration of the sustainability-organisation relationship, and highlighted four specific narratives of sustainability at an organisational level. Bringing together these two levels of literature, the figure below maps these narratives onto a slightly refined version of the Framework of Sustainable Business.

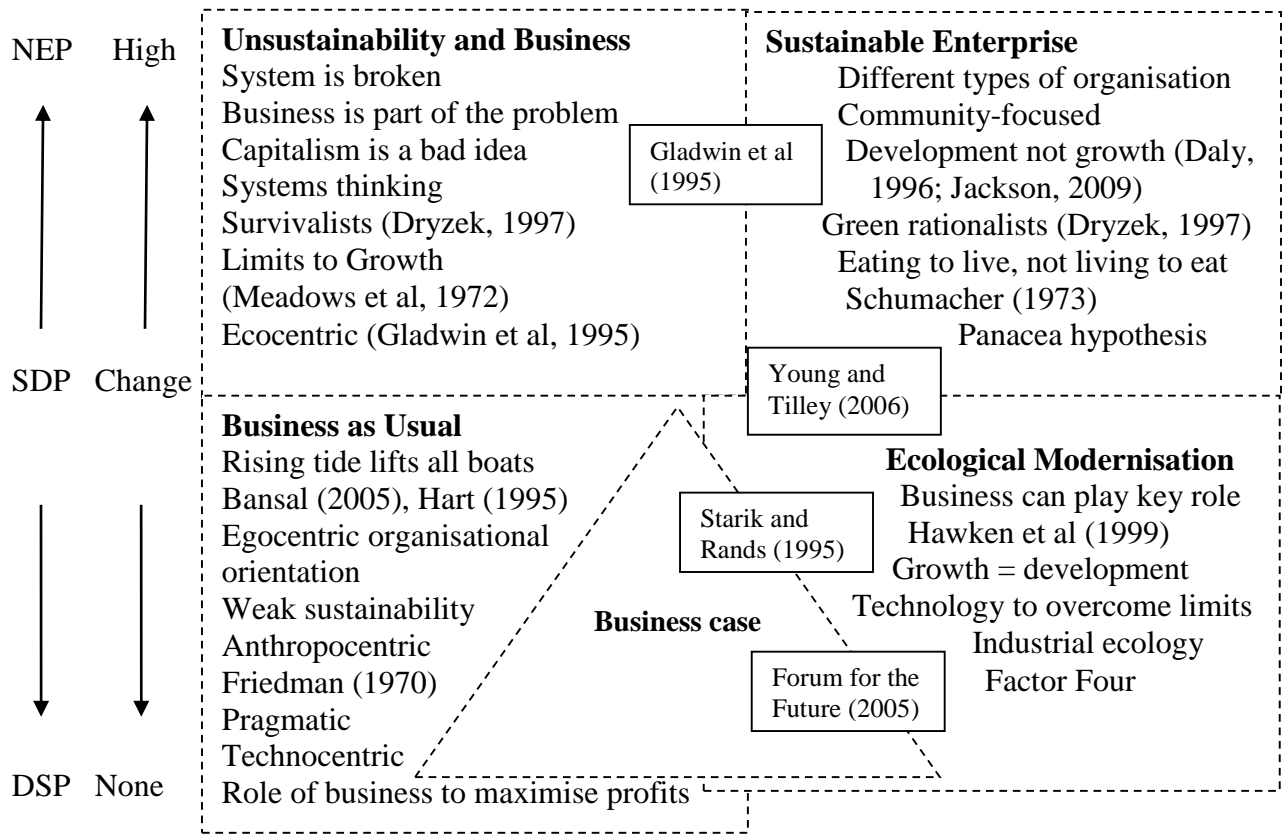


Fig 4.5: Theoretical framework and narratives of sustainability at an organisational level

Considering first the work of Gladwin et al (1995), it is suggested that aspects of “sustaincentrism” have much in common with the characteristics of both the “unsustainability and business” and “sustainable enterprise” quadrants. As discussed earlier, the language used is similar to that of Meadows et al, Daly and Schumacher. Gladwin’s work also hints at some contradictions, perhaps weaknesses within the Framework. The Panacea Hypothesis, which necessitates organisational growth, does not necessarily sit easily with “logistic growth”. Furthermore, the earlier critique of Gladwin et al’s work as idealistic highlights this as a potential weakness within the Sustainable Enterprise quadrant.

Moving on to Starik and Rands (1995), their model was identified as fundamentally pragmatic, but with some gently radical elements such as references to organisational members’ “spiritually-based values” or to the “substantial change” required to organisational behaviour. Their narrative is thus positioned partially in the Business Case and Ecological Modernisation (EM) sections, but up towards the more radical NEP/high change half of the Framework. However, the contradictions

within Starik and Rands' model also suggest a possible weakness in the Framework – can the “substantial change” they require take place with the Business Case, or Ecological Modernisation?

Young and Tilley's narrative is perhaps more straightforward to link to the Framework. It logically fits to the Sustainable Enterprise quadrant, but with its strong focus on eco-effectiveness, it also resonates with ecological modernisation. However, this highlights the potential conflict within Young and Tilley's model, between “sufficiency” and the growth narrative of EM.

Forum for the Future's model is arguably the most conservative of the four selected, and is thus placed towards the bottom of the Framework. While rooted in the business case, it is strongly of an EM orientation. This suggests that there is potential for both this and Starik and Rands' model to extend the business case into more interesting places.

In summary, this exercise adds to our understanding of both the theoretical framework and the four selected narratives of “sustainable organisation”. In the first instance, placing the models in the context of the framework illustrates how each narrative provides an alternative articulation of the relationship between organisations and sustainable development; alternative both to one another and to the dominant business case perspective. In this range of narratives there may be the potential to extend the scope of what “sustainability” might mean at an organisational level; and perhaps the possibility of some “reconciliation” (Dryzek, 2005) between conflicting discourses. In transcending the business case perspective, these alternative narratives may also offer possibilities for identifying and eventually resolving the challenges and tensions of applying sustainability at an organisational level (Spence and Gray, 2007).

Finally, this is also an opportunity to develop the Framework of Sustainable Business. To the Business as Usual category can be added work such as that of Bansal (2005) and Hart (1995), along with key words and phrases such as “technocentric” and “egocentric organisational orientation”. Furthermore, looking at the managerialist work studied in this chapter, the close links between Business as Usual and the Business Case are even more evident. A more appropriate representation might be therefore to enlarge the business case triangle and stretch it further into the Business as Usual quadrant.

4.9 Some Conclusions

This chapter aimed to review narratives of sustainability at an organisational level, and identify the complexities and challenges therein. Early insight came from the Organisations and the Natural Environment (ONE) field, where it was suggested that the “greening” of organisation studies would require a paradigm shift from the conventional “anthropocentric” management paradigm to a more “ecocentric management paradigm” (Purser et al, 1995). In particular, the work of Gladwin et al (1995) and Starik and Rands (1995) offered narratives of sustainability at an organisational level which engaged with this paradigm debate and challenged conventional management theories.

However, the ONE field has since become increasingly dominated by research on “sustainable” competitive advantage (e.g. Hart, 1995; Shrivastava, 1995), which privileges the organisation over the environment and supports “business as usual” (Starik, 2006; Hahn and Figge, 2011). There has been little engagement with the paradigmatic debate (Hahn et al, 2010) and the field displays a reluctance to ask “important questions beyond managerial/incremental perspectives” (Starik, 2006:433). Narratives of sustainability at an organisational level have correspondingly been reduced in many cases to lists of actions which organisations can take to be more “sustainable” (e.g. Bansal, 2005; Dunphy et al, 2003). The fundamental limitation of these narratives is that, unlike say, Gladwin et al (1995), they do not offer any insight into what organisations *cannot* do; and thus the ONE field provides little information on the complexities and challenges of applying sustainability at an organisational level.

The business as usual, “business case” narrative also dominates in practice, as evidenced by research on organisational communications and managerial perceptions (Milne et al, 2009; Livesey, 2002; O’Dwyer, 2003; Spence and Gray, 2007). With the aid of a growing community of consulting firms and “peak organisations” (Starik and Rands, 1995), this discourse is becoming increasingly hegemonic (Spence, 2007).

However, research on small businesses and “sustainable entrepreneurs” suggests that these organisations may offer alternative narratives of sustainability (Young and Tilley, 2006; Barter and Bebbington, 2010). Furthermore, this work provides some insight into the challenges of

applying sustainability at an organisational level, such as the difficulty of operating in an unsustainable system (Lamberton, 2000; Kearins et al, 2010). It is suggested that the ONE field, which rarely discusses these challenges (Hahn et al, 2010) could benefit from engagement with research on small business and sustainability entrepreneurship; and a re-engagement with the early paradigmatic debate encapsulated by Gladwin et al (1995).

Finally, a word on the “alternative” narratives singled out for in-depth discussion in this chapter³. It is suggested that Gladwin et al (1995), Starik and Rands (1995), Young and Tilley (2006) and Forum for the Future (2005) each offer, to varying degrees, narratives of sustainability at an organisational level which go “beyond” the anodyne models of “sustainable business” proposed in the mainstream managerialist literature; they challenge and in some cases transcend the business case and “business as usual”.

As Fig 4.5 illustrates, the four models proposed are not the “same”. However, what each offers is a level of engagement with the systems-level concerns of sustainable development, with the “future of humanity and the planet” (Milne and Gray, 2013). The models present a range of ideas of how organisations might begin to engage with sustainable development in a substantive way, with the emphasis on “sustainable” rather than “organisation”. Crucially, what these narratives do is pose some searching questions; we are forced us to consider what it is that organisations cannot do, and ultimately, what may need to change if the concepts of “sustainability” and “organisation” are to be brought together.

³ *Note that the focus on these four narratives is not to suggest they are the only models of sustainability at an organisational level worthy of study; they are an illustrative sample selected from the literature in a subjective manner.*

Chapter Five

Research Design

5.1 Introduction

Denzin and Lincoln (2000) define research design as “a flexible set of guidelines that connect theoretical paradigms first to strategies of enquiry and second to methods for collecting empirical material” (2000:22). The preceding four chapters, which introduced the research problem and explored related literature, represent the “theoretical paradigms” phase of the study. The later chapters of the thesis will focus on the findings of the empirical investigation. The purpose of this Research Design chapter, therefore, is to connect the theoretical and empirical phases of the research; to explain why and how particular empirical methods were selected to investigate the research problem.

The chapter begins by exploring the major philosophical assumptions underlying the research, which provide the basis for the research strategy. We consider the significance of these assumptions within the literature on business and sustainable development, and their influence on the current study. The ensuing decision to pursue a qualitative research strategy is then explained.

The second section of the chapter discusses the choice of research methods, outlining why three methods: content analysis, close reading and semi-structured interviews, were selected. Each of these methods is then explained in turn. The chapter closes with a summary of the research design and looks forward to the empirical phase of the thesis.

5.2 The Philosophy of the Social Sciences

Implicit in all social science research is a range of philosophical assumptions regarding the nature of the social world. This includes assumptions around reality, knowledge, human nature, and the purpose and process of research (Burrell and Morgan, 1979). The views of the researcher on these matters are central to research design.

5.2.2 Ontology

Ontological assumptions relate to the nature of social reality (Delanty and Strydom, 2003). The debate here is one of “objectivism” versus “constructionism” (Bryman, 2008). An objectivist position assumes a reality “external to social actors” (Bryman, 2008:18). The social world is “made up of hard, tangible and relatively immutable structures”; it is “as hard and concrete as the natural world” (Burrell and Morgan, 1979:4). This position is consistent with the ontological assumptions inherent in the natural sciences.

The opposing constructionist position proposes that reality is a “social construction”. There is no “external reality” as such, rather “social phenomena and their meanings are continually being accomplished by social actors” (Bryman, 2008:19). Reality is subjective, the “product of individual consciousness (Burrell and Morgan, 1979:1). A feature of constructionism is a concern with how language is used to create “shared meaning” (Wetherell et al, 2001).

These two positions are not, however, consistently in “binary opposition” (Willmott, 1990:48). Many researchers incorporate elements of each argument (Bryman, 2008). For example, we saw in Chapter Two that a number of authors (e.g. Hajer, 1995; Dryzek, 1997, 2005) conceptualise sustainable development as a discourse, an approach consistent with a constructionist position. But, as Hajer (1995) explains, the emphasis on discourse does not imply a denial of the existence of environment and nature “out there”, it merely reflects that our understanding of such is “mediated through an ensemble of specific discursive practices” (1995:17). Or as Dryzek (1997) states:

“Just because something is socially interpreted does not mean it is unreal. Pollution does cause illness, species do become extinct... But people can make very different things of these phenomena” (Dryzek, 1997:10)

Gray (2010) provides further insight. Although stressing that there are multiple “narratives” of sustainability, the author suggests that the concept is “not exclusively a discourse structure”. Gray argues that while “we can presuppose a form of truth which predates the language... it is through that language that those forms of truth are negotiated” (2010:55).

The observations of these authors illustrate the importance of ontological considerations to sustainable development research. While information on environmental and social problems is compiled through the objectivist frame of natural science, it is suggested that interpretation is largely in the form of shared meaning constructed through discourse (Dresner, 2008). This indicates that the topic may perhaps require a balancing of objectivist and constructionist assumptions, “a practical fusion of subjectivity and objectivity” (Willmott, 1990:56).

5.2.3 Epistemology

Epistemology concerns assumptions around the nature of knowledge and what is “acceptable knowledge in a discipline” (Bryman, 2008:13). Debate on epistemology is broadly characterized by the contrast between “positivism” and “interpretivism” (Bryman, 2008). Positivist epistemology, the natural science approach, assumes that knowledge is generated through developing and verifying/falsifying hypotheses to “explain and predict what happens in the social world” (Burrell and Morgan, 1979:5). Here, the researcher is an objective, scientific “observer”.

The term “interpretivism” essentially refers to an “anti-positivist” epistemological stance (Bryman, 2008; Burrell and Morgan, 1979). Critics of a positivist approach to social science suggest that the research subject i.e. humanity, is fundamentally different to that of natural science, and thus requires an alternative epistemology. Interpretivists take the view that, rather than being an external observer, researchers must seek to “understand from the inside rather than the outside” (Burrell and Morgan, 1979:5). The social world “can only be understood from the point of view of the individuals who are directly involved in the activities which are to be studied” (Burrell and Morgan, 1979:5).

An important point in relation to interpretivism is the subjectivity of the researcher. As Bryman (2008) notes, “the researcher is providing an interpretation of others’ interpretations” (2008:17). Furthermore, “the researcher’s interpretations have to be further interpreted in terms of the concepts, theories, and literature of a discipline” (2008:17). Here, the concept of “reflexivity”, the ability of the researcher to be “self-reflective”, and to acknowledge their values, biases and assumptions, is key (Bryman, 2008:25).

Reflexivity highlights the “role of the researcher as part and parcel of the construction of knowledge” (Bryman, 2008:682). Postmodernists use the concept to argue that, as all “knowledge” generated through research is based on the researcher’s interpretations, perhaps we can never really “know anything” (Bryman, 2008:680). Some postmodernists therefore focus on the language used to construct such claims to knowledge. It is suggested that such reasoning prompted the “linguistic turn” in the social sciences, reflected in the growing use of language-focused research methods such as discourse analysis (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2000).

The linguistic turn is evident in the sustainable development literature in work such as, again, Dryzek (1997, 2005) and Hajer (1995), and in particular, the discourse analyses of Milne (e.g. Milne et al, 2009; Tregidga and Milne, 2006) and Livesey (e.g. Livesey, 2002; Livesey and Kearns, 2002). This work focuses on the usage and meaning of language in organisations’ stand-alone reports; the epistemological stance taken is that these “accounts of sustainability...both communicate and construct reality” (Gray, 2010:48). For instance, Milne et al (2009) suggest that “meaning is not fixed but constituted through language, through words and images” (2009:1220), while Livesey (2002) characterises language as a practice of “signifying the world, constituting and constructing the world in meaning” (2002:319).

5.2.4 Methodology

Burrell and Morgan (1979) define methodology as “the way in which one attempts to investigate and obtain ‘knowledge’ about the social world” (1979:2). The authors distinguish between objectivist “nomothetic” methodology, characterised by a “search for universal laws” (1979:2), and “ideographic” methodology, which focuses on “getting close to one’s subject” (1979:6).

These contrasting methodological standpoints reflect the ontological and epistemological dichotomies explained above. Nomothetic methodology is associated with objectivism and positivism, and ideographic methodology with constructionism and interpretivism (Burrell and

Morgan, 1979)⁴. Methodological assumptions in turn guide the researcher's choice of "research strategy", a decision often positioned as a choice between "quantitative" and "qualitative" research (Bryman, 2008:21).

Quantitative research "emphasizes quantification in the collection and analysis of data" (Bryman, 2008:22). It reflects the positivist, natural science model and focuses on the testing of hypotheses. An example of such a research strategy is the extensive work on the relationship between CSR and financial performance, the "business case" (e.g. Orlitzky et al, 2003; Barnett, 2007). For instance, take Schreck's 2011 study, where the author sets out to investigate the "relationship between corporate social and financial performance" (2011:167). As is typical in the field, Schreck takes an objective ontological position; "corporate social and financial performance" are assumed to be tangible, measurable research constructs. There is no discussion around the potential ambiguity of these terms (e.g. see Banarjee, 2008). Naturally, the epistemological position which follows is to assume that knowledge about the "relationship" between these constructs can be gained by generating and testing hypotheses. The logical product of these assumptions is a highly quantitative study, concluding with recommendations for yet more quantitative research.

Qualitative research, in turn, "emphasizes words rather than quantification in the collection and analysis of data" (Bryman, 2008:22). Reality is socially constructed and epistemology interpretivist, with an emphasis often on language. Illustration is offered by a body of work (e.g. Prasad and Elmes, 2005; Newton and Harte, 1997) which explores the nuances of discourse around business and the environment. For example, Livesey (2001) examines Shell's role in the "discursive struggle...around what the proper relationship among corporations, communities, and nature should be" (2001:59). For Livesey, reality is largely socially constructed; sustainable development is a complex notion which "allows for the play of contradictory, fragmentary, and ambiguous meanings" (2001:82). Epistemologically, the focus is on how and why Shell and other actors use the language they do, within the broader social context. These underlying assumptions lead to a qualitative discourse analysis of the public utterances of Shell and its critics, with conclusions contextualized through existing theory.

⁴ *It is noted that the implied positivistic/quantitative and interpretive/qualitative dichotomy is not always so stark i.e. York et al (2003), Cho et al (2011).*

There are of course myriad ontological, epistemological and methodological positions between Schreck and Livesey. The aim of drawing attention to these contrasting studies is to illustrate how the researcher's philosophical assumptions can lead to entirely different research strategies towards the same topic i.e. business and sustainable development; and ultimately provide very different insight on the research problem.

5.3 Organisation Studies

Debates on ontological, epistemological and methodological issues are prominent in the organisation studies field (e.g. Knights, 1992; Morgan and Smircich, 1980; Alvesson and Karreman, 2000). Particularly influential has been the "pathfinding" work of Burrell and Morgan (1979) (Alvesson and Willmott, 1996).

Burrell and Morgan explored the major philosophical assumptions and their implications, from which they drew four distinct research paradigms (see Fig. 5.1). The authors argued that the organisation studies field was largely locked into one of these paradigms, the "functionalist" approach to research. Burrell and Morgan suggested that work within this paradigm was "narrowly founded" and grounded in "managerialism", its dominance ensuring that "the really big issues are rarely discussed" (1979:120).

The four paradigm framework proposed by Burrell and Morgan is illustrated below. Along with their "subjective-objective" continuum, which relates to assumptions about the nature of social science, the authors propose a second axis, reflecting researchers' assumptions around the nature of society. Here the contrast is between the "sociology of regulation" and the "sociology of radical change". Burrell and Morgan suggest that researchers focused on the former seek to "provide explanations of society" (1979:17), they are concerned with the "status quo". Researchers concerned with the sociology of radical change, however, seek explanations for "radical change, deep-seated structural conflict, modes of domination and structural contradiction". Rather than accept the status quo, they look for "alternatives" (1979:17).

THE SOCIOLOGY OF RADICAL CHANGE

	Radical humanist	Radical structuralist	
SUBJECTIVE			OBJECTIVE
	Interpretive	Functionalist	
	THE SOCIOLOGY OF REGULATION		

*Fig 5.1: Classification matrix for the analysis of social theory
(adapted from Burrell and Morgan, 1979)*

At the heart of Burrell and Morgan’s thesis is a critique of the functionalist paradigm. They argue that such research is fundamentally limited; it suffers from a “managerial bias”, which is so integral to the paradigm that “many theorists are not conscious of being biased one way or another” (1979:220). The authors position their “radical humanist” paradigm as a foil to the “dominant orthodoxy” of functionalism, focusing in particular on the potential for critical theory to radicalize organisation studies.

Burrell and Morgan’s call for engagement with critical theory was answered in the ensuing years through increasing interest in “critical management studies” (CMS). Fournier and Grey (2000) define CMS as research which aims to “unmask the power relations around which social and organizational life are woven” (2000:19). Characteristic of the field is constructionist ontology (Fournier and Grey, 2000) and a focus on language and discourse (Alvesson and Karreman, 2000). A further feature of CMS is a strong sense of reflexivity, and perhaps inevitably, a preoccupation with postmodernism (Fournier and Grey, 2000). The latter leanings, however, have led critics of

CMS to accuse it of privileging the “obscure intellectualism” of critique over pragmatic engagement with management (Fournier and Grey, 2000).

5.3.1 Organisations and the Natural Environment

Burrell and Morgan’s critique of the “pragmatic”, “conservative” functionalist paradigm is particularly relevant in the context of the literature on business and sustainable development. We have seen that there is also a “dominant orthodoxy” in the Organisations and the Natural Environment (ONE) field. Here, the dominance of the business case, characterized by a discourse of “pragmatism” (Prasad and Elmes, 2005) and “managerialism” (Gray and Bebbington, 2000), brings to mind the functionalist bias in the wider organisation studies field.

In Chapter Four we saw that Welford (1998) criticized the literature on business and sustainable development as legitimising “business as usual”. The author goes on to use Burrell and Morgan’s (1979) work to support his argument. Welford suggests that research on “business and the environment” is largely rooted in the interpretivist and (particularly) positivist traditions, with no ambition to bring about the “radical change in the way business is conducted” which he believes is required for sustainable development (1998:7). Welford cites “eco-modernism” and “research paper after research paper on environmental management systems or eco-efficiency” as examples of such limited research which serves only to “reinforce the status quo” (1998:8). His prescription is to apply critical theory to the study of organisations and the environment.

While later literature suggests that Welford’s call has not received a resounding answer (e.g. Ahlstrom et al, 2009), there is a small body of critical ONE research. Newton (2009) provides a review of the related literature. He argues that the field is generally “characterized by a lack of critical awareness” and cites the early ecocentric management work (e.g. Gladwin et al, 1995; Purser et al, 1995) as “the closest thing to a critical agenda” within ONE research (Newton, 2009:127).

As discussed in Chapter Four, however, work such as that of Gladwin et al (1995) and Purser et al (1995) was criticised by Newton (2002) as idealistic, lacking a “practical program” for

transformation. Pragmatism was supplied elsewhere, for example by Starik and Rands (1995), but critical authors argued that this came at the expense of the radicalism required to transcend business as usual (e.g. Prasad and Elmes, 2005). As in the debate within CMS (e.g. Fournier and Grey, 2000), the implication is that ONE researchers are caught between the inherent pragmatism of the study of organisations, and indeed sustainable development, and the need for radical critique of existing, unsustainable, structures.

This discussion brings to mind strongly the insights of Gray (2002a) and Tinker and Gray (2003) explored in the previous chapter. It was argued that pragmatic engagement with practice, “informed by critical perspectives” (Brown and Fraser, 2006) was the route forward (Gray, 2002a). The suggestion is that research on business and sustainable development could benefit from a sort of critical pragmatism (Alvesson and Deetz, 2000:20), or as Gray (2010) puts it, researchers need to “move forward embracing an emancipatory notion of doubt” (2010:55).

5.4 Assumptions in the Current Study

This study takes a lead from the ontological and epistemological insights of Dryzek (2005), Hajer (1995) and Gray (2010). In the first instance, the view is taken in that the problems of sustainable development, such as, for example, poverty or climate change, are “real” in an objective sense (Dryzek, 2005); they are truths which we can “know” in a traditional positivist sense (Gray, 2010).

However, we have seen that sustainable development is a complex, ill-defined concept (e.g. Dresner, 2008); the term encompasses a range of discourses constructed and manipulated by interested political actors (Dryzek, 2005; Hajer, 1995). In particular, business organisations have constructed a self-serving discourse of win-win eco-modernism which increasingly dominates political discussion on sustainable development (Levy and Egan, 2003; Banarjee, 2003).

It is suggested that through these discourses, social actors e.g. individuals in organisations, seek to construct their understandings, their “realities” of sustainable development (Gray, 2010). In developing these discourses, through talking and writing about sustainability, they and their readers and listeners come to “know” sustainability (Milne et al, 2009). Accounts of sustainability,

both written and spoken, produced by organisations therefore “both communicate and construct reality” (Gray, 2010). Thus, the view is taken in the current study that studying these “accounts” can provide insight into the relationship between business organisations and sustainable development.

The ontological and epistemological assumptions outlined here are largely consistent with the constructionist and interpretivist positions respectively. Remembering Burrell and Morgan’s (1979) framework, the leaning towards the sociology of radical change implied by an interest in sustainable development, and the concern with the hegemony of the business case, are suggestive of an engagement with critical theory. However, a sense of the “reality” of the exigencies of sustainability, as discussed above, leads to the belief that the topic must be studied, and engagement with practice, in some sense or other, encouraged (Welford, 1998; Gray, 2002).

The current study is thus informed by a sense of “reflexive pragmatism” (Alvesson, 2003). Here, the researcher aims to achieve a balance between pragmatism and critique, between “producing interpretations and challenging them” (Alvesson, 2003:14). While it is pragmatically assumed that the current study can generate knowledge of the relationship between business organisations and sustainable development, and that this can further a level of engagement with practice, the development of any “knowledge” is approached reflexively.

Such an approach requires an acute awareness of the subjectivity of the researcher, and consideration of the multiple levels of interpretation involved in the development of knowledge (Bryman, 2008). The study thus proceeds on this basis; during the empirical work the motivations of the creator of the source data, the possibility of multiple interpretations of the data, the relationship of text to practice and language to meaning, are all carefully considered (Krippendorff, 2004; Alvesson and Karreman, 2000). Overall, the aim is that “serious attention is paid to the way different kinds of linguistic, social, political and theoretical elements are woven together in the knowledge development process” (Alvesson and Skollberg, 2000:5).

Finally, key to reflexivity is an acknowledgement of the researcher’s “background theory and values” (Wetherell, 2001:397). Ultimately, this research is motivated by my concerns around social injustice and environmental degradation, and the role of business organisations therein (e.g.

Bakan, 2004; Beder, 2002); and also inspired by the alternative visions of such as Schumacher (1973) and Daly (1996). As intimated in Chapter One, I believe that it is imperative that business organisations engage with and ultimately support sustainable development, and therefore I wish to investigate the possibilities of and barriers to such an idea.

5.5 Research Strategy

The constructionist and interpretivist views outlined above are associated with ideographic methodology and lead naturally to the pursuit of a qualitative research strategy (Burrell and Morgan, 1979). Qualitative researchers “turn the world into a series of representations”, through which they come to “know” something about the research topic (Denzin and Lincoln, 2003:3). Qualitative research generally proceeds in a largely “inductive” manner, moving from research questions to data collection to interpretation and theory development (Bryman, 2008).

A key advantage of qualitative research is that it allows the researcher to “see through the eyes of the people studied” (Bryman, 2008:385). Denzin and Lincoln (2000) suggest that this immersion enables qualitative researchers to “confront and come up against the constraints of the everyday social world” (2000:10). Qualitative research also facilitates the gathering of rich, descriptive data and encourages a reflexive engagement with the research process (Bryman, 2008).

However, a major concern for qualitative researchers relates to evaluating the quality of the research. The primary criteria used to evaluate quantitative research are “reliability” and “validity”. Reliability can be most simply explained as the extent to which “another researcher can replicate your study and come up with similar findings” (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2008:292). Validity refers broadly to “the integrity of the conclusions that are generated from a piece of research” (Bryman, 2008:32). Quantitative researchers suggest that qualitative research often fails to satisfy these criteria, lacking in “replicability” and “generalisability” (Bryman, 2008).

Qualitative researchers have argued, however, that their research would be more appropriately assessed using alternative criteria. Lincoln and Guba (1985) propose the concept of “trustworthiness”, comprising “credibility”, “transferability”, “dependability” and

“confirmability”. Suggested techniques to enhance these criteria include transparency in explaining method, grounding the findings in the literature, seeking relevant peer review and adopting a reflexive stance (Bryman, 2008; Krippendorff, 2009; Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2008). In addition, researchers are advised to consider “triangulation”, the technique of “using more than one method or source of data in the study of social phenomena” (Bryman, 2008:279).

5.6 Choice of Method

Typical qualitative research methods include interviews, case studies, ethnography, qualitative document analysis etc. Along with the ontological, epistemological and methodological concerns we have explored, selection of research method is further guided by practical considerations, existing theory and literature, the researcher’s values and biases, and consideration of the evaluative criteria discussed above (Bryman, 2008).

The existing literature has highlighted the contested nature of the term “sustainable development” and the role played by language in constructing multiple “realities” thereof (e.g. Dryzek, 2005; Hajer, 1995; Banarjee, 2008). Epistemologically, the view is taken in the current study that organisations construct realities of sustainable development through written and spoken accounts of the topic; and analysis of such accounts may offer insight therein. Within the literature on business and sustainable development, a stream of research uses various forms of discourse analysis to illustrate how organisations use their public documents to promote a self-serving “business case” for sustainability (e.g. Milne et al, 2009; Livesey, 2002).

The pragmatic orientation of the current study encourages a degree of engagement with practice. Much of the research on sustainable entrepreneurship is of a practical nature, taking a case study approach to understanding the issues faced by organisations (e.g. Young and Tilley, 2006; Kearins et al, 2010). Interview research has also provided insight on the conflicts and constraints of applying sustainability at an organisational level (e.g. O’Dwyer, 2003; Crane, 2000; Barter and Bebbington, 2010)

The prior literature thus points towards document analysis, case studies and interviews as potentially appropriate research methods. Epistemological and ontological inclinations support the suitability of a focus on the construction of discourse and a reflexive engagement with practice. The evaluative criteria discussed above suggest that triangulation – using more than one method – could enhance the “trustworthiness” (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) of the research findings.

Practical considerations now become relevant. As outlined in Chapter One, it was aimed to study a range of different types of organisation, thus requiring a sample size of more than one organisation, and ideally at least four or five. However, due to time constraints, it would only have been possible to complete an in-depth case study, such as those conducted by Kearins et al (2010) or Young and Tilley (2006), on one organisation, meaning that “different types” of organisation could not have been analysed. This made document analysis and interviews, which allow for a larger sample size, more appropriate alternatives to case studies. In addition, these methods, particularly document analysis, allowed for relatively easy access to data.

A further issue is that of researcher biases and values. I was interested in talking to individuals in organisations and in exploring the construction of the conflicting discourses of sustainable development. Ultimately, all of these factors combined to lead to the selection of public utterances analysis and semi-structured interviews as the research methods.

5.7 Research Methods

This section of the chapter considers each of the selected research methods in turn, offering a brief explanation of the method, the rationale behind its selection and its limitations. The analysis of public utterances incorporated two techniques, content analysis and close reading, while the primary piece of empirical work was in the form of in depth, semi-structured interviews.

5.7.1 Public Utterances Analysis

Analysis of publicly available corporate “utterances”, such as annual reports or websites, is a commonly used qualitative method (Bryman, 2008). Key advantages of such analysis are easy access to data and the possibility of relatively large sample sizes (Burnham et al, 2008). The researcher must take into account, however, that the writers of corporate documents are “likely to have a particular point of view that they want to get across” (Bryman, 2008:522).

Analysis of stand-alone reports e.g. CSR or Sustainability Reports, has proved a popular method in the social and environmental accounting field (Gray, 2002b). In particular, there is a rich literature which uses “content analysis”, often quantitatively, to explore the extent of corporate environmental and social disclosure (Thomson, 2007).

Another stream of literature, however, focuses on qualitative analysis, suggesting that stand-alone reports can provide a “‘keyhole’ through which to provide insights into [the sample] organization’s conception of sustainable development” (Tregidga and Milne, 2006:220). This work often employs a “discourse analysis” method (e.g. Livesey, 2001; Milne et al, 2009), or in some cases, what Ferguson (2007) describes as “close critical reading”.

Why Two Methods

It was decided to use two methods to analyse corporate public utterances: “content analysis” and “close reading”. It was intended that the methods would be complementary, each providing distinct insight on the research problem but combining to promote a deeper understanding.

In line with the reflexive approach outlined earlier, the close reading would allow exploration of metaphor, rhetoric, language use and context (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2000). Analysing the public utterances in this way would enable engagement with the “adversarial”, almost critical perspective advocated by Welford (1998) and Gray (2010).

However, as discussed, this study is also pragmatically oriented. Key to the research is an exploration of sustainability at an organisational level, a consideration of the possibilities by which the concepts of “sustainability” and “organisation” might be brought together, and of the barriers to “sustainable enterprise”. In Chapter Four these issues were analysed in a largely pragmatic, almost functionalist way, through identification and discussion of narratives of sustainability at an organisational level. In particular, four narratives were highlighted which it was suggested go “beyond the business case” (Hahn et al, 2010) and offer ideas of “sustainable organisation” which engage with the system-level concerns of sustainable development. These narratives were drawn from the work of Gladwin et al (1995), Starik and Rands (1995), Young and Tilley (2006) and Forum for the Future (2005).

It was noted that key to the value of these narratives was that some of the elements therein would likely be problematic for organisations to address, such as, for example, “population size – stabilize soon” (Gladwin et al, 1995) or “sufficiency” (Young and Tilley, 2006). Thus, it was suggested that the narratives could potentially provide insight into what organisations *cannot* do, into the challenges of applying sustainability at an organisational level, and the barriers to “sustainable enterprise”.

Based on this premise, it was decided that these models, when refined and combined, could be developed into a research instrument, which could then be used to conduct qualitative content analysis of corporate public utterances. In this way, these selected academic narratives of sustainability at an organisational level could be compared to corporate narratives of sustainability, with a view to identifying similarities (what organisations perhaps *can* “do”) and the differences (what organisations “do not” and perhaps *cannot* “do”). Thus it was decided that content analysis would be an appropriate and effective method of addressing the research objectives in a pragmatic way.

5.7.2 Content Analysis

Milne and Adler (1999) explain that content analysis involves “codifying the text (or content) of a piece of writing into various groups (or categories) depending on selected criteria” (1999:237).

Content analysis is useful as an unobtrusive method of data collection which often lends itself to a large sample size (Krippendorff, 2004). Furthermore, as it is often easily replicable it can be an extremely reliable method (Burnham et al, 2008).

In the social and environmental accounting field, content analysis is most often employed as a quantitative technique (Gray et al, 1995b). However, Krippendorff (2004) argues the case for qualitative content analysis, suggesting that “ultimately, all reading of texts is qualitative” (2004:16) and that qualitative analysis may be more “context-sensitive”. Smith and Taffler (2000) in turn compare “meaning-oriented” content analysis, where the focus is on “analysis of the underlying themes in the texts under investigation”, favourably with the more quantitative “form-orientated” analysis (2000:627).

For the purposes of the current study, a qualitative approach to content analysis is deemed appropriate. Discussing methodology in social and environmental accounting research, Gray (2002b) highlights the “messy” nature of the research problem, suggesting that, rather than “precise and formulaic testing procedures”, it is more suited to qualitative analysis. The primary purpose of the content analysis is to compare academic narratives of sustainability with corporate ones. As Chapter Four revealed, these narratives are often ambiguous and contradictory, characteristics which make them intriguing to explore empirically but unsuited to precise quantitative analysis.

The content analysis is particularly useful to this study as it facilitates a comparison between academic and corporate “realities” of sustainable development. Academic narratives, such as Young and Tilley (2006) or Gladwin et al (1995), offer us a picture of what sustainability at an organisational level ostensibly “should” look like, while the public utterances provide a vision of what (individuals in) organisations believe it should look like. Are these narratives the same, slightly different or fundamentally contradictory? The content analysis allows us to identify the inconsistencies, and indeed consistencies, between these alternative realities, perhaps offering some insight as to how and why they diverge or converge. In addition, from a more critical perspective, it also allows us to ask the question: if organisations are pursuing something which does not at all resemble the academic interpretations of a “sustainable organisation”, what is it that they are pursuing and what are the implications thereof?

Furthermore, it is suggested that the development of the research instrument for the content analysis is a valuable exercise in itself. As Chapter Four endeavoured to demonstrate, narratives of sustainability at an organisational level which engage with a wider, systems-level conception of sustainable development, with the paradigm debate and the “contested middle ground” (see Chapter Two) are quite rare in the management literature. There are few attempts to develop a picture of what a “sustainable organisation” might look like where “sustainable” means anything more than “sustaining the corporation” (Banarjee, 2008). In bringing the four selected narratives (Gladwin et al, 1995; Starik and Rands, 1995; Young and Tilley, 2006; Forum for the Future, 2005) together in the form of a research instrument, a detailed, albeit rather messy, idea of “sustainable organisation”, beyond limited managerialist models, is created.

In addition, and of no little significance, it is noted that all of these narratives bring slightly different theories of “sustainability” to the picture. Forum for the Future’s (2005), for example, focuses on the tools of ecological modernisation, Starik and Rands (1995) incorporate concerns around consumption and population, Gladwin et al (1995) echo Dryzek’s (2005) Green Romantics, while Young and Tilley (2006) focus on small socially and environmentally-focused enterprises (see Schumacher, 1973 or Dauncey, 1989). The alternative and sometimes competing discourses of these narratives allow us to explore conflict, tension and perhaps potential “reconciliation” (Dryzek, 2005) within the sustainability-organisation relationship.

Finally, as illustrated by Fig 4.5, these narratives have been selected in the context of the study’s chief theoretical heuristic, the Framework of Sustainable Business (Fig.3.2). Using the four models for the content analysis thus allows for exploration and development of the theoretical framework through the results of the analysis.

Limitations of the Method

Burnham et al (2008) stress the subjective nature of qualitative content analysis, where the importance of the content “relies heavily on the judgement and expertise of the researcher” (2008:259). As Smith and Taffler (2000) note, “researcher bias cannot be avoided” (2000:637).

This makes validity a key concern. Krippendorff (2004) highlights here the role of the “analytical construct”, which he defines as follows:

“Analytical constructs operationalise what the content analyst knows about the context, specifically the network of correlations that are assumed to explain how available texts are connected to the possible answers to the analyst’s questions” (Krippendorff, 2004:36)

The author suggests a number of techniques by which to enhance the validity of the analytical construct. For instance, he advocates “operationalising available knowledge” through consulting “available theory, literature or acknowledged experts” (2004:90) and refining the construct during pilot analysis so that it develops into a “best fit”. As mentioned above, and as Chapter Six will explain, the analytical construct used for this study is a research instrument which combines several academic models of sustainability at an organisational level. When developing this instrument, Krippendorff’s advice was followed and it was refined through pilot analysis, peer review and expert critique.

Finally, Krippendorff (2004) suggests that “replicability is the most important form of reliability” (2004:18) and stresses the importance of making the analysis process clear and traceable. Such “dependability” (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) is pursued through explication of the context, detailed explanation of the data collection and analysis process (see Chapter Six), and the adoption of a reflexive approach.

5.7.3 Close Reading

“Close reading” was selected as a suitable method to facilitate “adversarial” analysis of corporate narratives of sustainable development. Craig and Amernic (2009) explain the process of close reading as follows:

“Our close readings entail several examinations of text to identify and interpret the metaphors, ideology and rhetoric deployed. The purpose of the readings is to increase comprehension by

unlocking how the underlying narrative may influence perceptions and help us to understand how information is privileged or marginalized” (Craig and Amernic, 2009:76)

This approach, which focuses on the multiple roles and meanings of language, is closely related to discourse analysis, loosely defined as the “structured investigation” of “systems of texts [discourse] and the concepts, objects and subjects that they constitute” (Hardy and Phillips, 1999:2).

With the linguistic turn, discourse analysis has become increasingly popular in organisation studies research (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2000), particularly among critical scholars (Fairclough, 2005). It is suggested that discourse analysis “illuminates the dominant ideas and identifies those who legitimise these ideas” (Burnham et al, 2008:257). In the business and sustainability literature, we have seen that the method has been used to this effect in the research of Milne et al (2006, 2009), Livesey (2001, 2002) etc.

Chapter Two revealed that sustainable development is interpreted in many different ways through a range of conflicting discourses; with certain discourses, such as ecological modernisation and particularly the business case, becoming increasingly dominant. This suggests what Hardy and Phillips (1999) refer to as a “dialogical struggle (or struggles), as reflected in the privileging of a particular discourse and the marginalisation of others” (1999:3). Livesey (2002) pursues this angle, identifying the “sociopolitical discursive struggle over environment and social justice” (2002:314) and investigating Shell’s involvement therein. Both of these studies illustrate the value of discourse analysis of public utterances in exploring the nuances of discursive struggle. In particular, the conclusions of Livesey (2002) resonate with this study’s search for “alternative” narratives of sustainability at an organisational level:

“Contradiction and ambiguity, which emerge as discourses overlap and intersect in a complex and unstable field, allow spaces for resistance and change and for new ways of imagining reality” (Livesey, 2002:319)

This chapter has stressed the importance of a reflexive approach to the research. Discussing techniques for reflexivity, Alvesson and Deetz (2000) write that it is essential that the researcher

consider “the metaphorical and contextual nature of language” (2000:117) and take into account the “wider institutional and ideological issues which shape society and social relations” (2000:131). Its focus on language character, context and multiple levels of interpretation, makes the close reading method ideal for a reflexive approach.

Limitations of the Method

A consistent criticism of discourse analysis methods is that “there are no firm guidelines about how such research should be carried out”, and consequently, “it leaves considerable discretion to the researcher who is responsible for ensuring that the analysis is rigorous, systematic and convincing” (Burnham et al, 2008:248). This raises significant concerns around reliability. Useful here, however, is the framework proposed by Phillips and Hardy (2002), which encourages greater precision by distinguishing between four types of discourse analysis:

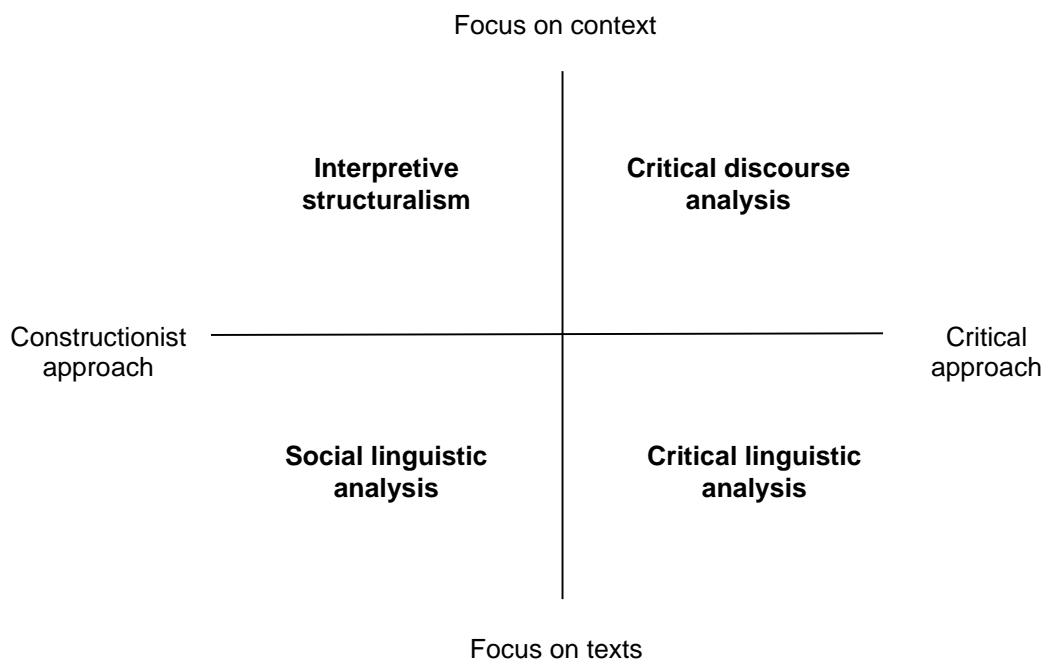


Fig. 5.2: Types of discourse analysis (Phillips and Hardy, 2002:20)

It is helpful to consider the above figure in the context of the selected methodological approach of reflexive pragmatism. Reflexivity suggests a focus on “context” (Krippendorff, 2004) rather than texts, while pragmatism points slightly more towards a constructionist rather than a critical

perspective. It is suggested therefore that “interpretive structuralism” is an appropriate approach for the current study. Using this approach, the close reading seeks to focus on “the social context and the discourses that support it” (Burnham et al, 2008:253). It is also relevant that Tregidga and Milne (2006) used the interpretive structuralist approach to investigate the construction of sustainable development narratives through stand-alone reports. Their “interpretive textual analysis” involved several careful readings to identify “significant features of the texts and differences between them” and “influential contextual factors” (Tregidga and Milne, 2006:225).

The second major issue for the close reading analysis is validity. Particularly pertinent here are the concerns of Alvesson and Karreman (2000), who ask “how can one know that the statement A truthfully represents the thing T?” (2000:137). These authors caution researchers against “mirror logic”, wherein it is simply assumed that “language mirrors social reality”, ignoring the possibility that “people may use different words to refer to the same thing, and they may produce similar accounts when referring to different experienced realities” (Alvesson and Karreman, 2000:138).

Again, taking a reflexive approach is the proposed solution. Alvesson and Karreman (2000) suggest that researchers must think carefully about the motivations of the author, cultivating an “understanding of language users as socially situated, discursively constituted, sensitive, and responsive to dominant cultural norms, social rules, and available scripts for talk” (2000:154). Ferguson (2007) also counsels reflexivity, advising that researchers consider “how these texts are interpreted by the individuals who encounter them in their everyday lives” and take into account the “social-historical contexts of text production, transmission and reception” (2007:913-4).

Finally, Alvesson and Karreman (2000b) warn discourse analysts against “linguistic reductionism”, or a “narrow focus on the details of language use” (2000b:1145). The possibility that this might affect the current study, however, is mitigated by the pragmatic thrust of the research and the triangulation of the close reading with the interview and content analysis methods.

5.7.4 Semi-structured Interviews

Bryman (2008) describes a semi-structured interview as one where “the interviewer has a series of questions that are in the general form of an interview schedule, but is able to vary the sequence of questions” (2008:196). The main purpose of such interviews is to “understand the meanings interviewees attach to issues and situations” (Easterby-Smith et al, 1991:73). Semi-structured interviews have been used by several authors to gain insight into the relationship between business organisations and sustainable development (e.g. Barter and Bebbington, 2010; O’Dwyer, 2003), with a number engaging with the issues from a critical perspective (e.g. Spence, 2007; Banarjee, 2001).

It is suggested that conducting interviews can serve to “develop an understanding of the respondent’s world so that the researcher might influence it” (Easterby-Smith et al, 1991:74). As Burnham et al (2008) note, “elite” interviewing in particular offers the potential for constructive engagement with practice, bringing the “practitioner and the academic together in a hopefully fruitful mutual dialogue” (2008:247). In depth interviews with managers in organisations therefore appeals to the pragmatic inclination of the current study, aiming to contribute to the “difficult fieldwork” required for productive engagement with practice (Gray, 2002a).

An advantage of the semi-structured approach in particular is that the loose structure “empowers respondents” (Spence, 2007:862), allowing the researcher to access the participant’s point of view, as is key to interpretivist research (Burnham et al, 2008). Furthermore, through engaging the interviewee in a “loosely guided conversation” (O’Dwyer, 2003:529), a semi-structured interview allows the researcher to be flexible; free to explore any unexpected issues or contradictions which emerge during the course of the interview (Bryman, 2008). The method thus lends itself to the current study, wherein it is hoped, as we have seen, to explore the conflicts and tensions of the business-sustainability relationship.

Limitations of the Method

A key concern in relation to qualitative interviews is the subjective nature of the technique and the role of researcher bias (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009). Fontana and Frey (2000) write that

“interviews are not neutral tools of data gathering but active interactions between two (or more) people leading to negotiated, contextually based results” (2000:646). A semi-structured interview is fundamentally a “conversation” (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009), shaped by the specific perspectives of the researcher and the participant (Warren, 2001). It is imperative to consider the “tremendous, if unspoken, influence of the researcher as author” (Fontana and Frey, 2000:661).

This brings us back once again to reflexivity. Alvesson (2003) outlines a reflexive but pragmatic approach to interviewing, suggesting that the researcher should consider a number of possible interpretations of the interview e.g. the interview as “impression management” or “a play of the powers of discourse” (2003:21-23). Techniques for applying this approach during the interview include asking the interviewee to explain a concept in simple terms as opposed to jargon, or framing the research in different ways when explaining it (Alvesson, 2003:28). At the data interpretation stage, it is suggested that the researcher consider a range of theoretical perspectives (Alvesson, 2003) and take into account “the metaphorical and contextual nature of language” (Alvesson and Deetz, 2000:117).

A further issue for interview researchers is that of evaluating the “quality” of the research (Cassell, 2009). Typical critiques are that interview data is lacking in terms of reliability and generalisability (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009; Bryman, 2008). Given that time constraints preclude a large sample size, the latter criterion is a real concern for the current study. However, it is noted at this point that, in common with much qualitative research, this study makes no claims to theoretical generalisability. Rather than claiming that the research findings can be generalised to the entire population, they represent “one of a number of possible representations... of social reality” (Bryman, 2008:383).

In relation to reliability and validity, insight is offered by returning to Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) concept of “trustworthiness”. The authors stress the importance of “dependability”, whereby the researcher keeps a detailed, easily traceable record of the research process, to allow the possibility of replicability. Lincoln and Guba also recommend “respondent validation”, where the researcher “provides the people on whom he or she has conducted research with an account of his or her findings” (Bryman, 2008:377), and triangulation. All of these techniques were adopted in the current study to mitigate the limitations of the interview method.

5.8 Conclusion

The aim of this study is to explore the possible role of business organisations in sustainable development. The topic is approached from a broadly constructionist ontological position, whereby it is assumed that, although the problems of sustainable development are “real”, the concept itself is socially constructed (e.g. Hajer, 1995; Dryzek, 2005). Epistemologically, an interpretivist stance is taken, characterised by a focus on the role of language in constructing realities of sustainable development. The assumption is made that through both written and spoken accounts of sustainability, organisations both “communicate and construct reality” (Gray, 2010); and “knowledge” on the relationship between business organisations and sustainable development can be furthered by studying these accounts.

This chapter revealed ontological and epistemological concerns to be particularly relevant to research on business and sustainable development. Drawing from the work of Burrell and Morgan (1979), Welford (1998) argued that the Organisations and the Natural Environment (ONE) field is rooted in the managerialist functionalist paradigm, and researchers must endeavour to engage with an “adversarial”, critical perspective. However, critical management studies has been accused of “obscure intellectualism” (Fournier and Grey, 2000), a concern particularly relevant in the context of the exigencies of sustainability. It is suggested by some authors that critique must be balanced with a level of pragmatism (Brown and Fraser, 2006); researchers must make some concessions to managerialism, and engage with practice in order to avoid “fiddling while Rome burns” (Gray, 2002).

It is the cultivation of this balance, between critique and pragmatism, which characterises the methodological position of the current study. The research is informed by a sense of “reflexive pragmatism” (Alvesson, 2003), whereby it is pragmatically assumed that empirical investigation can further knowledge of the relationship between business organisations and sustainable development, but the development of any “knowledge” is approached reflexively. So, as we will see in Chapter Six, during the data collection and analysis process, attention was constantly paid to the possibility of multiple interpretations of the data, the influence of the motivations of the author, the role and character of language, and the impact of researcher bias (Alvesson and

Karreman, 2000; Alvesson and Skollberg, 2000). The aim throughout was to achieve a consistent balance between “producing interpretations and challenging them” (Alvesson, 2003:14).

These methodological inclinations led to the pursuit of a qualitative research strategy, with choice of method further influenced by practical considerations, the existing literature and evaluative criteria. Three research methods were selected: qualitative content analysis, close reading, and semi-structured interviews. This triangulation enhanced validity and facilitated a balance between pragmatism, through the interviews and the content analysis, and critique, via the close reading. Finally, it is suggested that the development of a unique research instrument for the content analysis served to develop a deeper, multi-level understanding of the complexities of the research topic.

Chapter Six

Methods

6.1 Introduction

Chapter Six marks the beginning of the empirical phase of the thesis. While the research design chapter introduced and explained the selected research methods, this chapter deals with their execution. Its purpose is to illuminate the data collection and analysis process, and outline clearly the various issues which emerged. This detailed account of the work undertaken is crucial to the “trustworthiness” of the research findings (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

As discussed in Chapter Five, two methods were selected: public utterances analysis (incorporating content analysis and close reading) and semi-structured interviews, and these are considered separately in the form of Part One and Part Two of this chapter respectively. Each section discusses sampling considerations, data collection and analysis and finally, the related evaluative criteria.

Part One: Public Utterances Analysis

The data collection for the public utterances analysis was completed in November and December 2010. The close reading and the content analysis were performed simultaneously, using the same sample of organisations and the same sampling units i.e. public utterances. Sampling considerations are discussed below, before the processes of content analysis and close reading are explained individually.

6.2 Sampling Considerations

6.2.1 Population

A “best practice” approach was taken to defining the population (Gray et al, 1995a:87), whereby it was aimed to identify organisations at the “leading edge” (Spence and Gray, 2007) of sustainability. It was hoped that this would allow investigation of the limits to what even the “most progressive business organisations” (Barter and Bebbington, 2010) can do.

The first step was to define what was meant by “best practice”. An internet search was conducted to identify awards and standards given to or attained by organisations for sustainability-related “performance”, for example for sustainability reporting. In all, eight awards and eight standards were identified, and these are listed in the table below. The websites of the related awarding body/standard-setter (e.g. ACCA, AccountAbility) often provided lists of the recent winners of these awards, and these winning organisations became the “best practice” population.

Standard (attained as of 23rd November 2010)	Key (for table 6.2, below)
AccountAbility Rating >50	AA
Carbon Disclosure Project rating >70	CDP
Corporate Leaders Group on Climate Change	CL
Ethical Consumer Best Buy Label	EC
GRI A, B or C graded	GRI
Social Audit Network Approved	SAN
Social Enterprise Mark	SE
SustainAbility Rating > 50	SAR
Award	
ACCA reporting awards shortlist 2008	ACCA
Business in the Community Big Tick winners 2009 and 2010	BITC
Corporate Register Reporting Awards longlist 2010	CR
Soil Association Natural and Organic Awards Winners 2008-2010 inclusive	SAS
Observer Ethical Awards 2010	OE
Queens Award for Enterprise Sustainable Development 2008–2010 inclusive	QA
Green Business Awards 2009-2010 inclusive	GB
Social Enterprise Awards UK 2009-2010 inclusive	SEA

Table 6.1: Awards and standards used to identify the “best practice” population

The initial population thus consisted of all organisations which had received or attained at least one of the awards or standards listed in the above table. This meant a population of over 200 organisations. Following the identification of this initial population, two filters were then employed which refined the population:

A: Geography

For the purposes of comparability and with a view to the interview phase, the sample was restricted to UK-incorporated organisations, with one exception. This was Triodos Bank, which, though incorporated in the Netherlands, had a large UK presence (it had won a Queens Award for Enterprise – Sustainable Development in 2010) and represented an “interesting exemplar” (Gray et al, 1995a).

B: “Commercial exchange”

Key to this study is a focus on “different types” of organisation, particularly co-owned businesses and social enterprises. However, the research relates specifically to *business* organisations, rather than NGOs or charities, which some of the organisations in the initial population were (e.g. many recipients of the Social Enterprise Mark). It was decided therefore that there must be some form of “commercial exchange” (Peredo and McLean, 2006) involved in each organisation’s operations. This meant that the organisation must be self-funded through the selling of a product or service; it operates as a social business, rather than a charity. For example, one of the sample organisations, the Eden Project, although a registered charity, was largely self-funded through operating as a tourist attraction.

6.2.2 Selecting the Sample

After the application of these filters, a population of approximately 100 organisations, a “longlist” of sorts, remained. It was decided to select a sample of 40 “best practice exemplars” (Gray et al, 1995a) from this longlist (see below for more on sample size).

A broadly “purposive” sampling strategy was adopted, whereby the sample was selected “in a strategic way, so that those sampled are relevant to the research questions that are being posed” (Bryman, 2008:414). This was done by reviewing in detail the website of each of the 100 organisations on the longlist, with a focus on their public utterances relating to sustainability. Preference was given to organisations which published stand alone reports or maintained detailed,

up to date websites, and care was taken to ensure that a range of “different types” of organisations was selected.

The final sample consisted of 13 large PLCs, 10 social enterprises, 10 SMEs and 7 co-owned businesses. In summary, the stages in the sampling process were as follows:

1. Define “best practice” population based on awards and standards
2. Refine population using filters of “UK-based” and “commercial exchange”
3. Review websites of c. 100 longlisted organisations
4. Select final sample of 40 “interesting best practice exemplars”

6.2.3 Sample Size

A word now on the selected sample size of forty organisations. Fundamentally, this number was a compromise. As discussed in Chapter Five, the close reading and content analysis were designed to be complementary, making it necessary to select a sample size suitable for both. This guided the choice of forty, a number large enough to enhance the validity of the content analysis, but small enough to allow the “deeper understanding of social phenomena” (Silverman, 2010:123) required from the close reading.

In addition, there was also an element of “theoretical sampling” involved in the sample size selection. The close reading analysis was performed with an eye to “theoretical saturation”, whereby the researcher gradually reaches the point where “no new or relevant data seem to be emerging regarding a category” (Bryman, 2008:416). As the analysis progressed, it was judged that a degree of theoretical saturation had been reached with the sample of forty; for instance with regard to the use of the discourse of ecological modernisation by large PLCs, or the pervasiveness of the business case narrative.

It is noted that no claims are made that the sample selected is representative of the population, or indeed that the population itself includes all possible “best practice” organisations. Furthermore, there are no claims that the sample can provide for results generalisable to the rest of the

population. The final sample, illustrated in Table 6.2, is simply a selection of “best practice” organisations of different types, analysis of which it is hoped will offer some insight as to their possible role in sustainable development.

6.2.4 Sampling Units: “Public Utterances”

The sampling units were the public “utterances” (Amernic and Craig, 2001) of the forty organisations selected. This included their stand-alone report e.g. “Sustainability Report”, if available, their Annual Report and their website.

For the purposes of completeness, all of the above-mentioned public utterances, rather than simply stand-alone reports, were analysed, thus reducing the risk of “missing important disclosure” (Unerman, 2000:671). Stand-alone reports were reviewed in their entirety, while websites and Annual reports were searched using the term “sustain” to identify references to sustainability and sustainable development. The webpages where sustainability was referenced were used as documents of analysis.

The stand-alone and annual reports used were the most recent available for download from the organisation’s website, as of November 2010, and the website content was that provided as at November – December 2010.

Organisation	Primary Sampling Unit	Industry	Awards and Standards <i>(see Table 6.1 above for key)</i>
Large PLCs			
Anglo American	Report to Society 2009	Mining	ACCA, GRI, CR, QA
Barclays	Responsible Banking Review 2009	Financial Services	GRI, AA, CR, CDP, BITC
British American Tobacco (BAT)	Sustainability Report 2009	Tobacco	ACCA, CR, SAR
British Petroleum (BP)	Sustainability Review 2009	Petroleum Refining	ACCA, GRI, AA, SAR, CR
British Telecom (BT)	Sustainability Report 2010	Communications	ACCA, GRI, SAR, BITC, QA
GlaxoSmithKline (GSK)	Corporate Responsibility Report 2009	Pharmaceuticals	ACCA, SAR, CDP
Marks and Spencer	How we do Business Report 2009	Retail	BITC, GRI
Northumbrian Water	Corporate Responsibility Highlights 2009	Water	BITC, CDP, QA
Royal Bank of Scotland (RBS)	Sustainability Report 2009	Financial Services	GRI, AA, CDP
Shell	Sustainability Report 2009	Petroleum Refining	ACCA, AA, SAR, CDP, CL
Tesco	Corporate Responsibility Report 2010	Retail	AA, CR, BITC, CDP, CL
Unilever	Sustainable Development Report 2009	Manufacturing	ACCA, SAR, CDP, BITC, CL
Vodafone	Sustainability Report 2010	Communications	ACCA, GRI, SAR, AA, CR, CL
Co-owned Businesses			
Co-operative Group	Sustainability Report 2009	Retail and Fin. Services	ACCA, GRI, CR, QA
Ecology Building Society	Annual Report 2009	Financial Services	EC
Guardian News and Media	Sustainability Report 2010	Media	BITC, CR
John Lewis Partnership	CSR Report 2010	Retail	BITC
Midcounties Co-op	Social Responsibility Report 2010	Retail	BITC
Phone Co-op	http://www.thephone.coop/	Communications	EC, SE
The Better Food Company	www.betterfood.co.uk	Food & Agriculture	SE, SAS

Table 6.2: Public Utterances Analysis Sample (continued overleaf)

Organisation	Primary Sampling Unit	Industry	Awards and Standards (see Table 6.1 above for key)
SMEs			
Avon Metals	Sustainability Report 2008	Recycling Services	GRI, QA
Berkeley Group Holdings	Sustainability Report 2010	Housing	CR, QA
Ecotricity	Progress Report 2009	Renewable Energy	QA
Ethical Property Co.	Annual Report 2008-2009	Property	QA
Good Energy PLC	Living our Values 2008	Renewable Energy	EC
Innocent Drinks	Annual Report 2008	Beverages	BITC
PeopleTree	Social Review 2009	Clothing	OE
Riverford Organic	www.riverford.co.uk	Food & Agriculture	OE
Seasalt	Ethics Report 2010	Clothing	SAS
Triodos Bank	Annual Report 2009	Financial Services	QA
Social Enterprises			
Aster Group	Environmental Sustainability Review 2009	Social Housing	GB
Blue Skies Holdings Ltd	Sustainability Report 2008-2009	Food & Agriculture	QA
Cafedirect	Annual Report 2008-2009	Beverages	SAS
Centre for Alternative Technology (CAT)	Charity Accounts 2008	Education	SEA
Eden Project	Annual Review 2008-2009	Tourism	SE
Green Works	www.green-works.co.uk	Recycling Services	QA
Shared Interest Society	Social Accounts 2009	Financial Services	ACCA, QA
Traidcraft	Social Accounts 2010	Food & Beverages	ACCA, QA
Unlimited Potential	Social Accounts 2009-2010	Community Services	SE, SAN
Wise Group	Social Accounts 2009	Community Services	SE

Table 6.2: Public Utterances Analysis Sample (continued)

6.3 Content Analysis

This section aims to provide a precise, transparent account of the content analysis process. The first step is to explain how the research instrument, the “menu” of sustainability at an organisational level, was developed.

6.3.1 Developing the Research Instrument

Krippendorff (2004) writes that perhaps the most crucial aspect of content analysis is the “analytical construct”, the “*rules of inference* that guide the analyst, in steps, from the texts to the answers of the research questions” (2004:38). In simple terms, the analytical construct allows the researcher to link, in a reliable and valid manner, inferences drawn from the text to the research questions. Krippendorff further explains that all content analysis is “relative to a particular context”, of the researcher’s choosing, and the analytical construct “operationalises what the analyst knows about the context” (2004:30).

In the case of the current study, the primary purpose of the content analysis is to examine narratives of sustainability at an organisational level. The “context” is provided by the literature reviewed in Chapters Two, Three and Four. The last of those chapters in particular revealed research on sustainability in the organisation to be dominated by managerialist perspectives, with few “alternative” narratives available. There was no one “model” of sustainability at an organisational level which stood out as a possible analytical construct for content analysis. Therefore, as explained in Chapter 5, section 5.7, it was decided that a unique research instrument must be created.

In Chapter Four, four “alternative” narratives were highlighted:

- Gladwin, Kennelly and Krause (1995) – “Alternative Environmental Paradigms”
- Starik and Rands (1995) – “Characteristics of Ecologically Sustainable Organisations”
- Young and Tilley (2006) – “The Sustainable Entrepreneurship Model”
- Forum for the Future (2005) – “The Five Capitals Framework”

In obligingly proffering categories and sub-categories, these models provided a starting point for a research instrument. It was decided therefore that the models could be combined to create an instrument for the content analysis, hitherto referred to as the “Menu”.

Categories of the Menu

Although the four selected models were organised into categories, none provided what looked like a suitable structure for the menu, so it was necessary to develop a new framework of categories. Inspired by the equal focus of the Brundtland report on environmental and social issues, the first level of categorisation was on a simple “environmental” and “social” basis.

Next, sub-categories were created, based in part on frameworks from the literature and in part on the content of the four selected models. For the environmental category, a “life-cycle analysis” framework (e.g. Gray, 1993:169) was selected. This depicts the organisation’s relationship with the environment as an Input-Process-Output cycle, i.e. outputs are product, profits and waste. A “stakeholder analysis” framework (e.g. Freeman, 2010) was chosen for the social category, with “future generations” and “nature” added to the traditional stakeholders, as they were frequently referred to in the four models. A point to note here is that no “shareholder” sub-category was included as they were not referred to in any of the four models from the literature. The framework of categories is illustrated in Fig 6.1, below.

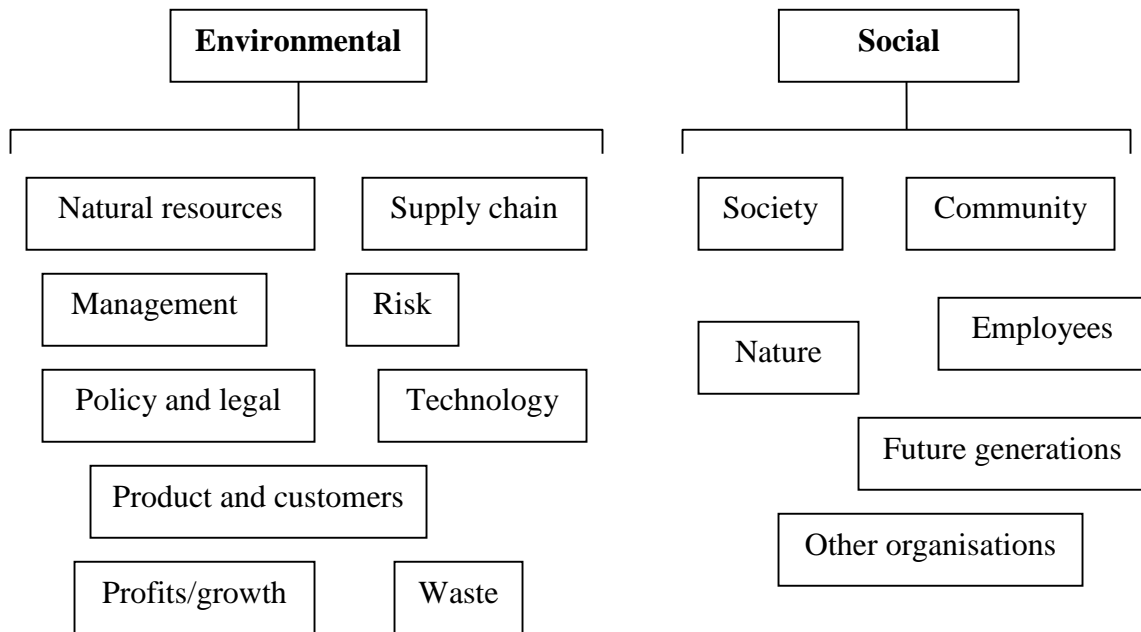


Fig 6.1: Categories of the “menu”, the content analysis research instrument

The final step of this phase was to assign items of the four models to each category of the menu. Here, the key task was to remove overlapping items, with a relatively small number of items removed in this way e.g. “participation in industrial ecology and other waste-exchange arrangements” (Starik and Rands, 1995) was judged to overlap with “industrial ecology - looking at synergistic production systems where one organisation's waste streams are another's resources” (Forum for the Future, 2005), and the latter was used in the menu. Fig 6.2 details the final Menu.

The Menu

1. Eco-balance – Inputs and Outputs

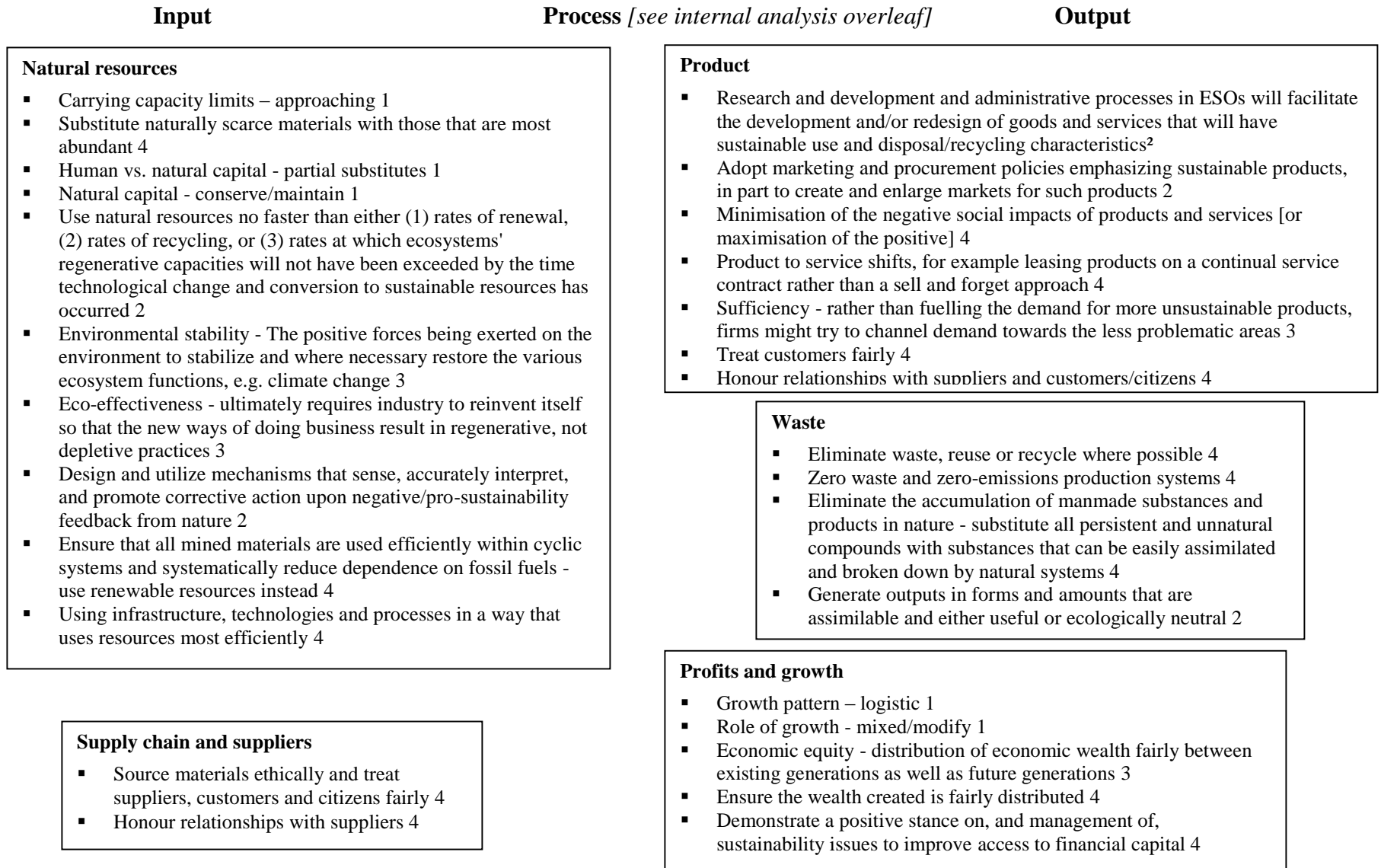


Fig 6.2 The Menu (continued overleaf)

2. Internal Analysis – “Process”

Risk

- Risk orientation – precaution 1
- Urgency of solutions - great/decades 1
- Severity of problems – consequential 1

Management

- Modular manufacturing systems 4
- Reverse logistics and re-use and re-manufacturing systems 4
- Industrial ecology - looking at synergistic production systems where one organisation's waste streams are another's resources 4
- Biomimicry - mimicking nature and natural processes in industrial processes and industrial systems design 4
- Internalise environmental and social costs and assigning an economic value to them 4
- Effective management of risk and corporate governance issues 4
- Sustainable construction techniques when looking at new infrastructures or offices 4
- Ensure financial measures reflect the value of other capitals 5
- Promote the value of environmental protection and sustainable organizational performance, instill norms for environmental sensitivity in all decisions, and develop role-specific expectations for environmental performance 2
- Consider all of their principles, policies, and practices from the standpoint of long-term ecosystem viability and vitality and will develop and implement strategies so that they act in ecologically sustainable ways 2
- Encourage national and international governmental bodies to adopt national income accounts that incorporate environmental impacts; also, they will develop and institute full-environmental-cost accounting procedures 2

Policy and Legal

- Economic structure – Green economy 1
- Contribute to open, transparent and fair governance systems 4
- Prompt and full payment of taxes and support of social infrastructure 4
- Respect and comply with local, national and international law 4
- Take political action to promote the adoption of laws and regulations that "raise the floor" of environmental performance 2
- Promote market-based governmental environmental-policy approaches over traditional command-and-control approaches 2
- Encourage national and international governmental bodies to adopt national income accounts that incorporate environmental impacts 2
- Work to remove anti-sustainability subsidies, and/or to institute pro-sustainability subsidies 2
- Work to move peak organizations to support pro-sustainability governmental policies 2

Technology

- Faith in technology – scepticism 1
- Technological pathways - benign/decoupled 1
- Improvement in product systems (eco-efficiency and eco-innovation) 5

Sources

1. Gladwin et al (1995)
2. Starik and Rands (1995)
3. Young and Tilley (2006)
4. Porritt/Forum for the Future (2005)

Fig 6.2 The Menu (continued)

3. Stakeholder analysis

Society

- Human nature - homo sapient 1
- Ethical grounding - broad homocentric 1
- Ecological equity 3
- Poverty alleviation – equal opportunity 1
- Population size – stabilise soon 1
- Seek out and disseminate information from stakeholders with diverse cultural backgrounds 2
- Assess the wider economic impacts of the organisation's activities, products and services on society e.g. in creating wealth in the communities in which the organisation operates 4
- Respect human rights throughout its operations and geographical regions 4
- Understand and respect human values and their different cultural contexts 4
- Social responsibility - where companies and individuals take responsibility and are accountable for direct and indirect, negative and positive impacts on existing generations 3
- Trade orientation – national 1
- The good life – postmaterialism 1
- Primary objective – quality of life 1
- Use health promotion and education to support a high standard of health 4
- Attempt to affect social-cultural elements in order to increase the strength of pro-sustainability values 2
- Become involved with educational institutions in activities designed to increase "environmental literacy" 2
- Socio-effectiveness - organisations having a social mission, which have a sustained positive impact on society 4
- Logic/reason - vision/network 1
- Political structure – devolved 1
- Socio-efficiency - continuing commitment by business to behave ethically and contribute to economic development while improving the quality of life of the workforce and their families as well as of the local community and society at large 3

Community

- Support the development of the community in which the organisation operates (including economic opportunities) 5

Future generations

- Inter-generational equity - economic welfare of future generations being taken into account in company decisions and operations 3
- Futurity - social well-being of future generations being taken into account in company decisions and operations 3
- Discount rate - low/complement 1
- Time/space scales – multiscale 1

Fig 6.2 The Menu (continued)

3. Stakeholder analysis (cont.)

Employees

- Give employees (and where possible other stakeholders) access to training, development and life long learning and capture and sharing knowledge 4
- Ensure adequate health and safety arrangements, incorporating physical and mental wellbeing 4
- Provide a reasonable living wage and fair remuneration for employees and business partners 4
- Create opportunities for varied and satisfying work 4
- Allow for and enhance recreation time and support individual's active involvement in society 4
- Provide safe, supportive living and working conditions, including family friendly policies 4
- Effective communication systems throughout the organisation, reflecting shared values and objectives 4
- Include ecological sustainability considerations and criteria in job design, recruitment and selection, and training and development systems 2
- Design their budgeting and reward systems, communication systems, organizational structures, and decision-making systems in order to empower individuals to engage in sustainability-oriented innovation 2
- Characterized by numerous cultural artifacts such as slogans, symbols, rituals and stories which serve to articulate and reinforce for their members the importance of ecologically sustainable performance 2
- Increase attention to the overall "spiritual well-being" of their members and will include attention to environmental stewardship as part of this effort 2

Nature

- Humans and nature – interdependence 1
- Environmental sustainability - The long-term sustainability of the environment being taken into account in company decisions and operations 3
- Value of nature – inherentism 1
- Resilience of nature - varied/fragile 1
- Metaphor of earth - life support system 1
- Perception of earth - home/managed 1
- System composition - parts and wholes 1
- System structure – holarchical 1
- Human role – stewardship 1
- Use renewable resources only from well-managed and restorative eco-systems 4

Other organisations

- Initiate and be involved in numerous environmental partnerships of different forms, which will involve different issues and various external stakeholder organizations 2
- Be the target of few, if any, protests by environmental activists 2
- Frequently utilize conflict-resolution practices regarding the natural environment 2
- Participate in peak organizations designed to encourage and assist other organizations to simultaneously adopt sustainability-oriented actions and achieve economic success 2
- Attempt to create sustainability-oriented self-regulatory programs within their respective peak organizations 2
- Devote extensive administrative resources to developing and implementing sustainability strategies involving interorganizational cooperation 2

Fig 6.2: The Menu (continued)

Decision Rules

The next, and perhaps most important stage in developing the research instrument was the process of deciding on the “decision rules” (Gray et al, 1995a), the rules which would define the categories and allow text from the public utterances to be matched to items in the menu. The challenge was to create a “data language” (Krippendorff, 2004), to translate the menu so that it could be compared, in a transparent, replicable fashion, to the corporate public utterances.

Initial translation was performed by reviewing Gladwin et al’s (1995), Starik and Rands’ (1995), and Young and Tilley’s (2006) papers, and Forum for the Future’s (2005) public utterances, to refine the meaning of each item in their models. This allowed the development of a more coherent data language; for instance, Gladwin et al’s (1995) “human nature – homo sapient” became “humans appreciate the full value of nature and other people, not just the economic value” (adapted from Gladwin et al, 1995:893).

From this initial interpretation, decision rules for each item were drawn up. Based largely on intuitive interpretation, key words and phrases were assigned to each item of the menu. However, this was also an iterative process; during the pilot analysis the decision rules were refined based on the content of the public utterances.

It is crucial at this point to acknowledge the subjective nature of this process; the decision rules represent only the researcher’s interpretation of the literature. However, Krippendorff (2004) argues that all content analysis is inherently subjective and that the researcher’s best defence is to “make their chosen contexts explicit, so that the results of their analyses will be clear to their scientific peers and to the beneficiaries of the research results” (2004:34). In this case, the context is made explicit by way of Appendix A, which illustrates the path from the literature to the decision rules for each item of the menu.

6.3.2 Data Collection

This section explains the process by which data was collected from the public utterances using the research instrument.

What is to be “counted”?

The primarily quantitative CSR content analysis literature focuses largely on volume of disclosure (Unerman, 2000). However, as discussed in Chapter Five, qualitative, rather than quantitative analysis, was the appropriate choice for the current study. The purpose of the content analysis is to compare corporate narratives of sustainability with academic ones, to identify the elements of sustainability which organisations do/do not address, and to examine the form that this address takes. The question is not “how much”, as in quantitative analysis, but “if”, and also “what”. Therefore, the content analysis looked to identify two forms of disclosure: incidence and thematic content i.e. do organisations say anything about the items of the menu (incidence), and what is it that they say (thematic content).

Recording units

A “recording unit” is “the specific segment of content that is characterised by placing it in a given category” (Holsti, 1969; cited by Krippendorff, 2004:100). To allow analysis of both incidence and thematic content, it was decided to use sentences as the recording unit for the current study. In support, Milne and Adler (1999) describe sentences as “far more reliable than any other unit of analysis”.

The process of extracting sentences from the public utterances inevitably incorporated a level of subjectivity. Recording units were distinguished thematically, which Krippendorff (2004) suggests provides “descriptive richness” (2004:108). As a general rule, sentences were recorded if they related to sustainability, with this decision guided by the categories and decision rules of the menu.

The “Other” Category

It is not intended for the menu to represent an all-encompassing model of sustainability at an organisational level; it is simply a collection of some “alternative” (Gray, 2010) narratives. Theoretically, an infinite number of alternative narratives is possible.

It is useful at this point to consider the experience of Gray et al (1995a), who developed a content analysis research instrument to collect data on CSR disclosure in corporate annual reports. As part of their research instrument, Gray et al included an “Other” category, which they hoped might capture “any ‘new’ meanings of CSR as they emerge” (Gray et al, 1995a:81). In its search for alternative narratives of sustainability at an organisational level, “new meanings” are of particular concern to the current study.

To address this concern, the content analysis was completed in an inductive manner. Sentences were recorded from the text, and then matched to items of the menu. If they did not match to an individual item, they were copied to an “Other” worksheet, thus allowing the capture of any “alternative” elements absent from the menu.

Recording Process

Excel workbooks were used to record all of the content analysis data, with a separate workbook created for each of the forty organisations. For each organisation, recording proceeded as follows:

Step 1: The public utterances were analysed and sentences related to sustainability extracted. These sentences were copied onto a sheet of the workbook and assigned a category of the menu e.g. natural resources, employees.

Step 2: Using the decision rules shown in Appendix A, the sentences were matched to items of the menu. Any sentences which did not match were transferred to a worksheet labelled “Other”.

Step 3: Incidence – to record incidence of disclosure, a tick was placed beside the matching items and a cross beside the items of the menu which did not have matching disclosures. The ensuing list was copied into a summary workbook – “Incidence results” – which eventually displayed the incidence results for all of the organisations.

Step 4: Thematic content – to record the thematic content of the disclosures (i.e. the sentence itself), a summary workbook was created – “Thematic content results” – which displayed the

thematic content results for all organisations, for each item of the menu. A workbook was also created for the “Other” items, with a separate worksheet for each category.

Pilot and Continuing Sample

Krippendorff (2009:352) advises that it is “essential” to test the reliability of a content analysis instrument on a pilot sample before moving on to the main data set. Pilot analysis is also extremely useful for researcher training (Milne and Adler, 1999). Five organisations from the sample listed in Table 6.2 were selected for the pilot analysis, which was completed using the recording process above. The sentences matched to each item of the menu were reviewed to check for consistency in coding. The initial decision rules of the menu were also refined slightly in order to enhance replicability. These five organisations were then reanalysed as part of the final sample of forty.

Finally, Krippendorff (2004) advises “stability” – “the extent to which a measuring or coding procedure yields the same results on repeated trials” – as an important measure of reliability in content analysis. With this in mind, the content analysis workbooks were reviewed approximately 12 months after the data collection had been completed, and the results refined slightly as a result.

6.3.3 Data Analysis

The data analysis was performed using Microsoft Excel and Word. The procedure followed was broadly that recommended by Miles and Huberman (1994): data reduction, data display and “conclusion drawing/verification” (1994:11).

To reduce the data, spreadsheets were created to collate the following information:

- Thematic content – a spreadsheet which brought together the results for thematic content for each item of the menu for each organisation.
- Incidence – incidence results for each organisation were copied into one spreadsheet. This allowed the calculation of overall incidence statistics per item of the menu.
- Incidence per model – incidence results per item were sorted according to the models from the literature, with a separate tab created for each of the four models.

- Incidence per type – a workbook which displayed incidence of disclosure for groups of organisations i.e. all PLCs, all social enterprises etc.
- Incidence per industry – organisations were divided into eight categories of industry and separate tabs created for each industry
- Other – all of the data which had been recorded as “Other” was copied into a workbook on a “per organisation” basis. Items which occurred more than once were highlighted and the items which occurred most often were gradually identified.

Analysis of these documents led to further data reduction and display in the form of the tables and graphs shown in Chapter Seven.

Data interpretation was ongoing during the process of reducing and displaying the data, which took place over a period of several months. Ultimately, the content analysis findings were interpreted alongside those of the close reading, thereby avoiding the “fragmentation” of data common to content analysis (Bryman, 2008:539). The eventual output of the interpretation was in the form of writing up both the results of the content analysis (Chapter Seven) and the drawing of conclusions later in the thesis.

Key to data interpretation was the reflexive approach discussed in Chapter Five. The inevitable subjectivity of the analysis is reiterated here; it is acknowledged that findings and conclusions drawn from the content analysis are based on the researcher’s own interpretation of the texts. Therefore, the advice of Krippendorff (2004) on reflexivity was followed during the data interpretation process: the researcher is encouraged to think about what is *not* being said in the text, who has written the text and why, and to consider what the text might mean to other readers. Furthermore, performing the data analysis for the content analysis and the close reading simultaneously allowed for a more reflexive interpretation of the findings.

6.3.4 Evaluative Criteria

It is important to consider the reliability and validity of the content analysis, particularly as recording incidence of disclosure brought a quantitative element to the analysis. Regarding reliability, Krippendorff (2004) suggests three associated criterion: stability, reproducibility and

accuracy. The first, stability, was addressed through performing a pilot analysis, and by reviewing and refining the content analysis a year after the original data collection. Reproducibility was enhanced, as Krippendorff advises, by the “explicit” account of the data collection procedure above, and the development of the decision rules in Appendix A. Making the process traceable in this way also contributes to “dependability” (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Finally, accuracy, the degree to which the analysis “yields what it is designed to yield” (Krippendorff, 2004:215), is more complicated, and leads us on to questions of validity.

Bryman (2008) characterises validity as relating to the “integrity” of the research conclusions. Here, triangulation is key, and particularly addressed by interweaving the findings from each of the three empirical methods – content analysis, close reading and semi-structured interviews – in Chapter Eleven of the thesis. Krippendorff (2004) suggests that the validity of a content analysis is enhanced by grounding the measurement instrument in “established theory”. The menu was accordingly drawn from the four narratives of sustainability at an organisational level identified in Chapter Four as “beyond the business case”. Suggesting a level of shared meaning, Hahn et al (2010) also identify two of these narratives (Gladwin et al, 1995; Young and Tilley, 2006) as examples of research which goes beyond the business case.

This brings us to what Lincoln and Guba (1985) refer to as “credibility” and “transferability”, two of the aspects of their notion of trustworthiness. These criteria relate to the potential “acceptability” of the research findings within the related literature (Bryman, 2008). When completing the data interpretation phase, an emphasis was placed on comparing the findings to those in the existing literature. As the results chapters illustrate, many of the findings were concurrent with those of prior studies, indicating a level of credibility and transferability.

A further point to note is that elements of the study, such as the theoretical framework, the research instrument, and preliminary findings, were presented to peers at several conferences and discussed with a number of experienced researchers over the course of the study. This form of review, which led to regular revisions of the research instrument and consolidation of the data, served to enhance credibility, dependability, and validity. The aim was to establish if “the members of a scientific community agree on talking about the same phenomena” (Krippendorff, 2009:351), and thus to mitigate the impact of researcher subjectivity.

A final step towards boosting reliability, validity and trustworthiness was researcher training. Milne and Adler (1999) suggest that content analysis reliability can be enhanced by ensuring that the coder has “undergone a sufficient period of training”, including coding a pilot sample (1999:238). It is suggested that performing the pilot analysis, combined with structured training in research methods, and content analysis of a colleague’s data set, all contributed towards a “sufficient” period of training.

6.4 Close Reading

This section takes a similar form to the discussion on content analysis above. The most significant task is to explain and justify the overall approach and the method of conducting the readings. This is followed by an outline of the data collection and analysis process and, lastly, of the evaluative criteria used.

6.4.1 Approach

A significant concern for researchers using discourse analysis-type methods such as close reading is the absence of “firm guidelines” on how to conduct the analysis, which raises questions as to the reliability of the method (Burnham et al, 2009). Phillips and DiDomenico (2009) acknowledge this issue, and advise that researchers must “develop an approach that makes sense in the light of their particular study *and* establish a set of arguments to justify the particular approach they adopt” (2009:560; emphasis in original).

In developing a close reading approach, the current study attempts to follow the advice of Phillips and DiDomenico (2009). A review of existing discourse analysis/close reading studies in the business and sustainable development literature (e.g. Milne et al, 2009; Tregidga and Milne, 2006; Laine, 2005; Livesey 2002 etc) revealed a range of different approaches, but no firm guidelines. Therefore, drawing from these and relevant studies in the wider organisational studies field, an approach was developed which “makes sense” for the current study.

The first point of reference is Milne et al (2009), who took a three-part approach to their discourse analysis study, using a framework developed by Thompson (1990). Here, the first phase involves “a social-historical analysis of the conditions that form the context of the production, circulation and reception of symbolic forms” (Milne et al, 2009:1221). In the current study, this analysis takes the form of the literature review. The second phase is a “formal or discursive analysis of those symbolic forms”, i.e. the close reading, and the third consists of the “interpretation or re-interpretation of those symbolic forms” (Milne et al, 2009:1221). This final phase, represented by the later chapters of the thesis, involves interpreting the research findings in the context of the existing literature.

For their second phase, Milne et al conducted a “close interpretive examination” of their selected texts. In the current study, phase two involves close reading of the selected corporate public utterances. Broadly following Amernic and Craig (2001), this meant conducting three readings of the texts, as follows:

Reading 1: Identifying key themes and overarching narrative

Reading 2: Focus on language use, including rhetoric and metaphor

Reading 3: Reflexive reading, considering context, purpose and alternative interpretations

The aim of the initial reading was to identify the key themes of the public utterances and the overarching narrative presented therein. This reflects the broader “descriptive”, as opposed to critical, emphasis which characterises the “interpretive structuralism” approach (Phillips and Hardy, 2002). It also provides the opportunity, as Craig and Amernic (2009) advise, to identify the “coherence” and “internal logic” of the narratives of sustainable development presented. Furthermore, this first reading allowed identification of “significant features of the texts and differences between them” (Tredidga and Milne, 2006).

The second reading sought to focus on the language used in the public utterances. Guidance here is offered by Amernic and Craig (2001), who illustrate the potential for critical engagement through analysis of a text’s rhetorical and metaphorical features. Bryman (2008) explains that rhetorical analysis involves looking at “the way in which arguments are constructed” and “the role that various linguistic devices (such as metaphor, analogy and irony) play in the formulation of arguments” (2008:506). During the second reading, the texts were scanned for the rhetorical

devices identified by these authors. For instance, Bryman (2008) cites “pre-formulation, whereby a possible counter-argument is discounted in the course of presenting an argument” (2008:506), while Amernic and Craig (2001) urge the researcher to look out for allusion to “a fact or event known to one audience but not to others” (2001:774). Furthermore, close attention to the use of metaphors, for example around a “vision” or a “journey”, and to the use of slogans (Amernic and Craig, 2001), was a feature of the second reading.

Finally, the third reading was designed to be a reflexive one. Here, the emphasis was on considering the potential for alternative (to the researcher’s) interpretations of the texts. Following the advice of Ferguson (2007), an effort was made to understand “how these texts are interpreted by the individuals who encounter them in their everyday lives” (2007:913). In particular, as Alvesson and Kärreman (2000) suggest, the motivations of the author of the text were considered e.g. who was the author, what message did they seek to convey with the text, why was the text written, whom was it written for and how might this intended audience interpret it? The wider context of the sustainable development discourse and emerging norms of language (e.g. buzzwords) was also considered. A final aspect of the third reading was to think about, as Krippendorff (2004) suggests, what is “not spoken of” (2004:346) and what such omissions might mean.

6.4.2 Data Collection

The sampling units for the close reading were the same as those used for the content analysis: the public utterances of the forty selected organisations. These texts were subjected to the three readings described above and notes recorded during and after each reading. A Word document was created for each organisation and the notes recorded here. Relevant extracts from the texts were also copied into these documents. The notes and extracts were loosely organized into headings (e.g. natural resources, business case) for ease of analysis. In addition, the “key themes” of each organisation’s public utterances were noted at the end of the related Word document. As with the content analysis, for researcher training purposes a pilot sample of five organisations was analysed initially.

6.4.3 Data Analysis

Once again, Miles and Huberman's (1994) three stages: data reduction, data display and conclusion drawing/verification, provided a guideline for the data analysis process. As Taylor (2001) suggests, identifying "patterns" was the primary aim of the data reduction phase. To assist with this activity, a number of documents were created:

- A spreadsheet listing the key themes identified for each organisation. A separate tab was allocated to each type of organisation i.e. social enterprises, PLCs etc.
- A mind map displaying the key overall themes and illustrating linkages between them.
- A Word document containing extracts from the public utterances grouped under each overall key theme. The relevant literature and organisations were also recorded alongside each theme.
- A Word document illustrating the key metaphors and other rhetorical devices identified and listing the extracts pertaining to them.

The data reduction process was an iterative one, involving frequent engagement with key literature and consideration of the notes made during the reflexive reading. To identify the emerging "stories" from the data, use was made of Miles and Huberman's (1994) "tactics for generating meaning", such as "clustering", counting, "noting relations between variables" and "building a logical chain of evidence" (1994:245-261). Data analysis took place at intervals over a twelve month period, allowing for several reinterpretations and refinements of the findings and encouraging a more reflexive perspective.

Data display largely took the form of Chapter Eight, where the findings of the close reading are presented. The final phase of analysis involved triangulating the findings with those of the content analysis and the interviews and drawing some conclusions, represented by the later chapters of the thesis. In drawing and verifying conclusions, techniques suggested by Miles and Huberman (1994) again proved useful, such as looking for outliers and extreme cases, "following up surprises" and considering "rival explanations" (1994:263-274). These tactics all contributed to a consistently reflexive approach to the interpretation of the data.

6.4.4 Evaluative Criteria

Validity is a key issue for the close reading. As Alvesson and Kärreman (2000) have asked, “how can one know that the statement A truthfully represents the thing T?” (2000:137). Or, as Bryman (2008) notes:

“When one reads articles based on DA [Discourse Analysis], it sometimes seems as though the practitioners come perilously close to invoking speculations that do not seem to be directly discernible in the sequences being analysed” (Bryman, 2008:510)

Therefore, a number of steps were taken to mitigate the possibility of “invoking speculations”. The primary precaution was conducting the third, reflexive reading of the texts. This process requires the researcher to be self-reflective, and thus discourages jumping to conclusions. A further measure was consistent engagement with the literature throughout the conclusion drawing/verification process, as Miles and Huberman (1994) recommend. An effort was made to incorporate “theoretical breadth and variation” (Alvesson and Skollberg, 2000:250) and to engage with “different research vocabularies” (Alvesson and Deetz, 2000:113). In addition, the process of triangulation increased validity. For instance, the content analysis helped to identify what is “not being said”, while the interviews in many cases offered insight into the motivations of the authors of the public utterances. Furthermore, the findings were considered in the context of the theoretical Framework of Sustainable Business (see Chapter Three, Fig. 3.2).

Reliability is also a particular concern for the close reading; for instance the approach outlined above inevitably lacks the replicability of the content analysis method. Some guidance is offered by Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) criterion of “dependability”, which they intend to approximate reliability. The authors suggest that researchers make their method “auditable”, keeping detailed records of the data collection and analysis process. Such records were kept of all the close reading data, and the approach and process has been explained in a transparent manner above. Also helpful was the advice of Miles and Huberman (1994), who counsel clear “connectedness to theory”, explicit description of the researcher’s role, and peer/colleague review (1994:278).

The final point is to acknowledge that the quality of the close reading was inevitably affected by time constraints. These made it impossible to conduct an in-depth close reading in the style of say, Amernic and Craig (2001), and it is likely that more time available for data collection and analysis would have yielded a richer data set. However, consistent with the pragmatic thrust of this study, it is argued that this limitation is mitigated to an extent by the triangulation of methods, which allowed perhaps more varied insight than that which may have been gleaned from close reading alone.

Part Two: Semi-Structured Interviews

The semi-structured interviews took place between January 2011 and June 2011 inclusive. Formal interview requests were made in a series of batches, beginning with a pilot sample, followed by the continuing sample, then an additional UK sample and finally an additional Irish sample. The relevant sampling considerations are explained below, followed by a discussion of the data collection and analysis process.

6.5 Sampling Considerations

6.5.1 Sample Size

The task here was to ensure that “sufficient” interviews were conducted within the time available. Burnham et al (2008) warn researchers against undertaking too many interviews, noting that there is a point at which “each additional interview yields diminishing returns” (2008:234). Sending the interview requests out in batches helped to identify this point of “theoretical saturation” (Bryman, 2008). After the completion of each batch, an effort was made to transcribe and review the interviews, to see if themes and patterns were emerging. By the time of the additional UK and Irish interviews in May/June 2011, preliminary analysis indicated that a level of theoretical saturation had been achieved.

Burnham et al (2008) suggest 20-30 interviews as a “reasonable target” for a research project based on “elite interviews” (2008:234). Turning to the literature on sustainability and business, a number of authors used semi-structured interviews as their primary method. For instance, O’Dwyer (2003) interviewed 29 individuals, Spence and Gray (2007) 36, Banarjee (2001) 14 and Barter and Bebbington (2010) 23. Bearing these figures in mind and considering time constraints, between 25 and 30 interviews was identified as a “reasonable target” for the current study.

6.5.2 Interviewees

The interviews sought to explore relatively large-scale strategic issues related to the organisations’ approach to sustainable development. Therefore, it was judged that the most appropriate interviewee would be an individual involved with sustainability at a decision-making level. In the smaller organisations, the CEO/Chairman was selected as the target individual, while in the large organisations, the Head of Sustainability/CSR or equivalent was targeted. The advantage of such “elite” interviews, as Burnham et al (2008) suggest, is their potential to bring “the world of the practitioner and the academic together in a hopefully fruitful mutual dialogue” (2008:247).

6.5.3 Pilot, Continuing and Additional Samples

The initial sample for the interviews was the forty organisations selected for the public utterances analysis. By way of a pilot sample, requests were sent to fifteen of these organisations in December 2010 and seven interviews completed as a result in January – March 2011. An eighth pilot interview with an Irish company (Private Company, Financial Services), and a ninth with a UK University, were also arranged through personal contact.

Following the pilot study, interview requests, incorporating slightly revised interview guidelines (see Appendix B) were sent to the remaining 25 organisations in the original sample of forty in March 2011. This led to fourteen interviews conducted between March 2011 and June 2011 inclusive. It was decided in May 2011, however, that the number of interviews from the original sample would be insufficient, and an additional sample was drawn up.

As one Irish organisation had been included in the pilot sample, an additional Irish sample of seven organisations was contacted. These organisations were selected on a “best practice” basis, based on the sustainability content of their public utterances. This led to two interviews in June 2011. The additional UK sample consisted of six organisations, leading to three interviews in May and June 2011. These were selected according to the same criteria as the original sample of forty (see section 6.2.2), with organisations identified which had almost been included in the original sample. Care was also taken to achieve a balance in the additional sample between different types of organisation.

In all, twenty seven individuals in twenty seven organisations were interviewed, as detailed in table 6.3 below.

Type of Organisation	Industry	Approx Turnover 2010 (£)	Interviewee Role in Organisation
Large PLCs			
PLC	Manufacturing	37,600,000,000	Global Vice President for Sustainability
PLC	Energy	14,343,000,000	Head of Corporate Responsibility
PLC	Water	651,500,000	Head of Corporate Responsibility
State-owned PLC	Financial Services	2,600,000,000	Head of Corporate Social Responsibility
PLC	Tobacco	14,800,000,000	Head of Sustainability
State-owned PLC	Financial Services	31,868,000,000	Head of Sustainability
PLC	Telecommunications	44,500,000,000	Head of Sustainability
PLC	Retail	9,740,000,000	Head of Sustainable Business
PLC	Energy	21,550,000,000	Policy and Research Director
PLC	Financial Services	31,440,000,000	Sustainability Consultant
PLC	Pharmaceuticals	28,400,000,000	Vice President for Corporate Responsibility
Co-owned Businesses			
Co-operative	Food & Agriculture	2,100,000	Chairman
Mutual society	Financial Services	1,982,000	Chief Executive Officer
Partnership	Retail	7,400,000,000	Head of Corporate Social Responsibility
Co-operative	Telecommunications	9,100,000	Membership and Co-operative Affairs Manager
Universities			
University	Education	147,000,000	Head of Sustainable Development

Table 6.3: Interviewees (continued overleaf)

Type of Organisation	Industry	Approx Turnover 2010 (£)	Interviewee Role in Organisation
Private Companies			
Private Company	Financial Services	<i>unavailable</i>	Chief Executive Officer
Private Company	Retail	4,400,000,000	Group Environmental Executive
Private Company	Property	2,923,000	Managing Director
Private Company	Financial Services	82,000,000	Managing Director UK
Social Enterprises			
Social Enterprise	Tourism	20,000,000	Chairman
Social Enterprise	Community Services	494,000	Chairman
Social Enterprise	Recycling Services	2,000,000	Chief Executive Officer
Social Enterprise	Food & Agriculture	30,000,000	Head of Sustainability
Social Enterprise	Community Services	32,000,000	Head of Sustainable Development
Social Enterprise	Recycling Services	271,000	Managing Director
Social Enterprise	Social Housing	81,000,000	Sustainability Manager

Table 6.3: Interviewees (continued)

6.6 Data Collection

Each interview averaged approximately 50 minutes in length, with a minimum of 30 minutes and a maximum of 90 minutes. Ten of the interviews were conducted at the organisations' premises and seventeen were conducted over the telephone. All were tape recorded and handwritten notes were taken during the interviews.

6.6.1 Telephone Interviewing

The interviews conducted over the telephone were done so because of time and cost advantages, and, in some cases, at the request of the interviewee. It could be argued that telephone interviewing limits the richness of the data, as it does not allow the researcher to observe the interviewee's body language and other non-verbal cues (Bryman, 2008). However, the same author acknowledges that in his own work he found that telephone interviewees gave "expansive... comprehensive" replies, going on to suggest that there is perhaps little difference between data gathered via face-to-face and telephone interviews (Bryman, 2008:488). Burnham et al (2008) also play down the disadvantages of telephone interviews, noting that in face to face interviews, "it is possible to exaggerate the extent that real rapport can be created in a one-hour interview; indeed there is always the possibility of negative impressions" (2008:234).

The main danger of telephone interviews, Burnham et al (2008) suggest, is that a rapport will not be built up and interviewees may thus be "less forthcoming". To mitigate this possibility, the advice of Irvine (2010) was followed. The author recommends being careful to remain focussed throughout the interview, making sure to have a good quality phone line and recording equipment, occasionally diverting to a less formal topic, ensuring that the interviewee is familiar with the interview guidelines, and avoiding "speaker overlap". Furthermore, in the absence of body language, more careful attention was played to verbal cues e.g. silence, curt responses, laughter, and these subtleties were recorded in the transcripts.

Irvine (2010) found in a comparative study of face-to-face and telephone interviews that, although the face-to-face interviews generated slightly more data, "more data may not necessarily equal better data" (Irvine, 2010:5). The author also notes that face-to-face interviews are most valuable when sensitive information, such as a personal revelation, is

required from the interviewee. In the case of the current study, the participants were being interviewed in professional capacity and the topics for discussion were not of a sensitive personal nature. Therefore, it is argued that the research is not likely to have been significantly limited because a large number of the interviews were conducted by telephone.

6.6.2 Interview Guidelines

Consistent with the semi-structured nature of the interviews, the aim of the interview guidelines was to encourage a “loosely guided conversation” (O’Dwyer, 2003:529). The guidelines thus consisted of just four questions, see Appendix B. Bryman and Bell (2007) suggest that when designing interview questions, the researcher should ask “what do I need to know in order to answer each of the research questions that I’m interested in?” (2007:483) With this advice in mind, the first three questions reflected the “Approaches, Boundaries, Future Directions” objectives of the study. The final “catch-all” question offered the interviewees the chance to “comment on specific issues and to put forward a personal opinion” (Bryman and Bell, 2007:487).

The first question, asking the interviewees about their organisation’s approach to sustainable development, was an “introducing question” (Kvale and Brinkman, 2009). As their response progressed, the interviewees were prompted with follow-up and “probing” questions (Kvale and Brinkman, 2009). To supplement the basic interview guidelines, a detailed interview guide was developed, see Appendix C, which was not supplied to the interviewees. This listed questions of various types e.g. “specifying”, “direct” and “interpreting”, which were used to follow up on the four major topics. The detailed interview guide was tailored slightly for each organisation during the pre-interview preparation stage. As Bryman and Bell (2007) recommend, each interview was closed by giving the interviewee the opportunity to identify any other issues which they wished to discuss/elaborate on.

6.6.3 Access

Following the selection of the sample organisations, the internet was used to search for the appropriate individual to approach in each organisation. By way of initial contact, a formal letter (Appendix D), with the Interview Guidelines enclosed, was sent to 53 individuals in 53 organisations. If no response was received, the letter was followed up with a phone call

approximately ten days later and, if necessary, an email a further week later. The 27 individuals who agreed to participate equated to a response rate of 51%. Reasons given for non-participation were lack of time, that it was company policy not to respond to such requests, and that any relevant information could be found on the organisation's website.

6.6.4 Pre Interview Preparation

Following their initial agreement to participate in the study, a suitable date was agreed with the interviewee. A week or ten days prior to the interview date, the interviewee was sent an email with the Participant Information Sheet (Appendix E), Participant Consent Form (Appendix F) and Interview Guidelines (Appendix D) attached. This offered them a reminder of the purpose of the study and the date of the interview, and also gave them time to ask any related questions. A signed copy of the Consent form was obtained from each interviewee.

Background information on each organisation was gathered before the interview. Where applicable, the initial notes from the public utterances analysis were reviewed and "interesting" extracts highlighted. The most recent Sustainability Report (or equivalent) produced by the organisation was downloaded, its website reviewed, and the internet searched for any recent news on the organisation. Finally, the internet was searched for any publications by the interviewee (e.g. newspaper articles, Powerpoint presentations) and, where applicable, these publications were reviewed.

6.6.5 Pilot Study

Nine pilot interviews were conducted, with the twin aims of assessing the reliability of the "research instrument" i.e. the interview guidelines, and providing some researcher training. At the end of the interview, the interviewees were encouraged to give feedback on the interview approach and structure. Following the pilot study, the tape recordings were reviewed, and notes made on interviewer technique and how effectively the responses to the questions appeared to address the objectives of the research.

The only significant change resulting from the pilot study was a revision of question two in the interview guidelines. In the guidelines for the pilot interviews, this question read "*What do you see as the boundaries of your organisation's involvement in sustainable development?*" The aim of the question was to develop a sense of the limits to organisations' contribution to

sustainable development, and the associated barriers. However, after a couple of interviews it emerged that question two was not providing this information. For instance, one interviewee discussed her organisation's "boundaries of responsibility", and began to speak about its' supply chain (Head of CSR, Partnership, Retail).

After the first few interviews therefore, this question was asked in a different manner, using the words "limits" or "barrier", and this resulted in clearer answers in the later pilot interviews. Therefore, for the continuing sample, question two was revised to "*What do you see as the barriers faced by your organisation in its path towards sustainable development?*", as shown in the interview guidelines in Appendix D. Based on analysis of the pilot interviews, only two or three interviews feature discussion of boundaries as opposed to barriers, and given that no other changes were made to the interview guidelines, no distinction is made between the pilot and continuing interviews in the remainder of the thesis.

6.6.6 Interview Technique

Interview technique was based largely on a combination of the advice of Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) and Bryman and Bell (2007). The overall aim was to be "three people" during the interviews, one having the conversation with the interviewee, one taking notes and finally, one keeping a critical eye on what the interviewee was saying and asking follow-up questions accordingly. The approach used throughout was what Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) describe as "gentle", giving the interviewee time to expand if they paused rather than jumping in with a new question. As a general rule, the interviewees were encouraged to do most of the talking, and allowed to divert to potentially interesting tangents (Bryman and Bell, 2007).

However, care was also taken to avoid being too passive and allowing the interviewee to dictate the course of the interview. Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) warn that the researcher must be aware that elite interviewees "may have more or less prepared 'talk tracks' to promote the viewpoints they want to communicate by means of the interview" (2009:147). Considering this, whenever interviewees began to veer towards "PR speak", for instance summarising the contents of their Sustainability Report, they were gently steered back to the interview guidelines.

A concern which further influenced interview technique was the need to minimise researcher bias through taking a reflexive approach. Here, techniques suggested by Fontana and Frey (2000) were helpful. The authors suggest that the researcher should avoid giving personal opinions during the interview, and should ask questions “intended to check the veracity of the respondent’s statements” (2000:660). The latter advice was followed via asking probing follow-up questions and maintaining a more critical eye throughout the interview, as mentioned above. Furthermore, as Alvesson (2003) advises, if the interviewees used jargon, they were asked to explain the issue in more simple terms.

6.7 Data Analysis

Data analysis was completed in a series of phases over a twelve month period, guided by the steps outlined by O’Dwyer (2004). Data reduction proceeded through transcribing and thematic analysis, and data display largely took the form of coding. Conclusion drawing/verification is discussed in the section on data interpretation below. In addition to the tape recordings, use was also made of the notes taken during the interviews, and my general impressions (including key themes), which were noted down immediately following the interview.

It is noted that four primary themes emerged from the initial thematic analysis:

- Understandings of sustainable development
- Role of the organisation in sustainable development
- Barriers to involvement
- Changes required in the future

These themes echo the interview structure, and indeed the research objectives. This reflects the pragmatic thrust of the interview phase of the research, whereby the interview guidelines were based closely on the research objectives. In keeping with this pragmatic approach, the results of the interview analysis, in the form of Chapters Nine and Ten, are presented in a structured fashion, based around these four themes. However, the final two chapters of the thesis are more reflexive, looking outside these themes to consider the theoretical implications of the data.

The key steps of the data analysis process are illustrated in the figure below.

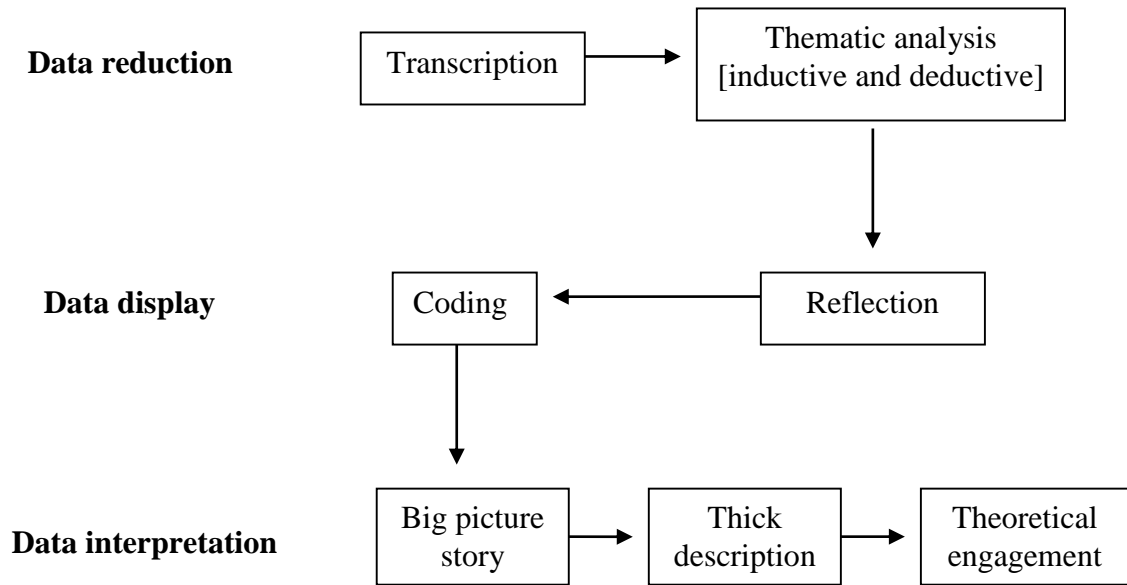


Fig 6.4: Phases of interview data analysis (based on O’Dwyer, 2004:394)

6.7.1 Transcribing

Each interview was transcribed into a Word document. The bulk of the recording was transcribed, with the exception of small portions of irrelevant information such as my initial description of the research, pleasantries etc. Also noted on the transcript were pauses, silences, laughter and changes in the interviewee’s tone.

Transcribing was also an analytical process. As transcription proceeded, headings were put on the topics the interviewees discussed and it was noted when they returned to a topic. This helped to indicate when the interviewees were emphasising a particular point or having difficulty with a question. Analysing while transcribing in this way ensured that transcription did not “erase the context” (Miles and Huberman, 1994).

6.7.2 Thematic Analysis

The transcripts were then used to conduct an initial thematic analysis of the interview data, with the object being to create “big picture summaries” as recommended by O’Dwyer (2004). Based on the headings assigned during transcription and the notes made immediately after the interviews, the major themes of each interview were identified, supported by relevant extracts

from the transcripts. In identifying themes, the advice of Ryan and Barnard (2003) proved helpful, for example to look for topics which occurred repetitively, “linguistic connectors” such as “because” or “since”, theory-related material, and “transitions” – the ways in which topics shifted.

An additional dimension to this initial analysis was to take a more deductive approach. Miles and Huberman (1994) suggest the following approach to qualitative data analysis:

“The challenge is to be explicitly mindful of the purposes of your study and of the conceptual lenses you are training on it – while allowing yourself to be open to and reeducated by things you didn’t know about or expect to find” (Miles and Huberman, 1994:56)

While the identification of key themes facilitated the latter suggestion, it did not directly connect the data with the objectives of the study. To address this component of the analysis, a spreadsheet was created listing the major topics discussed by each interviewee in response to the four specific questions. This document was then sorted according to type of organisation. This process was similar to O’Dwyer’s (2004) initial “open coding” procedure. Finally, to verify the major themes and topics identified, they were compared to the initial post-interview notes and refined slightly if necessary.

6.7.3 Coding

O’Dwyer (2004) recommends a combination of “detailed coding and broad thoughtful overviews” when analysing interview data (2004:405). After the broad overviews of the thematic analysis, detailed coding was undertaken by way of coding the text of each interview transcript. As noted above, the thematic analysis indicated that the interviews, guided by the questions asked, largely centred on the following primary themes:

- Understandings of sustainable development (S)
- Role of the organisation in sustainable development (R)
- Barriers to involvement (B)
- Changes required in the future (C)

These themes were coded with a single letter, as shown in brackets above. Based on the thematic analysis, several sub-codes were created under each heading e.g. S-D – “sustainability is difficult to define”, or B-F – “finance is a barrier”. The remainder of the codes were developed iteratively as the coding progressed.

The interviews were coded by adding electronic comments, containing the code, to the interview transcripts. An Excel spreadsheet was set up with a separate tab for each code and every time a piece of data was coded, the text was copied into the relevant tab of the spreadsheet, and referenced with the company name. Whenever appropriate, a new code was created and a tab added to the spreadsheet. In most cases, codes were attached to one of the four primary themes, but codes that did not relate to these themes were copied into an “Other” tab.

6.7.4 Data Display

When coding was completed, all of the codes and their descriptions were copied into a new spreadsheet, with four tabs representing the four primary themes. Also recorded here was the number of organisations to which that code had been attached, and the number of times that code had been used.

The next step was to collapse this initial display. The codes under each category were reviewed and group together into sub-categories, for instance, “business case” was a sub-category of S – “understandings of sustainable development”, and contained five codes. To make the data easy to analyse, all codes, organised into their categories, were copied onto a new tab and groups created which enabled the categories to be expanded and collapsed. The list of all codes grouped into categories is shown in Appendix H.

6.7.5 Data Interpretation

The interpretation phase was preceded by what O’Dwyer (2004) describes as a period of “reflection”. This involved not only reviewing the insights from the thematic analysis and the coding but re-reading the interview transcripts and the notes recorded during and after the interviews. Part of this process was reflexively looking for “negative” evidence (Miles and

Huberman, 1994), an active search for data which might contradict or challenge the themes and codes identified during the data reduction.

The next task was to identify the big picture “story” emerging from the analysis (O’Dwyer, 2004). To this end the coding spreadsheets were analysed in detail, with the sub-categories and the level of frequency of each code used to identify patterns in the data. The insights from both the inductive and deductive dimensions of the thematic analysis were collated and note made of any “outlying perspectives” (O’Dwyer, 2004). Here particular attention was paid to differences/similarities between different types of organisations. As the interpretation progressed, key patterns and themes, and relationships between them, slowly emerged.

Interpretation then moved on to “writing up” the interview story. The themes were discussed individually and relevant extracts from the interviews selected to illustrate key points; this was the “thick description” phase (O’Dwyer, 2004). During the write-up the data was consistently reflected upon and the story refined. Particular care was also taken to maintain a reflexive perspective. For instance, Alvesson (2003) urges researchers to appreciate the “potential richness of meaning in complex empirical material” (2003:14). Regular pauses were therefore taken during the analysis to consider possible alternative interpretations of the data, the motivations of the interviewee and the “metaphorical and contextual nature” of the language used by the interviewee (Alvesson and Deetz, 2000:117). The write-up ultimately took the form of Chapters Nine and Ten of the thesis

Finally, the interview data was contextualised through “employing the analytical lens” (O’Dwyer, 2004). This proceeded by way of triangulating the interview findings with those of the public utterances analysis, and re-engaging with the theoretical preoccupations of the earlier chapters of the thesis, particularly the Framework of Sustainable Business. Care was taken to heed O’Dwyer’s (2004) warning that researchers can be tempted to make their data “fit” their analytical lens, and to focus instead, as he advises, on “telling a story” (2004:403). This final phase of interpretation took the form of Chapters Eleven and Twelve, Discussion and Conclusions respectively, which consider the empirical findings in the context of the research objectives and the various relevant theoretical lenses.

6.8 Evaluative Criteria

Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) offer a detailed discussion of reliability and validity in interview research, focussing particularly on the latter. In relation first to reliability, the authors make a number of suggestions which were taken up in the current study, such as avoiding “leading questions” during the interview, and involving other researchers, in this case the research supervisor, in the development of the interview guidelines. In addition, the pilot study was particularly important for reliability; it resulted in refinement of the interview guidelines and the development of more consistent interviewer technique.

Concerns around the validity of the “knowledge” emerging from the interviews mirror those already discussed in relation to the public utterances analysis, particularly the close reading. For instance, when it comes to the statements of the interviewees, once again “how can one know that the statement A truthfully represents the thing T?” (Alvesson and Karreman, 2000:137). By way of enhancing validity, therefore, the advice of Alvesson (2003) and Alvesson and Skollberg (2000) on reflexivity was followed i.e. when writing up, biases were considered and explicated, assumptions were questioned and various theoretical lenses were employed. When considering interviewee responses, the “how”, “who” and “why” involved was always taken into account (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009).

Also along this theme, Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) suggest that the researcher consider validity at every stage of the interview process, continually “checking” and “questioning” the “credibility, plausibility and trustworthiness” of the emerging findings (2009:250). Conducting the interview data collection and analysis process over a relatively long period of time (18 months) allowed for regular researcher reflection and also facilitated engagement with alternative theoretical perspectives through exposure to newly-published literature.

Finally, the practical techniques of Miles and Huberman (1994) were applied throughout the data interpretation process: looking for “negative evidence” and “extreme cases”, “following up on surprises” and triangulation (1994:263). The authors also suggest respondent validation, or “getting feedback from informants” (Miles and Huberman, 1994:263). With this aim, each interviewee was sent a “participant debriefing form” (see Appendix G) detailing the preliminary findings from the interview portion of the study and inviting them to ask questions or provide feedback.

6.9 Summary and Conclusion

The empirical phase of the current study involved content analysis and close reading of the public utterances of forty organisations, and semi-structured interviews with twenty-seven individuals in twenty-seven organisations. Organisations were selected on a “best practice” basis (Gray et al, 1995a:87), based on their attainment of various awards and certain standards. The sample included a number of different types of organisation, including PLCs, social enterprises, SMEs and co-owned businesses.

The “public utterances” analysed were the stand-alone report (if available), annual report (if available) and website of each organisation. A research instrument was developed with which to perform the content analysis, consisting of a “menu” derived by combining four models, drawn from the literature, which presented narratives of sustainability at an organisational level. The menu was used to analyse the public utterances for both incidence of disclosure and the thematic content of the disclosure.

The approach to the close reading was based on the methods outlined by Amernic and Craig (2001) and Milne et al (2009). Three readings of the public utterances were conducted. The first aimed to identify the key themes and overarching narrative presented by each organisation, the second focussed on language use, while the third and final reading was a reflexive one, considering the context, purpose and possible alternative interpretations of the public utterances.

Each of the twenty-seven individuals interviewed played a key role in their organisation’s sustainability-related policies, being the CEO/Chairman of the smaller organisations and the Head of Sustainability/CSR in the larger companies. The interviews were semi-structured, with the interview guidelines consisting of only four questions.

Throughout the data collection and analysis, it was necessary to consider the reliability and validity of the methods and ensuing data. A primary concern in all cases was to minimise the subjectivity of the researcher. Reliability was enhanced through making the processes as transparent, traceable and replicable as possible. Efforts were made to address validity by grounding the research instruments and approaches in existing theory, and through triangulation of the three methods. Perhaps the most significant step taken to minimise

subjectivity, however, was the adoption of a reflexive approach during the data collection, and particularly, the data analysis process. In simple terms, this involved, as Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) articulate, regular “checking” and “questioning” of the “credibility, plausibility and trustworthiness” of the findings (2009:250). The context and purpose of the data sources, the possibility of alternative interpretations and what was “not spoken of”, were considered throughout.

The findings of the empirical work are outlined in the forthcoming chapters. The public utterances analysis and interview data are first considered separately, before the findings are finally triangulated and interpreted in the context of the theoretical dimensions of the research.

Chapter Seven

Content Analysis: Results

7.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the findings from the first phase of empirical work: a content analysis of the public utterances of forty business organisations. As explained in Chapters Five and Six, the research instrument used to complete the analysis was in the form of a “menu”, developed by combining four narratives of sustainability at an organisational level from the literature. The models of Gladwin et al (1995), Starik and Rands (1995), Forum for the Future (2005) and Young and Tilley (2006) were combined to create a menu of 106 items, and decision rules were developed which allowed sentences from the public utterances to be matched to these items (see Appendix A).

The menu is an attempt to construct a narrative of sustainability at an organisational level “alternative” to the mainstream “managerialist” narratives which dominate the literature and pervade in practice (Gray, 2010). Essentially, what the content analysis does is “test” the menu; it seeks to compare these alternative narratives of the sustainability-organisation relationship with narratives presented by organisations themselves. In this way it is hoped to identify and explore the elements of sustainability which organisations seek to emphasise and to understand.

Furthermore, and perhaps more pertinently, it is hoped to explore which elements of sustainability organisations do not, perhaps *cannot* emphasise and understand. This aspect of the content analysis is particularly important in the context of the literature. It was argued in Chapter Four that a key limitation of the managerialist literature and its’ largely business case narratives of “corporate sustainability” is that it fails to acknowledge what business “cannot” do; thus the tensions within the “sustainability-organisation” relationship are ignored and unsustainable “business as usual” remains unchallenged. It is suggested that the narratives which make up the menu, however, go “beyond the business case” (Hahn et al, 2010), they incorporate some elements which business organisations may find challenging, which may even conflict with their key goals. It is hoped that the content analysis can identify some of these elements and thus begin to provide some insight on the difficulties and tensions of applying sustainability at an organisational level.

Finally, as noted in Chapter Five, developing the menu, and indeed “testing” it through the content analysis, is a useful exercise in itself. By using the menu as a research instrument, we

can begin to explore “what happens” when we attempt go beyond managerialist, business case narratives of sustainability at an organisational level. Are there items “missing” from the menu? Are there contradictions within the menu? Is there really potential for “reconciliation” between these contradictory discourses..?

As illustrated in Chapter Four (Fig. 4.5), the models used to create the menu are rooted in the Framework of Sustainable Business (see Chapter Three). This chapter therefore begins with an overview of the data in the context of the theoretical framework, highlighting some of the key findings and refining the Framework accordingly. Throughout the data interpretation, the Framework is consistently in the background, informing the analysis and contextualising the results within a “bigger picture”.

The remainder of the chapter is structured based on the Menu, discussing each of its fifteen categories (see Fig. 6.1) in turn. The results are then presented per individual model, and per organisation type. As discussed in Chapter Six (section 6.3.2), the content analysis seeks to examine both the “if” – incidence of disclosure – and the “what” – thematic content” – and both of these elements are considered throughout the presentation of the data. The chapter concludes by drawing together the key findings of the analysis. Also relevant is Appendix J – The “Other” Category, which discusses elements of the public utterances which did not match to the Menu.

7.2 What the Content Analysis is and what it is not

The above paragraphs explain what the content analysis *is*: it aims to compare academic and corporate narratives of sustainability. However, it is also necessary to say a few words about what the content analysis is *not*.

1. The content analysis does not measure how “sustainable” an organisation is:

The menu is not a model of what a “sustainable organisation” might look like. It is merely a research instrument; the combining of four different narratives of sustainability at an organisational level to allow their comparison with the narratives presented by business organisations. The menu does not measure an organisation’s “sustainability performance”; it does not tell us whether one organisation is “good” or “bad” or more or less “sustainable” or

“unsustainable” than another. Instead it tells us how similar, or not, the narratives presented by the organisations are to those in the literature, which elements of the menu are emphasised and how they are understood.

2. The content analysis does not tell us what organisations do, only what they say

Related to the first point is that the texts analysed do not necessarily reflect the organisation’s actions and behaviour. Again, analysis of these reports therefore does not tell us how “sustainable” an organisation actually is, merely what the organisation says about sustainability.

The term “addressed” is used throughout the chapter, meaning that a sentence from the public utterances was matched, per the decision rules, to the item of the menu. “Addressed” does *not* mean that the organisation behaves in whatever way the item suggests. So an organisation with a high “score” is simply one whose public utterances contain sentences which match to a high number of the items in the menu, it does not mean that it is a particularly “good” or “sustainable” organisation. It is suggested also that the reader may find it helpful to have a copy of Appendix A, the decision rules, to hand when reading the chapter.

3. The content analysis is not quantitative

As explained in Chapter Five, the content analysis is a qualitative process. That said, “incidence” of disclosure was measured, and the ensuing figures are presented below. However, these figures are for illustrative purposes only, to begin to develop a picture of what organisations are addressing in their public utterances, rather than offering concrete quantitative statistics. The sample size is not large, there are no claims of generalisability, and there are no tests for statistical significance. The figures are merely pieces of information, along with the thematic content, to be developed and connected as the findings emerge over the later chapters of the thesis.

7.3 Revisiting the Framework

The focus of this chapter is data. However, the results of the content analysis also have theoretical implications. In particular, they allow for further exploration and development of the Framework of Sustainable Business.

Two aspects of the findings are highlighted on the revised Framework below. First, note that the four models of sustainability at an organisational level are different sizes, based on their “popularity” with the sample organisations. For example, as discussed later in section 7.6, the organisations addressed, on average, 66% of the items in Forum for the Future’s (2005) model, and 38% of the items in Gladwin et als’ (1995). This suggests that more organisations present narratives of sustainability consistent with the more conservative lower half of the Framework than with the more radical upper section.

In addition, the figure below depicts some of the most frequently addressed categories and items of the menu. These are mapped to particular quadrants based on the models e.g. the “management”, “employees” and “other organisations” categories are consistent with the “business as usual”, “business case” aspects of Starik and Rands’ (1995) and Forum for the Future’s models.

What these findings suggest is that organisational narratives of sustainability are closest to business as usual and the business case, with some engagement with ecological modernisation and, in the case of the smaller organisations sampled, with ideas of Young and Tilley’s such as ecological equity and eco-effectiveness. The sizes of the quadrants are thus revised to reflect this. We will return to the Framework at the beginning of Chapter Eight.

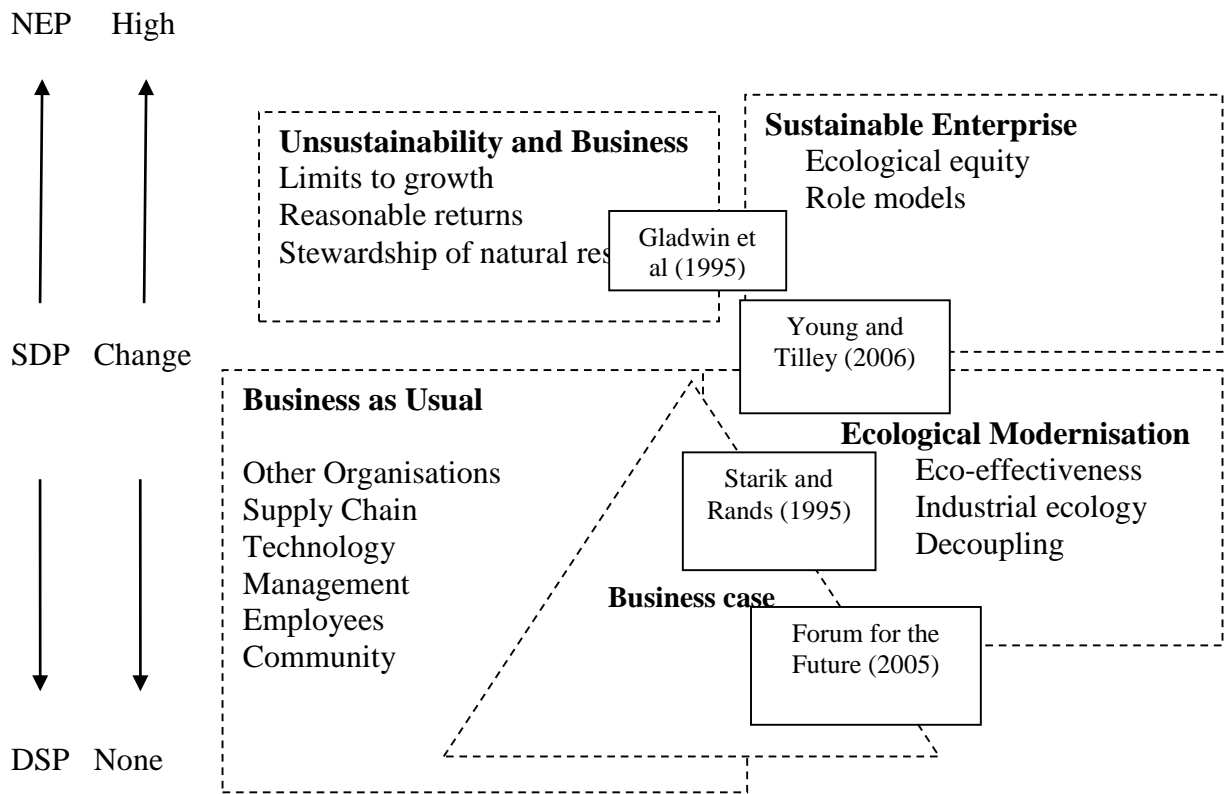


Fig 7.1: Theoretical framework and content analysis results

7.4 Headline Statistics

The first point to note is that none of the organisations sampled succeeding in addressing all 106 items of the menu in their public utterances, with the Co-operative Group coming closest at 83 items (78% of all items). As the table below illustrates, some of the items were more popular than others, with four items addressed by all 40 organisations in the sample, but five items not addressed by any organisations.

Item	Category	Model	No. of orgs addressing item (% total orgs)
Eliminate waste, reuse or recycle where possible	Waste	Forum for the Future (2005)	40 (100%)
Generate outputs in forms and amounts that are assimilable and either useful or ecologically neutral.	Waste	Starik and Rands (1995)	40 (100%)

Initiate and be involved in numerous environmental partnerships of different forms, which will involve different issues and various external stakeholder organizations.	Other organisations	Starik and Rands (1995)	40 (100%)
Support the development of the community in which the organisation operates (including economic opportunities)	Community	Forum for the Future (2005)	40 (100%)
Human vs. natural capital - partial substitutes	Natural resources	Gladwin et al (1995)	0 (0%)
Encourage national and international governmental bodies to adopt national income accounts that incorporate environmental impacts	Policy and legal	Starik and Rands (1995)	0 (0%)
Discount rate - low/complement	Future generations	Gladwin et al (1995)	0 (0%)
Perception of earth - home/managed	Nature	Gladwin et al (1995)	0 (0%)
Be the target of few, if any, protests by environmental activists	Other organisations	Starik and Rands (1995)	0 (0%)

Table 7.1: Most and least frequently addressed items of the menu

What we can see from the above table is that there were some items which none of the organisations sampled addressed. This suggests straight away that there are certain elements of “sustainability” which organisations, for whatever reason, do not seek to emphasise in their public utterances. In addition, we also see that there are a number of aspects of the menu, related to waste management, partnership with other organisations, and community development, which *every* organisation seems to believe is an essential element of sustainability.

In addition, the above table hints that organisations were more likely to address items from Starik and Rands’ (1995) and Forum for the Future’s (2005) models. This is supported by a

closer look at the results; elements of these models account for sixteen of the twenty most “popular” items of the menu. In contrast, elements of Gladwin et al’s (1995) “sustaincentric” paradigm account for ten of the twenty least frequently addressed items. Further detail can be found in Appendix K, which presents the incidence figures for each item of the menu.

7.5 Categories of the Menu

This section is organised around the fifteen broad categories derived for the menu, as depicted in Fig 6.1 in the previous chapter.

7.5.1 Natural Resources

The organisations sampled were eager to talk about natural resources, with all of the items bar Gladwin’s “human vs. natural capital – partial substitutes” addressed by more than half of the sample. The table below shows the highest and lowest incidence rates for the items in this category.

Item	Model	No. of orgs addressing item (% total orgs)
Environmental stability - The positive forces being exerted on the environment to stabilize and where necessary restore the various ecosystem functions, e.g. climate change	Young and Tilley (2006)	38 (95%)
Use natural resources no faster than either (1) rates of renewal, (2) rates of recycling, or (3) rates at which ecosystems' regenerative capacities will not have been exceeded by the time technological change and conversion to sustainable resources has occurred	Starik and Rands (1995)	37 (93%)
Ensure that all mined materials are used efficiently within cyclic systems and systematically reduce	Forum for the Future (2005)	37 (93%)

dependence on fossil fuels - use renewable resources instead.		
Eco-effectiveness - ultimately requires industry to reinvent itself so that the new ways of doing business result in regenerative, not depletive practices	Young and Tilley (2006)	30 (75%)
Natural capital - conserve/maintain	Gladwin et al (1995)	29 (73%)
Carrying capacity limits - approaching	Gladwin et al (1995)	23 (58%)
Human vs. natural capital - partial substitutes	Gladwin et al (1995)	0 (0%)

Table 7.2: Incidence of disclosure of selected items of the menu – Natural Resources category

Although these incidence figures of 90%+ are high, they can be deceptive. Looking at thematic content, and taking Forum for the Future’s advice to “systematically reduce dependence on fossil fuels - use renewable resources instead” as an example, although 93% of organisations addressed this item, for the majority the disclosure took the form merely of a reference to renewable energy. Only a small number addressed the more specific half of the suggestion, to “reduce dependence on fossil fuels”. For example, the Better Food Company cautions against a “future where we cannot depend on fossil fuels” (Better Food Company, 2010a).

Perhaps more surprising is that 73% of all organisations make reference to conserving natural capital, as advocated by Gladwin et al (1995), while 58% address “carrying capacity limits – approaching”. This is unexpected in the context of suggestions in the literature that a “significant proportion” of organisations “cannot or will not accept the principal exigencies of sustainability” (Gray and Bebbington, 2000). Far from Promethean denial, the language used by some organisations is resonant of the “limits to growth” discourse of “survivalism” (Dryzek, 2005), for example:

“We recognise that there are physical limits to the resources of the Earth (both in terms of generating materials and absorbing wastes), and that any business activity that exceeds these

limits is, by definition, unsustainable in the long term and will need to be reconstituted” (Co-operative Group, 2009:6)

“We recognise that growth must not come at the expense of the environment which we all share” (John Lewis Partnership, 2010a)

There are exceptions, of course, with a number of organisations in resource-intensive industries employing some more “technocentric” language. BP, for example, remarks that “plentiful energy resources exist to meet growing global demand” (BP, 2009:8), while Shell refers to a desire to “extract more from existing resources” (Royal Dutch Shell, 2009:4).

Shell is a particularly interesting case. While some pages of the organisation’s Sustainability Report speak sustain-centrally of avoiding “dangerous climate change”, others technocentrically describe natural gas as “abundant”. There appears to be a contradiction here; the organisation is borrowing from the discourse of more than one, if not all, of what Gladwin et al (1995) envisioned as distinct paradigms. Can an organisation be both ecocentric and technocentric? A clue to the puzzle is offered by Shell’s constant references to the power of technology, for example:

“We will continue to use advanced technologies to improve our energy efficiency, reduce emissions in our own operations and extract more from existing resources” (Royal Dutch Shell 2009:4)

This sentence is only one of countless endorsements of technological solutions to environmental problems, which is suggestive of ecological modernisation. While Shell makes regular use of sustain-centric language, the more techno-centric language, such as that cited earlier, reflects the dominant social paradigm (see Chapter Two). This brings to mind Orsato and Clegg’s (2005) misgivings about ecological modernisation, it could be just “another neo-liberal ideology in green camouflage” (2005:262). These extracts from Shell’s public utterances suggest that it is perhaps possible to appropriate the discourse of ecological modernisation to present technocentric business as usual as “sustainability”.

7.5.2 Supply Chain

Both items in this category were addressed by a large number of the organisations sampled, with 38 (95%) deemed to address the issue “source materials ethically and treat suppliers fairly” and 28 (70%) to “honour relationships with suppliers” (both Forum for the Future, 2005).

Analysis of the related thematic content, however, reveals some variation in the range of information presented. Popular topics are ethical screening of suppliers and working with suppliers to improve environmental standards. But it is interesting to contrast these rather generic commitments with the policies of some of the Fairtrade organisations. For example, Traidcraft makes “advance payments to producers” (Traidcraft, 2010a:8), and PeopleTree does not allow a supplier’s orders to “fall below 75% of the previous years” (PeopleTree, 2009). These policies offer a hint of how other organisations *could* be treating their suppliers, as a “true partnership...versus a supplier-buyer relationship” (Cafedirect, 2009:16). Such an approach is perhaps one way of going “beyond the business case”.

7.5.3 Technology

In the context of the increasing prominence of ecological modernisation, as discussed in Chapter Two, this is an intriguing category. The table below illustrates the popularity of “eco-innovation” (e.g. Hawken et al, 1999), and a relative absence of scepticism, caution, or support for “appropriate technology” (Schumacher, 1973).

Item	Model	No. of orgs addressing item (% total orgs)
Improvement in product systems (eco-efficiency and eco-innovation)	Forum for the Future (2005)	34 (85%)
Faith in technology - skepticism	Gladwin et al (1995)	9 (23%)
Technological pathways - benign/decoupled	Gladwin et al (1995)	7 (18%)

Table 7.3: Incidence of disclosure of each item of the menu – Technology category

As the high incidence figure for the first element in the table indicates, many organisations speak of “new technology” and “eco-innovation” of products, with some particularly optimistic. BT, for example, presents elaborate visions of “the potential of technology” (BT, 2010:5), while Ecotricity hails the “dawn of the age of Renewables - nothing less than a second industrial revolution” (Ecotricity, 2010a).

Critics of ecological modernisation point to its reliance on “technofixes” (Young, 2000). Negative comments regarding technology were rare in the public utterances analysed, with only nine (of 40) organisations displaying any signs of Gladwin et al’s (1995) “skepticism”. There were however a small number of allusions to what Gladwin et al (1995) might call technology on an “appropriate scale”. For example, and not surprisingly, the Centre for Alternative Technology aims to develop technology for use on a “domestic scale” (Centre for Alternative Technology, 2010a), while the Co-operative Group refers to “Integrated Farm Management”, which “combines traditional farming techniques with modern technology” (Co-operative Group, 2009:85). Most specifically, PeopleTree echoes Schumacher (1973) views on the replacement of manual labour with technology:

“Hand production reduces the need for oil-based energy, is carbon neutral and reduces waste through mass-production. Highly value-added products provide marginalised people with incomes, whilst using the minimum amount of materials. This also gives great opportunities for artisans whose livelihoods are undermined by machines” (People Tree, 2009)

Finally, this category is also an interesting one in terms of analysing the menu itself. Consider the contrast between Gladwin et al’s scepticism and Forum for the Future’s faith in technology, a dichotomy which recalls the debate in Chapter Two on the “paradox of sustainability” (see section 2.9). Some insight on this paradox can perhaps be gained from the comments of some of the eight organisations which addressed both Gladwin et al’s and Forum for the Future’s items in their public utterances. It is noted that both the Centre for Alternative Technology and Ecotricity, although technology-intensive organisations, had a “domestic” focus. For example, Ecotricity speaks of “local energy” and “energy independence for Britain” (Ecotricity, 2009). Perhaps here we see a sort of “reconciliation” (Dryzek, 2005) between the often contradictory discourses of eco-modernism and “green” community enterprises; technological development is essential, but on an “appropriate scale”.

7.5.4 Risk

Gladwin et al's (1995) "sustaincentrism" includes the assumption that problems are "grave" and solutions "urgent". The "precautionary" approach advocated by Gladwin et al offers a counterpoint to the confidence characteristic of the business case argument (e.g. Holliday et al/WBCSD, 2002). The table below indicates that over half of the organisations sampled did indeed appear to show signs of a "sustaincentric" approach to risk.

Item	Model	No. of orgs addressing item (% total orgs)
Severity of problems - consequential	Gladwin et al (1995)	25 (63%)
Risk orientation - precaution	Gladwin et al (1995)	22 (55%)
Urgency of solutions - great/decades	Gladwin et al (1995)	16 (40%)

Table 7.4: Incidence of disclosure of each item of the menu – Risk category

It is not surprising that many of the smaller enterprises, selected for study in part for their awareness of sustainability, stress the severity of environmental and social problems. For example, the Centre for Alternative Technology suggests that climate change will have "serious consequences for the human race" (Centre for Alternative Technology, 2010b), while Innocent Drinks expects it to be "catastrophic" (Innocent Drinks, 2010a). However, these comments are also echoed by some of the larger organisations:

"If we are to avoid catastrophic climate change, scientists believe that a commitment to limiting global temperature increase to less than 2°C is critical" (Unilever, 2009:17)

"Urgent action is needed to mitigate and adapt to the effects of climate change, including rising sea levels and more frequent extreme weather events such as droughts, floods and hurricanes" (GlaxoSmithKline, 2009:209)

While these extracts suggest an engagement with the "exigencies of sustainability" (Gray and Bebbington, 2000), it is useful once again to read between the lines. Analysis of the related thematic content reveals that environmental and social issues are more frequently described as "challenges", as opposed to "problems". For example, only four organisations use the word "problem" while ten refer to "challenges". The use of the more positive-sounding "challenge" suggests that increasing acknowledgement of the severity of sustainability issues is still

accompanied by determined optimism. After all, “challenge” is easily paired with “opportunity”:

“Mapping a route to a more sustainable energy future is a challenge for governments, business and consumers alike. It is also a technology opportunity” (Shell, 2009:3)

“It is all too easy to feel powerless in the face of climate change. We see it as an enormous challenge but also an opportunity” (Good Energy, 2009:4)

7.5.5 Management

This category of the menu was made up entirely of items suggested by Starik and Rands (1995) and Forum for the Future (2005), whose narratives have a practical, “semi-managerialist” focus.

Item	Model	No. of orgs addressing item (% total orgs)
Promote the value of environmental protection and sustainable organizational performance, instill norms for environmental sensitivity in all decisions, and develop role-specific expectations for environmental performance.	Starik and Rands (1995)	30 (75%)
Effective management of risk and corporate governance issues.	Forum for the Future (2005)	29 (73%)
Reverse logistics and re-use and re-manufacturing systems	Forum for the Future (2005)	21 (53%)
Consider all of their principles, policies, and practices from the standpoint of long-term ecosystem viability and vitality and will develop		15 (38%)

and implement strategies so that they act in ecologically sustainable ways.	Starik and Rands (1995)	
Industrial ecology - looking at synergistic production systems where one organisation's waste streams are another's resources	Forum for the Future (2005)	9 (23%)
Modular manufacturing systems.	Forum for the Future (2005)	4 (10%)
Develop and institute full-environmental-cost accounting procedures.	Starik and Rands (1995)	4 (10%)
Biomimicry - mimicing nature and natural processes in industrial processes and industrial systems design	Forum for the Future (2005)	2 (5%)

Table 7.5: Incidence of disclosure of selected items of the menu – Management category

While the top two items in the table above could be regarded as “low-hanging fruit” (Walley and Whitehead, 1994), it is noted that many of the organisations did not address the other, more sophisticated, elements of the Management category.

To consider the manufacturing elements of Forum for the Future’s (2005) model, organisations seemed most eager to discuss “reverse logistics...”, with industrial ecology and, in particular, “modular manufacturing systems” and biomimicry, more rarely cited. Popular techniques referred to included anaerobic digestion, reusing by-products, and in the case of some of the larger organisations, “closed-loop” manufacturing. These comments indicate a level of engagement with a more “ecological” manufacturing process, as envisioned by Hawken et al (1999) and Porritt (2005), which goes beyond the traditional eco-efficiency focus.

One of the more radical elements of this category was Starik and Rands’ (1995) suggestion that organisations “consider all of their principles, policies, and practices from the standpoint of long-term ecosystem viability and vitality...” When discussing this idea in their paper, the

authors propose that organisations develop “environmentally orientated missions” and “strategies for reducing population and consumption”. While none of the sampled organisations mentioned population reduction, some do touch, albeit rather vaguely, on reducing consumption, stating their aim to “support a more sustainable way of life” (Guardian News and Media, 2010a). These comments were largely (13 of 15 organisations) restricted to organisations with a social and/or environmental mission.

7.5.6 Policy and Legal

In this category we find one of the most interesting contradictions within the menu, where on one hand Starik and Rands (1995) encourage organisations to “promote market-based governmental environmental-policy approaches”, while on the other Gladwin et al (1995) suggest a “green economy”, wherein “policy instruments and economic incentives are required to place preemptive constraints on the pursuit of purely market criteria bearing upon natural resource use and satisfaction of basic human needs” (1995: 893).

Item	Model	No. of orgs addressing item (% total orgs)
Take political action to promote the adoption of laws and regulations that "raise the floor" of environmental performance.	Starik and Rands (1995)	32 (80%)
Economic structure - green economy	Gladwin et al (1995)	11 (28%)
Work to remove anti-sustainability subsidies, and/or to institute pro-sustainability subsidies.	Starik and Rands (1995)	10 (25%)
Promote market-based governmental environmental-policy approaches over traditional command-and-control approaches.	Starik and Rands (1995)	8 (20%)
Encourage national and international governmental bodies to adopt national income accounts that incorporate environmental impacts	Starik and Rands (1995)	0 (0%)

Table 7.6: Incidence of disclosure of selected items of the menu – Policy and Legal category

Here we find a clear difference between the large PLCs and the social enterprises sampled. All eight organisations deemed to “promote market-based governmental-policy approaches” were large PLCs, while of the eleven judged to support a “green economy”, seven were social enterprises and the remainder had a strong social or environmental mission. This suggests that the large PLCs sampled may share the WBCSD’s belief in the efficacy of “open and competitive markets” (Schmidheiny/BCSD, 1992) to bring about sustainable development. For example:

“We will continue to work with governments to help them set the policy frameworks to create market-based incentives, such as an effective cap-and-trade market for CO₂, that will contribute towards improving energy efficiency and developing CCS technologies” (Royal Dutch Shell, 2009:10)

“For some diseases disproportionately affecting developing countries there are no effective prevention methods or treatments, largely because normal market incentives for innovation do not exist” (GlaxoSmithKline, 2009:70)

A number of the smaller organisations, in contrast, make negative statements about “purely market criteria” (Gladwin et al, 1995). For instance, the Eden Project suggests that “our moral compass has been disoriented by over-respect for the free market” (Eden Project, 2009:5). In addition, Riverford Organics questions “the underlying philosophy of looking for a market-based solution to this problem”, arguing that “long-term solutions will not be produced by consumer pressure and market forces; the issues are just too complex” (Riverford Organics, 2010).

In terms of “reconciliation”, the results of the content analysis do not provide any hints of what some sort of middle ground between these contradictory elements of the menu might look like. None of the organisations sampled address both “green economy” and “market-based” approaches and, considering the opposing views in the literature (e.g. see Thielemann, 2000 on the “unfettered market” versus Friedman, 1962), it is difficult to see how reconciliation might occur (although Porritt, 2005, makes an attempt). Suffice to say for now that this impasse suggests that perhaps support for and/or participation in the free market may be a considerable source of conflict within the sustainability-organisation relationship.

7.5.7 Product and Customers

The popularity of the top items in this category is predictable: what organisation would not wish, for example, to extol the positive social impacts of its products and services? Therefore, our attention is focused on the lower three items in the table below, in particular the difference between the number of organisations addressing Starik and Rands’ (1995) advice to “adopt marketing and procurement policies emphasizing sustainable products” and Young and Tilley’s (2006) to “channel demand towards the less problematic areas”.

Item	Model	No. of orgs addressing item (% total orgs)
Minimisation of the negative social impacts of products and services [or maximisation of the positive]	Forum for the Future (2005)	39 (98%)
Honour relationships with customers/citizens	Forum for the Future (2005)	35 (88%)
Adopt marketing and procurement policies emphasizing sustainable products, in part to create and enlarge markets for such products.	Starik and Rands (1995)	24 (60%)
Sufficiency - rather than fuelling the demand for more unsustainable products, firms might try to channel demand towards the less problematic areas	Young and Tilley (2006)	7 (18%)
Product to service shifts, for example leasing products on a continual service contract rather than a sell and forget approach.	Forum for the Future (2005)	2 (5%)

*Table 7.7: Incidence of disclosure of selected items of the menu –
Product and Customers category*

There is a subtle but important distinction between Starik and Rands’ proposition and Young and Tilley’s. The former’s is straightforward – in their paper the authors refer to “green marketing” – and 60% of the organisations sampled address this issue. For example, the food retailers (e.g. Tesco, Marks and Spencer, John Lewis Partnership, Co-operative Group)

highlight their efforts to promote healthier products, bringing to mind the WBCSD's suggestion that "it's not about consuming less, it's about consuming differently" (WBCSD, 2011:14).

Young and Tilley (2006), on the other hand, discuss issues of "sufficiency" and "sustainable consumerism", asking whether organisations should limit sales. In short, while Starik and Rands suggest consuming differently, Young and Tilley consider consuming less. It seems that the organisations sampled prefer the idea of the former; only seven make reference of any sort to sustainable consumption. Here, some of the social enterprises state their intention to "promote sustainable consumerism" (Better Food Company, Cafedirect, Traidcraft) but do not mention limiting their own sales. This suggests that perhaps business organisations may struggle to engage with the complexities of an idea such as sustainable consumption. Some insight into the related tensions is offered by Guardian News and Media:

"We recognise that tensions can arise between our need for advertising revenues to sustain our business and being a medium for promoting consumption... We will work with our readers and users to gain a deeper understanding of what products and services they want in this area, and use this knowledge to engage with our advertisers and sponsors on the issue of sustainability" (Guardian News and Media, 2010b:3)

Finally, the table above shows that only two organisations addressed the notion of "product to service shifts" (Forum for the Future, 2005). These were the two large communications companies, BT and Vodafone, who referred to "dematerialisation", which BT describes as "a virtual product [presumably their own?!] replacing a physical one" (BT, 2010:6). None of the organisations go further and mention exactly what Forum for the Future recommend: "leasing products on a continual service contract rather than a sell and forget approach".

7.5.8 Profits and Growth

With growth a key issue in the wider sustainability literature (e.g. Jackson, 2009), each element within this category raises interesting questions. Here, Forum for the Future (2005) refer to the business case ("management of sustainability issues to improve access to financial capital"), Gladwin et al (1995) recommend limiting economic growth, and Young and Tilley (2006) touch on wealth redistribution ("economic equity").

Item	Model	No. of orgs addressing item (% total orgs)
Demonstrate a positive stance on, and management of, sustainability issues to improve access to financial capital	Forum for the Future (2005)	28 (70%)
Role of growth - mixed/modify	Gladwin et al (1995)	27 (68%)
Ensure the wealth created is fairly distributed	Forum for the Future (2005)	19 (48%)
Growth pattern - logistic	Gladwin et al (1995)	19 (48%)
Economic equity - distribution of economic wealth fairly between existing generations as well as future generations	Young and Tilley (2006)	18 (45%)

Table 7.8: Incidence of disclosure of each item of the menu – Profits and Growth category

To be deemed to address the top item in the table above, organisations had to refer in their public utterances to a link between sustainability and business success and/or shareholder returns, something which the large PLCs managed with aplomb. Perhaps more unexpected, however, is that some of the socially/environmentally motivated organisations also alluded to a link between sustainability and competitive advantage (e.g. GreenWorks, Blue Skies, Cafedirect), suggesting that the business case is not the exclusive domain of large multinational PLCs. For example:

“As much of the banking industry suffered, Triodos Bank benefited from its strong reputation. People increasingly recognise the importance of the values at the heart of the organisation, leading to unprecedented growth in 2009” (Triodos Bank, 2009:19)

Gladwin et al’s (1995) “logistic” approach to growth, as opposed to the technocentric assumption that “growth is good and more growth is better” (1995:884), has the potential to create tension for commercial organisations, particularly PLCs, which are legally required to

“maximise” profits. It is unexpected, therefore, that 68% of organisations addressed Gladwin et al’s “role of growth – mixed/modify”, and 48% “growth pattern – logistic”. Looking more closely at the “role of growth...” item, 5 of the 27 organisations which addressed this were large PLCs. However, their comments relate solely to specific, product-related issues. For example, Unilever and GlaxoSmithKline mention selling products at lower prices in developing countries, while Tesco “do not sell products that might appeal disproportionately to a younger audience” (Tesco, 2010:40). In contrast, some of comments from the co-owned organisations and social enterprises are suggestive of a more general “mixed/modify” approach, for example:

“Business has a purpose and responsibilities beyond the sole pursuit of profit” (Co-operative Group, 2009:88)

“We recognise that organisations should work in the interests of all stakeholders, and not simply to maximise financial returns” (Traidcraft, 2010b)

“Our priority is to maximise the use of the furniture we get, not to maximise our profits” (GreenWorks, 2010)

Although not as direct as the above, the Royal Bank of Scotland does declare that “businesses do not just exist to serve shareholder interests” (Royal Bank of Scotland, 2009:10), also stating that it plans to aim for “sustainable shareholder returns”. This idea of “fair”, or “sufficient”, or “reasonable” returns was in fact quite popular among the organisations sampled. For example, the John Lewis Partnership and the Ecology Building Society aims for “sufficient profits”, the Co-operative Group to “optimise profits”, and GlaxoSmithKline and the Phone Co-op for “fair” returns. It is noted, however, that in most cases, a figure on what actually constitutes a fair or reasonable return is not provided. The variation in the figures which are given, by Traidcraft (6.5%), Triodos Bank (7%) and RBS (15%), suggest an amount of flexibility.

A last piece of data on growth is that a small number (four) of the smaller organisations remark on the virtues of being small. In particular, Triodos Bank’s Annual Report is eloquent in its argument that a “modern network of smaller specialist banks” could make for a more

sustainable financial system than the current one dominated by “big banks” (Triodos Bank, 2009:11).

Finally, to tick Young and Tilley’s (2006) “economic equity” box, organisations were required to mention creating wealth in developing countries, economic wealth in future generations, and/or wealth redistribution. The majority of thematic content here related to organisations’ work in developing countries, with the Fairtrade organisations the most vocal. More specific to an organisational level is Forum for the Future’s (2005) “ensure the wealth created is fairly distributed”. Here the co-owned businesses were keen to stress how their profits were “shared” among its members, as opposed to benefitting only a “smaller group of shareholders” (Ecology Building Society, 2007:1).

7.5.9 Waste

Item	Model	No. of orgs addressing item (% total orgs)
Eliminate waste, reuse or recycle where possible	Forum for the Future (2005)	40 (100%)
Generate outputs in forms and amounts that are assimilable and either useful or ecologically neutral.	Starik and Rands (1995)	40 (100%)
Eliminate the accumulation of manmade substances and products in nature - substitute all persistent and unnatural compounds with substances that can be easily assimilated and broken down by natural systems	Forum for the Future (2005)	28 (70%)
Zero waste and zero-emissions production systems	Forum for the Future (2005)	16 (40%)

Table 7.9: Incidence of disclosure of each item of the menu – Waste category

The very high incidence figures above indicate that the sample organisations are eager to discuss their work on waste management. There was little in the way of variation in the

thematic content of the first three items; commitments to reduce, reuse and recycle waste, and reduce carbon emissions, were common to every organisation sampled.

The only relatively unpopular item in the category was Forum for the Future’s (2005) challenging goal of “zero waste and zero-emissions production systems”. However, some organisations (e.g. Tesco) did state their aim to become a “carbon neutral”, or a “zero carbon” business.

7.5.10 Society

This category affords an opportunity to consider in more detail the four individual models used to create the menu. A glance at the table below suggests that the organisations sampled were more likely to address the items proposed by Starik and Rands (1995), Forum for the Future (2005) and Young and Tilley (2006) than those of Gladwin et al (1995).

Item	Model	No. of orgs addressing item (% total orgs)
Attempt to affect social-cultural elements in order to increase the strength of pro-sustainability values.	Starik and Rands (1995)	39 (98%)
Socio-effectiveness - organisations having a social mission, which have a sustained positive impact on society	Young and Tilley (2006)	31 (78%)
Logic/reason - vision/network	Gladwin et al (1995)	26 (65%)
Ecological equity	Young and Tilley (2006)	26 (65%)
Trade orientation – national	Gladwin et al (1995)	25 (63%)
Human nature - homo sapient	Gladwin et al (1995)	23 (58%)
Poverty alleviation - equal opportunity	Gladwin et al (1995)	23 (58%)

Primary objective - quality of life	Gladwin et al (1995)	22 (55%)
Ethical grounding - broad homocentric	Gladwin et al (1995)	18 (45%)
Political structure – devolved	Gladwin et al (1995)	10 (25%)
Population size - stabilise soon	Gladwin et al (1995)	9 (23%)
The good life - postmaterialism	Gladwin et al (1995)	7 (18%)

Table 7.10: Incidence of disclosure of selected items of the menu – Society category

First, it is notable, and perhaps unexpected, that 65% of the organisations displayed some awareness of “ecological equity” (Young and Tilley, 2006). For example, Anglo American acknowledges that “we recognise that these natural systems are under pressure, that the consequences of this are often borne disproportionately by the poor...” (Anglo American, 2009:29). We also have the following comment from Vodafone:

“The impact of climate change will be felt disproportionately by emerging economies that are important to the future growth of our business” (Vodafone, 2010a:31)

From a more critical perspective, however, this extract highlights the ease with which sustainability-related language can be assimilated into the discourse of the business case. The focus of this sentence, and the further text on that page of Vodafone’s report, is not ecological equity, but how Vodafone is addressing the impact of climate change on the business.

When adapting the menu for use as research instrument, as described in Chapter Six, the elements of Gladwin et al’s (1995) model in the Society category presented a particular challenge, as at first glance it is difficult to imagine them as report disclosures. Perhaps this helps to explain in part why they appear at the bottom of the table above. However, there were some organisations which addressed almost all of the items: PeopleTree, the Better Food Company and Triodos Bank each addressed seven, and Traidcraft managed to address all nine. This suggests that perhaps the “ecocentric” management research is not quite as “idealistic” as some argue (e.g. Newton, 2002).

Most popular of Gladwin et al's items was "logic/reason – vision/network". Many organisations were keen to stress the power of collective action, suggesting that "together we can make a difference" (Marks and Spencer, 2010), or that "the world's problems are better solved by people working together than alone" (Ethical Property Company, 2009:3). Also popular was "trade orientation – national" (63% of organisations). However, the large multinational organisations' comments here were largely restricted to pointing out that they used local suppliers. By way of contrast, Good Energy is helping its customers to produce their own energy and Traidcraft is encouraging its suppliers to sell to their own local markets.

The lack of multinational enthusiasm for national trade is not unexpected, and neither is the fact that none of the large PLCs sampled address "political structure – devolved". Here again there is a notable contrast between the thematic content presented by "big business" and the smaller socially/environmentally-motivated organisations. Some of the social enterprises, for example, make negative comments about globalisation. Green Works criticises the "massively increased power wielded by corporate organisations in the global, privatised economy" (Green Works, 2010a), while Good Energy has an almost ecocentric perspective:

"We believe that decentralised generation, where energy is generated at home and in the community, is better for our future energy security, as assets remain owned by the community rather than in the hands of a few big companies" (Good Energy, 2009:3)

7.5.11 Community

This category consisted of only one item, which all of the organisations addressed, with no notable variation in thematic content.

7.5.12 Employees

Filled as this category is with elements from the narratives of Starik and Rands (1995) and Forum for the Future (2005), the high incidence levels shown in the table below are not unexpected. The overall impression from the content analysis was that organisations were happy to talk about their employee policies. There is, however, one exception to this rule, in the form of Starik and Rands' (1995) exhortation that organisations seek to "increase attention to the overall "spiritual well-being" of their members..."

Item	Model	No. of orgs addressing item (% total orgs)
Include ecological sustainability considerations and criteria in job design, recruitment and selection, and training and development systems.	Starik and Rands (1995)	34 (85%)
Give employees (and where possible other stakeholders) access to training, development and life long learning and capture and sharing knowledge.	Forum for the Future (2005)	33 (83%)
Provide a reasonable living wage and fair remuneration for employees and business partners.	Forum for the Future (2005)	17 (43%)
Increase attention to the overall "spiritual well-being" of their members and will include attention to environmental stewardship as part of this effort.	Starik and Rands (1995)	3 (8%)

Table 7.11: Incidence of disclosure of selected items of the menu – Employees category

Their discussion of the “religious or spiritual dimension” of sustainability at the organisational level is one of the more radical elements of Starik and Rands (1995) paper. The authors suggest that “organizational encouragement of spiritually based values such as stewardship and respect for nature may have far-reaching environmental impacts” (1995:928). Their advice, however, was only taken up by three organisations in the sample: the Centre for Alternative Technology, Riverford Organics and Traidcraft. The latter, being a Christian organisation, has much to say on spirituality, and states that one of its “foundation principles” is to “to respect all people and the environment” (Traidcraft, 2010c). Perhaps this philosophy is what Starik and Rands had in mind:

“We recognise the importance of caring for the world that God has created and promoting good environmental practices. We subscribe to the view that humankind is the steward of creation...” (Traidcraft, 2010c)

In relation to the other elements, there is little in the way of variation in the thematic content provided. One small exception concerns the “provide a reasonable living wage...” item (Forum for the Future, 2005). While the majority of the organisations refer to paying “fair” or “above average” wages, Barclays Bank notes that it seeks to “reward good performance” with “remuneration consistent with industry standards (Barclays Bank, 2009:5), and RBS points out that it must “pay the minimum necessary to retain and motivate staff who are critical to the recovery of RBS” (Royal Bank of Scotland, 2009:3). Some of the smaller financial services organisations (e.g. Triodos Bank, Ecology Building Society) take an alternative approach, however, adopting a maximum high:low salary ratio.

7.5.13 Future Generations

Perhaps the most striking feature of the table below is that while nearly all (93%) of the organisations sampled addressed Gladwin et al’s (1995) “time/space scales – multiscale”, none addressed “discount rate – low/complement”. A look at the decision rules (Appendix A), however, reveals a clear difference between these two items. While “time/space scales...” requires the organisation only to make a vague statement about the future, “discount rate...” is extremely precise, and the sample organisations were not given to precise statements about their impact on future generations.

Item	Model	No. of orgs addressing item (% total orgs)
Time/space scales - multiscale	Gladwin et al (1995)	37 (93%)
Futurity - social well-being of future generations being taken into account in company decisions and operations	Young and Tilley (2006)	21 (53%)
Inter-generational equity - economic welfare of future generations being taken into account in company decisions and operations	Young and Tilley (2006)	17 (43%)
Discount rate - low/complement	Gladwin et al (1995)	0 (0%)

Table 7.12: Incidence of disclosure of each item of the menu – Future Generations category

Turning to the thematic content of “time/space scales – multiscale”, here organisations typically made a brief reference to “future generations” or a “sustainable future”. Several (seven) referred to taking a “long-term” approach to business, often comparing this favourably with a short-term outlook, for example:

“We’re not just in it for today, we’re thinking long-term” (Phone Co-op, 2010)

“We take a very far-reaching view, not a short-term view” (Royal Dutch Shell, 2009:7)

We see also that almost half of the organisations addressed Young and Tilley’s (2006) suggestions to consider the economic and/or social welfare of future generations. The related comments largely referred to the work the organisations were doing with children and young people, and often focussed on local communities. It is noted that organisations were more likely to refer to future generations in combination with natural resources than with economic or social welfare.

7.5.14 Nature

Once again, this category draws our attention to the work of Gladwin et al (1995), whose sustaincentric assumptions were largely unpopular.

Item	Model	No. of orgs addressing item (% total orgs)
Use renewable resources only from well-managed and restorative eco-systems	Forum for the Future (2005)	35 (88%)
Environmental sustainability - The long-term sustainability of the environment being taken into account in company decisions and operations	Young and Tilley (2006)	27 (68%)
Humans and nature - interdependence	Gladwin et al (1995)	17 (43%)
Metaphor of earth - life support system	Gladwin et al (1995)	13 (33%)

Value of nature - inherentism	Gladwin et al (1995)	11 (28%)
Resilience of nature - varied/fragile	Gladwin et al (1995)	11 (28%)
Human role - stewardship	Gladwin et al (1995)	8 (20%)
System composition - parts and wholes	Gladwin et al (1995)	4 (10%)
System structure - holoarchial	Gladwin et al (1995)	2 (5%)
Perception of earth - home/managed	Gladwin et al (1995)	0 (0%)

Table 7.13: Incidence of disclosure of each item of the menu – Nature category

The most frequently addressed item here from Gladwin et al’s conception of “sustaincentrism” was the recognition that humans and nature are interdependent. However, the related comments largely fell into one of two very different categories, one which stressed the role of “ecosystem services” and their value to the organisation, and the other, more eco-centric approach which discussed the “connection” between humans and nature. Two quotes, from BP and the Eden Project, respectively illustrate these contrasting views:

“The concept of ecosystem services considers the ‘services’ provided by nature – such as the provision of food, water and fibre or support for fundamental processes such as photosynthesis or nutrient cycling... A number of BP businesses have used an ecosystems service approach to help assess potential impacts from projects and operations, typically as a regulatory requirement” (BP, 2009:24)

“When the Eden Project was built the theme of people’s dependence on plants and the natural world was important - and the way Eden has brought it alive in many different ways has attracted an audience of millions of people. This is about connections we dare not lose. It is about understanding who we are” (Eden Project, 2009:8)

The next three items in the table, “metaphor of earth”, “value of nature” and “resilience of nature” are related and support the above observations. While these items are addressed by a number of the large PLCs along with some of the environmentally/socially-orientated enterprises, the former focus on the dependence of the organisation on nature and its consequent “value”, but the latter are more inclined to refer to the inherent value of nature.

7.5.15 Other Organisations

The organisations sampled were all very eager to talk about their “numerous environmental partnerships” and “interorganisational co-operation” (Starik and Rands, 1995), and there was little variation evident in the thematic content. Some of the social enterprises in particular, however, wished to “influence how other organisations behave” (Traidcraft, 2010a:2), and the large organisations were more likely to “create sustainability-oriented self-regulatory programs” and “participate in peak organisations...” (Starik and Rands, 1995).

7.6 Comparing the Models

Each of the four models which make up the menu offers a distinct narrative of sustainability at an organisational level, and it is useful therefore to consider each model individually. By way of an initial overview, the chart below shows the average “score” for each model. This tells us that, on average, each organisation addressed, say, 59% of the items in Starik and Rands’ (1995) model. It also indicates, perhaps not unexpectedly, that Forum for the Future’s (2005) narrative of sustainability at an organisational level was most similar to that presented by the sample organisations in their public utterances, with Gladwin et al’s (1995) the least similar.

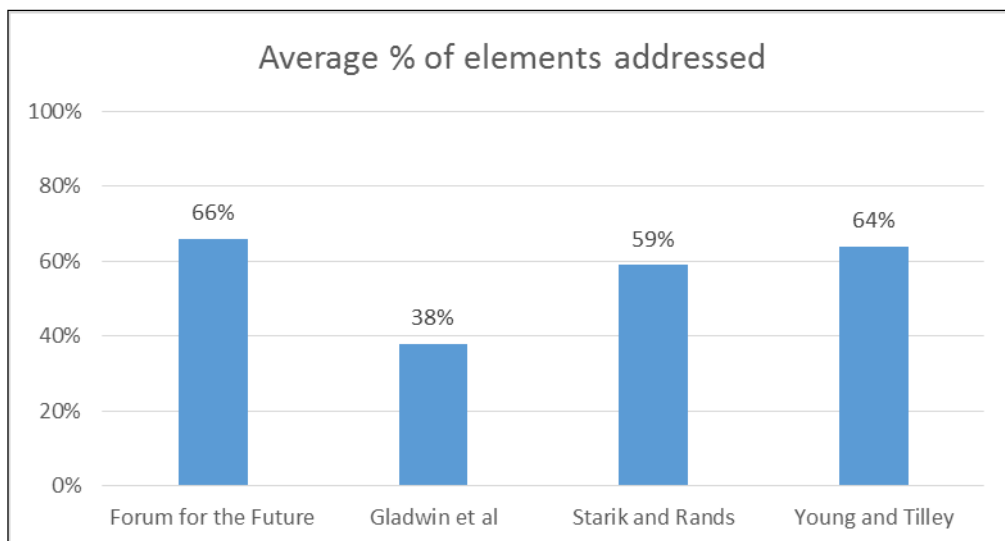


Fig 7.2 Average percentage of elements addressed – per model

7.6.1 Forum for the Future

As discussed in Chapter Four, a key feature of Forum for the Future’s (2005) “Five Capitals Framework” is its use of the language of business to express some ideas which go beyond “business as usual”; it aims to stretch the traditional corporate discourse on sustainability.

Looking at the organisations which presented a narrative closest to that proposed by Forum for the Future, the first point is that nine of the top ten organisations were large companies, seven of which were large PLCs. Predictably, most are clients of Forum for the Future, including BT (95%) and the Co-operative Group (92%). Social enterprises, particularly smaller organisations, were least likely to present a narrative consistent with Forum for the Future’s. For example, the Better Food Company scored only 46% here, compared to its’ 77% of Gladwin et al’s (1995) model. In contrast, Barclays Bank addressed 74% of the elements in Forum for the Future’s model, but only 13% in Gladwin et al’s.

Some of the most frequently addressed elements of Forum for the Future’s model were eco-modernist techniques such as “eco-innovation” and “re-use and re-manufacturing systems”. However, as the next table illustrates, some of the lowest scoring items also fall into this category.

Item	Category	No. of orgs addressing item (% total orgs)
Industrial ecology - looking at synergistic production systems where one organisation's waste streams are another's resources	Management	9 (23%)
Modular manufacturing systems	Management	4 (10%)
Product to service shifts, for example leasing products on a continual service contract rather than a sell and forget approach	Product and Customers	3 (8%)
Biomimicry - mimicing nature and natural processes in industrial processes and industrial systems design	Management	2 (5%)

Table 7.14: Least frequently addressed items from Forum for the Future’s (2005) “Five Capitals Framework”

These figures tell us that most of the organisations sampled do not yet address in their public utterances these technologically advanced and perhaps more radical elements of ecological modernisation; ideas which could be said to “extend” the business case. However, it is arguably encouraging (from Forum for the Future’s perspective for example) that these ideas were referenced by *some* of the organisations, suggesting that the concepts, particularly industrial ecology, have the potential to permeate the wider corporate discourse on sustainability.

7.6.2 Young and Tilley

To go “beyond the business case” is a key aim of Young and Tilley’s (2006) “sustainable entrepreneurship model”. In particular, the authors highlight the difficulty for an organisation of addressing the “sufficiency” component of the model, as this requires limiting sales and “hence consumption” (2006:414).

The results of the content analysis echo Young and Tilley’s reservations – the stand-out, lowest scoring element was indeed sufficiency, which was addressed by only seven (18%) of the organisations, in comparison with the 40%+ scores of every other item. The authors also focus on “eco-effectiveness”, stressing the need for organisations to move beyond eco-efficiency and develop “new ways of doing business” (2006:404). This item did prove popular, with 85% of the sampled organisations addressing eco-effectiveness in their public utterances. Here, organisations often talked about reducing *total* energy/water consumption, carbon emissions or waste, rather than the per unit reductions of eco-efficiency. For instance, Tesco refers to the need to “reduce our absolute emissions”, while the John Lewis Partnership is “looking for absolute changes in our overall CO₂ equivalent emissions” (John Lewis Partnership, 2010b:7). John Lewis and Unilever even look to “decouple growth from environmental impacts” (Unilever, 2009:1).

The only organisation to address all 11 items of Young and Tilley’s model was social enterprise Traidcraft, a Fairtrade company not dissimilar to the authors’ case study organisation, the Day Chocolate Company. While Young and Tilley found that their case organisation neglected the environmental dimension of sustainability, Traidcraft is careful to address this, and produces an Environmental Policy document. It is here that the organisation declares that “we have a responsibility to promote sustainable consumption practices”

(Traidcraft, 2008:1), which relates to the “sufficiency” element of Young and Tilley’s model. But the organisation does not elaborate on *how* it does this. What Traidcraft does explain in the next paragraph, however, is that its priority is to free the world “from the scandal of poverty”, and therefore:

“We recognise that there can be tensions between social and environmental objectives, in that the short term immediate needs of the poor may have to be balanced with longer term environmental sustainability” (Traidcraft, 2008:1)

Along with the comments from Guardian News and Media discussed earlier in section 7.5.7, these extracts from Traidcraft’s public utterances suggest that the idea of “sufficiency” may be a significant source of tension when it comes to bringing the concepts of “sustainability” and “organisation” together.

7.6.3 Starik and Rands

Similar to Forum for the Future’s (2005) model, Starik and Rands’ (1995), with 26 items and a managerialist focus, is also biased towards large organisations. This is reflected in the results of the content analysis: nine of the “top ten” organisations were large companies, and seven of these were PLCs. Due to the structure of the model, many were organisations which scored highly in the “Policy and Legal” and “Other Organisations” categories. For example, Shell addressed 81% of the items in Starik and Rands’ model, but achieved relatively low scores for other models, for example, 64% for Young and Tilley (2006). Shell’s public utterances were particularly detailed on “policy and legal” matters, perhaps not unexpectedly so, given its history (Livesey, 2001). This, and the relatively high scores achieved by other organisations in “controversial” industries – Anglo American (73%) and British American Tobacco (65%) – perhaps suggests that these organisations may perhaps be appropriating the ideas and language of Starik and Rands for legitimacy purposes.

Overall, organisational narratives examined were further from Starik and Rands’ model than those of Forum for the Future and Young and Tilley. The closest any organisations came to addressing the “characteristics of ecologically sustainable organisations” was 81% (Shell and the Co-operative Group). The table below, which shows the lowest scoring items, hints at why this might be so.

Item	Category	No. of orgs addressing item (% total orgs)
Increase attention to the overall "spiritual well-being" of their members and will include attention to environmental stewardship as part of this effort.	Employees	2 (5%)
Encourage national and international governmental bodies to adopt national income accounts that incorporate environmental impacts	Policy and Legal	0 (0%)
Be the target of few, if any, protests by environmental activists	Other Organisations	0 (0%)

Table 7.15: Least frequently addressed items from Starik and Rands' (1995) Characteristics of Ecologically Sustainable Organisations

What these items have in common is that they all relate to the “more radical” side of Starik and Rands’ work. Although some of the organisations sampled, particularly the social enterprises, were eager to make an impact at a policy level, words and phrases used by Starik and Rands (1995) such as “reducing population”, “overconsumption” and indeed “national income accounts” did not feature in their public utterances.

7.6.4 Gladwin et al

Gladwin et al’s (1995) “sustaincentrism” is distinct from the other three models in that it is a paradigm, consisting of a range of assumptions which a human being would have about the world; it is focussed on the individual, not on the organisation. This is likely a major reason why, on average, the organisations sampled addressed only 38% of the items in Gladwin et al’s model. Furthermore, as the focus is on the individual, the results are biased towards smaller organisations, whose public utterances are likely the output of a small number of people, perhaps even one individual, rather than the “Sustainability Teams” of the large companies.

These caveats aside, a range of organisations did score highly on Gladwin et al’s model, with the top ten including four social enterprises, but also some co-owned businesses, PLCs and private companies. The organisation which presented a narrative closest to sustaincentrism, the Better Food Company (77%), along with the Centre for Alternative Technology (60%), was extremely strong in the “nature” category, which contained some of the least popular elements of the model.

Item	Category	No. of orgs addressing item (% total orgs)
System composition - parts and wholes	Nature	4 (10%)
System structure - holoarchial	Nature	2 (5%)
Human vs. natural capital - partial substitutes	Natural Resources	0 (0%)
Discount rate - low/complement	Future Generations	0 (0%)
Perception of earth - home/managed	Nature	0 (0%)

Table 7.16: Least frequently addressed items from Gladwin et al’s (1995) “Sustaincentrism”

Some of the figures in relation to the large PLCs confirm the contrast between Gladwin et al’s model and the others. For example, Shell scored 20% here, but 81% on Starik and Rands (1995). This illustrates the considerable gap between the discourse of “sustaincentrism” and the largely managerialist narratives presented by some of the large PLCs sampled.

7.7 Different Types of Organisation

To allow exploration of a range of possible narratives of sustainability at an organisational level, the sample contained several different “types” of organisation: large PLCs, SMEs, co-owned businesses and social enterprises, divided accordingly in the table below. Taking a look at each group’s score for the individual models within the menu, and indeed for individual elements therein, offers some further insight on the alternative narratives presented.

It is noted at this point that a limitation which applies to the content analysis – the small sample size does not allow for generalizability – is even more pertinent here, where the sample is divided into small groups of organisations. Therefore, the figures discussed below are not

significant in themselves, but aim to contribute to building an overall picture of the narratives presented by different types of organisation.

Organisation type (number in sample)	Average % of total items addressed
Large PLCs (13)	59%
Social enterprises (10)	55%
Co-owned businesses (7)	60%
SMEs (10)	52%

Table 7.17: Average % of total menu addressed – by organisation type

It is noted, however, that even at this level of generality, the figures presented in this table are surprisingly similar. This suggests that there is no one type of organisation which is substantially closer to the idea of “sustainable enterprise”. The results of the content analysis indicate that there are some elements of sustainability, such as “overconsumption” (Starik and Rands, 1995), population reduction and future generations, which *all* business organisations may struggle to address. This hints that there may be ultimate boundaries to the sustainability-organisation relationship; there may be certain issues which business organisations by their nature *cannot* address, some elements of sustainability which do not “fit” with “organisation”. Furthermore, remembering the concerns of Gray and Milne (2004) around the concept of a “sustainable organisation”, it may be that some aspects of sustainability cannot be addressed by *individual* organisations. For example, as Young and Tilley (2006) point out, it is difficult to imagine how a single organisation can limit its sales when its competitors are intent on growing theirs.

7.7.1 Large PLCs

Due to the volume and detail of their public utterances, the large PLCs were likely to address a high percentage of the menu, and this is reflected in their high scores – the lowest score was 48% and the highest 74%. However, none of the PLCs in the sample addressed issues such as “sufficiency” (Young and Tilley, 2006), “the good life – postmaterialism” and “economic structure – green economy” (both Gladwin et al, 1995).

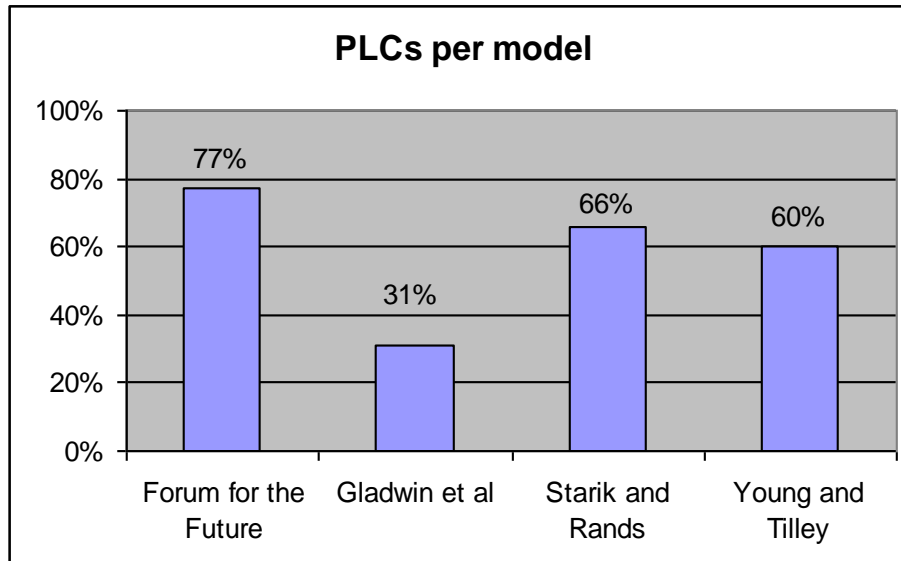


Fig 7.3: Percentage of items addressed per model – PLCs

The most striking feature of the above graph, which shows the average percentage of each model addressed by the PLCs sampled, is the gap between the figures for Forum for the Future (77%) and Gladwin et al (31%). This supports what has been intimated already; that the large PLCs presented a narrative largely consistent with that of Forum for the Future's (2005), with all addressing at least 67% of the items therein.

7.7.2 Social Enterprises

There were ten social enterprises in the sample, ranging from quite large (e.g. Wise Group – 2010 turnover £32m) to very small (e.g. Unlimited Potential – 2010 turnover £494k). The overall score of 55% for the group reflects the relatively low volume of public utterances available for some of the organisations. The public utterances also generally contained less detail than those of, for example, the PLCs. However, the group did score quite highly on the Gladwin et al (1995) elements, as the figure below illustrates.

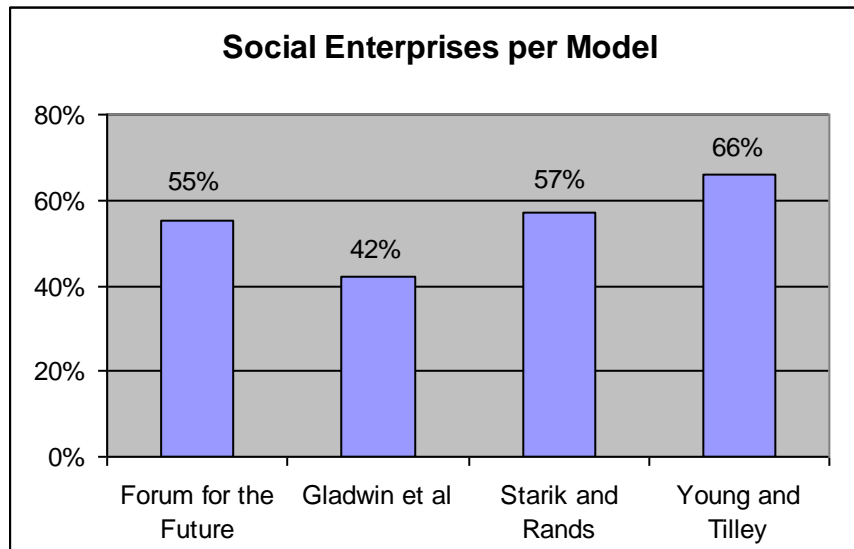


Fig 7.4: Percentage of items addressed per model – Social Enterprises

The figure confirms that, on average, the social enterprises sampled presented a narrative closer to Gladwin et al’s “sustaincentrism” than the average for the sample of 38%. Six of the ten organisations addressed both “economic structure – green economy” and “role of growth – mixed/modify”, and a few touched on “the good life – postmaterialism” and “system composition – parts and wholes”, which were very unpopular items in the overall analysis.

Perhaps not unexpectedly, the social enterprises’ narratives were also closer to Young and Tilley’s (2006) “sustainable entrepreneurship model” than the other three models, and indeed than the PLCs and the SMEs. This was due to a 100% score for “socio-effectiveness” i.e. having a social mission, and also to relatively high scores for “intergenerational equity” (70%) and “economic equity” (60%). The figure above also highlights that Starik and Rands’ (1995) model of “ecologically sustainable organisations” is more similar to those presented by large PLCs than smaller organisations.

7.7.3 Small and Medium-sized Enterprises

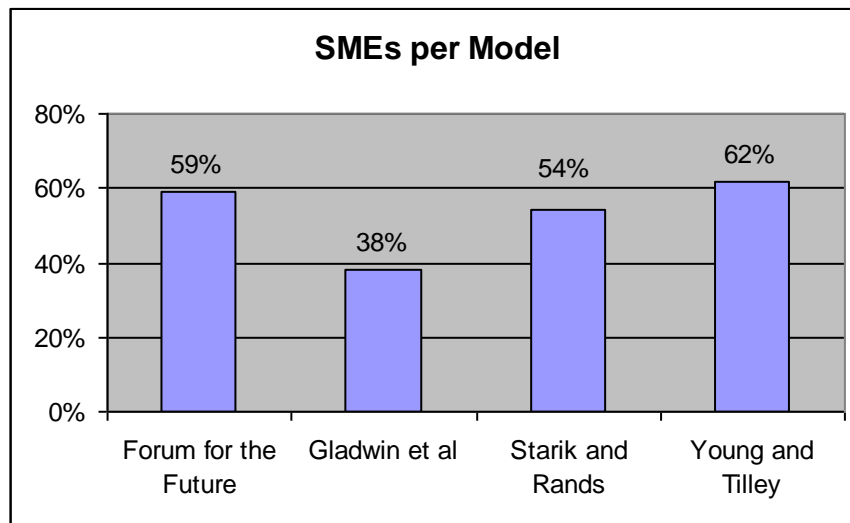


Fig 7.5: Percentage of items addressed per model – Small and Medium-sized Enterprises

The figures in the graph above are very similar to the overall figures per model depicted in table 7.17, indicating that perhaps there was nothing above or below “average” about the narratives presented by the SMEs sampled. The relative parity between the models displayed above is in contrast to the PLCs, which were relatively close to Forum for the Future’s narrative, and the social enterprises, which were closer than average to Gladwin et al. It appears that the SMEs fall somewhere in between, addressing elements from all four models rather than resembling one in particular.

Although there were few elements on which the group scored notably high or low, a couple of exceptions are that nine of the ten SMEs addressed “trade orientation – national”, while 50% referenced “political structure – devolved”, both much higher than the average figures for these items. This suggests a local focus which could be related to organisation size. Also in relation to size, it is noted that 80% addressed “role of growth – mixed/modify” (Gladwin et al, 1995).

7.7.4 Co-owned Businesses

The seven co-owned businesses had the highest average score of 60%. However, before reading too much into this, it is noted that the results are affected by both the smaller size of

the group and the presence in it of a number of high scoring organisations, such as the Co-operative Group (78%) and the John Lewis Partnership (69%).

Looking at the overall figures per element for this category, we see that the organisations had a lobbying focus, all aiming to “take political action to promote the adoption of laws and regulations that ‘raise the floor’ of environmental performance” (Starik and Rands, 1995). All also showed signs of a “mixed/modify” view of the role of growth, each organisation suggesting that their ownership structure allowed this approach. In addition, the co-owned businesses scored particularly high in the “Society” category, with, for example, all addressing “logic/reason – vision/network” and 86% “human nature – homo sapient” (both Gladwin et al, 1995).

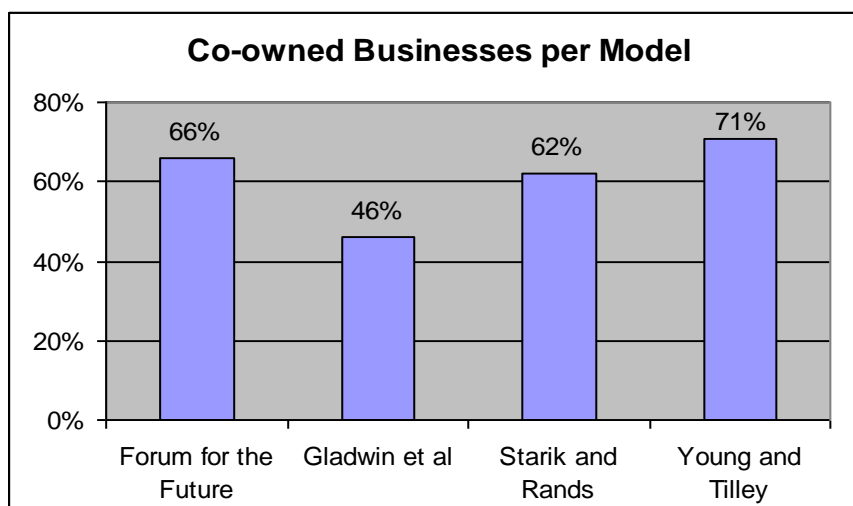


Fig 7.6: Percentage of items addressed per model – Co-owned Businesses

The figures above show that the co-owned businesses sampled averaged relatively high scores for each model, suggesting that it is possible for an organisation to combine many of the aspects of these very different narratives. A useful example is the Co-operative Group, which was one of the highest scoring organisations for each narrative. So how can one organisation present a narrative which has so many similarities with models as diverse as, for example, Forum for the Future (2005) and Gladwin et al (1995)?

First, it is helpful that the Co-operative Group has a large volume of public utterances, its’ 2009 Sustainability Report was 121 pages and its website is extensive. But what is striking about these utterances, the Report in particular, is how it manages to simultaneously address the key aspects of each model. Discussion of environmental management techniques and eco-

technological developments (Forum for the Future, 2005), is combined with pro-sustainability lobbying activity (Starik and Rands, 1995), a “logistic” view of growth and an “interdependent” view of humans and nature (Gladwin et al, 1995), and consideration of the needs of future generations (Young and Tilley, 2006).

The Co-operative Group’s public utterances thus present an attractive vision of sustainability at an organisational level, incorporating elements of both ecological modernisation and “green” thinking. However, it is important to remember, as Porritt notes in the organisation’s report, to “beware of falling prey to cornucopian fantasies” (Co-operative Group, 2009:5). This chapter has hinted that there are inherent tensions in the business-sustainable development relationship. For example, the Co-operative Group, an organisation with a large retail business, does not address sustainable consumption in its public utterances. Furthermore, analysis of the “Other” category (see Appendix J) revealed the organisation to be strongly focused on growing the business, and indeed growing profits; and, as the organisation itself warns, via Porritt, even “growth, ‘Co-op style’” must have limits (Co-operative Group, 2009:5). Once again, these reservations suggest ultimate boundaries, fundamental limitations within the sustainability-organisation relationship.

7.8 Reflexive Considerations

Chapters Five and Six highlighted the importance of “reflexivity”, whereby the researcher must consider the many possible levels of interpretation of the data and continually question his or her role in the creation of any “knowledge”. It is appropriate therefore to consider the findings presented in Chapter Seven in a reflexive light.

As the content analysis was a highly subjective process, an effort was made during the chapter to focus on presenting the data, and to avoid making inferences based on the findings. It was intended that knowledge would gradually emerge as the empirical work proceeds, and inferences are thus largely the preserve of the final chapters of the thesis. However, Chapter Seven does contain a number of preliminary inferences drawn from the data, and these must be considered from a reflexive perspective.

During the chapter, connections were often made between the data and the theoretical perspectives discussed in the earlier chapters of the thesis. For instance, organisations’ positive

comments about technology were linked with ecological modernisation, and phrases designated as sustain-centric or techno-centric. Another researcher, however, might not make these connections at all, or another might make many more. As Krippendorff (2004) reminds us, “any text may have multiple readings” (2004:22). So perhaps a more managerialist researcher might interpret the use of sustain-centric language by large PLCs as an “encouraging” sign, or a critical scholar might view this as corporate capture of sustainability.

In addition, there is the issue of the intended “audience” of the public utterances, or for whom the documents have been written. Taking the analysis of the social enterprises as an example, it was mentioned that many talked of “collective action”, urging people to work together. This may, however, merely reflect a desire to attract new customers. Looking at the large organisations, many of the reports were categorised according to what was identified as most “material” to their stakeholders, meaning that they only addressed issues under these categories, thus potentially skewing the results of the analysis. However, it is suggested that this is mitigated in part by reviewing the organisations’ public utterances, including their websites, as opposed to their reports alone.

Crucial to taking a reflexive approach is the consideration of what is “not said” (Krippendorff, 2004:346). Much of this chapter has focused on the items of the menu which organisations *do not* address; for example, it was suggested that organisations do not talk about the more radical elements of Forum for the Future’s and Starik and Rands’ models. However, just because they do not address these things in their public utterances, does not mean that they do not do them. This also applies to broad issues such as sustainable consumption and population size. It is suggested that this limitation is mitigated to an extent by the semi-structured interviews conducted.

Finally, to consider “context” Krippendorff (2004), organisation size and a related issue, the volume of public utterances available, were referred to throughout the chapter. What has not yet been mentioned is the potentially significant influence of industry. For example, it is possible that some of the models, Forum for the Future’s in particular, could have made the menu biased towards organisations in manufacturing industries. Or through Gladwin et al’s model, it could have been biased towards organisations in agriculture. Although it is impossible in this analysis to adjust statistically for the effects of industry, in an effort to gain

some information on the possibility of a bias, the organisations were grouped by industry and average scores calculated.

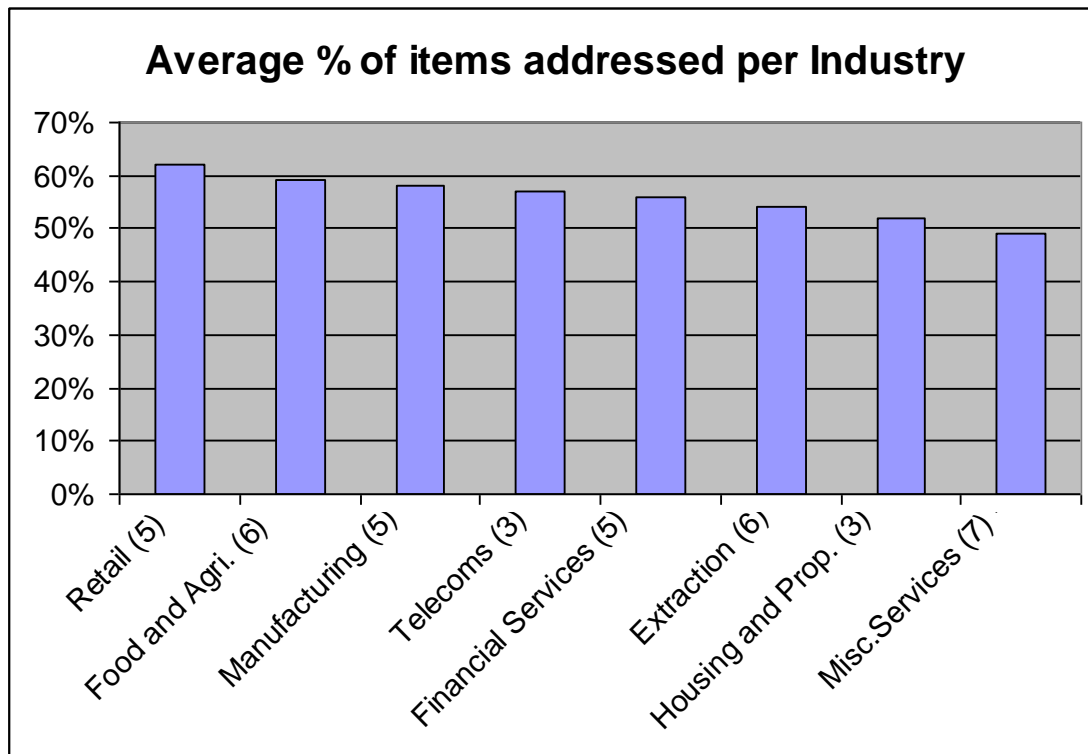


Fig 7.8: Average % of items addressed per industry

The first thing to note in relation to the figure above is that the number of organisations (in brackets next to name of industry) in each industry group was relatively similar, as the sample was selected to cover a range of industries, in part to mitigate the possibility of sampling error. The graph also tells us that there were only very small differences between the overall incidence figures per industry (standard deviation 4%). In addition, looking at the most and least popular items for each industry revealed very few differences from group to group. While it is acknowledged that narratives of sustainability may vary somewhat from industry to industry, it is suggested that, as the menu covered so many issues and the sample was so broad, industry does not have a significant bearing on the findings of the content analysis.

7.9 Some Conclusions

The content analysis sought to compare selected “alternative” academic narratives of sustainability at an organisational level with the narratives presented by organisations in their public utterances, with a view to exploring the challenges and tensions of applying sustainability at an organisational level.

It is noted in the first instance that some organisations presented narratives of sustainability which could be said to “push the boundaries” of the business case, in the style for example of Hawken et al (1999) or Weisacker et al (2009). These organisations addressed some of the more challenging “semi-managerialist” items of the menu, such as “reverse logistics”, (Forum for the Future, 2005), “eco-effectiveness”, and “ecological equity” (Young and Tilley, 2006), and also spoke of industrial ecology and “decoupling”. In addition, there was a scattering of “sustaincentric” language, in terms of recognition of ecological limits and of the interdependence of humans and nature, and comments which suggested a “mixed/modify” approach to the role of growth (Gladwin et al, 1995).

In relation to the “different types” of organisation sampled, the overall analysis indicated relatively little variation between types. Although the social enterprises and co-owned businesses were more likely than the large PLCs to address the more radical elements of the menu, the results did not indicate the emergence of a clear “alternative” narrative to the dominant business case, business as usual narrative. However, taking a closer look at the thematic content does reveal some hints of an alternative approach to sustainability. For example, some of the smaller organisations set themselves a “reasonable” target for financial returns e.g. 6.5% (Traidcraft) or 7% (Triodos Bank). Or, rather than seeking to maximize its own growth, Triodos Bank spoke of alliances with similar organisations, suggesting a financial system of a “modern network of smaller specialist banks” (Triodos Bank, 2009:11). Snippets such as these suggest that there are distinct variations in how different organisations seek to understand elements of sustainability, and that there is considerable scope for the development of “alternative” narratives of sustainability at an organisational level.

It was also envisaged that the content analysis might provide some information on what issues organisations do *not* engage with in their public utterances. Turning to the less frequently addressed items of the menu, there were notably few references to sustainable consumption

(Young and Tilley's "sufficiency"), with the related comments suggesting tension in this area. In addition, only a small number of organisations addressed the more challenging suggestions of Forum for the Future (2005), such as biomimicry and "product to service shifts". Broader issues like population size and wealth redistribution were also not directly alluded to.

Overall, what the content analysis suggests is that, while most organisations are happy to speak of "low-hanging fruit" (Walley and Whitehead, 1994) in their public utterances – items such as employee training, supplier relations and community involvement were very popular – they do not engage with the broader issues of sustainable development, such as consumption or inequality. In the case of the majority of the organisations sampled, there was a considerable gap between the narrative they presented and those proposed by, for instance, Gladwin et al (1995) and to a lesser extent Young and Tilley (2006). This suggests that there may be some elements of sustainability which organisations cannot address; they simply do not "fit" with the concept of "organisation" as currently understood. Furthermore, that these issues are often at a systems level e.g. population, consumption, supports the suggestion that it may be inappropriate to apply sustainability at an organisational level (Gray and Milne, 2004).

This also supports the argument that claims made by organisations to "sustainable business" or "sustainable organisation" may be unfounded and misleading (Gray, 2010). The content analysis illustrates that many such organisations are simply not addressing key aspects of sustainability (e.g. future generations, maintaining natural capital). It is also noted that, in some cases, an overarching corporate discourse of "techno-centrism" was merely peppered with instances of "sustain-centric" language (Gladwin et al, 1995). This hints at corporate "capture" of sustainability, with these organisations misappropriating the language of sustainability to legitimise unsustainable "business as usual" (see Chapter Eight for more).

Finally, the analysis highlights the deficiencies in the managerialist literature. As discussed in Chapter Four, narratives of sustainability at an organisational level such as those by, for example, Hart (1995) or Bansal (2005), are dominated by "low-hanging fruit". That the organisations sampled so readily addressed such items suggests that these narratives require little more than business as usual (Milne et al, 2009), or a "natural extension of TQM" (Schmidheiny et al/BCSD, 1992) from the organisation. In contrast, using the menu, composed as it was of "alternative" narratives of sustainability at an organisational level, has allowed us to begin to consider some of the contradictions and tensions of the sustainability-organisation relationship.

Chapter Eight

Close Reading: Results

8.1 Introduction

The second phase of the empirical work consisted of a “close reading” of the public utterances of forty organisations, the results of which are presented in this chapter. The close reading is key to the perspective of “reflexive pragmatism” which, as explained in Chapter Five, guides the research strategy of this study. The literature review revealed that much of the existing work on the business-sustainable development relationship is from a “managerialist” perspective; there is scope for more critical, or “adversarial” work (Welford, 1998). The close reading allows this reflexive “adversarial” perspective, taking a more critical look at how organisations use their public utterances to construct and present their relationship with sustainable development.

In addition, a major aspect of the close reading is a focus on language and discourse. The literature review highlighted the “discursive struggle” (Livesey, 2002) within the debate on the meaning of sustainable development and the role of business therein. It is suggested that there has been a level of “corporate capture” of sustainable development, with organisations using their public utterances to promote the “business case” for sustainability and perpetuate unsustainable “business as usual” (Milne et al, 2009), to the exclusion of alternative narratives. The close reading allows exploration of this discursive struggle through the “keyhole” of organisations’ public utterances (Tregidga and Milne, 2006). As the sample includes a range of different types of organisation, it is hoped to expand the boundaries of the discursive struggle, and perhaps open the gateway to “new ways of imaging reality” (Livesey, 2002), to new ways of thinking about sustainability at an organisational level.

As with Chapter Seven, this chapter begins by revisiting the theoretical framework, contextualising some of the key findings of the close reading. The chapter is then structured based on the three readings conducted. As explained in Chapter Six, the close reading process involved three readings of the texts, the first identifying key themes and arguments, the second focusing on language use and the third from a reflexive perspective. This chapter is organised accordingly: first the major arguments presented by the organisations are outlined, then the common linguistic devices used, metaphors in particular, are discussed. Reflexive issues resulting from the third reading are then considered. The chapter concludes by drawing the findings together and considering their possible implications for the debate on the sustainable development-business relationship

8.2 Revisiting the Framework

The Framework of Sustainable Business is a particularly useful lens through which to interpret the close reading data. The key themes and arguments identified largely reflect the categories of the Framework e.g. the business case, ecological modernisation. This is illustrated by the refined Framework illustrated below, where some of the words and phrases used by the organisations are matched to each quadrant. Furthermore, combining this data with that of the content analysis allows us to roughly position certain organisations in particular quadrants.

As section 8.3.2 below will discuss, the close reading provides some interesting information on the business case. Language consistent with the business case is used by some of the social enterprises and other “different types” of organisations sampled, suggesting that the business case may extend slightly into the Sustainable Enterprise quadrant. This suggests scope for varied iterations of the business case e.g. combined with ecological modernisation or “doing business differently”.

A final point relates to the use of metaphors in the texts analysed. Prominent are “building” and “journey” metaphors, which combined create the image of the organisation travelling steadily and solidly towards “sustainability”. As the convergence of the results and the Framework indicate however, there are a number of ideas of what “sustainability” might actually mean. Therefore, the idea that organisations could move from one area of the Framework to another on their “journey” is acknowledged and, for now, represented by the circular arrows in the middle of the diagram; organisations may be going somewhere, but we do not know where yet.

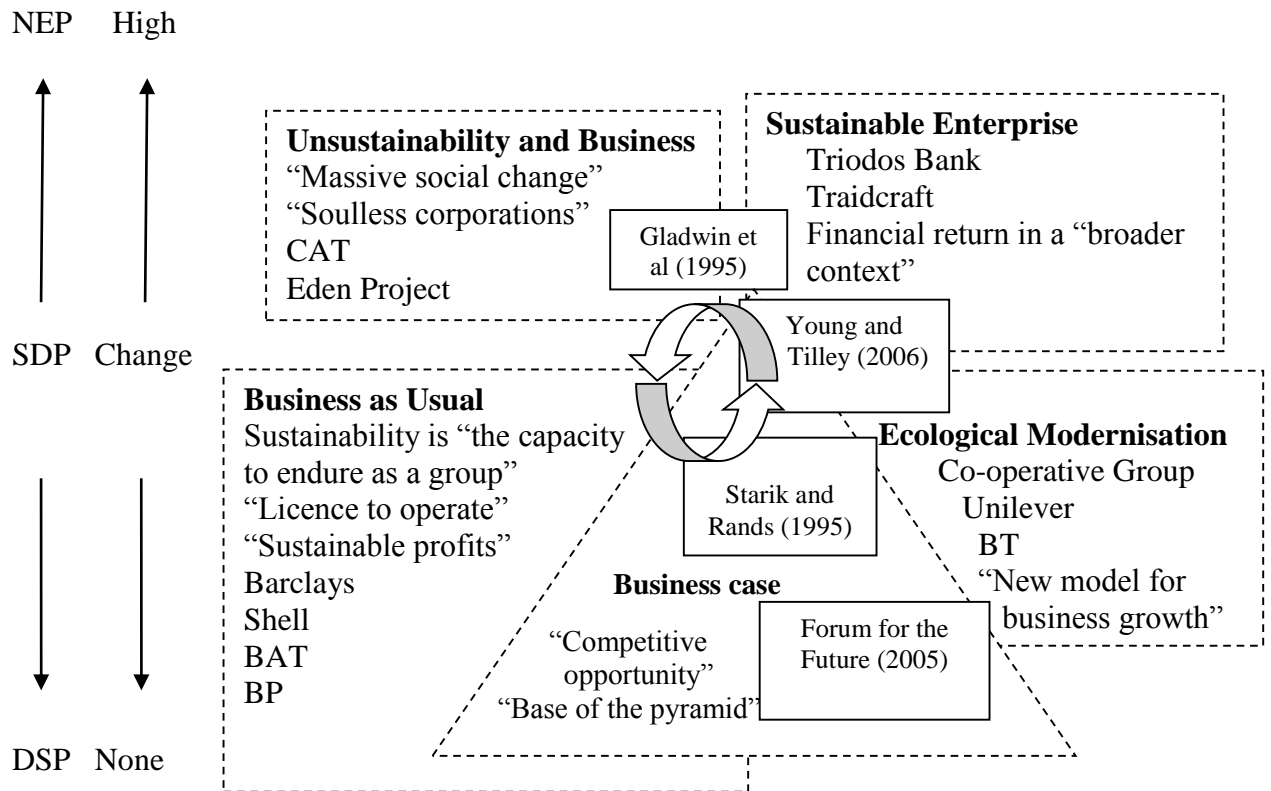


Fig 8.1: Theoretical framework and close reading results

8.3 Reading One: Key Themes and Arguments

The initial reading of the public utterances concentrated on the key themes and principal arguments used to construct the narratives of sustainability presented. As the analysis progressed, patterns began to emerge in the shape of recurring themes and similar arguments expressed by groups of organisations.

8.3.1 Licence to Operate

Several of the sample organisations use their Sustainability Reports to justify their "licence to operate" (Anglo American, 2009:10). This theme is particularly evident in the public utterances of large PLCs in "controversial" industries, such as British American Tobacco (BAT) or Barclays Bank.

The argument typically begins with an acknowledgement of negative comments or accusations made against the organisation. For example, BAT asks: “given the nature of our products, should we even attempt to build a sustainable business?” (BAT, 2009:4). The organisation then follows this with a rebuttal, in which it explains how it “earns” its licence to operate. This often takes the form of pointing out that the organisation is a “responsible corporate citizens” (Barclays Bank, 2009:2) which operates “with integrity and openness” (Royal Bank of Scotland, 2009:1).

Another common riposte is that the organisation goes on to extol the benefits which its business brings to society. For example, Barclays Bank suggests that “a successful banking sector creates good things for society” (Barclays Bank, 2009:5), and Tesco comments that “by continuing to grow our business, we are creating more jobs around the world and helping more people develop skills and careers” (Tesco, 2009:3). The following extract from Unilever’s public utterances typifies this manifestation of the licence to operate argument:

“Unilever’s role in developing and emerging markets is sometimes challenged by campaigning groups who claim that multinationals simply extract wealth from poorer countries for the benefit of shareholders in developed nations. We dispute this. Our evidence suggests that business plays a vital role, generating wealth and jobs around the world, transferring technology and training and developing people” (Unilever, 2009:30).

This argument is problematic, however. If business “plays a vital role” in societal development simply by doing business, then there is no need for it to engage with sustainable development. The notion that business is fundamentally “good for society” brings to mind Smith’s (1776) contention that “by pursuing his own interest [the businessman] frequently promotes that of society” (1776:456). The limitations of this argument are highlighted by this comment from BAT:

“Well-run, financially sound multinational companies, with their ability to invest and create profits and employment, can help significantly to create prosperity... Companies can make their most fundamental contribution by running their business well, helping to drive the economic engine that delivers the other sustainability objectives” (BAT, 2010a)

The phrase “running their business well” is key here. This implies that to support “sustainability objectives”, all that the organisation must really do is to continue to make a

profit, to “drive the economic engine” of development. Supporting sustainable development therefore becomes a matter of, as Banarjee (2008) puts it, “sustaining the corporation”. This argument effectively exempts the corporation from engaging with the systems level social and environmental concerns of sustainable development, and places the focus solely on the economic performance of the business. Sustainability is thus “redefined” in a way which “does not threaten business as usual” (Milne et al, 2006:822). What the “licence to operate” argument ultimately does, therefore, is reinforce business as usual and legitimise a narrow “organisation-centric” approach to sustainability⁵.

8.3.2 The Business Case

It is not unexpected that the “business case for sustainability” is presented as a key argument by many of the sample organisations. The large PLCs in particular frequently link sustainability with profitability and use language characteristic of the business case literature, such as “win-win” (BT, 2010:8) or “the base of the pyramid” (Unilever, 2009:31). Consistent with the work of Porter and van der Linde (1995), sustainability is often presented as a “competitive opportunity”. Again, the related extracts are resonant of an “egocentric organizational orientation” (Purser et al, 1995):

“Climate change also represents a commercial opportunity...we will seek to leverage our knowledge and assets in order to generate additional value for our stakeholders” (Anglo American, 2009:22)

“Meeting society’s needs creates enormous opportunities to grow our business” (Vodafone, 2010b)

⁵ *It is noted however that, as these organisations operate in “controversial” industries, they may use their public utterances as a defence mechanism against negative publicity, and thus base the narrative around a defensive argument. There could be more to their contribution to sustainable development which is not discussed in their public utterances. If so, the interview phase offers an opportunity to explore this.*

What is more surprising, however, is that the business case argument is not restricted to the large PLCs sampled; it also features in the public utterances of several of the social enterprises, which suggest that their “alternative” approach to business has generated competitive advantage. For example:

“As much of the banking industry suffered, Triodos Bank benefited from its strong reputation. People increasingly recognise the importance of the values at the heart of the organisation, leading to unprecedented growth in 2009” (Triodos Bank, 2009:19)

This brings to mind the argument, discussed in Chapter Three, that social entrepreneurship privileges a “business-like rationale” (Grenier, 2006). We saw that the sustainable entrepreneurship literature can slip into the discourse of the business case and ecological modernisation (Tilley and Young, 2009), and in practice too, organisations which may appear “ecocentric”, are found to adhere to the dominant social paradigm (Kearins et al, 2010).

It is noted, however, that comments elsewhere in Triodos Bank’s public utterances are suggestive of a broader understanding of sustainability, in contrast to the organisation-centric approach characteristic of the business case. For example, here the organisation discusses how “financial return” fits within its approach to sustainable development:

“Triodos Bank is committed to sustainable development, with a focus on people’s quality of life. Quality of life includes but extends beyond the well-being of individuals, to social relationships and how we treat the environment. It does not contradict entrepreneurship and financial return, but puts them in a broader context.” (Triodos Bank, 2009:12)

A major criticism of the business case is that, leaning on the triple bottom line metaphor for a moment, it privileges financial returns over social and environmental “returns” (Gray and Milne, 2004). The above quote, in contrast, suggests that Triodos Bank does not privilege financial return, but instead puts it in “a broader context”. The organisation also attaches a figure to this “broader context”, stating in its Annual Report that it aims for an annual Return on Capital Employed (ROCE) of 8%, a figure which contrasts with, say, the Royal Bank of Scotland’s annual target ROCE of 15%.

This data is particularly interesting from a pragmatic perspective. These extracts from Triodos Bank's public utterances give the general impression of the business case "within reason", the business case "reined in" as it were. Here the organisation appears to pursue win-win situations but, by effectively capping financial returns, does not allow (in theory) the financial "win" to dominate. This gentle "stretching" of the business case suggests that there may be potential for organisations such as Triodos Bank i.e. socially/environmentally-focussed SMEs, to contribute to advancing the "discursive struggle" within the sustainable development-business relationship, in this case by placing the business case in a "broader context".

8.3.3 Ecological Modernisation

We saw in Chapter Seven that several of the sample organisations, particularly the large PLCs, frequently used the language of ecological modernisation, such as "decoupling" (Unilever) and "closed loop" manufacturing (GlaxoSmithKline). The close reading also identified this as a key theme within these organisations' public utterances.

The ecological modernisation argument often begins with a statement stressing the gravity of sustainability related issues. For example, BT warns that "our society faces huge challenges" (BT, 2010:1), and Unilever that "the world is changing" (Unilever, 2009:6). The organisation then outlines its "vision" for a "new model for business growth" (Unilever, 2009:6), typically based on developing advanced new technologies, partnerships, and inspiring others. Other key elements of the argument are the contention that "business has a key role to play" in sustainable development (BT, 2010:1) and "we do not believe there is a conflict between sustainability and profitable growth" (Unilever, 2010:3).

As discussed in Chapter Two, Dryzek (2005) distinguished between "weak" and "strong" form ecological modernisation, suggesting that a "strong" form was the only option for "transforming industrial society into a radically different and more environmentally defensible (but still capitalist) alternative" (2005:179). Strong form ecological modernisation would require engagement with more radical "green" ideas such as ultimate limits to growth and sufficiency (Huber, 2000) and a sense of reflexivity and "social learning" (Dryzek, 2005), whereby "the dominant institutions can learn and...their learning can produce meaningful change" (Hajer, 1996).

Some of the language in BT and Unilever's public utterances does suggest a level of engagement with these "strong form" ideas. For example, Unilever refers to living "within the natural limits of the planet" (2010:3), and BT comments that "change on this scale requires a fundamental transformation, not incremental improvement" (BT, 2010:6). However, as the content analysis revealed, neither organisation tackles sustainable consumption, and both are committed to "growing our business" (BT, 2010:3). This approach is more suggestive of a narrative of "weak form" ecological modernisation. The implicit assumption is that "technofixes" (Young, 2000) will work, decoupling will happen and limits to growth will no longer be an issue. It may be that such confidence could make "social learning" problematic.

8.3.4 We Do Business Differently

There is one key theme which is common to the public utterances of the co-owned businesses, the social enterprises, and the environmentally-motivated SMEs sampled: the argument that "we do business differently". The basis of this argument is to present the organisation as an "alternative" to "business as usual" (The Phone Co-op, 2010), "a better and more sustainable way of doing business" (John Lewis Partnership, 2010b:3)

A feature of the argument is to first critique "conventional" organisations (Ecotricity) and/or the existing "unsustainable" system (Good Energy) that has "so singularly failed" (Triodos Bank). For example, the Better Food Company chastises "soulless corporations", while Cafedirect suggests that "it's time for the large multinationals to really sit down and think about what they should be doing" (Cafedirect, 2009:45). The next step is to compare the organisation favorably with its less sustainable competitors, typically using the words "new", "different", "alternative" or "better", for example:

"Our sustainable approach to banking contrasted starkly with the beleaguered high-street banking sector" (Triodos Bank, 2009:27)

We believe that we should offer our customers both value and values. Which makes us a bit different" (Co-operative Group, 2010)

“The difference between Ecotricity and the rest of the UK’s energy companies is one of purpose. Ecotricity exists to bring about environmental change, not to make a profit for shareholders” (Ecotricity, 2009:6)

The organisations then often go on to put themselves forward as “a model that others can learn from” (Triodos Bank, 2009:11), as “an example for others to follow” (Ethical Property Company, 2009:1). For example, Blue Skies Holdings suggests that “it is our mission to be a leading model for Sustainable Development” (Blue Skies, 2009:6), while at the Better Food Company, “we believe the world is ready for new ideas and new models of how we live” (Better Food Company, 2010b). Some of these organisations wish to act as a “catalyst” for “massive social change” (Eden Project, 2009:40).

These comments are resonant of the “Panacea hypothesis”, discussed in Chapter Three, wherein it is proposed that small, socially and/or environmentally-orientated organisations can “pull the whole market towards sustainability” (Schaltegger and Wagner, 2011). This theory has, however, been criticised as “overly-optimistic” (Hall et al, 2010), and it is noted that the language used by these organisations can occasionally border on hyperbolic; Ecotricity, for example, speaks of “a big vision for a Green Britain” (2010b), while Good Energy refers to “faceless, profit-driven organisation[s]” (2009:10).

However, what is striking in the public utterances of these organisations is how relatively radical ideas are discussed in the language of business. This is particularly evident in Triodos Bank’s 2008/2009 Annual Report, where the organisation argues for fundamental changes to the financial system:

“Just financing sustainable projects, and being transparent about it, is not enough. We cannot have a more sustainable lifestyle without a more sustainable financial system. Speculation about what happens after the recession fails to recognise that lasting change depends on a new system approach that can underpin a new, more sustainable economy. Much of the recent debate around the crisis focuses on ‘rebuilding trust’, which sounds ominously like business as usual. Rather we need to change finance more fundamentally so that we can build a better economy and deal with the really big problems that face us, like the climate and poverty crises” (Triodos Bank, 2009:10)

As in the discussion on the business case above, this extract again highlights the potential for these “alternative” organisations to contribute to the “discursive struggle” – here and elsewhere in the organisation’s public utterances we see ideas of system level change proposed in corporate-friendly language. There is potential for Triodos Bank, for example, when speaking to people it wishes to influence, to change perspectives by proposing unconventional ideas in conventional language.

However, to come back to Hall et al’s (2010) suggestion that the Panacea hypothesis is “overly-optimistic”; while Triodos Bank is large for a social enterprise, in the context of the financial services industry it is positively tiny. In 2010 it had turnover of c. £82 million, in comparison with RBS’s £32 billion. Of the organisations mentioned in this section, Triodos Bank is one of the largest; for example the Ethical Property Company had 2010 turnover of just over £2 million and the Eden Project of £20 million. It remains questionable, therefore, how effective these organisations can be in spreading their “alternative” message while they remain so small. Furthermore, there is the issue of “capture” as their presently alternative approach begins to become more mainstream (Tilley and Young, 2009).

8.4 Reading Two: Metaphor and Language Use

The second reading of the public utterances was more specific than the first, focussing on the linguistic devices used by the organisations when constructing their narratives of sustainability. The strongest impression emerging from this reading was that metaphor is frequently used to express the organisation’s approach to sustainable development. In addition, it is striking that the words “sustainability” or “sustainable” are used in many different ways.

8.4.1 Sustainability as Something Tangible

Many of the organisations sampled use metaphors which suggest that sustainability is in fact something tangible, something solid and concrete which can be measured and functionally manipulated. For example, sustainability is alternately something that can be “delivered” (Avon Metals, John Lewis Partnership), “embedded” (BT, Shell), “driven” (Vodafone, BAT), and is even the “heart” of the organisation (Blue Skies Holdings, Tesco). Very common is to

speak of a sustainable development or sustainability “agenda” (e.g. Aster Group, BAT, Co-operative Group, RBS, Vodafone), which gives the impression of a to-do list entitled “sustainability”, with boxes ready to be ticked-off.

Perhaps the most frequent metaphor used here, however, is a “building” one. Organisations are “building a sustainable business” (BAT, John Lewis Partnership, Marks and Spencer) or, in some cases, building a “sustainable future” (Guardian News and Media, Vodafone). Within this metaphor, sustainability becomes something which has “pillars” (Avon Metals, BT, M&S), a “cornerstone” (Anglo American) and strong “foundations” (BT, Vodafone, Unilever). The message is one of strength, of solid, unshakeable foundations, of trustworthiness. Dryzek’s (2005) “discourse of reassurance” springs to mind; we are encouraged that “the planet is safe in the hands of business” (Gray and Bebbington, 2000).

The building terminology in particular resonates with the “organisation as physical structure” metaphor discussed by Amernic and Craig (2001). The authors suggest that this metaphor allows the organisation to be presented as a “natural, coherent whole”, in charge of its own destiny and progressing confidently towards its goal. In the public utterances of the organisations mentioned above, sustainability is presented as something solid, something definite, which can gradually be “built”, both simplifying the concept and giving the impression that it is something which the organisation is in charge and in control of.

Amernic and Craig (2001) also identify another metaphor relating to “organisation as physical structure”: the idea that the organisation is “going somewhere” (2001:778). Looking at the “building” metaphor more closely, it is suggested that it blends almost seamlessly with the “journey” metaphor (Milne et al, 2006), wherein organisations claim to be on a (perhaps never-ending) journey of incremental improvement towards “sustainable business”. The message is that organisations may be on a difficult journey, but they have firm foundations in place to keep them on a steady course. As Shell declares:

“Technology and innovation will remain at the heart of our strategy as we push into challenging frontiers and make the most of existing resources. Sustainable development will continue to underpin our approach. The foundations for future growth are in place” (Royal Dutch Shell, 2009:4)

Finally, it is noted that not all of the sample organisations refer to building a sustainable business or adopting a sustainable development agenda. Some eschew metaphors in favour of more direct language; less reassuring perhaps, but also less obfuscating. For example, the Ecology Building Society speaks of promoting “ecological policies designed to promote or enhance the environment in accordance with the principles of sustainable development” (2009:8), the Co-operative Group proposes to “manage and develop its businesses in a sustainable manner” (2009:6), and Shared Interest aims to “conduct our business in a manner which reflects the principles of stewardship and environmental sustainability” (2009:13).

8.4.2 An Expected Journey

Although the journey metaphor has been touched on above, a brief mention does not do justice to its persistent prevalence in the public utterances of so many of the organisations sampled. These organisations suggest that they are on a “journey to sustainability” or a “sustainability journey” (e.g. Aster Group, Guardian News and Media, Unilever), driving the “transition” (Barclays, BP, Vodafone) or “transformation” (Tesco) to a more sustainable future.

This is consistent with the findings of Milne et al (2006), and much of the language highlighted by those authors was also evident in the public utterances of the organisations sampled for this study. For example, organisations are “making progress” (Tesco) on a “challenging journey” (GlaxoSmithKline), and holding a “steady course” (BAT) in a “clear direction” (Northumbrian Water).

Characteristic of this metaphor is for the organisation to speak of taking “small steps” (Cafedirect) or “steady steps” (BAT) on the “path to sustainability” (GlaxoSmithKline). This is consistent with the idea, as Milne et al (2006) point out, that incremental changes to existing structures will be sufficient to bring about sustainable development. Again, the message to the reader is a reassuring one; as Unilever suggests, “we will inspire people to take small, everyday actions that can add up to a big difference for the world” (Unilever, 2009:6).

As Unilever’s remarks hint, some of the organisations position themselves as the “leader” of this “shared journey” (Milne et al, 2006) to sustainability. For example, Guardian News and Media indicates that “our vision is to be a leader on sustainability” (2010a:3), while BT suggests that “this is the start of a journey... companies who choose to innovate will be leading

the world into the next decade and beyond” (BT, 2010:8). Amernic and Craig (2001) also note how organisations position themselves as leaders in their public utterances, and warn that this implicitly asks the organisation’s stakeholders to “toe the line” and “restricts perception and open, honest human debate and interchange” (Amernic and Craig, 2001:779).

A further feature of organisations’ use of the journey metaphor is a warning that this is going to be a “long journey” (Unilever), perhaps even a “continuous” one (John Lewis Partnership) wherein “we don’t know all the answers” (Marks and Spencer). Innocent Drinks illustrates this point of view:

“Achieving our goals is going to be a long journey, and probably one that will never end, but every small positive change is a step in the right direction” (Innocent Drinks, 2010a)

This tendency to describe the journey to sustainability as “probably one that will never end” was identified by Milne et al (2006) as particularly problematic. Sustainability is thus “deferred” indefinitely, “forestalling radical change that many commentators believe is necessary for its achievement” (Milne et al, 2006:821). This in turn endorses the continuation of “business as usual”.

However, once again it is noted that not every organisation adopts the language of the journey metaphor; a few are more encouraging of radical rather than incremental change. For example, although claiming to be on a “journey”, BT takes an alternative attitude to its travels:

“To avoid the most dangerous effects of climate change, governments, businesses and individuals must radically reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Change on this scale requires a fundamental transformation, not incremental improvement” (BT, 2010:6)

As has been discussed earlier, the narrative through which BT presents its strategy for this “fundamental transformation” is resonant largely of weak ecological modernisation. But the organisation’s dismissal of “incremental improvement” offers a notable contrast to many of its peers’ consistent pursuit of the never-ending “journey to sustainability”.

8.4.3 Balancing

In the literature review it was noted that organisations were reluctant to recognise the existence of tensions and conflicts between corporate and societal interests (Spence and Gray, 2007). In the few instances where organisations did acknowledge the inevitability of trade-offs, Tregidga and Milne (2006) suggest that they proposed to “manage” them through “balancing” the triple bottom line elements.

Balancing is indeed a popular metaphor with the organisations sampled. For example, several discuss “food miles”, and the negative environmental but positive social consequences of trading with the developing world. Their conclusion to this dilemma is to speak of “balancing” environmental and social outcomes:

“...any actions we take to reduce food miles need to be balanced with the positive social and economic benefits of international trade” (John Lewis Partnership, 2010c)

“Investigating and minimising our use of airfreight whilst balancing the need to trade with developing countries and provide nutritional choice” (Marks and Spencer, 2009:22)

As Tregidga and Milne (2006) discuss, the balancing metaphor is a problematic one; it implies that the elements of the triple bottom line are “not competing against each other” and ultimately “weakens the sense of tension between business and environment” (2006:237). In using the balancing metaphor, the organisations above suggest that the trade-off situation is defused; it is no longer a problem. The metaphor thus serves to reinforce the notion that sustainability is something which can be measured, managed and controlled by the organisation (Tregidga and Milne, 2006).

However, there are a number of instances where organisations refer to tension and conflict without adding a “balancing” footnote. For example:

“While we promote all of the above it is recognised that financial implications will have to be considered for all purchases” (Shared Interest, 2009:85)

“It remained the case in 2009 that it was necessary to select counterparties firstly for their financial safety rather than their environmental and ethical track record which remains our established policy” (Ecology Building Society, 2009:6)

It is noted that these quotes are both examples of tension between financial and environmental goals; the organisations acknowledge that sometimes economic considerations must take precedence. This brings to mind the concerns of Gray and Milne (2004), who argued that financial concerns will inevitably outweigh social and/or environmental ones. The extracts also support the suggestion in the literature (e.g. Barter and Bebbington, 2010; Holt, 2011) that smaller social/environmentally-focussed organisations often struggle with financial stability.

8.4.4 Many (if any) Meanings of Sustainability

The literature review of this thesis also highlighted the continuing debate over the meaning of “sustainable development” and “sustainability”, and the many alternative, often contradictory, interpretations of these terms. This ambiguity means that concept lends itself to corporate “capture”. Once again, we are reminded of Banarjee’s (2008) argument that the increasing use of terms such as “corporate sustainability” implicitly shift the focus from “global planetary sustainability to sustaining the corporation” (2008:66).

What is striking from the public utterances analysed is that the words “sustainability” or “sustainable” are attached to any number of things. In particular, they are often coupled with “profits”, or “profitability.” For example, we have:

- “sustainable profits” (BAT, 2010b)
- “sustainability achievements” (Berkeley Group, 2010:7)
- “Sustainability Checklist” (Blue Skies, 2009:7)
- “sustainability vision” (Guardian News and Media, 2010a:3)
- “sustainable profitability” (RBS, 2009:2)
- “sustainability strategy” (Vodafone, 2010b:6)

The implication of this ubiquity, combined with the confusion over its meaning, is that the word “sustainability” could become almost meaningless, simply a pronoun. The ensuing

danger is that any sense of the concept of sustainability as a desirable planetary and societal state could be lost as it becomes just another corporate “strategy” or “performance”.

Some of the extracts from the public utterances bring Banarjee’s (2008) comments about “sustaining the corporation” sharply into focus. A number of the organisations discuss sustainability in terms of remaining financially stable. For example, RBS speaks of “restoring the company to sustainable profitability” (RBS, 2009:2). Perhaps the most notable example, however, comes from BP

“At BP we define sustainability as the capacity to endure as a group” (BP, 2009:1)

Furthermore, there is a tendency at times to closely link sustainability with business “success” and “strategy”. For example, GlaxoSmithKline aims to be a “successful and sustainable business”, the Berkeley Group argues that “financial and sustainability performance can go hand in hand” (Berkeley Group, 2010:7), and Vodafone remarks that “our business strategy and our sustainability strategy are inseparable” (Vodafone, 2010b). Again, these comments suggest an attempt to present sustainability as a manageable concept of which the organisation is in control. This indicates a level of corporate “capture” of the terms “sustainability” and “sustainable”.

8.5 Reading Three: Reflexive Considerations

As discussed in Chapter Five, reflexivity was a key aspect of the “adversarial” nature of the close reading. The third and final reading of the public utterances thus aimed to be a reflexive one, with a focus on multiple possible interpretations of the text, the motivations of the author, and, crucially, what might it be that is “not spoken of” (Krippendorff, 2004).

8.5.1 Identifying the “Unsaid”

One thing common to all of the arguments and metaphors considered in this chapter is that they are determinedly positive. For example, the “building” and “journey” metaphors present the organisation as moving upwards, or forwards, the business case argument is positive by definition, technological optimism is a feature of ecological modernisation, and the small organisations which “do business differently” are confident of their impact as a role model.

Acknowledgement of any negative aspects of the relationship between business organisations and sustainable development, for instance such as an organisation's conflicts with stakeholders, or dubious environmental record, is relatively rare. When negative statements are made, as we saw above in the "licence to operate" argument, they are used merely as a rhetorical device; what Bryman (2008) calls "pre-formulation, whereby a possible counter-argument is discounted in the course of presenting an argument" (2008:506). Difficult questions, such as the validity of, say, a fashion, petroleum, mining or retail company even trying to be "sustainable", are unasked and unanswered. As discussed above, references to trade-offs are usually accompanied by claims of "balancing". Furthermore, the majority of the organisations sampled are consistently focused on continued business growth, in spite of the related cautionary literature (e.g. Meadows et al, 2004; Jackson, 2009).

It is difficult to see how "social learning" (Dryzek, 2005) can come about without some honest consideration of what business cannot do, or is doing in an unsustainable manner (Spence and Gray, 2007). Unconstrained optimism may leave no room to "allow spaces for resistance and change and for new ways of imagining reality" (Livesey, 2001:319) to emerge.

That said, however, it is noted that just because these issues do not appear in its public utterances does not mean that they are not being considered by the organisation. It may be that public utterances are not viewed as the appropriate forum for negative comments about sustainability, and it is suggested that the interview phase of the empirical work can offer more insight on this issue.

8.6 Some Conclusions

Guided by the more critical "sustainability reporting" literature (e.g. Milne et al, 2006, 2009; Tregidga and Milne, 2006; Livesey, 2002), the close reading allowed for an "adversarial" perspective (Welford, 1998) on how organisations use their public utterances to construct and present their relationship with sustainable development. Ultimately, the findings offer support for many of the concerns expressed in the existing literature.

The analysis revealed a reliance on various metaphors to shape the narratives presented (see also Milne et al. 2006; Livesey and Kearins, 2002). In particular, a feature of the public

utterances was the regular use of “building”, “journey” and “balancing” metaphors to describe the organisations’ approach to sustainable development. Along with simplifying the concept of sustainability, through these metaphors it is presented as something which the organisation is comfortable with and in control of. Indeed, the overall message from most of the public utterances was one of confidence and positivity; the reader is reassured that “the planet is safe in the hands of business” (Gray and Bebbington, 2000).

This determinedly positive approach is a particular issue in terms of the role an organisation’s public utterances may play in shaping its understanding of sustainable development (Tregidga and Milne, 2006). Cultivating an exclusively optimistic view of sustainability invites cognitive dissonance within the organisation, and may leave limited opportunity for “social learning” (Dryzek, 2005), for identifying and addressing the inevitable negative issues, and for the development of “spaces for resistance and change” (Livesey, 2002).

Furthermore, the comforting “journey”, “building” and “balancing” metaphors serve to reinforce corporate “capture” of the sustainable development discourse (Gray, 2010; Milne et al, 2009). It was also noted that the organisations often used the terms “sustainability” and “sustainable” indiscriminately, and, through the “business case” and “licence to operate” arguments, presented a narrow, organisation-centric view of sustainable development. It is suggested that together these linguistic and rhetorical devices allow organisations (particularly large PLCs) to legitimise their continuing pursuit of “business as usual” disguised as “corporate sustainability”.

However, through the analysis of “different types” of organisations, there were hints of a continuing “discursive struggle” within the sustainable development-business relationship, which offer some hope that “new ways of imagining reality” may eventually emerge (Livesey, 2002). For example, Triodos Bank brought an alternative perspective to the business case by placing financial return in “a broader context”, while a number of socially/environmentally motivated organisations made relatively radical statements in the language of commercial business. In addition, BT called for “fundamental”, rather than incremental change within its narrative of ecological modernisation, while other organisations acknowledged the inevitability of tension between environmental, social and financial goals. It is suggested that, although reframing of the sustainable development discourse as “corporate sustainability” is widespread, it is perhaps not complete; “spaces for resistance and change” (Livesey, 2002) may yet exist.

Chapter Nine

Interview Results: Part One

9.1 Introduction

The in-depth semi-structured interviews, with individuals from a range of different types of organisation, represented the major empirical effort of the study. Findings are thus presented over the course of two chapters. This chapter discusses the interviewees' understandings of sustainable development and the role of their organisation therein, while Chapter Ten explores their perspectives on barriers to doing more and future directions.

The literature review revealed a range of possible ways in which the sustainable development-business relationship may be understood, such as for example the business case, ecological modernisation or the "Panacea hypothesis" (see Chapter Three). Prior research suggested, however, that the "business case" understanding of sustainable development was dominant among individuals in business organisations (Spence, 2007, O'Dwyer, 2003).

The semi-structured interviews offered a chance to gain up-to-date, nuanced insight into understandings of sustainable development in business, uniquely engaging with individuals in a variety of different types of organisation to explore "alternative" practical interpretations of sustainability in the organisation. In this way, it allowed for a level of engagement with some of the "important questions" (Starik, 2006) proposed by the literature, such as the limitations of the business case (Spence and Gray, 2007), corporate capture of the sustainability discourse (Levy and Egan, 2003), the idealism of the Panacea hypothesis (Hall et al, 2010), and the role of big business in perpetuating unsustainability (Gray, 2006a).

The choice of interviews as the primary research method reflected the pragmatic aspect of the research approach (see Chapter Five). It was aimed to explore the sample organisations' engagement with sustainable development through gathering a spoken account of that engagement, from a key member of each organisation. To temper this pragmatism, however, a reflexive approach was taken to the data collection and interpretation. The interviews were semi-structured, allowing the respondents to discuss their views in depth, and a number of theoretical perspectives were taken into account during data interpretation (Alvesson, 2003). The reflexive considerations related to the interview data analysis are explored in Chapter Ten, section 10.5.

As explained in Chapter Six, a combination of inductive and deductive analysis of the interview data led to the identification of four main themes:

- Understandings of sustainable development
- Role of the organisation in sustainable development
- Barriers to involvement
- Changes required in the future

After reflection and preliminary development of the “big picture” from the data, it was decided that the findings could be clearly presented using these four themes as a structure. The next two chapters are organised accordingly, with the “Understandings” and “Role” themes discussed in this chapter. As the findings are spread over two chapters, the theoretical framework is revisited in Chapter Ten only.

Chapter Nine begins with a brief profile of the interviewees, followed by a discussion of the results of the data analysis, and concludes by considering the key findings and the emerging “story” of the interview analysis.

9.2 Profile of Interviewees

As explained in detail in Chapter Six, twenty seven individuals from twenty seven organisations were interviewed. The tables and figures below provide a profile of the interviewees according to job title, industry and organisation type.

Interviewee Job Title	No. of Interviewees
Head of Sustainability	4
Chief Executive Officer	3
Chairman	3
Managing Director	3
Head of Sustainable Development	2
Head of Corporate Social Responsibility	2
Head of Corporate Responsibility	2
Other	8
Total	27

Table 9.1: Profile of interviewees by job title

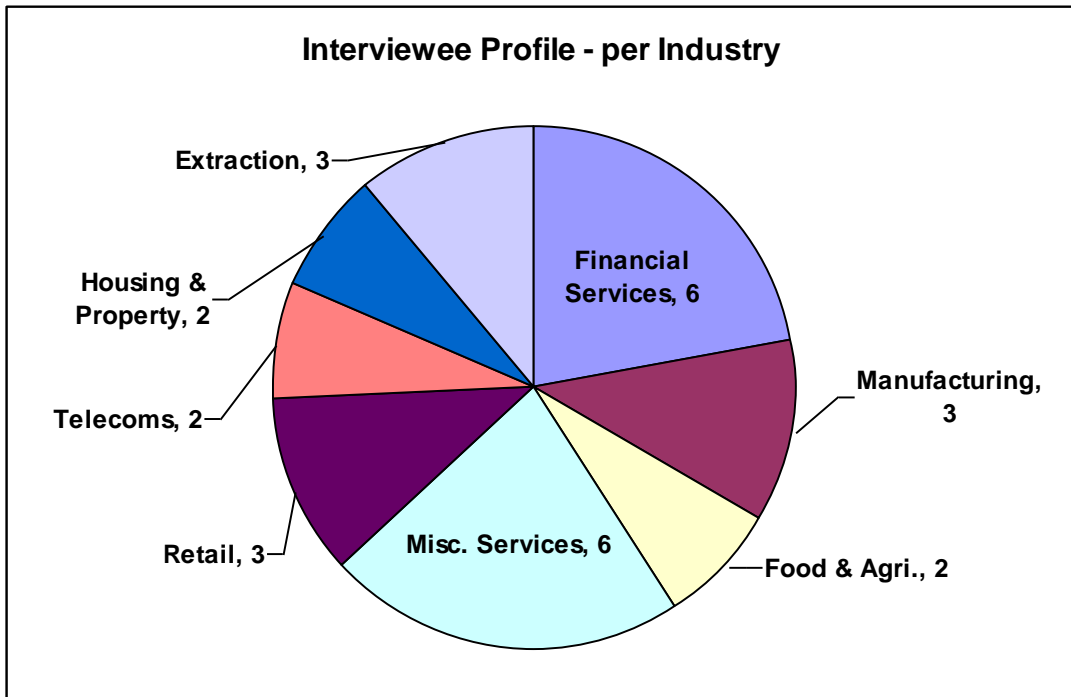


Fig 9.1: Profile of organisations per industry

Type of organisation	Number of interviewees
Large PLC	9
Social Enterprise	7
Co-owned Business	4
Private Company	4
State-owned PLC	2
University	1
Total	27

Table 9.2: Profile of interviewees per type of organisation

9.3 Understandings of Sustainable Development

The interviews typically began with a detailed discussion of how the participant believed sustainable development to be understood in their organisation. Understandings chiefly fell into one or more of the following categories:

- The Business Case
- Balancing
- Entity Focus
- Direct Impact
- Ownership Structure

A key point, however, is that many interviewees were in fact unsure of what sustainable development “means” in the context of their organisation. These individuals suggested that they found the concepts of “sustainability” and “sustainable organisation” extremely difficult to define, and discussed how this affected their organisation’s approach to sustainable development. Their views are considered presently in section 9.3.6 – Defining Sustainability.

9.3.1 The Business Case

Given its prominence in the literature (see Chapter Three), it is not unexpected that many interviewees used the business case to frame their understanding of sustainability. They stressed the benefits of “the whole sustainability agenda” (Head of CSR, Partnership, Retail) to the business, speaking of reputational, regulatory and cost benefits. In particular, sustainable development was often said to present an “opportunity”; for example, the representatives of several large PLCs highlighted the opportunity for “business growth” in “emerging markets” (Head of Sustainability, PLC, Telecoms).

However, the phrase “the business case” was rarely used by the interviewees. One individual hinted that it may be somewhat outdated:

“The business case was made so long ago. It’s something we don’t really think about very much these days, in that it’s just obviously something that as a company we should do” (Head of Corporate Responsibility, PLC, Energy)

The implication is that perhaps the term “business case” itself is out of fashion. However, from the frequent references to “opportunities”, “added-value” and “business benefits”, it appears that the principle that sustainability is a “win-win” remains popular.

A twist on the business case is the view, expressed by several interviewees, that engagement with sustainability is necessary for sustaining the business, for the “survival” of the organisation. As one individual commented, “the sustainable development of our business is dependent on supporting the sustainable development of the world” (VP for Corporate Responsibility, PLC, Pharmaceuticals). A number of the organisations which depend on natural resources were particularly conscious of “adaptation”. The representative of a water provider spoke of “protecting our product” (Head of Corporate Responsibility, PLC, Water), while an executive from a multinational Fast Moving Consumer Goods (FMCG) manufacturer noted wryly that “we saw the dwindling fish stocks and we said, you know, no fish, no fish fingers!” (Global VP for Sustainability, PLC, Manufacturing).

Echoing the findings of the close reading (see Chapter Eight), once again endorsement of the business case was not confined to the large multinationals; several interviewees from social enterprises suggested that their “sustainable development approach to business” gave them a competitive advantage, a “point of difference” (Head of Sustainable Development, Social Enterprise, Food & Agriculture). For example, the CEOs of two recycling organisations both noted that large organisations often chose to work with them rather than their competitors for “corporate social responsibility benefits” (CEO, Social Enterprise, Recycling Services). The Chairman of one social enterprise was particularly keen to stress the commercial value of its social business model. Discussing the organisation’s pursuit of public sector tenders, he suggested that their business model gave them an edge over their competitors as it helped in “developing the relationships and the degree of trust we have with people” (Chairman, Social Enterprise, Community Services).

This individual went on to explain that the social enterprise model could not only compete with the traditional commercial business model, but was *better* than it, both in terms of service

quality, and, as he put it, making “the world a better place”. For example, he suggested that their policy of employing local people improved their service, and furthermore, being a social enterprise, “we can get to people... that mainstream providers can’t get to” (Chairman, Social Enterprise, Community Services). In effect, what is being described here is a “win-win” situation, with social goals (ostensibly) prioritised. The issue here, as ever, is what happens when a “win-lose” situation arises (Hahn et al, 2010). As was the case in the public utterances analysis, for many interviewees the solution was “balancing”.

9.3.2 Balancing

When asked to describe their organisation’s understanding of sustainability, several participants went straight to the triple bottom line, the “three legs” of sustainability (CEO, Social Enterprise, Recycling Services). One interviewee described her organisation as a “Triple Bottom Line company”, meaning that “we equally value our social, environmental and financial returns” (MD, Private Company, Property).

Reference to the triple bottom line was frequently accompanied by talk of “balancing” the three elements, of the “constant balancing act” required (CEO, Mutual Society, Financial Services). For example, one individual commented:

“Basically, as I understand the definition of sustainable development about balancing the competing needs of the economy, society and the environment” (Head of Corporate Responsibility, PLC, Water)

While some of the interviewees made rather vague pronouncements on balancing, a number referred specifically to decision-making, speaking of the need to “weigh up all of the issues” (Group Environmental Executive, Private Company, Retail). The Managing Director of an ‘ethical’ property development company described how its “balancing” policy manifested itself in the organisation. She explained that “we’re constantly making decisions” which require “compromise”, for example:

“We would very much reiterate the equality of the bottom line, so we would measure the environmental as importantly as the social, but also, you know, we’re realistic; if we buy a building and refurbish it to the highest environmental spec, it wouldn’t be affordable. So that

would not meet the triple bottom line. So it's a compromise on everything. So it's just a matter of making hard decisions on which ones we do. We would always refurbish buildings to as high an environmental standard as we can, within an affordability criteria. And that's that balance" (MD, Private Company, Property)

As we saw in the previous two chapters, again the difficulty of balancing the “economic” element of the triple bottom line is highlighted. A number of the organisations referred to the need to balance “costs and benefits”, or the difficulty of “trying to balance the level that you go to in environmental sustainability against how much it costs” (Sustainability Manager, Social Enterprise, Housing). The interviewee from the property company stressed that key to being a triple bottom line company was compromising on the economic element. She explained the consequences of charging “affordable rents” so as not to “price out the poorer, more struggling organisations” looking for tenancy in their buildings:

“If we wanted a maximum return, we'd have commercial rents. The whole point of a triple bottom line is that we're not maximising financial returns. We offer about a three and a half to four percent return to shareholders, which is good in the market, much more than they'd get in the bank, but it isn't seven or eight percent that a commercial company might offer. We would never say we maximise financial returns to investors, and that's not why they invest in us” (MD, Private Company, Property)

This issue of maximising financial returns was discussed with several interviewees, and again, balancing was the common response. However, the focus was not always on the triple bottom line, but also on the idea of balancing short-term and long-term returns. For example, one of the interviewees, the Head of Sustainable Business at a large PLC, suggested that investors would have to get used to returns which “go in cycles” and “balance out” over several years (Head of Sustainable Business, PLC, Retail).

This view that sustainability requires “longer-term thinking” was very popular among the interviewees, with some suggesting that they were beginning to adopt longer “payback periods” when making investment decisions. In particular, representatives from the financial services industry highlighted the unsustainable nature of “excess returns” in the short term (Policy and Research Director, PLC, Energy). One of these individuals applied this way of thinking to the concept of “maximising profits”:

“I just think that old sort of paradigm of business pulling against society to maximise profit, it doesn’t really hold. I mean, maximising profit is a much more complex concept than it seems, it’s not just short-term profit. Maximisation, almost by definition I would say means sustainable long-term profits” (Head of Sustainability, State-owned PLC, Financial Services)

One of the interviewees felt that the balancing metaphor encapsulated his organisation’s approach to sustainability: it’s about “trying to find ways that better allow the two balancing acts, the short versus long-term and the three-way economic, environmental and social” (Policy and Research Director, PLC, Energy). However, while the comments from these participants suggest that the concept of “balancing” may have a degree of pragmatic potential, it is crucial to remember its limitations and bear in mind the concerns of authors such as Tregidga and Milne (2006) and Barter and Bebbington (2010) e.g. what is being “balanced” and is it “sustainable” for the three bottom lines to be infinitely substitutable? Furthermore, as Milne and Gray (2013) argue persuasively, the triple bottom line is “not the same as sustainability”.

9.3.3 Entity Focus

A number of interviewees took an entity-focussed, “organisation-centric” view of sustainability, defining it in terms of the sustainability of their organisation. For example, when asked to define a “sustainable organisation”, one Executive responded that “it’s an organisation that can go on and on and on” (VP for Corporate Responsibility, PLC, Pharmaceuticals). A few of the individuals from organisations in the financial services sector in particular focussed on this understanding of sustainability, with one noting that, as her organisation had not required government bailout, it had proved to be “sustainable” (Sustainability Consultant, PLC, Financial Services).

One of the interviewees, however, distinguished between this “commercial sustainability” and sustainable development, suggesting that the word “sustainability” had been chosen in his organisation as a unifying concept:

“From my perspective it [“Sustainability”] unifies the concept of commercial sustainability and sustainable development; sustainable development being in my opinion the global agenda, and commercial sustainability being modern companies that just try to continue to make

money. I think the important thing is connection between the two, where you get greatest benefit from companies to both agendas, and I think both are mutually more successful as a result of doing so, and sustainable development is better if companies are motivated to their interests” (Head of Sustainability, PLC, Tobacco)

These comments bring to mind strongly the work of Banarjee (2008). For this interviewee, the “global agenda” of sustainable development is “better if companies are motivated to their interests”. As Banarjee articulates, here “business, not societal or ecological, interests define the parameters of sustainability” (2008:67). Any sense of “planetary sustainability” is thus lost and sustainability becomes merely a matter of “sustaining the corporation” (Banarjee, 2008); it is business as usual.

The same individual went on to explain how in his organisation, because of the “connection” between business strategy and “sustainability strategy”, sustainability was becoming “a natural part of corporate strategy rather than something being talked about separately” (Head of Sustainability, PLC, Tobacco). This view was echoed by several interviewees, who described sustainability as “embedded within the business” (Group Environmental Executive, Private Company, Retail). These comments are suggestive of “corporate capture” of sustainability; it threatens to become just another corporate strategy or policy.

Returning to “commercial sustainability”, a number of the interviewees, while not making this the focus of their approach to sustainability, wished to emphasise that the “foundation layer” of sustainability was “financial viability” (Policy and Research Director, PLC, Energy). One of the individuals, an executive in a large private company, noted that “a fundamental part of business is for a business to stay in business...for us to be sustainable from the sustainable development perspective, we need a robust, functioning healthy business in the background” (Group Environmental Executive, Private Company, Retail). The Chairman of a social enterprise agreed that the organisation had to make “some sort of financial surplus...because obviously if we’re not doing that, it doesn’t matter what else we’re doing” (Chairman, Social Enterprise, Community Services).

This comment hints at a point stressed by several interviewees from social enterprises; that to compete and survive, they must be “commercially minded”. The founder of a waste recycling company remarked that “social enterprises have these lovely touchy-feely outcomes, but they

do operate like businesses” (MD, Social Enterprise, Recycling Services). Another individual commented that “it’s as important that we’re an enterprise as that we’re social, because we can’t afford to lose money. We used to talk about not-for-profit and that, but we’re not for loss either!” (Head of Sustainable Development, Social Enterprise, Community Services). This suggests that some level of commercial “sustainability” is a key issue for these non-commercial organisations. It is noted however that, as the discussion above in relation to “maximising” financial returns illustrates, it is likely that “commercial sustainability” means different things in different organisations.

9.3.4 Direct Impact

In contrast to the entity-focussed perspective, some of the individuals interviewed, particularly those representing social enterprises, sought to understand sustainability in terms of the direct impact their organisation has on sustainable development. In simple terms, they spoke of sustainable development and how their organisation aimed to contribute to it, rather than talking about what sustainability meant in the context of the organisation.

For example, the representative of a social enterprise which operates in developing countries commented that “as a business, sustainable development is very much understood as our impact in the countries where we do most of our business” (Head of Sustainable Development, Social Enterprise, Food & Agriculture), while the Head of Sustainable Development at a University explained that “it’s in our core business, to do sustainable development research and teaching” (Head of Sustainable Development, University). The founder and Managing Director of a social enterprise in the waste recycling industry summed up his organisation’s approach to sustainability as “that’s really why were here, we’re here, ultimately, to make a contribution to sustainability” (MD, Social Enterprise, Recycling Services). For him, “at the end of the day it’s about the outcomes; we measure our success in jobs that we’ve created and in tonnes of resources we’ve taken out of the waste stream” (MD, Social Enterprise, Recycling Services).

The message from these organisations was along the lines of “sustainable development is just what we do”. One of the interviewees, the Managing Director of an ethical bank, emphasised the importance of “what” an organisation does, suggesting that it was crucial for organisations to address this, their direct impact, rather than the “how” of engaging with sustainability:

“I think, when you look at big commercial banks, they will focus a lot on how they do it, managing their environmental impacts from the point of view of their buildings and their use of paper and whatever. But the ‘what’ they do is the bit that is more difficult to move, in terms of how they’re using the power of the money that they’re lending, which is considerable, in terms of behaviour generally. And I’m not suggesting that overnight they should stop lending to anybody who wasn’t deemed to be pure in some way, but they could set some benchmarks and over time, shift, and that would be very powerful” (MD, Private Company, Financial Services)

These comments raise a number of interesting questions, particularly around the issue of the fundamental purpose of the organisation. There is a distinct contrast here between how the individuals from social enterprises versus the individuals from large PLCs understand sustainability in the context of their organisation. The latter appear largely to seek to “embed” sustainability in their organisation, to incorporate it somehow, usually through the business case, into their ideas of what an organisation is and what it is for; they seek to fit “sustainability” to “organisation”. In the case of the individuals from socially/environmentally-focused organisations quote above, however, sustainability *is* the purpose of the organisation, so there is no need to frame sustainability so that it fits with “organisation”, the organisation simply “fits” within sustainability. It appears that what we may have here is a very basic, but critical distinction between “conventional” business organisations, created for a largely commercial purpose, and, perhaps, organisations created in order to contribute to sustainable development (in some way or other).

9.3.5 Ownership Structure

Not unexpectedly, the interviewees from each of the four co-owned organisations sampled were keen to stress the importance of their ownership structure to their understanding of sustainable development. One of the individuals commented that “because we are a co-owned business, we should be able to do this better than anyone else!” (Head of CSR, Partnership, Retail). This Head of CSR explained that the organisation was always mindful of “the long-term interests of our partners” and therefore, “the whole premise of our business is...about preserving the business for future generations and future partners” (Head of CSR, Partnership, Retail).

The CEO of a mutual society agreed, suggesting that “the mutual model...allows us to look just that bit further than, say, a corporate, PLC model would do” (CEO, Mutual Society, Financial Services). He also highlighted the society’s “engaged membership”, noting that “our need to follow the concept of sustainable development” is part of the society’s rules and memorandum, which would require two thirds of the members to vote to change it, a “control” which ensures that “we stick to the mission” (CEO, Mutual Society, Financial Services). A point of note is that the Chairman of a social enterprise suggested that registering the organisation as a community benefit society operated as a similar control: “the community benefits society model basically means that our social mission, values... the community benefit, the triple bottom line is locked in legally. So it no longer matters who’s on the Board... if everybody left tomorrow, things would still be locked in” (Chairman, Social Enterprise, Community Services).

The representative of a co-operative highlighted the co-operative movement’s “values and principles” as being “very closely linked” to sustainable development. She suggested that their members joined the society because they believed in these principles and therefore, are “not fussed about the little bit of dividend that they earn”, because “they’re members not for the money, often our members are members because they believe in what we’re doing” (Membership and Co-Operative Affairs Manager, Co-Operative, Telecoms). This suggestion that co-operative owner-members are “not fussed” about maximising profits was echoed by the founder and Chairman of a small, co-operative community farm and shop:

“The business model which we’ve got here... in a good year it’ll make ten grand, fifteen grand, something like that, and that’s on a turnover of half a million. So it’s miniscule really, and it could just as easily make a loss. But when it’s owned by the members, they will kind of feel that that’s ok and that it’s part of them, and if they need to up their subs, as it were, for one year, to try and make sure that it works better the following year, then because it’s theirs, they will be happy to do so” (Chairman, Co-Operative, Food & Agriculture)

The phrase “that it’s part of them” is particularly interesting here, and brings to mind the work of Schumacher (1973) and Dauncey (1989) on local, community enterprises. This interviewee’s comments suggest that when people feel that they are so close to the business,

so close that it is “part of them”, money becomes secondary to keeping the business going; “individualisation” (Giddens, 1990) becomes secondary to community and collectivity.

9.3.6 Defining Sustainability

At this point it is appropriate to turn to those individuals who were less than certain of how sustainability was understood in their organisation. Several participants, before even attempting to describe their understanding of sustainable development, began the interview by asking “what do you mean by sustainability?” Many commented that sustainable development was difficult to define; it was described as “not something you can pin down too far” (Head of Sustainable Development, University), or even something that’s “not actually defined” (VP for Corporate Responsibility, PLC, Pharmaceuticals). One Head of Sustainability suggested that the most difficult part of his job was “trying to agree on a working definition of sustainability, which works for different stakeholders”. He commented that “we spend a lot of time translating between internal business contacts and the outside world, in terms of what they deem to be sustainable or unsustainable” (Head of Sustainability, State-owned PLC, Financial Services).

One of the interviewees identified the “wide” nature of sustainable development as a particular issue. She noted that “sustainable development is everything, it’s absolutely everything, so I struggle with the term generally” (VP for Corporate Responsibility, PLC, Pharmaceuticals). Throughout the interview, she returned to this topic, finally suggesting that we could not continue unless I provided her with a specific definition of sustainable development:

“Unless you tell me exactly what you mean by it [sustainable development] I can’t keep answering questions about it, because what you’re talking about is asking me to compartmentalise activity and I can’t do that. I don’t sit at my desk thinking about sustainable development every day...because we just don’t, companies don’t think that way. But if we’re going to articulate something externally, we might think it through and take it to the sustainable development piece” (VP for Corporate Responsibility, PLC, Pharmaceuticals).

While such a frustrated response was not typical, the issues raised by this interviewee are intriguing. In the first instance, she appears to suggest that sustainable development is so ill-defined, to the point of being “everything”, that it is impossible to apply at an organisational

level. Furthermore, “companies don’t think that way”. She makes it clear when referring to the “sustainable development piece” that she does not think of sustainability as an internal policy or guiding principle, but something which the company must “articulate externally”. The implication is that sustainable development is just a label, under which various organisational good deeds are presented externally.

Sustainability v. CSR

Quite a few interviewees conflated sustainability with corporate social responsibility, suggesting that “in terms of what we do, I think they are kind of one and the same” (Head of CSR, Partnership, Retail) or “I don’t see them as different at all” (Head of Corporate Responsibility, PLC, Energy). The overall message was along the lines of, it doesn’t matter what you call it, “as long as you do it” (Head of Corporate Responsibility, PLC, Energy). Similar to the reference to the “sustainable development piece” above, one of the interviewees explained that the organisation’s sustainability policy, or what was then “environmental and social accountability”, came about when “the business began to look at its’ activities and wanting to formalise a lot of the stuff that we now see as sustainable development, under one heading” (Group Environmental Executive, Private Company, Retail). We are minded again of Banarjee’s (2008) warnings; conflating sustainable development with CSR risks losing sight of “global planetary sustainability” (see also Gray and Milne, 2004).

Language

Closely related is the issue of the language and discourse associated with sustainability, which was raised by a number of the interviewees. For example, one individual was frustrated by the sheer extent of the sustainable development discourse:

“You can go and look at global initiatives, and I think they have 23 indicators...The wider things get it becomes more disparate and it’s much more difficult to keep a perspective on what somebody’s talking about really. Because within that whole area of CR and sustainable development there’s a huge amount of jargon and writings and really you wouldn’t know where you want, what it’s all about. It can be very difficult to drill it down into what is important” (Head of CSR, State-owned PLC, Financial Services)

Some of the interviewees expressed a desire for sustainable development to be framed in simple language, suggesting that “very often, academic definitions of stuff becomes the constraint itself” (Chairman, Social Enterprise, Tourism). One interviewee argued that “people make it [sustainability] a very complex science”, and therefore organisations are reluctant to engage with it (CEO, Social Enterprise, Recycling Services). Another interviewee noted that, for sustainability to be understood in the organisation, it should not be explained in “academic-speak”:

“...it’s got to be in something that people can pick up quickly, they can understand why, and that’s it’s translated into... I’m not saying easy-speak, but, you know, something that people can pick up relatively quickly within their work organisation. Because otherwise it just doesn’t make sense. People generally are too busy to sit down and sort of think it out for themselves”
(Head of CSR, State-owned PLC, Financial Services)

One of the interviewees was critical of what he described as the “flabby, mediocre thinking” in the sustainable development field (Chairman, Social Enterprise, Tourism). This individual characterised the “sustainable development dialogue” as “not pragmatic, it is kind of zealot”. Another interviewee was dismissive of the “theoretical stuff” around “the ins and outs of how people define sustainable development”, explaining that her job was to focus on “very practically based stuff” (VP for Corporate Responsibility, PLC, Pharmaceuticals).

The impression from comments such as these is a frustration with the “jargon” of sustainable development and an underlying suspicion that the term may not mean very much. One of the interviewees described sustainable development as a “buzzword” (Head of Corporate Responsibility, PLC, Energy), and another noted that it had only become a “mainline topic in the second half of the 2000s” (Policy and Research Director, PLC, Energy). This interviewee admitted that “certainly when I got made head of sustainable development I had to go off and look it up on the internet...” (Policy and Research Director, PLC, Energy). Again these comments highlight the considerable vulnerability of the sustainable development discourse to “capture” (Levy and Egan, 2003).

Sustainable Organisation?

Finally on this topic, many interviewees were asked if they believed theirs to be a sustainable organisation, and if not, what would such an organisation look like? The responses fell into several categories.

A small number of individuals suggested that their organisation was sustainable, but usually meaning “sustainable” in the entity-focussed, financial sense. For example, one interviewee answered that “there are challenges, but I think [organisation name] and the pharma sector, well most sectors are pretty sustainable” (VP for Corporate Responsibility, PLC, Pharmaceuticals), while another, as we saw above, suggested that her organisation was sustainable as it was “self-financing” (Sustainability Consultant, PLC, Financial Services).

A second category was those interviewees who used the triple bottom line to argue that “we have quite a high level of sustainability” (MD, Private Company, Property), or that “we’re moving towards being what you might call a sustainable organisation” (Chairman, Social Enterprise, Community Services). These individuals were from social enterprises which also have environmental objectives and could perhaps be said to fit the profile of a “sustainable enterprise” (Young and Tilley, 2006).

Most interviewees, however, indicated that their organisation was not sustainable and that, furthermore, “I don’t think you could show me one that is” (Sustainability Manager, Social Enterprise, Housing). Some used the “journey” metaphor (see Chapter Eight), suggesting that “we’re well on our way” (Sustainability Manager, Social Enterprise, Housing) and “it’s a continuing thing” (Policy and Research Director, PLC, Energy). But there were also suggestions that no-one really knows what being a sustainable organisation “means in practice” (Head of Sustainable Business, PLC, Retail). The latter individual commented that “whether that [a sustainable organisation] takes 15 or 30 years, I don’t know. All I know is that it will have to be very different from what we have now”. Another interviewee agreed that “I don’t think any corporation or business yet has a fully-formed understanding of what it means to be sustainable; it’s just a huge mindset change and shift” (Head of Sustainability, State-owned PLC, Financial Services).

A frequent follow-up to comments like these was that no organisation “can become sustainable in isolation” (Sustainability Manager, Social Enterprise, Housing). Quite a number of interviewees suggested that an individual organisation cannot be sustainable in an unsustainable system. Some cited their suppliers and customers specifically, stressing the need to have “everybody practicing sustainability” (Head of Sustainable Development, Social Enterprise, Food & Agriculture). One interviewee, representing a small ethical financial services provider, highlighted the lack of “counter-parties in the market who share the same ideal” (CEO, Mutual Society, Financial Services). He suggested that a proliferation of ethical banks would allow a “parallel liquidity system run on ethical lines”, citing the “well-developed co-operative bank sector” in Germany as an example (CEO, Mutual Society, Financial Services).

One of the interviewees went on to explain that part of his organisation’s approach to sustainable development involved working to “change the wider system”, because “no business is going to get sustainable on its’ own, we need the infrastructure, reporting framework, the whole competitive market around us to change aswell” (Head of Sustainable Business, PLC, Retail). He suggested that society will need to move to a “more sustainable, closed-loop” system of consumption, but cautioned that this will need to be a collaborative effort:

“To be fair to us and to others, you can’t leap from where we are today to that perfect system overnight, you’ve got to go through a series of pragmatic steps to take your business, supply chain and customers with you. And it’ll be a big, big task and a huge degree of organisational change. And that’s why you need to reach out and work with the wider marketplace, you can’t create one sustainable consumption model within an unsustainable marketplace, you need the whole marketplace moving towards it, broadly together” (Head of Sustainable Business, PLC, Retail)

9.4 Role of the Organisation in Sustainable Development

As the quote above hints, discussion of understandings of sustainable development usually incorporated or led on to the interviewee’s views on the role of their organisation therein. Most saw their organisation as playing broadly one of two roles: either as an active change agent,

inspiring others, or working in partnership with others to collectively further sustainable development.

9.4.1 Change Agent

Several interviewees, mostly from social enterprises or socially/environmentally motivated organisations, suggested that they would like to see their “model” replicated by others. They used terms such as “pathfinders” (CEO, Social Enterprise, Recycling Services), “blazing a trail” (MD, Social Enterprise, Recycling Services), and “point of reference” (MD, Private Company, Financial Services). One interviewee, the Chairman of a small co-operative, argued that the more people who copied their model, the greater the contribution to sustainable development:

“I guess what we are doing and what I have always tried to bring about is pioneering new models... the models that we’ve got here...I know that already a lot of people have replicated them in some way or another, and the more that we can do that, the more that we’re contributing to the goal of long-term sustainable development” (Chairman, Co-Operative, Food & Agriculture)

These suggestions confirm the findings of Barter and Bebbington (2010), who noted that the environmentally-motivated organisations they sampled were happy for others to replicate their model. The quote above also has echoes of the “Panacea hypothesis” (Hall et al, 2010), whereby small, more sustainable enterprises “pull” their whole industry towards sustainability. Such a view was even more evident in the comments of a social enterprise Chairman, who suggested that business will have to change fundamentally:

“[Our role is] demonstrating that this stuff can be done, and it can be done as part of a commercially viable enterprise. To demonstrate that these two things are not divorced from each other, that you can either run a business or you can be sustainable, but actually to demonstrate that being sustainable is core to being a commercially-viable business in the 21st Century. So in my view, I broadly buy into the view that the standard 19th, 20th Century capitalist model of business is dying, and businesses that don’t get this agenda, and don’t build this agenda in over time will go to the wall” (Chairman, Social Enterprise, Community Services)

These individuals also saw their organisation as promoting sustainable development, as alerting people to a “more sustainable” “alternative” (Chairman, Co-operative, Food & Agriculture). The latter interviewee commented that his organisation was about “informing people more about what the market was actually doing”, and “trying to kind of get them off the bandwagon of working with the norm, the status quo of the big corporates and the big brands constantly telling you that this is what you need, this is where you should shop” (Chairman, Co-operative, Food & Agriculture).

9.4.2 Partnership

In contrast to the change agent role, where the organisation was positioned as a “pioneer” and a role model, some interviewees suggested that the best way for their organisation to contribute to sustainable development was via partnership with others. For example, one Head of CSR remarked that “some of the issues that we face as a business are hugely challenging, and we don’t have the answers to them...so I think we can play our part but then I think it’s about working with government, with NGOs, or other kind of think-tanks, to really understand how we might tackle some of these issues” (Head of CSR, Partnership, Retail).

A common consensus was “we’ll never achieve this goal without partnership” (Global VP for Sustainability, PLC, Manufacturing). In particular, interviewees suggested that they will have to work alongside government, and that “consensus politics” (Policy and Research Director, PLC, Energy) will be required. One individual was particularly clear that collaboration and partnership will be the only way to achieve sustainable development:

“You reach a tipping point where everybody suddenly sort of looks at each other and says, ah, I’m not alone on this, we’re all sort of in this together, let’s have a bigger debate, it’s not just me, we can actually be a bit more ambitious here, and so change comes. But I don’t think it’ll ever come from a big conference in Rio and everybody sitting down together and saying this is the grand plan for a sustainable economy, not quite that... But it’ll definitely be a moment in time where individual businesses recognise that they can’t do it alone, individual governments will recognise they can’t do it alone, they start to shift to more collaborative and supportive” (Head of Sustainable Business, PLC, Retail)

Other individuals agreed that organisations would have to become less competitive and more collaborative. The Head of Sustainable Development at a social enterprise stressed that his organisation was not “predatory” and “our motivation is building the social enterprise sector” (Head of Sustainable Development, Social Enterprise, Community Services). Another interviewee, from a large FMCG manufacturer, commented that its retail customers “have got their own sustainability targets, and they can only reach them if companies like us respond” (Global VP for Sustainability, PLC, Manufacturing).

However, several interviewees argued that it was not the role of business to “solve all of those problems” (Head of CSR, Partnership, Retail). A Head of CSR commented that “we recognise we have a part to play in this, but at the end of the day we are a business, so we have to think about it in those terms” (Head of CSR, Partnership, Retail). Another individual was firm that “I do not believe we should be a quixotic NGO in this place. We’re a business, we’re there to give sustainable, I don’t mean environmentally and socially, I mean sustainable economically, sustainable long-term steady growth in returns to investors” (Head of Sustainable Business, PLC, Retail). The message was that it is not the “primary role” of a businessperson to “lead society, to lead the choices society makes” (Head of Sustainability, State-owned PLC, Financial Services), sustainable development must be a “collaborative” effort (Head of Sustainability, PLC, Tobacco).

What is striking about some of these comments is their somewhat contradictory nature. One minute the interviewees are suggesting that collaboration and partnership will be essential for sustainable development, but the next they add the caveat that business can and indeed *should* only play a limited role in such partnerships. The implication is that business will aim to support sustainable development, but not to the extent that it disturbs their “returns to investors” or goes beyond their “primary role”. Though there are complex permutations therein to be explored, it is suggested that these inconsistencies indicate tension between “partnership” and the commercial objectives of business organisations.

9.4.3 The Role of Business in Context

Continuing this theme, a number of individuals went on to argue that other institutions must play a large part in bringing about sustainable development. For example, a few specifically cited the “responsibility” of the investment community, suggesting that many PLCs are

“driven by continually giving returns to their investors” (Sustainability Consultant, PLC, Financial Services). The representatives of two financial services organisations highlighted the role played by shareholders in the “mayhem in the banking sector” (MD, Private Company, Financial Services), both criticising investors’ focus on short-term returns.

Furthermore, with echoes of the “licence to operate” argument identified in the close reading, a number of interviewees were keen to stress the “value” of their organisation to society. One individual, a Sustainability Consultant at a large bank, suggested that banks have “an ultimate purpose to sustain society”. She conceded that “I think they’ve forgotten that role of late and got a little bit carried away making lots and lots of money”, but argued that “I think that’s changing, it definitely is. We do need sustainable banks and I think that’s what we’re going to see in the future” (Sustainability Consultant, PLC, Financial Services). Another interviewee, representing a large energy company, stressed that making profits means good things for society:

“There’s this belief in a lot of circles that making profits is bad. ...You need to look at what the profits are being used for...all of [our] profits are ploughed back into new investment, to create the energy infrastructure that people are going to need to keep the lights on in years to come... and we keep trying to make the point that you can’t do all of these good environmental and social things unless you’ve generated money in the first place to pay for them, and that’s what profits are going towards. And again, a lot of people’s image of profits is lining the pockets of the fat cats rather than going out in dividends to pay for the pensions of granny and grandpa” (Policy and Research Director, PLC, Energy).

It is interesting that these sentiments were echoed to an extent by the Chairman of a social enterprise, who noted that large organisations are “under so much pressure to keep the profits very very high, in order to feed their shareholders. And who are their shareholders? Well, it’s you and me, basically, indirectly. It’s our pensions” (Chairman, Co-operative, Food & Agriculture). This interviewee went on to muse that given “how the world’s organised itself”, large PLCs are “kind of powerless in a way” (Chairman, Co-operative, Food & Agriculture).

The message coming across here is that there are limits to what organisations can do to support sustainable development and they should not be “expected” to “solve all of those problems” (Head of CSR, Partnership, Retail). However, as we saw in Chapter Three, it is likely that

Bakan (2004), Beder (2002) or Korten (1995) would take issue with this argument. We have seen that 147 large multinationals control 40% of global operating revenues (Coghlan and MacKenzie, 2011), making these organisations far from powerless. Furthermore, as the “engine of economic development” (Gray, and Bebbington, 2000), and with a significant impact on global socio-economic policies (Levy and Egan, 2003), it could be argued that large multinationals are very much complicit in “how the world’s organised itself”.

9.5 Some Conclusions

This chapter is the first of two to present the findings of the interview phase of the empirical work. Here the focus was on the interviewees’ understandings of sustainable development and the role of their organisation therein.

In the first instance, the findings suggest that understandings of sustainability in organisations vary fairly widely. In particular, a tentative distinction is noted between individuals in large commercial enterprises and those in smaller, socially and/or environmentally-focused organisations. The former were more likely to try to “fit” sustainability within “organisation”, often using the business case, while the latter largely understood sustainability in terms of the related impact they believed their organisation could have. This suggests that the fundamental purpose of the organisation, its *raison d’être*, may be a significant factor in how it seeks to engage with sustainable development.

The “triple bottom line” was also a popular way of framing sustainability, with many respondents speaking of “balancing” environmental, social and economic objectives, or short-term and long-term returns. This way of thinking is problematic, however. A couple of interviewees pointed out that balancing requires “compromises”, some of which are inevitably financial. One individual explained that this works in her organisation because its investors do not expect “maximum” financial returns and “that’s not why they invest in us” (MD, Private Company, Property). However, it is difficult to see how substantive economic compromises can be made in an organisation where the investors *do* expect maximum returns. When an interviewee from a large PLC was asked how he believed its investors would feel about returns which “go in cycles”, he conceded that explaining this “in today’s context...would be very difficult” (Head of Sustainable Business, PLC, Retail).

A group of organisations which claimed to be free of such problems were the co-owned businesses sampled, whose representatives' understandings of sustainable development revolved around ownership structure. It was suggested that because the organisation is "theirs", members are "not fussed" about dividends. There are hints here that perhaps "closeness" within an organisation (Gray et al, 1997) is important.

Another notable point to take forward from this chapter is that many interviewees suggested that sustainability is difficult to define and is too often expressed in complicated language. However, we know from the literature review that sustainable development is a complex idea, and reducing it to pithy bullet-points risks losing its fundamental meaning, to the extent that it is interchangeable with CSR or corporate citizenship (Banarjee, 2008). The interviews illustrate how over-simplifying sustainability also exposes the concept to corporate capture; one of the interviewees referred to the "sustainable development piece", implying that the term was merely a label used for external purposes (Milne et al, 2009).

A related issue is that a number of interviewees argued that because their organisation was financially sustainable, it could be called a "sustainable organisation". Most were more cautious however, suggesting that, like the concept of sustainability itself, the idea of a "sustainable organisation" is difficult to define. In particular, many interviewees, echoing concerns in the literature (Gray and Milne, 2004), proposed that an individual organisation cannot be sustainable in an "unsustainable system". A key issue for these individuals was that, at the moment, "when you look at how the world's organised itself, it's not really working very well..." (Chairman, Co-operative, Food & Agriculture).

This brings us to the role (or non-role) of business organisations in sustainable development. Not surprisingly, all of the interviewees suggested that their organisation had *some* role to play. Perspectives on the extent of that role, however, varied considerably. Individuals from social enterprises largely saw their organisation as a change agent, while representatives of large businesses focused on "partnership". Contradictions within the "partnership" argument, however, suggest that this may be more complicated than the interviewees envisage.

Finally, as in the close reading (see Chapter Eight, section 8.5), what is also striking is what was *not said*. While many individuals referred to the "unsustainable system", none mentioned their organisation's role in perpetuating that system. It is suggested in the literature that large

multinational organisations are a significant driver of unsustainability (e.g. Gray, 2006a; Bakan, 2004). However, for some of the interviewees, the unsustainable system was someone else's fault: government, other, less "sustainable" organisations and, in some case, their customers. As the representative of a tobacco company remarked:

"We do get feedback from stakeholders that you shouldn't as a tobacco company be aiming to be sustainable, you should be aiming to go out of business...diversify. I just don't think that's a very practical solution, because the product won't go away. It appears that there will be a substantial number of people still smoking in the future, there'll be probably more smokers by 2050 than there are today..." (Head of Sustainability, PLC, Tobacco)

Conveniently absent from this defence is a recognition of the tobacco industry's history of aggressive marketing and continuing campaign for "self-regulation" (Fooks et al, 2013). Rather, what is argued above is that the company is itself "sustainable" (or more likely on a "journey to sustainability", see Chapter Eight); the things the organisation does to drive unsustainability are pointedly ignored. Rather than reflexive "self-confrontation" (Beck, 1994), we have a situation where unsustainability is a "collective responsibility" and the company is "distanced...from the blame" (Craig and Amernic, 2009). This lack of responsibility and accountability is not likely to be conducive to "social learning" (Dryzek, 2005).

Chapter Ten

Interview Results: Part Two

10.1 Introduction

Chapter Ten represents Phase Two of the presentation of the interview findings. Here, the focus is on barriers which prevent the organisation from contributing further to sustainability, and changes required in the future. The ultimate aim of the chapter is to gain some insight into a topic at the heart of this thesis: to identify the limits, if any, to what business organisations can do for sustainable development, and to begin to consider if and how the related barriers can be overcome in the future.

Chapter Ten begins by revisiting the theoretical framework and considering the interview data in this context. The chapter thereafter follows a simple structure: both major themes are discussed separately, with “barriers to doing more” followed by “changes required in the future”, and several sub-themes identified within each topic. Reflexive considerations relating to the interview phase are then briefly discussed. The chapter concludes by evaluating the significance of the interview findings within the thesis, and looking forward to the closing phase of the research.

10.2 Revisiting the Framework

When we last saw the Framework of Sustainable Business at the beginning of Chapter Eight (see Fig. 8.1), it had evolved somewhat from its original incarnation (see Fig. 3.2). The interview findings, however, suggest the need for considerably more nuanced development. The result is a much more complex diagram (see Fig. 10.1 below).

The results outlined in Chapter Nine tell us much about how organisations perceive their role in sustainable development, and the concurrent “journey” they have embarked upon. In the context of the Framework, many individuals who might fall into the Unsustainability and Business quadrant saw their organisation as a “role model”, seeking to influence those in Business as Usual. This was part of their proposed journey: attempting to drag those at the bottom of the Framework up to the top. Some of the interviewees from larger organisations, in contrast, gave the impression that their journey would be from the Business Case, the “low-hanging fruit” towards Ecological Modernisation. Much of their “progress”, they suggested, would occur through partnerships, with government, with other organisations, and with their employees and customers.

These observations point to what may be a key weakness in the Framework: it does not consider other actors apart from “the organisation”. The interview findings, and this chapter in particular, suggest however that there are myriad enablers and constraints affecting the “sustainable business”. We will see below that many interviewees speak of the influence of government, of individuals, and in some cases, of shareholder expectations, on their engagement with sustainability. This tells us something not only about the Framework but the objectives of the thesis; it is not the case that there are simply “barriers” to “sustainable organisation”, but that there are many factors within the system surrounding the organisation which can both enable and constrain its behaviour. To give an idea of the importance of these various actors, they are placed in circles around the revised Framework below.

A valuable aspect of the interviews is the access they offer to the personal views of people in organisations. Two issues in particular stand out when considering the interviewee’s responses in the context of the theoretical framework.

First, the results suggest that an individual may be “in” one quadrant, but their organisation in another. For example, a number of the individuals who had founded social enterprises make comments consistent with Unsustainability and Business, but their organisations must engage with the business case to remain solvent. This suggests further that the Business Case section may even extend into Unsustainability and Business. In addition, some interviewees, as this Chapter will discuss, wish to pull their organisation into their own preferred quadrant, as in the case, for example, of the Head of Sustainable Business who speaks of “renting clothing” (strong EM) in an organisation currently more in tune with the business case and weak EM.

Secondly, the interviews give rise to a suspicion that some people are in a different box than the one they think they are in. For example, as section 10.3.2 below reveals, a number of interviewees reposition “trade-off” situations for their organisation as “win-wins”, thus moving away from potential engagement with the Sustainable Enterprise quadrant and remaining in the Business Case. These individuals may perceive themselves as a driver of change in their organisation, but in rooting their approach within the business case paradigm, they may instead become a constraint.

Finally, the results discussed in Chapter Nine highlight the shifting parameters of the Business Case section of the Framework. In Chapter Eight it was suggested that social enterprises might engage with the business case in a somewhat modified way. The interview findings indicate that this is done through making “compromises”, “balancing” and not seeking to “maximise” financial return. This possibility of a modified business case is reflected in the figure below.

The revised Framework of Sustainable Business attempts to incorporate most of the above insights, adding some relevant quotes from the interviewees to each quadrant. Note that the four models of “sustainable organisation” are not in their customary positions. Instead, the authors are filed under the most relevant quadrant. This is not to diminish the importance of the models but to simplify the diagram and make it easier to understand. The NEP – DSP spectrum is also removed temporarily for the same reason. The models and the spectrum are returned to the Framework in Chapter Eleven.

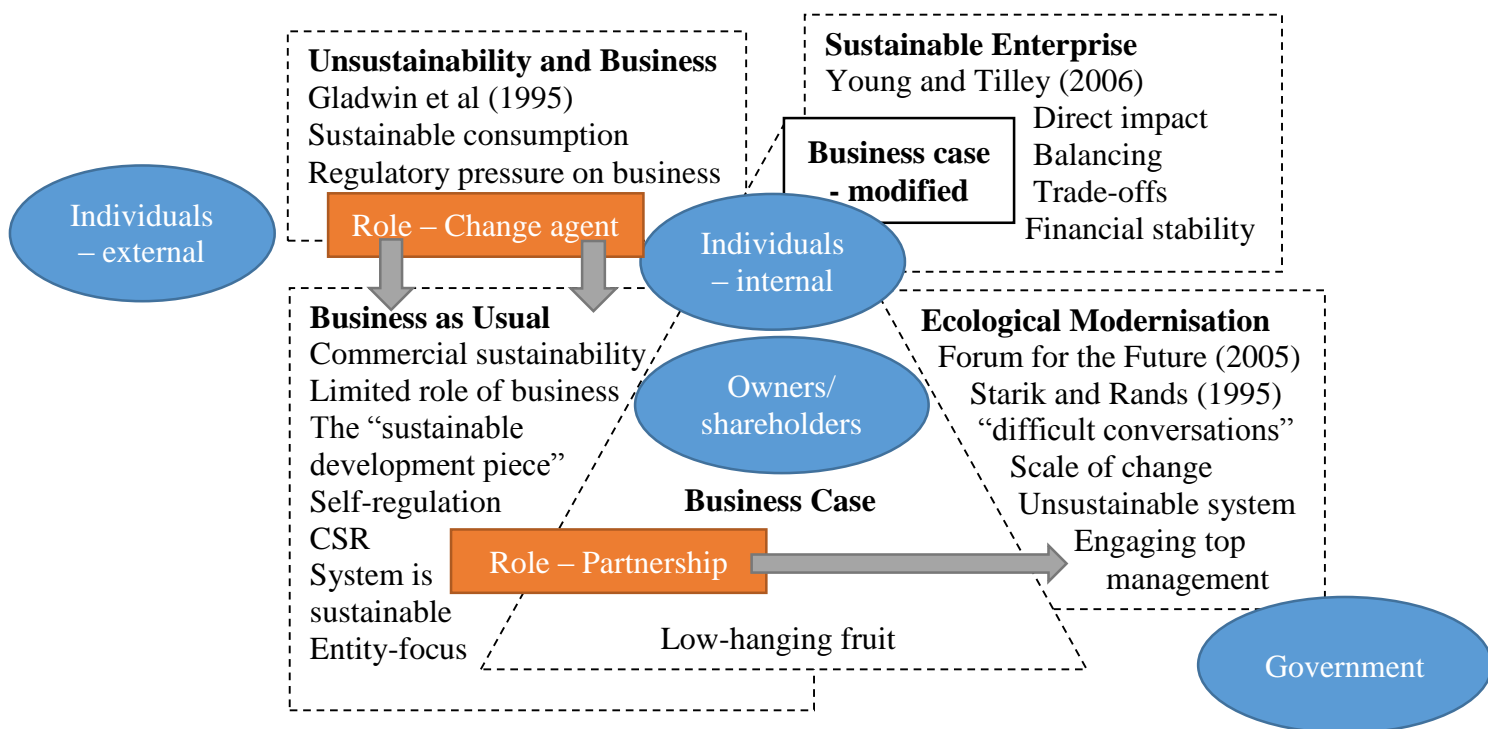


Fig 10.1: Theoretical framework and interview results

10.3 Barriers to Doing More

Barriers and boundaries were a key focus of the interviews, with participants asked to discuss in detail the “barriers faced by your organisation in its path towards sustainable development”. The data analysis revealed that their answers were dominated by three main themes: internal barriers, financial barriers, and structural barriers. In addition, a number of “other”, less frequently cited barriers are discussed in Appendix L.

10.3.1 Internal Barriers

Engaging Top Management

Many interviewees complained of a “lack of understanding” of sustainability issues within their organisation. For example, one individual commented that not all employees “get it [sustainability] to the same degree... it’s a difficult sell internally” (Head of Corporate Responsibility, PLC, Energy). In particular, the interviewees stressed the importance of getting “top management” interested in sustainability. It was often suggested that the organisation’s approach to sustainable development was largely “driven from the top down”, by Executives and Board Members (Head of CSR, State-owned PLC, Financial Services).

A number of participants described their organisation’s CEO or Chairman as “supportive” or “passionate” about sustainability, and praised their “leadership” and “vision”. However, several admitted that they had experienced difficulties in getting top management to “buy-in” to sustainability.

For example, one interviewee discussed the “softening up and trying to get people sorted-out type process” which occurred during the development of the organisation’s sustainable development policy (Head of Sustainable Development, University). She explained that senior management had rejected the policy proposed in 2010, so she and her team “spent the rest of 2010...working with people and building the capacity so that they understood what we’re trying to do better”, leading to acceptance of the revised policy in 2011. Another individual, Head of CSR at a large bank, spoke of her frustration at trying to “get the top team on side”:

“...several times, this was in the early 2000s, when I went to get an environmental policy put in place, I know I got thrown out about once or twice out of senior management team meetings because it just wasn’t, you know, important” (Head of CSR, State-owned PLC, Financial Services)

This interviewee went on to explain that, eventually, with “quite a bit of cajoling”, she obtained management support for her policy. She found that the key lay in demonstrating that “there was a reputational issue... and that there was a business opportunity there as well in terms of costs” (Head of CSR, State-owned PLC, Financial Services). The implication was that to achieve the all-important top management buy-in, a “business case” for sustainability had to be made.

Making the Business Case

We saw in Chapters Eight and Nine that, in many organisations, sustainability is understood chiefly through the lens of the business case. Now we have a clue as to why – in these organisations the business case may be the only way of getting decision-makers to “accept” sustainability. As one of Crane’s (2000) participants noted, “things like sustainability – unless you dress them up in business language they’re going to be resisted” (2000:683).

Several individuals suggested that, when seeking top management support for sustainability initiatives, it was important to “demonstrate the commercial viability of things” (Head of Sustainability, PLC, Telecoms). In particular, this was an issue for those representing large PLCs, for example:

“The more we’re able to demonstrate that this is a success in a given market or in a given region, the more you can expand it out. It’s not an open bar, we as a company need to be able to justify initiatives. So by virtue of showing something to be a commercial success as well as a social success, a sustainable development success, that then allows you to expand the programme more, and to reach more people with it” (Head of Sustainability, PLC, Telecoms)

However, this was not a phenomenon confined solely to large PLCs. For example, a Sustainability Manager at a social enterprise remarked that when proposing a new initiative, “the financial balance has to work in order to get buy-in from senior management; you need

to be able to show that it stacks up” (Sustainability Manager, Social Enterprise, Housing). Discussing a new government policy which may result in income for the business, she observed that “it’s a really positive thing at the moment because it’s actually got our Finance Director interested in sustainability!” (Sustainability Manager, Social Enterprise, Housing).

Another interviewee, the Chairman of a social enterprise, suggested that making a “commercial” argument was essential to engage people with sustainable development:

“The softer arguments will get to those people whose hearts are in it...The people I particularly aim this stuff [the commercial argument] at are what I’d call bean counters, the people who are just very hard-nosed, contract and finance people. If they get the argument, that’s really what will make this work... it’s got to be hard-headed as well as high-minded if you like... You have to sell it in their terms... So it doesn’t really matter where they’re coming from, but what matters is can I construct an argument around sustainability that makes sense in wherever they’re starting, rather than trying to persuade them that sustainability in itself is just a good thing, because some people will get that and some people won’t” (Chairman, Social Enterprise, Community Services)

The overall impression from the above quotes is that decision makers in commercial organisations will not “buy-in” to sustainability without the incentive of some sort of “hard headed” argument – a business case. The interviewees quoted above are pragmatic, embracing the business case as a means to an end i.e. to obtain support for their “high-minded” projects. However, this leaves us to wonder what happens when the high-minded and hard-headed arguments diverge, when, as is often the case, there is no “business case for sustainability” (Gray, 2006a). The comments of one interviewee perhaps offer us a clue. Asked if sustainability was always good for the organisation, she replied:

“I can’t imagine an instance in which... I mean by definition, sustainability has got to be good for the organisation. How could it not be...? We wouldn’t do that [invest a lot of financial resources] if it wasn’t sustainable. By definition, any sustainable development is good for the company, otherwise we wouldn’t be doing it...we’re not going to invest unless it supports the sustainability of the organisation” (VP for Corporate Responsibility, PLC, Pharmaceuticals)

This quote effectively illustrates the limitations of the business case; organisations will invest in sustainability with so far as it is “good for the company”. Beyond this point lie choices which would very likely not be “good” for the company e.g. electing to stop depleting non-renewable natural resources or, in the case of the company above, using its considerable resources to develop and distribute a malaria vaccine. We are thus reminded once again that the business case relates to sustainable development only in a very narrow, limited interpretation of the concept. It is thus very unfortunate that, in many organisations, it appears that this is the *only* way sustainability is understood.

10.3.2 Financial Barriers

Financial Stability

Most of the interviewees representing social enterprises suggested that remaining financially stable was their organisation’s most significant barrier. One respondent even remarked that for his organisation, finance was “the only issue” (CEO, Social Enterprise, Recycling). In the case of some of the smaller organisations, it was a struggle just to remain in business. For example, for the Chairman and Founder of a small co-operative, the challenge was “making ends meet”:

“There’s still a lot of work to do, and the constrictions of that are very much around trying to make a business stack up, and not having the resources to invest sufficiently in making it truly sustainable. It’s a fact of life that it’s very difficult for independent retailers and box schemes and small farms to make ends meet at the best of times. It is very hard to make small business, small sustainable business, work economically” (Chairman, Co-operative, Food & Agriculture).

For larger social enterprises, while their organisation did not have difficulty remaining financially stable, several interviewees suggested that if they had more money, they could contribute further to sustainable development:

“I suppose what would really help is if someone handed me a £20 million cheque I could only spend on advertising, and I’d be away really!” (Managing Director, Private Company, Financial Services)

“We’d like to put more money and time into developing longer life products, and we’ve got a project going now that, if we had the capital, that could be a bit further down the road than we are... We wouldn’t have to think twice about it, we’d go and do it tomorrow” (Head of Sustainable Development, Social Enterprise, Food & Agriculture)

This is a major concern for proponents of the Panacea hypothesis. It is hard to see how small socially/environmentally-focused organisations can “transform the way mainstream capital markets and organisations function throughout our world” (Emerson, 2006:405) if they are struggling to break even.

A couple of interviewees, however, suggested that finance need not be such a big issue for social enterprises. One participant remarked, for example, that “there’s no reason why a social enterprise need be insecure, because... it’s as much about mindset and thinking” (Head of Sustainable Development, Social Enterprise, Community Services). This individual was critical of other social enterprises for being “shoddy and amateurish” and stressed that a social enterprise must operate as a *business*. He suggested that his organisation’s “very good governance and leadership structure”, along with “delivering good performance” ensured that it remained financially sustainable (Head of Sustainable Development, Social Enterprise, Community Services).

Shareholder Expectations

Also in the category of financial barriers is the pressure of shareholder expectations. This issue was in fact often raised by individuals from organisations which did *not* have such demanding shareholders e.g. co-owned businesses and social enterprises, who suggested that their approach to sustainability would be very different if they faced short-term shareholder expectations. For example, the CEO of one social enterprise remarked that “if I had shareholders that only wanted money, the whole thing would be completely different”. He commented that:

“We’re here to protect the environment, not to protect shareholder’s income. If I had people screaming at me because they wanted more money then we would have to compromise on what we do” (CEO, Social Enterprise, Recycling).

Two interviewees from financial services organisations, one representing a mutual society and the other a large PLC, discussed the issue of shareholder expectations in the context of “what their banking clients are doing with the money” (CEO, Mutual Society, Financial Services). The CEO of the mutual society suggested that, while one or two banks are beginning to ask this question, most will continue to “turn a blind eye to what’s actually happening” because “if you have a balance sheet that’s bigger than Belgium, and you’re driven by growth, you’re going to be driven again to take on business that’s primarily simply profitable” (CEO, Mutual Society, Financial Services). The other individual, representing the large PLC, in essence agreed. She argued that:

“I think there’s probably a perception that [her organisation] could have a greater influence than they do have on their customers. But, I think at the end of the day, they’re constrained because they have to make money for their shareholders, and that would be their first and foremost, they would see that as a moral obligation as well” (Sustainability Consultant, PLC, Financial Services)

This quote brings to mind Friedman’s (1970) arguments that a PLC’s responsibility is to its shareholders and any “social responsibility” belongs to individuals alone. The above interviewee went on to discuss the responsibility of shareholders, which she believed was “often overlooked”:

“Investors will stop investing in a company where they think there’s no further growth...So I think there needs to be another piece that looks at responsibility of shareholders, and responsible investment...If your shareholders are pushing you for double digit growth, and returns on income...it’s the short-term versus the long-term growth that shareholders need to consider” (Sustainability Consultant, PLC, Financial Services).

When this interviewee was then asked what would happen if her organisation informed its investors that it intended to restrict itself to long-term steady growth, she remarked wryly that “I think our share price would hit the floor!” (Sustainability Consultant, PLC, Financial Services).

It is indeed hard to imagine how shareholder pressure on financial returns would not be a constraint, or at least a significant influence, on an organisation’s approach to sustainable

development. The representatives of large PLCs with whom this issue was discussed had varying views on the subject. One interviewee placed his faith in the business case, hoping that the company's investors would eventually recognise that "the returns that they're expecting in the future, to a degree are increasingly dependent on good performance in this space", and support the organisation's engagement with sustainability (Head of Sustainable Business, PLC, Retail). Two participants suggested that they aimed to provide their shareholders with a "fair" or "decent" return, distinguishing this from "excessive" (VP for Corporate Responsibility, PLC, Pharmaceuticals) or "off the scale" returns (Head of Sustainability, State-owned PLC, Financial Services). However, as one of these individuals noted, "I don't think we've ever defined a fair return...it's a return that's acceptable to our shareholders" (VP for Corporate Responsibility, PLC, Pharmaceuticals).

To take the idea of an "acceptable" return a little further, it is helpful to consider the comments of several interviewees who spoke of their investors in favourable terms. For example, the CEO of an environmentally-motivated building society explained that its investors "accept that they won't necessarily get the highest market rate" because they are "buying in to the proposition that we will use those funds that they place with us, to pursue this environmentally focussed lending policy" (CEO, Mutual Society, Financial Services). The Managing Director from a small 'ethical' property company similarly noted that its investors "want some financial returns, but they're happy to have a lower financial return because of the social and environmental returns" (MD, Private Company, Property).

Also useful is to look at the case of an "ethical" bank which, though consistently profitable, delivers financial returns much lower than that of its competitors. The Managing Director of this private company explained that it keeps investors happy through open and "transparent" shareholder engagement:

"We will be interested in what's happening on a quarterly basis for sure... but we are balancing that with the longer term consequences of what we're doing, the businesses we're involved in. And that is always there in the forefront... And you could argue that we are privileged because we have shareholders that share that same vision. Well, that may be the case, but at the same time I would argue that we've been clear with them from the start that it's what we'll be doing" (MD, Private Company, Financial Services)

In summary, the message from this individual was that it is possible to run a successful commercial organisation with low but consistent financial returns, as long as investor expectations are clear “from the start”.

Trade-offs

Chapter Nine touched on the idea of “balancing” environmental/social returns with financial returns, noting that a number of interviewees had spoken of the need to make “compromises” due to financial issues. As part of the discussion on barriers, many interviewees were asked if they had ever identified tension between financial considerations and environmental/social ones, and if they felt the need to make compromises, or “trade-offs” between them.

Supporting the hints identified in the public utterances analysis, several participants did identify tension. The CEO of a social enterprise, for example, noted that because the organisation had “made very little money” over the past ten years, “I’ve had to lay people off more often than perhaps I would have liked...and obviously that’s not a great social outcome” (CEO, Social Enterprise, Recycling). Another conceded that “there’s always a tension between commercial objectives and sustainability”, but argued that “the gaps between the two are beginning to become more blurred” (CEO, Private Company, Financial Services).

A number of interviewees were also asked if they believed that the “business case” always held. Some were firm believers in the business case; one individual for example, argued that sustainability “is not about trade-offs”. He further explained that the organisation approached sustainability as a “virtuous circle”, whereby it was about “understanding what the value is, rather than doing things when they are detrimental to your business, or detrimental to life” (Head of Sustainability, PLC, Tobacco).

In contrast, a couple of interviewees did acknowledge that there are cases where sustainability issues cannot be turned into a “business advantage” (Global VP for Sustainability, PLC, Manufacturing). For instance, an executive from a large multinational explained that the company had spent a lot of money adding sustainably-sourced palm oil to the organisation’s products because “we need to do it, from the point of view of responsible sourcing for the future”, even though “the consumers don’t know it’s there, they don’t care,

they don't want to know". However, it is noted that she concluded that this was a "long-term positive" for the company, and ultimately a "win-win" (Global VP for Sustainability, PLC, Manufacturing).

Another interviewee, Head of CSR at a large retail organisation, suggested that, in aspiring to be a "truly sustainable" business, the organisation will face "some serious trade-offs and dilemmas" (Head of CSR, Partnership, Retail). She commented that the organisation had "made a lot of progress on the low-hanging fruit"; for example, "we've driven efficiencies in terms of energy, we're using less water, we're reducing our waste". But now they are at "a point where we've got more challenging decisions to make". She summarised that there will be "difficult conversations that we have to have as a business, in terms of how far we're willing to go and how fast, and also where we're willing to sort of make trade offs" (Head of CSR, Partnership, Retail). However she also suggested that opportunities may arise for the business:

"There will be more challenges as the business grows and diversifies, but equally there's opportunities for us as well...From a product perspective, producing more and more products and getting people to buy more and more products, is obviously quite challenging from a sustainability perspective. So, the opportunities might be around how we make our products lower carbon, more durable...actually maybe diversifying into services rather than selling more products" (Head of CSR, Partnership, Retail)

It is striking that in this interview, discussion of trade-offs and "difficult conversations" moved so quickly to "opportunities". As in the case of the interviewee from the large manufacturing multinational quoted above, the implication is that what might appear to be "win-lose", trade-off situations for the organisation can actually be turned into a "win-win". There is also a sense that "win-lose" is unacceptable, that these situations *must* become win-win. The literature, however, tells us that trade-offs are inevitable (Hahn et al, 2010). These interviewees' responses suggest that it is likely that trade-offs, although acknowledged, are not being substantively addressed.

10.3.3 Structural Barriers

Government Policy

The majority of the interviewees identified one or more structural barriers. Chief among these was the impact of government policy, with almost half of the respondents suggesting that there are “things that government can do that will help remove barriers for business” (Head of CSR, Partnership, Retail).

A number of individuals suggested that lack of “coherent” legislation is a barrier. One interviewee cited the range of “carbon-related policies out there” and suggested that they be consolidated into “something that’s much clearer and simpler, and less bureaucratic for businesses to follow” (Head of CSR, Partnership, Retail). The UK government was also criticised for focusing on short-term “politically-set targets” (Policy & Research Director, PLC, Energy).

Some participants argued for the introduction of pro-environmental subsidies (like Starik and Rands, 1995). For example, one interviewee suggested that “government has a huge ability to influence the development of certain sectors by facilitating more money flows into them” (MD, Private Company, Financial Services). More directly, another individual proposed that government “reward banks with huge tax breaks for investing in projects which were sustainable, and had a long-term view, and tax them to buggery for exploiting the work of people on a short term basis” (Chairman, Social Enterprise, Tourism).

Others suggested the introduction of more stringent environmental legislation. Proposals ranged from the broad, such as climate change and fuel poverty targets (Head of Sustainable Development, Social Enterprise, Community Services), to the more specific. For example, the CEO of a small co-operative farm remarked that “I long for the day where waste is allowed to be fed to animals such as pigs”, because new legislation has meant that only raw vegetables can be fed to pigs, and “they don’t particularly go for a lot of raw vegetables...” (Chairman, Co-operative, Food & Agriculture). In contrast, one individual from a large bank suggested more certainty around the “price of carbon” and “carbon trading regulations” (Sustainability Consultant, PLC, Financial Services).

Organisation Size

“What we argue is that it’s our ambition to become small, because what we are actually in global financial terms is absolutely micro, so it would be great to be as big as small!” (CEO, Mutual, Financial Services)

A number of interviewees representing small organisations expressed the view that “there will always be limits to what we can do, because we’re a small company” (MD, Private Company, Property). One individual stressed that “growth is essential”, that although “we’re not driven by growth for growth’s sake”, the organisation must “achieve a certain level of size so that we can be reasonably efficient and apply the capital well, and thereby have more impact, in terms of our mission” (CEO, Mutual Society, Financial Services).

The same interviewee cautioned, however, that “all the time what we have to try and do is ensure that the growth comes not at the expense of quality” (CEO, Mutual Society, Financial Services). He continued that “I just want to be able to every day say the stuff we’ve got on the book meets our values... you’d quickly lose control of that if you then took on other business” (CEO, Mutual Society, Financial Services). Another individual noted the “danger of mission drift” as the organisation grew (MD, Private Company, Property). She suggested that this was less of a risk in a very small organisation where one individual has “total control over what the organisation does” (MD, Private Company, Property).

The Chairman of one social enterprise had a slightly different view, hoping to “licence the franchise of what we do...rather than just getting bigger and bigger” (Chairman, Social Enterprise, Community Services). He noted that “spreading the ideas” would be his preferred method of growth because “our ultimate definition of growth is about growing our impact on the world” (Chairman, Social Enterprise, Community Services). Related was the ambition of some interviewees for their organisation to “unite with other people with the same belief system” (Membership and Co-op. Affairs Manager, Co-operative, Telecoms). The Managing Director of an ethical bank highlighted the benefits of working “as a group on certain things”, to achieve “economies of scale” (MD, Private Company, Financial Services). He suggested that allying with other ‘ethical’ banks allowed the organisation to “physically lend more to organisations that are making a difference”, ultimately taking its activity to “a different level of influence” (MD, Private Company, Financial Services).

At the other end of the scale, some of the interviewees representing large organisations suggested that their size was a barrier to contributing further to sustainable development. For example, one individual from a large PLC stressed the daunting “scale of change” required:

“It’s the sheer scale of change... 2.7 billion individual products pass through our tills every year, 21 million customers, 600 stores, 2000 factories making products, 2000 farms making fruit, veg and meat for us, probably 7 million working in supply chain... all that’s got to change. It’s a big organisational task...” (Head of Sustainable Business, PLC, Retail)

A number of interviewees agreed that it was difficult to manage engagement with sustainability across large organisations. One commented that “we’re running a major multinational company with hundreds of strands, I can’t just say this is the way it’s going to evolve, it’ll be different across loads of different areas” (VP for Corporate Responsibility, PLC, Pharmaceuticals). Another spoke of the difficulty of “trying to build 24 [sustainability] strategies in 24 countries around the world, broadly aligned to some global goals, and then help bring these things to fruition” (Head of Sustainability, PLC, Telecoms).

10.3.4 No Limits

A final note in the barriers section is that a few interviewees remarked that “I don’t see a lot of barriers” (Group Environmental Executive, Private Company, Retail). The Head of Corporate Responsibility at a water company suggested that “I don’t personally feel that we have many barriers. I think we’re in quite a fortunate position in where sustainability is so core to what we actually do as a business... I’m very fortunate in that I have a very supportive leadership team and Board...” (Head of Corporate Responsibility, PLC, Water). Asked about limits to what the organisation could do, another interviewee commented that “there are no boundaries as far as I’m concerned” (Head of Sustainable Development, University). One Executive was confident that “we don’t necessarily feel limited...the sky’s the limit, you can do so many different things” (Group Environmental Executive, Private Company, Retail). It is noted however that, while these interviewees may not have recognised “a lot of barriers”, they did identify some constraints during their interviews, as their remarks earlier in the text illustrate.

10.4 Changes Required in the Future

The final major interview theme was the changes which the respondents believe are required for a more sustainable future. In particular, the interviewees were asked to consider the changes which they felt could help them to overcome the barriers they had earlier cited.

Within this topic, the interviewees variously discussed the changes they would like to see coming from individuals, government and business organisations. A number of interviewees also considered the possibility of change at a wider, system level, and some shared their personal views on the likelihood of sustainable development becoming a reality.

10.4.1 Individuals – Behaviour Change

Over half of the participants cited behaviour change as a key issue, even pinpointing it as “the only thing that’s going to make a real difference” (Chairman, Co-operative, Food & Agriculture). For example, the representative of a social enterprise which provides housing suggested that “we may well put in energy efficiency measures across all of our housing stock, but if the residents don’t use those in the right way... It’s almost out of our control” (Sustainability Manager, Social Enterprise, Housing).

Several interviewees criticised “our values system” (CEO, Social Enterprise, Recycling) and stressed the need to work towards “sustainable consumption” (Head of Sustainable Business, PLC, Retail). The Managing Director of a social enterprise suggested that the key lay in changing people’s attitudes: “if we all shared the same attitude of reducing consumption, reducing energy use, reducing food intake, eating less red meat, travelling a bit less.. I guess we could turn it around, couldn’t we” (MD, Social Enterprise, Recycling). Another, representing a large retail PLC, spoke of encouraging “people to think about different consumption patterns, closing the loop on products when they’re finished” (Head of Sustainable Business, PLC, Retail).

Many interviewees felt that education and training would be required to bring about behaviour change. One respondent cited an “intensely high level of ignorance about sustainability...people just don’t understand it, don’t get it, haven’t learned anything about it,

don't relate to it..." (CEO, Social Enterprise, Recycling). Some individuals suggested that many people "still don't really care" about sustainability (MD, Social Enterprise, Recycling). It was observed that this was a particular issue in the current "economic climate" (Global VP for Sustainability, PLC, Manufacturing) and that sustainability might "seem too difficult and too expensive" (Policy & Research Director, PLC, Energy).

In this vein, some interviewees remarked that people need to see the "financial benefits" of more sustainable living (Sustainability Manager, Social Enterprise, Housing). One individual for example suggested that behaviour change would be largely about "making a lower carbon lifestyle more affordable than a higher carbon lifestyle" (MD, Private Company, Property).

This argument brings to mind the "business case" for sustainability; the message is that a more sustainable lifestyle will be financially beneficial for the individual. However, it is necessary to consider the limitations of the business case in this form also. While the "positive image" approach to engaging people with sustainability may be pragmatic, it does not make people aware of the "win-lose" situations, the "painful choices" (UNWCED, 1987) that a more sustainable society is likely to require.

10.4.2 Role of Government

A large number of interviewees, again over half of the sample, suggested that sustainable development would have to be "heavily driven by government" (Sustainability Manager, Social Enterprise, Housing). This was a major theme for some respondents and several cited government policy as the one thing that could make the biggest difference to their ability to contribute to sustainability.

In the first instance, many interviewees suggested that government legislate for behaviour change. It was frequently suggested that people will not change their behaviour "voluntarily", there will need to be "large scale statutory requirements to change" (MD, Private Company, Property). Or as one interviewee put it, "you can do all the education you want, but unless people are told they have to do it, they just won't do it, they'll take the easy option" (Sustainability Manager, Social Enterprise, Housing). Another individual mused that, to bring about more sustainable consumption habits, it may be necessary to "look at personal freedoms, maybe preventing us from consuming so much..." (MD, Social Enterprise, Recycling)

There were conflicting views, however, when it came to legislating business organisations. A couple of interviewees used the phrase “level-playing field”, suggesting new environmental standards, such as on carbon and waste reduction, for all organisations (MD, Private Company, Property). Others disagreed, however. One Head of CSR warned of legislation becoming “the lowest common denominator” (Head of CSR, Partnership, Retail), and another that “if everybody just has to toe the line, just do the basics, there’s no incentive to do anything further” (Head of CSR, State-owned PLC, Financial Services). An Executive from a large private company agreed, explaining clearly why he thought “legislating for sustainability” was a bad idea:

“The danger with legislating for things like sustainability is that it then becomes a fairly cynical sort of box-ticking exercise... The problem is that what you’ll get then is people will do the minimum to hit the standard. For example, if it was mandatory in Ireland, my role would change from being one of being innovative and trying to introduce new ideas and stuff, to compliance. That would stifle any innovation...” (Group Environmental Executive, Private Company, Retail)

A number of interviewees from smaller organisations, however, argued strongly in favour of more “regulatory pressure” on businesses and urged greater accountability (MD, Private Company, Financial Services) rather than government “kow-towing to the interests of business” (Chairman, Co-operative, Food & Agriculture). One individual suggested that “one of the greatest things you could do for sustainable development would be to make accountants honest... taking account of the genuine cost on natural services of the production processes of each business that exists...” (Chairman, Social Enterprise, Tourism). The representative of a smaller bank advised legislating banks to be “more transparent about what they are doing with the money that people give them” (MD, Private Company, Financial Services). Another interviewee concluded that penalties for failure to meet environmental targets was “the only way to persuade some businesses” (Membership and Co-op. Affairs Manager, Co-op, Telecoms).

These comments are the first inkling in this discussion of any sort of “critical” view of business. The individuals quoted above were frustrated by what they saw as lack of corporate accountability and government “kow-towing” to business. There was a sense, also noted in

the public utterances analysis (see Chapter Seven), of a rejection of “market-based governmental environmental policy approaches” (Starik and Rands, 1995) and a desire for “policy instruments and economic incentives to place pre-emptive constraints on the pursuit of purely market criteria” (Gladwin et al, 1995). It is difficult to see how this could happen, however, if big business is indeed opposed to “legislating for sustainability”.

10.4.3 Role of Business

Continuing in this vein, a number of interviewees from smaller organisations were scathing about big business’ engagement with sustainable development, suggesting that business should be doing more. Some interviewees from social enterprises used the phrase “greenwash” and even “sustainable development wash” (Head of Sustainable Development, Social Enterprise, Community Services). One individual referred to CSR in big corporations as “a bit like buying indulgences in the medieval days, to get you into heaven from the priest” (Chairman, Social Enterprise, Tourism). He continued that:

*“I think the problem is...they steal the language of the entrepreneur, the socially aware, by using words like CSR and look at our people, we lecture in Tower Hamlets and we’re jolly nice. And then they do treasonous things like bet against their own nations currency and then f*** everybody up”* (Chairman, Social Enterprise, Tourism)

Some respondents suggested further that many businesses are simply “reluctant to engage, to really get behind and understand what sustainability is about” (Group Environmental Executive, Private Company, Retail). One CEO of a social enterprise commented that large multinationals, with shareholders in “a thousand different places” have “no sense of home” and have therefore lost “a lot of those, almost family values that a lot of older companies had” (CEO, Social Enterprise, Recycling). Large corporations were also criticised for promoting “our consumerist society” (Membership and Co-op. Affairs Manager, Co-operative, Telecoms).

Representatives of large PLCs, however, were keen to highlight what a significant contribution they could make to sustainable development. For example, an interviewee from a large retail organisation proposed that the company could drive change through “reaching out to 21 million customers...taking them on a journey” (Head of Sustainable Business, PLC, Retail).

Another from a large manufacturing company noted that “two billion times a day somebody somewhere is using a [organisation name] brand. That means if we make small changes to our product, designing them better, sourcing them better, that has an immediate scale impact” (Global VP for Sustainability, PLC, Manufacturing).

These individuals also often wished to point out how their organisation was constantly “improving” in its engagement with sustainability. Again, it was on a “journey”. For example, one interviewee was particularly defensive of the “good reporting work” done by his organisation:

“I do get quite annoyed when people have a wholesale attack on all the sustainability and CSR, because there’s some genuinely important stuff happening” (Head of Sustainability, State-owned PLC, Financial Services)

A clear contrast is visible here between the comments of some interviewees from large companies who suggest that a lot of big businesses are “genuinely trying to do sustainability” (Head of Sustainable Business, PLC, Retail), and those of some individuals from smaller, socially/environmentally-motivated organisations who ask “is that really good enough?” (MD, Private Company, Financial Services). There are suggestions in the comments of these latter individuals that “big business” needs to wake up and accept that they need to change their behaviour; the technocracy must “refute itself” (Beck, 1994). The views of many of the representatives of big business, however, suggest that they believe they are “doing their best”.

10.4.4 System Change

A number of interviewees discussed changes to the economic system, or as one individual referred to it, “the world economic order” (MD, Social Enterprise, Recycling). As the public utterances analysis had suggested that sustainable consumption might be a contentious issue, it was deliberately raised with a number of interviewees. One participant commented that “we’ve got an economic model which ultimately is based around consuming and wasting”, noting that “at this first sign of an economic downturn we’re encouraged again to consume, to get the economy moving again” (MD, Social Enterprise, Recycling). He concluded that “it’s very difficult to see, without fairly radical change of structure, how we’re going to sort out the issues” (MD, Social Enterprise, Recycling).

Comments from an Executive in a large PLC, however, were suggestive of a more incremental ecological modernisation response; she hoped that sustainable consumption would be “largely about smart consumption, underpinned by new systematic ways of applying technology to help us live in a more sustainable way”, citing the “dematerialisation of music” as an example (Global VP for Sustainability, PLC, Manufacturing). Another large PLC representative also talked of people “consuming differently”, but acknowledged that it was “hard” to “see a way forward” on sustainable consumption (Head of Sustainable Business, PLC, Retail). He suggested in addition that “there’s still so much to be done with the production system, before we can really broach that consumption debate in any meaningful way” (Head of Sustainable Business, PLC, Retail).

Several interviewees also suggested that major changes would have to take place in the way business is done. The phrase “step-change” was used by four individuals from large organisations; as in “how do we bring about a step-change in terms of running ourselves as a business” (Head of Sustainability, State-owned PLC, Financial Services). One respondent in particular discussed the need for a “step-change in how we organise the marketplace” in detail (Head of Sustainable Business, PLC, Retail). He argued that “the shift from the current model of what business does... which is broadly incremental, two percent, three percent improvement each year, and it’s broadly about a recognised form of business model that’s been around for 40, 50, 100 years and making it less bad” (Head of Sustainable Business, PLC, Retail). He went on to suggest that for a shift to “sustainable purchasing” and “sustainable consumption” to occur, “different business models” would have to be imagined:

“For example (and this is entirely made up) will you sell clothing in 10, 20 years time...well, will you rent it? If it’s worn, it’s out of fashion, you bring it back, turn it into next years fashion. We dematerialise the system... That kind of step-change in each individual industrial sector will be required. But then we’ll need a step-change in how we shift from a vertically arranged economy, so we have a pharmaceutical industry, a banking industry, a retail industry, a car industry, all separately run... to a horizontal economy, that the linkages between the different sections of the economy and how they support each other...” (Head of Sustainable Business, PLC, Retail)

As barriers to the development of such a “system”, this interviewee cited the “sheer scale of how much is invested in the current unsustainable system” and the “huge degree of organisational change” required (Head of Sustainable Business, PLC, Retail). He stressed that a great deal of collaboration between “government, businesses and the third sector” would be necessary to “deliver a more sustainable economy and society” (Head of Sustainable Business, PLC, Retail).

Another interviewee, this time from a social enterprise, also suggested that the “standard model” of business would need to change (Chairman, Social Enterprise, Community Services). In this case, however, he argued that there would be a shift from the “standard single-bottom-line capitalist model of business” to “more ethical business” (Chairman, Social Enterprise, Community Services). He remarked that:

“The way that capitalist business has been running is not sustainable, even in business terms it’s not sustainable... It wouldn’t surprise me if in 30, 40, 50 years we look back and say, Tescos, who are they. That may sound daft now, but if you look back 30, 40, 50 years, if you look at the range of business that were around then, how many of them are still around? And only the ones that have seriously adapted, they’re still here” (Chairman, Social Enterprise, Community Services)

It is noted, however, that these comments do bring to mind Hall et al’s (2010) suggestion that the “Panacea hypothesis” is “overly-optimistic”; many unsustainable businesses have thrived for a century or more (Bakan, 2004).

10.4.5 Optimism/Pessimism

“I’m a Gemini, it depends on the day...” (MD, Social Enterprise, Recycling).

During the closing stages of the interview, several respondents were asked whether or not they were optimistic that sustainable development could be realised in the future. To put this question in context, previous chapters have highlighted that corporate engagement with sustainability is frequently characterised by a determinedly positive “can-do” attitude. Asking the interviewees whether they were optimistic or pessimistic for the future was an attempt to gain some insight into the rationale for this attitude, and to see if it is all-pervasive.

Overall, the responses were more of a pessimistic than an optimistic nature. Beginning with the latter, one individual suggested that he was “hugely optimistic”, but qualified that “we’re living at a time where we’re either going to fly or we’re going to fry” (Chairman, Social Enterprise, Tourism). Another interviewee took an almost Promethean perspective (Dryzek, 2005):

“To my mind, our society is sustainable... We’ve been sustaining ourselves for thousands of years, we haven’t fallen off the world yet, we’re sustainable already” (VP for Corporate Responsibility, PLC, Pharmaceuticals)

It is noted that the same executive defined a “sustainable organisation” as one which “can go on and on” (VP for Corporate Responsibility, PLC, Pharmaceuticals), which, combined with the above quote, is suggestive of a relatively narrow, anthropocentric view of sustainability.

Most interviewees were less decided, however, suggesting that they “waver between optimism and pessimism” (MD, Social Enterprise, Recycling). For example, a Sustainability Manager at a social enterprise commented that “some days I’m really optimistic and I think there’s a lot we can do to become more sustainable as an organisation. And there are other days when I think have we passed the point, have we gone too far down this commercial materialistic route of life, that is it going to be too hard to pull it back” (Sustainability Manager, Social Enterprise, Housing). She continued that “I’m optimistic for the planet, because the planet can sort itself out once we’ve gone. I’m not too optimistic for the human race!” (Sustainability Manager, Social Enterprise, Housing)

Others were more clearly pessimistic, suggesting for example that “time’s not on our side...I think it will take a series of major crises” (Global VP for Sustainability, PLC, Manufacturing). One interviewee answered simply that “no, I’m not [optimistic]. That’s why I think we have to have regulated solutions; I don’t believe that we will reach the targets that we need by behaviour change alone” (Policy & Research Director, PLC, Energy). Comments such as these suggest that the “can-do” attitude is not in fact all-pervasive; some individuals in organisations are genuinely pessimistic about the future of humanity. Which begs the question, why does the positive attitude prevail?

A number of interviewees suggested that the answer lies in pragmatism. The CEO of a social enterprise summarised his views on the subject as follows:

“Broadly, am I optimistic about humanity getting there quickly enough? Big agenda. Not wildly optimistic, no... We have no choice but to try and do this. It may not work, in which case it doesn’t work anyway, but if we don’t try it definitely won’t work. So there is no option, we have to try” (Chairman, Social Enterprise, Community Services).

Another respondent, representing a large PLC, agreed that “we live in an unsustainable society that’s heading in the wrong direction”, but explained that “I wake up in the morning and say, well, whether we’re optimistic or pessimistic, the world will go on... so lets make the very best of it that we can” (Head of Sustainable Business, PLC, Retail).

10.5 Reflexive Considerations

Consistent with the research approach of reflexive pragmatism (Alvesson, 2003), it is appropriate to consider the findings of Chapters Nine and Ten from a reflexive perspective. As explained in Chapter Five, the interviews represented the pragmatic aspect of the research approach, rather than the more critical perspective of, say, the close reading. At the data interpretation stage, the pragmatist’s temptation is to accept the interviewee’s views as “knowledge”, rather than considering the myriad factors shaping the “conversation” which took place, such as the motivations of the participant, or their awareness of their role in the organisation (Alvesson, 2003). Taking a reflexive perspective requires consideration of these factors and thus allows for more nuanced, and arguably more valid, development of the emerging knowledge (see Chapter Six).

Therefore, every effort has been made during Chapters Nine and Ten to follow Alvesson’s (2003) guidelines for a “reflexive pragmatism” approach to interview data analysis. To this end, some of the issues raised in these chapters are now considered from a reflexive perspective. This involves thinking about the motivations of the interviewee, the possibility of multiple interpretations of the data, the character of the language used, and taking into account a range of theoretical perspectives (Alvesson, 2003).

Motivations of the Interviewees

It is likely that the motivations of some of the respondents had a notable impact on the content of those interviews. In some cases, individuals representing different types of organisations hinted at different motivations. For example, a number of individuals representing small businesses spoke of “raising awareness” of the organisation, with one suggesting that part of this was “talking to people like you” (MD, Private Company, Property). It follows that these interviewees were keen to stress the organisation’s efforts at engaging with the local community, with education and behaviour change, identified as a major theme above.

In contrast, in the case of some individuals from large PLCs in “controversial” industries, there were clues that part of their motivation was to defend the organisation. For example, the representative of a large bank stressed the recent increase in accountability and reporting activity, commenting that “I get quite annoyed when people have a wholesale attack on all the sustainability and CSR” (Head of Sustainability, State-owned PLC, Financial Services). Or take the representative of the tobacco company, who was quick to point out that a “substantial number of people still smoke”, suggesting that individual rather than corporate responsibility was required (Head of Sustainability, PLC, Tobacco).

With a view to mitigating the impact of these issues on the interpretation of the data, efforts were made throughout the analysis to consider all types of organisation together. For instance, behaviour change and education of individuals was highlighted as a key theme because it was discussed by a large number of interviewees from a range of different types of organisation, not just from small businesses. As a general rule, topics which were brought up by just one interviewee have not been discussed in depth.

Multiple Interpretations of the Data

In the name of reflexivity, it is appropriate to consider how a more critical researcher may have interpreted the interview data presented. Take, for example, the section above on the role of government in sustainable development. Perhaps a critical researcher would have interpreted the interviewees’ comments as attempts to legitimise corporate irresponsibility and pass responsibility for sustainability on to government. In Chapter Eleven – Discussion, the

research findings are in fact considered from a critical (and a pragmatic) perspective, and such issues are discussed therein.

Throughout the data presentation, a conscious effort was made to present the data, with limited theoretical engagement (while of course recognising the subjective nature of the data interpretation and presentation process). Considering theory was largely left for Chapter Eleven. However, Chapters Nine and Ten incorporated a level of engagement with a more critical, reflexive perspective. For example, part of the analysis involved identifying contradictions in the interviewees' comments, such as in the discussion above on trade-offs, where it was noted that two of the interviewees cited trade-offs and immediately turned them into "win-win" opportunities. Furthermore, in some cases, efforts were made to take both a pragmatic and a more critical perspective, such as the discussion in Chapter Nine on an "entity-focussed" approach to sustainability (section 9.3.3). It is aimed in the later chapters to further engage a "range of theoretical perspectives" (Alvesson, 2003).

Researcher Bias

It is inevitable that the interview findings presented are significantly affected by researcher bias. To mitigate the impact of bias, the advice of Miles and Huberman (1994) was followed when interpreting the data. For example, the authors suggest looking for "negative evidence". A point was made therefore of looking for exceptions to the rule and presenting them alongside; such as, when discussing financial barriers above, it was noted that some individuals from social enterprises did not see lack of finance as an issue.

A conscious effort was also made to avoid judging the interviewees and their comments as "good" or "bad", to avoid indulging any biases I might have, for instance, towards individuals from social enterprises, or individuals who had been pleasant to interview. To this end, the organisations were all considered together, and note made of both similarities and differences between different types. I was also aware of not looking for parallels with the results of the close reading and the content analysis. It is argued that the danger of this occurring was mitigated by completing the interview coding before the write up of the results.

Finally, as the conclusion to this Chapter illustrates, the effort has been made not to attempt to “fit” the data to whatever answers to the research questions may have been desired, but to accept the limitations of the data and acknowledge if it raises more questions than answers.

10.6 Some Conclusions

It is appropriate at this point to draw together the interview findings presented both in this and the previous chapter. Chapter Nine looked at understandings of sustainable development and the potential role of the organisation therein, while the purpose of the “barriers and changes” phase of the interviews, discussed in this chapter, was to attempt to gain some insight into the limits of what business organisations can do to contribute to sustainable development.

It is noted in the first instance that there is arguably no coherent overarching narrative to be drawn from the interview findings; there is no big “story”. Rather than answers, what the interviews raise is a number of contentious issues, a series of “important questions” (Starik, 2006).

The first point relates to the pervasiveness of the business case, particularly among large corporations. Chapter Nine indicated that it was the most popular way of understanding sustainability in many of these organisations, and Chapter Ten suggested why – the business case appears to be the only way to get people who do not “get” sustainability to engage with sustainability.

Several interviewees highlighted that there remains a lack of understanding of and interest in sustainability, many people “just don’t understand it, don’t get it...don’t relate to it” (CEO, Social Enterprise, Recycling Services). It was suggested that to achieve top management “buy-in”, for example, a “commercial case” for sustainability must be made. But the limitations of this approach were illustrated when interviewees were asked to discuss “trade-offs”; win-lose situations were reframed as “opportunities” and conflicts unaddressed.

Related, and also problematic, were the frequent references to the triple bottom line and “balancing”. Individuals in socially/environmentally-focused organisations stressed that balancing necessitates a level of financial compromise, but representatives of large PLCs indicated that shareholder expectations would make such compromises “very difficult”.

This is not unexpected given that the purpose of a PLC is arguably to “maximise shareholder profits” (see Friedman, 1970 and Jacobsen, 2000, for contrasting arguments), not to “balance” social, environmental and financial returns. A point noted in Chapter Nine was that the fundamental purpose of the organisation may have a significant impact on how sustainability is understood therein. In the large PLCs, it seems that efforts are made to “fit” sustainability within “organisation”, largely through the business case, while in the socially/environmentally-focused organisations, their *raison d’être* is to contribute to sustainable development; there is no need to “fit” sustainability to the organisation.

The interview data also raises a number of issues in relation to the role and perceived role of the organisations sampled in sustainable development. Again we can make a tentative division here between large PLCs and the “different types” of organisation. Representatives from large PLCs focused predominantly on “partnership”, but were careful to stress that “at the end of the day we’re a business”, with the primary role of providing “returns to investors”.

In contrast, individuals representing smaller organisations often echoed the Panacea hypothesis, positioning the organisation as a “pioneer” or a “role model”. Some of the barriers they highlighted, however, suggest that the theory may be “overly-optimistic” (Hall et al, 2010); many struggled with financial stability and most were limited by “how the world’s organised itself”.

Finally, in this vein many interviewees referred to the “unsustainable system”. However, not unexpectedly, only individuals from smaller organisations suggested that business in fact plays a large role in perpetuating the “world economic order”. These participants called for more regulation of business, a distinctly unpopular idea with their peers in larger organisations. These individuals, in “big business”, argued that they are trying their best. For the interviewees in smaller, more “unconventional” organisations, however, their best looks a lot like business as usual. What this begins to hint at is that some of the biggest barriers to “sustainable business” may be related to “business” itself.

What has been summarised here is a series of conflicts, a number of points of tension within the sustainable development-business relationship. Overall, this makes the interview data a little scattered, and it is difficult to extract the key issues. In summary, we know from Chapters

Nine and Ten that understandings of sustainability vary from organisation to organisation, that some barriers are internal, some are external, and some arguably relate to the behaviour of “big business”. We also often see conflict between the views of those representing big business and those in smaller, usually socially/environmentally-motivated organisations, and furthermore, a distinction between the few individuals who “get” sustainability (including most of the interviewees), and the majority who simply do not.

This brings the data presentation phase of the thesis to an end. Next, Chapters Eleven and Twelve will consider the implications of the inferences drawn throughout the previous four chapters. Through re-engagement with the literature and triangulation of the three methods of empirical analysis, it is aimed to bring some shape to the disparate issues articulated above.

Chapter Eleven

Discussion

11.1 Introduction

The primary task of Chapter Eleven is to bring together and explore the implications of the findings from each of the three phases of empirical work, presented in detail in the preceding chapters: content analysis (Chapter Seven), close reading (Chapter Eight) and semi-structured interviews (Chapters Nine and Ten). It is aimed to “triangulate” the data and identify the key issues raised.

As discussed in Chapter Six, triangulation was key to enhancing the validity, or “integrity”, of the research conclusions (Bryman, 2008). The triangulation process began with the three categories of research objectives: Approaches, Boundaries and Future Directions (see Chapter One). Following the write-up of the results chapters, the key findings from each phase of empirical work were extracted and assigned to one (or more) of these categories. Through this process, similarities and differences between the results from the different phases were identified.

This process took place in parallel with a re-engagement with the literature. Many papers and texts were re-read and re-considered in light of the research findings. The literature was also re-considered through a more critical lens, in contrast to the initial, largely pragmatic perspective.

This chapter is structured according to the three categories of Approaches, Boundaries and Future Directions. The research findings are organised into a number of themes, which are discussed under each category. Through re-engagement with the literature the implications of the findings are explored. It is aimed to tease out a narrative through which to bring together the theoretical and empirical phases of the thesis, a process which ultimately shapes the conclusions of the research study.

Chapter Eleven concludes by revisiting for a final time the Framework for Sustainable Business. The significance of the research findings at a theoretical level is explored and contextualised, and a revised Framework presented to reflect the insights gained.

11.2 Approaches to Sustainable Development

As outlined in Chapter One, the “Approaches” heading incorporated three research objectives:

RO1: To explore the possible roles of business organisations in sustainable development

RO2: To examine to what extent (if any) that possible role is influenced by organisation type

RO3: To examine narratives of sustainability at an organisational level

As the study progressed, these objectives became primarily about exploring understandings and narratives of the sustainability-organisation relationship. The chief concern highlighted in the literature review was the hegemony of a business case, “business as usual” narrative, which was rooted in the industrial, anthropocentric, and fundamentally unsustainable Dominant Social Paradigm. It was aimed to address this concern by searching for “alternative” narratives, examining understandings of sustainability in “different types” of organisation. This involved engaging with both the critical and “managerialist” literatures, exploring the “contested middle ground” of sustainable development and identifying the possibilities by which the concepts of “sustainability” and “organisation” might be brought together.

All three pieces of empirical work explored the issues of the Approaches section. In triangulating the findings, a number of key themes emerged.

11.3.1 Business as Usual and the Business Case

Consistent with the existing literature (e.g. Spence and Gray, 2007; Milne et al, 2009), the results of each form of empirical enquiry suggest that, in many large business organisations, engaging with “sustainability” often involves little more than “business as usual”.

For example, the content analysis revealed the organisational narratives of sustainability presented to be most similar to the practice-oriented, relatively conservative framework proposed by Forum for the Future (2005), and least similar to the more radical, NEP-influenced work of Gladwin et al (1995). Items such as eco-efficiency, community

development and recycling were frequently addressed by the organisations sampled, with the broader, systems-level concerns of sustainability very rarely considered. We are minded of Schmidheiny/BCSD's (1992) assurances that, for efficient leading companies, engaging with sustainability would be no more than a "natural extension" of total quality management.

The close reading and interviews largely supported this sense of "business as usual". Sustainability was understood in many public utterances and by many interviewees through the lens of the "business case"; it was stressed that sustainability is an "opportunity". In a number of organisations, the interviews suggested that the business case was the *only* way in which sustainability was understood. Some participants also suggested that senior management would only engage with sustainability if it was framed within the business case.

There were, however, some indications that large PLCs are beginning to engage with sustainability in a way which some might refer to as "beyond the business case" (e.g. Young and Tilley, 2006). In particular, the language of ecological modernisation was highlighted through the content analysis and identified as a key argument by the close reading. A number of organisations spoke in their public utterances of "closed-loop" systems (e.g. GlaxoSmithKline, 2009) and "cradle to cradle" manufacturing (Avon Metals, 2008), while a few large PLCs argued that they could someday "decouple growth from environmental impacts" (Unilever, 2009). A couple of interviewees tentatively proposed "new business models" based on "smart consumption", suggesting for example that we may "rent clothing" in twenty years time (Head of Sustainable Business, PLC, Retail).

As noted during the close reading, however, the language used by these organisations was also characterised by determined positivity and optimism. The related discourse was largely suggestive of "weak" ecological modernisation (Dryzek, 2005), lacking a sense of the "painful choices" of sustainability (UNWCED, 1987) and of the level of "social learning" (Dryzek, 2005) which may be required. Furthermore, a number of interviewees, who acknowledged the possibility of trade-offs and "difficult conversations", then proceeded to reframe the issues as "opportunities". These comments highlight the limitations of even an "extended" business case (see Chapter Three, section 3.5.2); it is too focused on "win-win" outcomes to allow for reflexivity, to allow for "doubt" (Beck, 1994).

However, it is interesting that in contrast to this positive tone, when some interview participants were asked if they were optimistic or pessimistic about the future, most confessed to being pessimists. They were personally well aware of the “exigencies of sustainability” (Gray and Bebbington, 2000), and were sceptical of the idea of a “sustainable organisation”. Similar to the participants in Bebbington and Thomson (1996) and O’Dwyer’s (2003) studies, they were unconvinced of the possibility of sustainable development becoming a reality but pragmatically doing what they could within their organisational role.

This is an important point, and brings us back to the business case. It appears that these pessimistic but pragmatic individuals found that the business case was the only acceptable lens through which to “fit” sustainability to their organisation. This was the only way to “sell” sustainability to decision-making individuals; sustainability would not “work” unless it was presented in organisation-centric, business case terms. The comments of one interviewee, a senior executive, illustrate the point. She declared that “by definition, any sustainable development is good for the company, or we wouldn’t be doing it” (VP for Corporate Responsibility, PLC, Pharmaceuticals). It is difficult to see how an individual of such persuasion could be engaged by any means other than through the business case.

11.3.2 Alternative Narratives

The search for “alternative” narratives of the sustainability-organisation relationship is key to this thesis. The results of the empirical analysis, however, do not indicate any overarching narratives “alternative” to the dominant business case. Instead, what the findings do suggest is that different types of organisation understand certain elements of sustainability in different ways.

It is helpful here to re-engage with the “menu” of sustainability at an organisational level (see Fig. 6.2) used for the content analysis, and in particular with the work of Gladwin et al (1995). For example, the comments of some of the “different types” of organisation sampled were suggestive of a “logistic” and “mixed/modify” approach to growth (Gladwin et al, 1995). They spoke of “reasonable” targets for financial returns e.g. 6.5% (Traidcraft) and 7% (Triodos Bank), in stark contrast to the PLC maxim of “maximising shareholder wealth”. Interviewees from these organisations also spoke of maxing economic compromises and placing financial returns in a “broader context”.

Furthermore, a number of individuals from different types of organisations spoke of their desire to keep the enterprise itself relatively “small”. They wished to “grow” by influencing others or forming networks, to “grow the idea” rather than the organisation. As one individual put it:

“Our ultimate definition of growth is about growing our impact on the world, not how big is our turnover or how big is our workforce, that’s not of major interest to us. It’s more about what impact we’re having on the world and how we can spread the ideas” (Chairman, Social Enterprise, Community Services)

This approach is suggestive of an “alternative” narrative of organisational growth, of “growth” measured by the nebulous concept of spreading the “ideas” rather than “how big is our turnover”. Such an approach may have implications for the problematic concept of “sufficiency” (Young and Tilley, 2006). If an organisation can reject the idea of growing revenue, perhaps it can reject the idea of growing physical sales of goods; aiming instead to “develop” and “increase the quality of life in equitable ways” (Gladwin et al, 1995).

In addition, representatives of the smaller, socially/environmentally-motivated businesses stressed the importance of the relationship between the organisation and its owners. In particular, individuals from co-owned businesses suggested that because members were involved with the business, were “close” to it, they were “not that fussed” about the level of financial return. One interviewee explained that his organisation made a point of telling investors “about the things their money is helping to happen... to help you to feel a bit of that project” (Managing Director, Private Company, Financial Services). There was a sense of “closeness” (Gray et al, 1997) and trust between the organisation and its members/shareholders. In striking contrast, several interviewees from large PLCs cited shareholder expectations of short-term, “off the scale” financial returns as a barrier to making a greater contribution to sustainable development.

Finally, a notable point relates to the purpose of the organisation. The interview analysis indicated a distinct contrast between large PLCs and small socially and/or environmentally-motivated organisations in terms of how they understood their organisation’s relationship with sustainability. In large PLCs efforts were made to “fit” sustainability to the organisation, while

in the more “unconventional” organisations, sustainability was directly related to the purpose of the enterprise. As discussed in Chapter Nine, many individuals in “different types” of organisation focused on their organisation’s direct impact, for example:

“At the end of the day it’s about the outcomes. We measure our success in jobs that we’ve created and in tonnes of resources we’ve taken out of the waste stream...that’s really why we’re here, we’re here, ultimately, to make a contribution to sustainability” (Managing Director, Social Enterprise, Recycling Services)

In contrast, for the individuals in “business” the purpose of their organisation was to “make money for shareholders” (Sustainability Consultant, PLC, Financial Services), and sustainability was engaged with only to the extent that it supported this goal i.e. if there is a “business case”. Thus these organisations cannot go “beyond the business case” in a substantive way. Therefore it is only through more “unconventional” organisations, perhaps those created for the purpose of contributing to sustainable development, that we can begin to develop “alternative” narratives of “sustainable organisation”.

11.3.4 “Business” and “Non-Business”

It is becoming clear at this point that there is an ongoing, unofficial distinction being made between the large PLCs and the more “unconventional”, “different types” of organisation sampled. This has become gradually more evident as the results analysis has progressed; comparisons were consistently being made between these two “groups” of organisation. It is perhaps appropriate now to make this distinction “official”.

In Chapter Six - Methods, it was explained that this is a study of “business organisations”, with the concept of “commercial exchange” (Peredo and McLean, 2006) used to broadly define a “business organisation”. At this stage, however, it is apparent that, arguably, we have been looking at two distinct types of “business organisation”: large commercial PLCs and small, socially and/or environmentally-motivated enterprises. As the section above on alternative narratives illustrates, there are notable distinctions between these two groups, such as their attitude to financial returns, the “closeness” of their members, and the fundamental purpose of the organisation.

This distinction is crucial to the theoretical foundations of this study. The research is in a sense about bridging a conceptual gap; between the dominant social paradigm and the new environmental paradigm, between incremental and radical change, between managerialist and critical perspectives. Looking at the data, we see a gap emerging between “business” i.e. large multinational PLCs, and other “business organisations” i.e. the “different types” of organisation sampled. We also begin to see within this gap a selection of divergences, distinctions, and elements of sustainability which these two groups understand in fundamentally different ways. Exploring these elements could be key to developing “alternative” narratives of the sustainability-organisation relationship.

Coming back to a more immediately practical level, during the results chapters the “different types” of organisations were assigned various labels, such as, “socially/environmentally-orientated organisations”, “unconventional organisations”, or “organisations with social or environmental goals”. To avoid confusion, for the moment this group of organisations will be designated as “non-business”, a phrase which will cover social enterprises, private companies and co-owned businesses. The other group, the large multinational PLCs, which made up 30% of the sample for the public utterances analysis, and 37% of the interview sample, will be designated as “business”.

11.4 Boundaries

The broad purpose of the “Boundaries” section of the study was to explore what organisations “cannot do” and why. It was aimed to identify the key barriers to bringing the concepts of sustainability and organisation together, and to explore how these barriers were manifested in different types of organisation. Two related research objectives were developed:

RO4: To identify the barriers to “sustainable enterprise”

RO5: To investigate what organisations cannot do – the limits to their ability to contribute to sustainable development

As outlined in the Research Design section (see Chapter Five), it was expected that much of the data on barriers and boundaries would come from the interview phase, with participants asked direct questions on the topic. The interviews did indeed provide some insight,

particularly on practical issues such as financial pressures and the “unsustainable system”. One of the most significant barriers, however, was apparent in all three phases of empirical work: the misappropriation and corporate “capture” of sustainable development.

11.4.1 Corporate Capture and Social Learning

In the literature review it was suggested that it may be neither possible nor appropriate to bring together the concepts of “sustainability” and “organisation” (e.g. Gray and Milne, 2004). The results of the content analysis offer some support for this hypothesis; it was suggested that organisations may struggle to engage with some of the system-level concerns of sustainability, such as consumption, population, future generations or natural capital. In addition, a number of the interviewees were also sceptical, suggesting that a sustainable organisation would be “radically different from where we are now” (Head of Sustainable Business, PLC, Retail).

The public utterances analysed, however, offer a striking contradiction to these individuals’ concerns. In these documents “sustainability” and “business” were brought together frequently and casually. The close reading revealed that the term “sustainability” was in fact used to precede any number of nouns e.g. “sustainability achievements” (Berkeley Group, 2010) or “sustainability strategy” (Vodafone, 2010b). Furthermore, through use of the “journey” and “building” metaphors, an image is created of business steering a steady, solid course to sustainability. This “discourse of reassurance” (Dryzek, 2005) encourages us to believe that a “sustainable organisation” is not only possible but actually quite simple, and in fact the organisation is already “well on the way”.

Overall, the impression is that, particularly in “business”, the terms “sustainable development” and/or “sustainability” are functioning primarily as a label. Some interviewees suggested that “sustainability” was interchangeable with “corporate social responsibility” or “corporate citizenship”, and at any rate, “I don’t think it actually matters what you call it, as long as you do it” (Head of Corporate Responsibility, PLC, Energy). One participant explained that the “sustainable development piece” only came into play when the organisation wished to “articulate something externally” (VP for Corporate Responsibility, PLC, Pharmaceuticals). The same interviewee in fact described a “sustainable organisation as “one that can go on and on”, perhaps the ultimate corporate capture of the word “sustainable”.

The net effect of these various (mis)appropriations of sustainability is that the concept is simplified; it is disassociated from the systems-level concerns of its origins (i.e. UNWCED, 1987) and becomes all too easy to equate with “organisation”, or “profitability”, or indeed “economy”. Thus it become familiar, we become more confident that it can be achieved, and as corporate public utterances claim, it is in fact being achieved already.

This brings us back to a point stressed throughout the results chapters: the importance of reflexivity and “social learning” (Dryzek, 2005). Gladwin et al (1997) argue that before working to bring about sustainable development, we must acknowledge and engage with the issues of *unsustainable* development. Using this criterion, the interviewees can roughly be divided into three different categories. First, there are those (the minority) who do not really “believe” in sustainability, the “we haven’t fallen off the world yet” group. Second, there are those who seek change but focus on incremental change within a business case and/or ecological modernisation paradigm. Finally, there is the third group, who believe that only radical change can bring about sustainable development.

Here we have varying degrees of what Beck (1994) might call “self-confrontation”. The first group fail to acknowledge *unsustainability*, an attitude which does not bode well for reflexive modernisation. The second group, into which we could also put most managerialist, “corporate sustainability” scholars, seek to work for incremental change within existing structures, and believe that this approach can deliver sustainable development.

However, arguably the only group which really suggests some potential of social learning is the third, which comprises individuals from both “business” and, primarily, “non-business” organisations. For the “business” individuals, they seem to have chosen the “Trojan horse” method (Spence, 2007). As one interviewee suggested, “if we’re going to get anywhere in sustainability as a concept, and as a process in business, you need to get out of niche businesses and into the big ugly businesses; it’s where change will happen” (Head of Sustainability, State-owned PLC, Financial Services). For the non-business individuals, they have set up their own, “unconventional” organisations. The problem, however, is that the interview data suggests that many “business” individuals in fact fall into the first group: they do not recognise the problem in the first place.

11.4.3 People Don't "Get" Sustainability

The interview findings suggest that an enormous barrier to sustainable development is that people do not understand or care "enough" about it. As one participant summarised, "there's an intensely high level of ignorance about sustainability...people frankly just don't understand it, don't get it, haven't learned anything about it, don't relate to it" (CEO, Social Enterprise, Recycling).

In particular, this was perhaps the biggest issue for individuals in "business". In the first instance, and as discussed above, they often struggled to get top management to engage with sustainability, relying on the business case. Secondly, and even more pertinently for PLCs, many interviewees highlighted the pressure of shareholder expectations. For example, one individual suggested that if her organisation informed its investors that it would be concentrating on long-term steady growth, "our share price would hit the floor!" (Sustainability Consultant, PLC, Financial Services).

These findings are interesting in the context of the literature on ownership structure (e.g. Schumacher, 1973; Dauncey, 1989), where it is sometimes suggested that PLC status could be a barrier to "sustainable enterprise" (e.g. Barter and Bebbington, 2010). However, a number of interviewees from private companies explained that it was not the legal status of the company which mattered, but the expectations of the owners, and being "clear with them from the start" (MD, Private Company, Financial Services). For example, the MD of a private company which had recently transferred from PLC status indicated that its ownership structure had no impact on the organisation's approach to sustainability (MD, Private Company, Property). This suggests that investor expectations may be a more influential enabler or constraint than the legal status of the organisation.

Considering investor expectations raises some interesting and potentially important issues around the purpose of a "business organisation". One interviewee, representing a large PLC, was keen to stress that his organisation was not a "quixotic NGO", it was "a business" and therefore "we're there to give sustainable, I don't mean environmentally and socially, I mean sustainable economically, sustainable long-term steady growth in returns to investors" (Head of Sustainable Business, PLC, Retail). We are reminded of the distinction made above between how "business" and "non-business" organisations appear to understand sustainability; for the latter it relates to the direct impact of the organisation, while for big business, attempts are

made to “fit” sustainability into “organisation”. For companies like the large retail PLC above, its fundamental purpose is to provide “returns to investors”, and sustainability must be made to fit inside this parameter.

In addition, there is a point to be made here in relation to the expectations of investors as individual human beings. The interviewees from socially/environmentally-motivated organisations stressed that their investors’ “personal values” made them more focused on social and/or environmental “returns” than financial returns. As Bakan (2004) illustrates, the behaviour of an organisation will reflect the values of its owners. Therefore if those owners see the world through the lens of the dominant social paradigm, as an “economic (wo)man”, (Jensen and Meckling, 1994), the behaviour of their organisation will reflect the associated, unsustainable, values of self-interest, growth and anthropocentrism

11.4.4 The Unsustainable System

The discussion to date has focused primarily on agency-related barriers. However, the interview findings in particular suggest that there are also significant structural barriers to “sustainable enterprise”. The “unsustainable system” was an extremely popular topic.

Both in their interviews and through their organisation’s public utterances, some individuals questioned “our over-respect for the free market” (Eden Project, 2009) and suggested that “fundamental” changes were required (Triodos Bank, 2009). One interviewee expressed concern at the “power of markets”, and suggested that it was necessary to “worry away at the capitalist model and make it one that is genuinely able to be sustainable” citing the work of Porritt (2005) as influential (MD, Private Company, Financial Services).

Another participant, bringing to mind the work of such as Jackson (2009) and Daly (1996), noted that “we’ve got an economic model which ultimately is based around consuming and wasting. Our measure of success, GDP, is based on consumption...” (MD, Social Enterprise, Recycling Services). A representative of a large multinational PLC suggested that it was “hard to see a way forward...there’s still so much to be done with the production system, before we can really broach the consumption debate in any meaningful way” (Head of Sustainable Business, PLC, Retail).

In the case of what might be called the most “progressive” PLCs sampled, their strategies for “sustainable consumption”, focused as they were on “consuming differently” or “smart consumption”, were consistent with weak ecological modernisation. “Strong” ecological modernisation would require some engagement with the idea that some elements of society need to consume *less* (Dryzek, 2005). However, this would probably mean that business organisations would sell fewer products, and ultimately probably grow less. For “business”, the idea of “steady-state growth” (Daly, 1996) is fundamentally incompatible with shareholder expectations of exponential growth (and it may indeed be mathematically incompatible with financial capitalism, see York et al, 2003).

In addition, and crucially, consider the role of aggressive corporate advertising in fuelling consumption and materialism (see Bakan, 2004). Not unexpectedly, this was an issue on which interviewees from business were not forthcoming, using the “licence to operate” argument to quickly deflect any potential criticism of their organisation. For example, as discussed in the conclusion to Chapter Nine, the representative of a tobacco company justified the continued production and marketing of its creation, arguably the very antithesis of a “sustainable” product, by arguing that “there will be a substantial number of people still smoking in the future...” (Head of Sustainability, PLC, Tobacco). In this capacity as a promoter of materialism (Korten, 1999), and in some cases of environmentally and socially-detrimental products, “business” plays an active role in perpetuating the “unsustainable system”.

11.4 Future Directions

The objectives of this final section of the study were:

RO6: To explore how limits and barriers may be transcended in the future

RO7: To consider the possibilities by which the business–sustainable development relationship could evolve in a positive way for society and the environment

These objectives were perhaps the least prescriptive of the study, and became even less so as the research progressed. Rather than identifying specific problems and opportunities for resolution, this section became more about exploring what a “sustainable enterprise”, and

sustainable commercial activity, might possibly look like. In this discussion, we will look separately at future directions for “business” and “non-business” organisations.

11.4.1 Business

As discussed in the Introduction to this study, large business organisations have enormous potential to contribute to sustainable development. However, the research findings raise a number of issues which cast considerable doubt on their ability to support sustainable commercial activity.

Ecological Modernisation

As depicted in Chapter Ten’s iteration of the theoretical framework (Fig. 10.1), ecological modernisation appears to be the “journey” of choice for a number of large PLCs, particularly those which have worked with Forum for the Future. It is through this narrative, one of decoupling, “cradle to cradle”, and partnerships, that many “business” organisations seek to enable more sustainable commercial activity.

However, both the literature and the research findings raise a number of related concerns. First there is the issue of “radicalising” ecological modernisation (Dryzek, 2005), so that it does not become “another neo-liberal ideology in green camouflage” (Orsato and Clegg, 2005). While the content analysis did suggest that some of the organisations sampled were engaging to an extent with the more radical ideas of “natural limits” (Unilever, 2009) and “fundamental transformation” (BT, 2010), it was noted that references to more contentious and specific issues such as “sufficiency” (Young and Tilley, 2006) or maintaining natural capital (Gladwin et al, 1995) were absent. The discourse was largely suggestive of “weak” rather than “strong” ecological modernisation.

Furthermore, there is the problem of appropriation of the eco-modernist discourse (Milne et al, 2009). Echoing the findings of Ketola (2007), the content analysis and close reading suggested that some organisations had smoothly integrated the language of ecological modernisation into an approach to sustainable development firmly rooted in the dominant social paradigm and “technocentrism” (Gladwin et al, 1995). Such appropriation effectively

neutralises any radical potential which ecological modernisation may have and implicates it in corporate capture of sustainable development (Pataki, 2009).

Competition

As one interviewee pointed out, transforming business along eco-modernist lines will require a huge collaborative effort; both “individual businesses” and “individual governments” must “shift to being more collaborative and supportive” (Head of Sustainable Business, PLC, Retail). This participant argued that although there was a “need for competition in the marketplace” to bring about “innovation and step-change”, he hoped that at some point, perhaps in the next three to five years, “everybody in the marketplace” would realise that “having all these individual plans is not good enough and we need to work a bit more coherently together” (Head of Sustainable Business, PLC, Retail). The message is that big businesses will have to stop competing so fiercely and begin to work together for the “common good” (Daly and Cobb, 1990).

There are clear limitations to this theory, however. We know from the literature review that competition is central to capitalism (Porritt, 2005) and individualisation to modernity (Beck, 1994). It is telling that the same interviewees who stressed the need for partnership also saw their organisation as participating in, rather than leading these collaborative “solutions”. There was a sense that “we’re not in business to solve all of these problems” (Head of CSR, Partnership, Retail). Or as one individual from the retail sector argued, “we’re not a charity...you need to have a strong robust business, competitive business, because the retail sector is extremely competitive” (Group Environmental Executive, Private Company, Retail).

These comments bring to mind again the familiar themes of self-interest (Smith, 1776; Friedman, 1970) and individualisation (Lash, 1994). Both seem to contradict directly with the notion of collaboration, in the sense of the compromise and “collective action” envisaged by the Brundtland Report (Dryzek and Schlossberg, 2005). Capitalism, as Balakrishnan et al (2003) explore, glorifies the “individual”; it is based on the “detachment of the individual from ‘people’ and nature” (2003:303). As Mangham (2012) notes, capitalism creates a distinction between being an “individual” and a “member of society” (see also Dillard, 2007). It is difficult to see how “partnership” and “collaboration” can overcome individualisation and competition within a capitalist framework, and among the organisations which embrace it.

Power and Policy

This brings us to another significant issue – the relationship between “business” and government. It was highlighted in Chapter Ten that, while a number of individuals from non-business spoke of government “kow-towing to the interests of business” (Chairman, Co-operative, Food & Agriculture), this was rarely addressed by the interviewees representing business. They consistently spoke of “partnership” and “alignment” with governments, and presented an attractive picture of “collaboration between industry, government, NGOs, stakeholders...” (Head of Sustainability, PLC, Tobacco). For the most part, they studiously ignored the elephant in the room: the concerted corporate lobbying which often advances business’ interests at the expense of societal or ecological good (Bakan, 2004; Beder, 2002; Korten, 1995).

It is important to consider the implications of this point in the context of the legislative changes which would likely be required for “strong”, “reflexive” ecological modernisation (Gouldson and Murphy, 1998). For example, in *Prosperity without Growth*, Jackson (2009) outlines a 12-step policy plan for a more sustainable, low-growth economy and society. However, the proposals involve many policies which would require either significant corporate co-operation or State coercion, such as “reversing the culture of consumerism”, “imposing clearly defined resource emissions caps” or “increasing public control of the money supply” (2009:104-7). Would the companies ever allow this? A simple example is ecological tax reform, an essential component of the visions of more sustainable industry proposed by Weisacker et al (1997) and Hawken et al (1999). Ten years later, in 2009, Jackson reports that progress towards ecological tax reform “remains painfully slow”.

It is the nature of business to act in its own interests (Bakan, 2004), not the “general social interest” (Friedman, 1970), and it is far more in the interests of business to lobby for less rather than more regulation relating to their environmental and social involvement. To illustrate the point, take the issue of accountability. It has long been argued in the social accounting literature that honest, transparent “*unsustainability reporting*” could be a catalyst for more stringent corporate regulation (e.g. Owen et al, 1997; Gray, 2006b). Or as one interviewee suggested:

“One of the greatest things you could do for sustainable development would be to make accountants honest... taking account of the genuine cost on natural services of the production processes of each business that exists, and when you do that, you would actually drive a form of sustainable development, in terms of which you’d be taxed to buggery if you did anything that was unsustainable” (Chairman, Social Enterprise, Tourism)

Greater accountability would very likely be in the interests of sustainability (Owen et al, 1997). But the promise of being “taxed to buggery” makes any sort of “Unsustainability Report” distinctly contrary to the interests of business. What is far more in the interests of business is to continue to cultivate the metaphor-heavy “discourse of reassurance” which characterises many “Sustainability” Reports (see Chapter Eight) and reinforces corporate capture of the sustainability discourse at a policy level (Levy and Egan, 2003).

In summary, it is suggested that, while business may have the capacity to drive a weak form of ecological modernisation, it is actively standing in the way of the strong, reflexive form required to support sustainable commercial activity. Through a combination of corporate capture of the sustainable development discourse, and pressure on government to allow “self-regulation”, business itself becomes a significant barrier to accountability, reflexivity, “social learning” and a more radical, systems-level understanding of sustainable development.

11.4.2 Non-Business

Earlier in this chapter it was suggested that it is only through engaging with different types of organisation, or “non-business”, that we can begin to explore the possibilities of “sustainable enterprise”. Looking at the research findings, it is suggested that the non-business organisations sampled share a number of key characteristics which may allow them to support more sustainable commercial activity.

Collaboration

Like their colleagues in “business”, interviewees from non-business organisations stressed the importance of “inter-organisational co-operation” (Starik and Rands, 1995). A number of individuals suggested developing networks with like-minded organisations in their industry, and some had already begun to implement their proposals. Perhaps the most developed

example came from the Managing Director of an “ethical” bank, who discussed how his organisation had formed an alliance with other similar banks around Europe. He explained that along with offering economies of scale, this alliance simply took his organisation to “a different level of influence” (MD, Private Company, Financial Services).

One interviewee, representing the largest social enterprise sampled, highlighted that his organisation was “partnership driven”, with the motivation of “building the social enterprise sector”, rather than a “predatory” approach to growth (Head of Sustainable Development, Social Enterprise, Community Services). He noted that “we do have competitors in the sector, of course. But we’re as likely to form a partnership with them...rather than just go, hiss, get out of my patch.” (Head of Sustainable Development, Social Enterprise, Community Services).

This collaborative approach is a striking contrast to the competitive, “predatory” focus inherent in a capitalist approach to business (Porritt, 2005). There is ultimately a sense here of a recognition of the “common good” (Daly and Cobb, 1990). While these organisations do not wholly reject self-interest – they aim to increase their own influence through forming networks – there is also a co-operative, collaborative motivation for their behaviour (see also Barter and Bebbington, 2010).

In contrast, we have seen how the pursuit of self-interest leads to anti-sustainability business behaviour. As discussed above, it is self-interest which motivates business to “capture” the discourse of sustainability, or lobby for deregulation, thus perpetuating the psychological and structural barriers to sustainable development. Consider the societal and environmental impacts if business was to reject self-interest in favour of the “common good”, as Schumacher (1973) or Lux (2003) envisage.

Mission

Related is the fundamental purpose of a non-business, versus a business organisation. We know from the earlier discussion that for the PLCs sampled, their fundamental purpose is narrow, it is to “make money for their shareholders” (Sustainability Consultant, Large PLC, Financial Services). The non-business organisations, however, have a broader range of goals,

encapsulated by what some referred to as their “mission” (Managing Director, Private Company, Property).

This has echoes of Young and Tilley’s (2006) concept of “socio-effectiveness”, whereby they suggest that a “sustainable enterprise” will have a “social mission”. Consider also the words of Starik and Rands (1995), who propose that organisations address “overconsumption and overpopulation” (see also Shrivastava, 1995). It is suggested that it is characteristic of non-business organisations is to have a wider purpose, to pursue broader goals which reflect these system-level issues, perhaps to “trade for the public good” (Smith, 1776).

The work of Gladwin et al (1995) is particularly helpful here, and allows us to take “socio-effectiveness” to a different level. These authors focus on what they term “systemic interconnection”, remarking that such a view “would see organizations both partially causing and being affected by biodiversity loss, climate change, freshwater scarcity, food insecurity, population growth, persistent poverty, gender bias, and explosion of megacities” (Gladwin et al, 1995:897). In other words, the organisation and its goals are intrinsically and intimately intertwined with the wider system; “there are no wholes and no parts anywhere in the universe; there are only ‘holons’ (i.e. whole/parts)...economic and human activities are inextricably linked with natural systems” (Gladwin et al, 1995:890).

“Closeness”

These ideas around interconnection lead us to consider the concept of “closeness” (Gray et al, 1997), an idea touched upon earlier when discussing ownership structure. Gray et al (forthcoming) broadly explain this concept as how close “individuals and groups are physically, intellectually, professionally and in terms of their values”, suggesting also that “social enterprises and other small organisations” have “high degrees of closeness” (Gray et al, forthcoming).

Consider for a moment the ownership structure of a large multinational PLC, many of which are “owned” largely by institutional investors (Collison et al, 2011). Porritt sums up the situation as follows:

“Investment markets today are dominated by huge funds that buy and sell millions of shares on a daily basis... Boards of directors are in thrall to institutions and individuals who have no concern for their companies, their products and services, let alone their employees or the communities in which they are based” (Porrirt, 2005:182)

The image the above extract creates is one of distance, of separation and remoteness. It provokes sympathy with the work of Schumacher (1973) and other “green” theorists (see Dryzek, 2005), who argue against globalisation and individualisation, and in favour of decentralisation and community. There is a sense from Porrirt’s words of the stakeholders of a large corporation e.g. “their employees or the communities in which they are based” being utterly disconnected from the “huge funds” which “own” the corporation, and indeed from the people whose pensions are tied up in those funds. There is a “wedge of disengagement” between the organisation and its operations, and its shareholders (Mintzberg et al, 2002), and the company and its shareholders can thereby be “distanced...from the blame” (Craig and Amernic, 2009) in the case of negative impacts on the community or the environment in which it operates.

One interviewee, the CEO of a social enterprise, touched on the topic of distance, suggesting that large multinational organisations by nature lack a “sense of home”:

“These companies [large PLCs], the shareholders live in a thousand different places, there’s no sense of home, they’ll up the factory and move it across to China or Czechoslovakia or wherever they want to go. So the sense of identification is diminished...” (CEO, Social Enterprise, Recycling Services).

An individual from just such a large multinational corporation made a similar point from a different perspective, remarking that operating in so many different countries put the company in danger of “becoming a giant behemoth that can’t do anything” (Head of Sustainability, PLC, Telecoms). To consider these comments side by side for a moment, what links these two perspectives is the idea that when an organisation becomes so large, so global, it loses its sense of connection between human beings.

This brings to mind the comments of one “non-business” interviewee, who stressed the importance of “transparency”. This individual suggested that “good business” for his

organisation meant cultivating “relationships... built on trust and transparency” (Managing Director, Private Company, Financial Services). He noted that this was of particular importance when managing shareholder expectations, pointing out that the organisation had been “clear with them [shareholders] from the start” that returns would be below (i.e. less than half) the industry standard.

The same interviewee also stressed that it was organisational policy when talking to “potential savers” to “talk about the things that their money is helping to happen”, to help them “feel a bit of that project” (Managing Director, Private Company, Financial Services). This in turn reminds us of the comments of the Chairman of an agricultural co-operative, who suggested that its members are relatively unconcerned with profits because the organisation is “theirs”, because it’s “part of them” (Chairman, Co-operative, Food and Agriculture).

There is a striking contrast between these remarks and the picture of investment markets painted by Porritt above. Here there is a sense that its “owners” feel connected in some way to the organisation and to the other individuals involved in it; there is a sense of closeness and of social cohesion. This “non-business” organisation is fundamentally a social structure, an aggregation of a series of human relationships which allows commercial activity to take place. In this, it is utterly different from the multinational corporation, a “behemoth” with “no sense of identification”, characterised by remoteness, disconnection, and, arguably, a distinct lack of closeness.

Human Organisations

It may be that what is at issue here is some sense of what might be called “human-ness”. To explore this further it is helpful to consider the words of Dillard (2007):

“Under the capitalist mode of production, human beings, just as are all other resources, are means to the ends of economic growth and wealth accumulation...thus the individual is estranged from his or herself, from their fellow human beings, and the natural system within which they live. The natural and intended state is that human beings live in harmony with themselves, with the other members of society, and with the natural system” (Dillard, 2007:40)

Ideas around “harmony” between human beings, and between human beings and the “natural system”, appear in various guises in the literature. For example, Balakrishnan et al (2003) stress the “non-capital factors of development”, Korten (1999) suggests “human-scale self-organisation”, and Dauncey (1989) proposed “holistic businesses”. Hawken et al (1999) summarise that “the best long-term environment for commerce is provided by true democratic systems of governance that are based on the needs of people rather than business” (Hawken et al, 1999:10).

To explore these ideas in the context of commercial organisations, it is helpful to again engage with the work of Gladwin et al (1995). These authors suggest that “sustaincentrism” would incorporate a sense of human nature as “homo sapient”, rather than “homo economicus” as in the case of technocentrism. While homo economicus is chiefly self-interested, homo sapient feels a “moral obligation” to ensure intergenerational and intragenerational equity (Gladwin et al, 1995). In this way, sustaincentrism incorporates an acute sense of what it means to be a human, and a human living on a planet with billions of other humans, some yet to be born. Rather than being “estranged” from other human beings, as Dillard (2007) puts it, people live in “harmony”; they are not individualistic but collective, not self-interested but concerned with the common good.

It is suggested that some sort of sense of this “harmony”, of “human-ness”, may ultimately be key to a less unsustainable form of commercial organisation. Some of the more critical work on the sociology of organising (e.g. Silverman, 1970; Scott, 2003) speaks of “organisations as systems”. Drawing from these theories, it is suggested that an organisation is ultimately a human system, a function of humanity and its interdependence, created for the purpose of allowing humans to survive through relating to each other and to nature. The “enterprise” and the humans relating to it are not separate from society, but participants in society. It may be that what is required for “sustainable” commercial activity is a more “social”, more “human” form of organisation, characterised by trust, transparency, collaboration, and collectivity.

11.5 Revisiting the Framework

The Framework of Sustainable Business, first introduced in Chapter Three, has provided the theoretical foundations for the study. Its' initial aim was to illustrate a range of perspectives on the sustainable development-business relationship. The evolution of the Framework throughout the data interpretation process tells us much about the complexities, barriers and possibilities of “sustainable business”. A quick reminder of the original Framework:

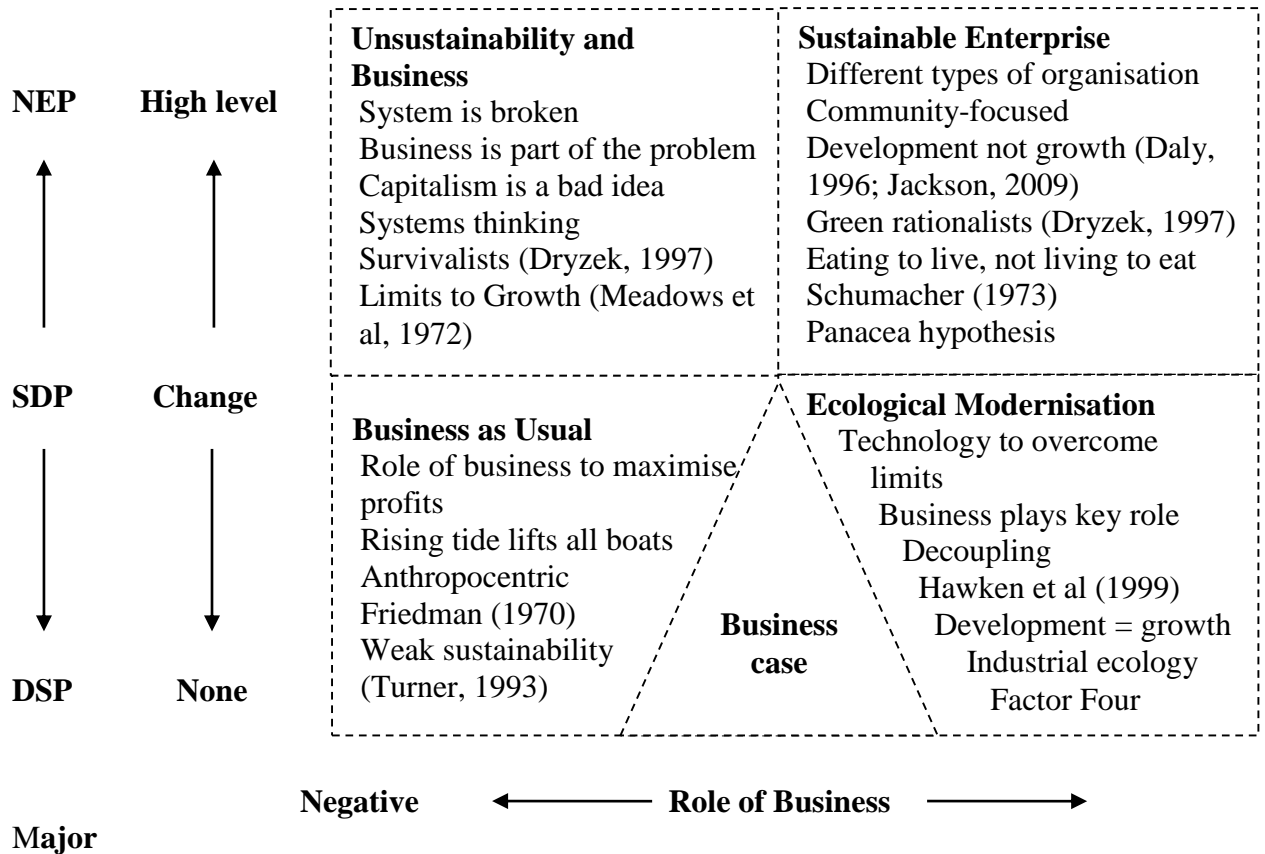


Fig 11.1 Some possible perspectives on the role of business organisations in sustainable development [copy of Fig 3.2]

The research findings suggest that the above figure does not reflect the complexities of the sustainable development-business relationship. A revised Framework of Sustainable Business is accordingly presented below in Fig 11.2. Drawing on the data collected, this framework displays key authors, ideas, discourse and examples of organisations falling into each category. It also recognises key barriers to “sustainable business”, influential actors outside of the organisation, and the different roles of different types of organisation. The evolution of the Framework throughout the relevant chapters of the thesis was as follows:

Chapter Four:

- Four models of “sustainability at an organisational level” were added to the Framework. This recognises that there are a number of possible narratives of “sustainable organisation”. The positioning of the models on the framework reflects that three of the four are closer to the conservative, DSP half of the figure than the more radical NEP upper half
- The Business as Usual quadrant was enlarged, based on the managerialist bias within the literature, identified in Chapter Four. Some key managerialist work, such as Bansal (2005) and Hart (1995), was added to this quadrant

Chapter Seven:

- Quadrant sizes were adjusted to reflect the distribution of the content analysis results e.g. the Business as Usual and Business Case sections were enlarged
- The upper quadrants, Unsustainability and Business and Sustainable Enterprise, were adjusted so that they do not reach to the top of the figure. This reflects the lack of really radical, NEP inspired language amongst the content analysis data
- The size of the four models was adjusted to reflect their prominence in the results
- Some of the categories in the content analysis research instrument e.g. employees, community, were added to the relevant quadrants

Chapter Eight:

- Some quotes from the close reading, and the names of some of the sample organisations, were matched to the relevant sections
- The prominent journey metaphor was acknowledged and depicted on the figure
- The Business Case triangle was extended into the Sustainable Enterprise quadrant, reflecting the results of the close reading

Chapter Ten:

- Depiction of the journey metaphor was refined to reflect the different roles of “business” and “non-business” organisations. This meant that the “Role of Business” arrows at the base of the figure were removed, as it is suggested that different types of business may have different roles in sustainable development

- A “modified business case” was added to the Business Case triangle based on the data collected from individuals in different types of organisation
- The Business Case triangle was extended up into the Unsustainability and Business quadrant
- Reflecting the interview results, other actors outside of the organisation, such as Government and Individuals, were added to the Framework

Chapter Eleven:

- In Fig 11.2, below, the key barriers discussed earlier are positioned on the Framework, represented by the red shapes.
- In addition, the Business as Usual and Business Case sections are outlined in red, reflecting that one of the most notable barriers to sustainable business is that many organisations, and individuals, currently reside in these sections

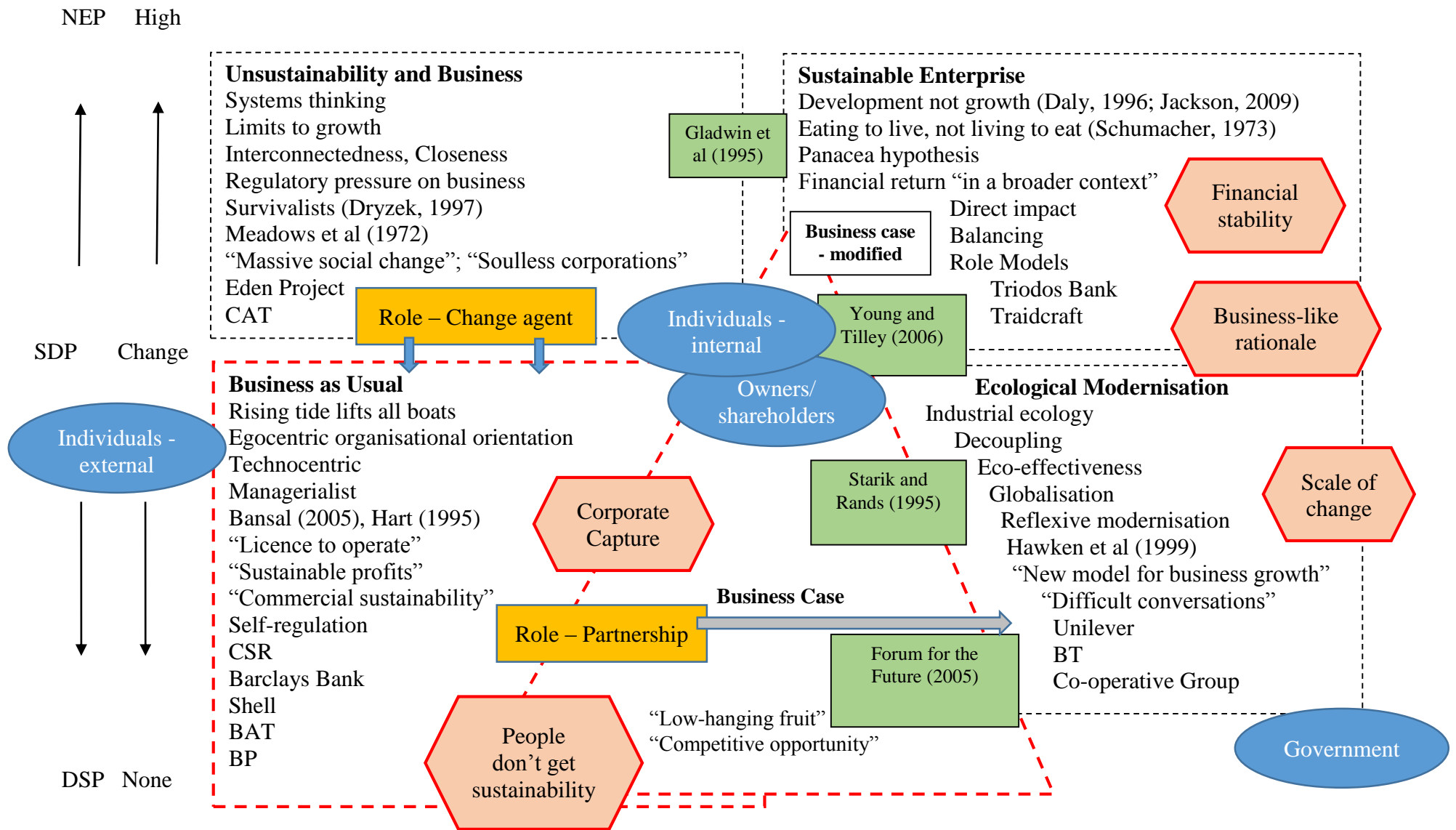


Fig 11.2: A Framework of Sustainable Business – Revised

Ultimately, what the above Framework suggests is that some of the key “barriers” within the sustainable development-business relationship relate to the Business as Usual and Business Case concepts, the most popular articulations of the relationship in academia and practice. Aspects of these two sections, such as competition, growth, technocentrism and self-interest, clash fundamentally with sustainable development. To develop ideas of “sustainable business” and sustainable commercial activity, we must break out of these areas and engage with a strong, reflexive Ecological Modernisation, the more radical elements of Sustainable Enterprise, and particularly, the ideas of Unsustainability and Business.

11.6 Some Conclusions

The aims of Chapter Eleven were to collate the empirical findings, consider their significance in the context of the existing literature, and to begin to develop a narrative of the key implications of the research.

The first point to note is that the discussions of this chapter indicate a range of significant structural and psychological issues related to the sustainable development-business relationship. It is suggested that the barriers to “sustainable enterprise” and the parameters of sustainable commercial activity are of both a structural and an agency-related nature.

Psychological issues centre around the apparent reluctance to embrace reflexivity and “doubt” (Beck, 1994). We saw that sustainability is consistently presented in a positive manner in corporate public utterances, and the comments of many interviewees suggest that sustainability will only be accepted in their organisation if it is presented as a “business case”. While these individuals expressed personal reservations about the idea of a “sustainable organisation”, this and similar phrases appeared regularly in their organisations’ reports. These public utterances, often laden with hopeful, reassuring metaphors, reinforce corporate “capture” of sustainability and allow unsustainable “business as usual” to continue unchallenged.

Furthermore, there was a distinct lack of a sense of accountability amongst many participants from large organisations. In contrast to the representatives of “non-business”, who called for

increased regulation, many “business” individuals argued for self-regulation, stressed that their organisation wished to act in “partnership” with government, and, particularly in controversial industries, highlighted their company’s “licence to operate”. There was a definite reluctance to acknowledge the role of business in perpetuating unsustainability. As one interviewee remarked, “there’s nothing in the design of business which makes it inherently anti-society” (Head of Sustainability, State-owned PLC, Financial Services). This “evangelical faith” (Newton and Harte, 1997) in business and attachment to business as usual may be the very opposite of the reflexivity required for “social learning” (Dryzek, 2005).

Structural barriers are equally challenging, and indeed equally tied up with the actions of “business”. The “non-business” individuals interviewed highlighted the difficulty of operating in an “unsustainable system”, citing aspects such as the focus on growth and consumption and the power of financial markets. These participants were also critical of large corporations, suggesting that they lobbied government to act in their own interests rather than those of society and the environment. The results suggest that the “Panacea hypothesis” is significantly limited by financial pressures, market structures and a regulatory environment which favours large powerful organisations.

These findings are not unexpected in the context of some strands of the existing literature. Prior research on small socially and/or environmentally-focussed enterprises also highlights financial and structural barriers (e.g. see Lamberton, 2000; Young and Tilley, 2006; Barter and Bebbington, 2010; Kearins et al, 2010). In addition, some of the more critical management literature suggests that individuals in business are indeed reluctant to embrace doubt and consider the “wrong answer” (e.g. Gladwin et al, 1997; Hoffman and Bazerman, 2007; Gray, 2010).

What is also coming through from the findings of this study, however, is a sense, that fundamentally, the concepts of “sustainability” and “business” may not “fit” together. The nature of business may make it incompatible with sustainability. Take for example the key differences between “business” and “non-business” organisations. They include the organisation’s perspective on financial returns, its relationship with its owners, and the very purpose of the organisation. These are all elements fundamental to why and how a business organisation acts the way it does.

Furthermore, the research findings suggest that the way “business” acts is inextricably linked with the “unsustainable system” (see also Gray, 2006a; Bakan, 2004). It was argued above that business perpetuates both the psychological and structural barriers to sustainable development, through corporate capture and political pressure respectively. It is suggested that an alternative, more “human” form of business organisation may be required to support more sustainable commercial activity. Chapter Twelve outlines the theoretical and empirical implications of these conclusions.

Chapter Twelve

Conclusions

12.1 Introduction

As the closing chapter of the thesis, Chapter Twelve seeks to draw out and assess the conclusions of the research study. After briefly revisiting the original research problem, the chapter takes its lead from the insights of Chapter Eleven. Through re-engagement with the literature the contribution of the study is explored, and some suggestions offered for future research. Possible implications for practice and the limitations of the study are outlined before the chapter closes with some remarks which bring the thesis to a conclusion.

12.2 Revisiting the Research Problem

This study began with a relatively simple, pragmatic objective. It was aimed to explore the possible role of business organisations in sustainable development, with a view to considering how they might come to support it in the future. Implicit within this objective was an assumption that business organisations *could* come to support sustainable development, whatever this might mean. As the research progressed, this initial pragmatism was tempered by reflexivity, with insights from the literature encouraging more critical analysis of the data.

At the end of Chapter Eleven, however, this approach of reflexive pragmatism left the thesis at an impasse of sorts, caught between offering practical suggestions for action and skirting around bigger questions about the nature and power of business. It became impossible to avoid any longer the concerns of the more critical literature, where it is suggested that conventional business in its current form *cannot* come to support sustainable development (e.g. Gray and Bebbington, 2000; Gray, 2010). It was ultimately concluded that only through alternative, more “human” organisations, can we hope to develop the possibilities of sustainable enterprise.

12.3 Contribution of the Study

At this point it is appropriate to take a step back and to consider the implications of these inferences for the literature which this study seeks to address. As Chapters Four and Five discussed, research on business and sustainable development largely suffers from the

“functionalist” bias prevalent in the wider management literature. Several authors (e.g. Welford, 1998; Newton, 2009) have highlighted this bias and called for more critical work which challenges the nature of business. While also echoing this call, what this study does is expose the limitations, and the implications thereof, of a functionalist and managerialist bias.

The issues discussed in Chapter Eleven are complex and important; it is suggested that some fundamental elements of the nature of “business” e.g. self-interest, competition, growth, lack of “closeness” and transparency, make it incompatible with sustainability. The implication is that business cannot begin to support sustainable development until these issues have been confronted and resolved. For researchers exploring the business-sustainable development relationship, this offers some clarity on the identity of Starik’s (2006) “important questions”: can the nature of business be transformed and, if so, how?

It is not easy, however, to find these questions asked in the management literature, and yet more unusual to find them answered. As explored in Chapters Three and Four, in the mainstream, “managerialist” literature, the business case and weak ecological modernisation dominate and the focus is an organisation-centric one, on “sustaining the corporation” rather than sustainable development (Banarjee, 2008). This work finds its counterpoint in the shape of some more critical work which does tackle “bigger issues” and question the nature of business (e.g. Gray, 2010 or Gladwin, 2012; but see Chapter Four for a more comprehensive review). It is rare, however, to find work which draws on the theories of these more critical authors to explore possible and pragmatic answers to the important questions they pose (although see the work of Schaltegger for a level of engagement with the more critical literature e.g. Schaltegger, 2012).

As outlined in Chapter Five, “pragmatism” was key to the methodology of this study. Part of this approach was to explore the ideas offered by the emerging, empirically-driven research on “sustainable entrepreneurship” (e.g. Young and Tilley, 2006) or “visionary small enterprises” (Kearins et al, 2010), from whence it was hoped might spring potentially radical, “alternative” models of business. However, as this study has progressed, signs have begun to emerge that this research in this area is in danger of sacrificing radicalism in favour of pragmatism, and thus succumbing to the same functionalist bias which characterises the more mainstream literature (Tilley and Young, 2009; Nicholls, 2010a). For example, the work of Elkington and Hartigan

(2008) and Bansal and Hoffman (2012) focuses on how social entrepreneurs can work within capitalism, market and corporate forces, along the lines of Leadbetter (1997), rather than seeking to challenge them, as for example, Schumacher (1973) had in mind.

This brings us back to the fundamental limitations of the mainstream managerialist literature on sustainable development and business. The original aim of this study was to identify the barriers and limits which prevented business from supporting sustainable development. As explained in Chapter One, implicit therein was a normative worldview, a conviction that business in its current form should and indeed *could* come to support sustainable development; the possibility that they could *not* was thus excluded from the scope of the study. However, as this chapter has attempted to illustrate, the findings of the study ultimately suggest that the key issue is in fact not simply barriers and limits; the problem is that the most crucial barriers and limits arise from the nature of business itself. This is brought into sharp focus by the revised theoretical framework (Fig 11.2), which illustrates how the mainstream managerialist literature languishes within the limited Business as Usual and Business Case perspectives.

This has significant implications for the literature. Before researchers can begin to consider how business may come to support sustainable development, they must confront the probability, as the findings of this study suggest, that in its current form it simply cannot. It is confrontation of this nature which is lacking in much of the existing work on barriers to sustainable business (e.g. Young and Tilley, 2006; Lamberton, 2000). Scholars have often concluded that the unsustainable system is the issue, but failed to explore further and confront the role of business in that system. Only through such confrontation can we begin to create a space of “social learning” (Dryzek, 2005), and the possibility to “speak the world anew” (Gray, 2010).

The inevitable consequences of the above conclusions are a call for a fundamental re-orientation of the field away from “business as usual” and towards critical and indeed pragmatic suggestions for the transformation of the nature of business. The “big issues” involved suggest a paradigm shift may be necessary, and re-engagement with related work such as that of Starik (1994), Purser et al (1995) and Gladwin et al (1995) will likely be required. In addition, the findings of this study suggest a complementary focus on “human-ness” and “human organisations”, perhaps engaging with and taking inspiration from the theoretical foundations of Burrell and Morgan’s (1979)

“radical humanist” paradigm (1979:318), and the work, for example, of Dillard (2007) and Dauncey (1989). It is to be hoped that, in the future, work on alternative business models and more critical challenging of corporate hegemony could combine to explore the possibilities of “sustainable” commercial activity.

12.4 Some Suggestions for Future Research

In light of these insights, it is useful to consider some suggestions for future research. As indicated by the discussion above, the main point is that it is crucial for researchers to confront the unsustainable nature of business upfront. In fact, if this study were to begin again, it would use such a confrontation as a starting point for the research, going on then to explore what kinds of commercial activity might allow for and indeed support sustainable development. The following suggestions are in this spirit, essentially considering how researchers might proceed armed with the insights of this study.

12.4.1 Critical Engagement

The first point relates to critical engagement with practice, with a view to challenging corporate behaviour. As discussed in Chapter Eleven, there may be potential “spaces for resistance and change” (Livesey, 2002) to be exploited through engagement with senior individuals in organisations. However, it is suggested that it is imperative to approach such engagement in an “adversarial” manner (Welford, 1998), with a keen sense of reflexivity. There is much potential for case study work here (e.g. Mitchell et al, 2012). Remembering Dryzek’s (2005) urging of reflexivity, it is suggested also that critical engagement may be particularly important for fields associated with ecological modernisation, such as environmental management and accounting (see also Everett and Neu, 2000).

Substantive critical engagement with practice was lacking from this study. The interviews with “business” representatives were not approached from an adversarial perspective; interviewees were encouraged rather than challenged when giving their views. If the study had instead begun with the hypothesis that the nature of business makes it unsustainable, interview questions would

have been more challenging, relating perhaps to the political power of business or the nature of the “businessman”. Alternatives to the dominant business case, managerialist discourse could also have been discussed, and cognitive dissonance explored in detail.

Coming back to future research and thinking in terms of the literature, it is suggested that critical research which endeavours to engage with the mainstream managerialist literature may be useful (Parker, 2005). There is scope for what could be termed “enlightened managerialism”, with a level of “critical awareness” (Newton, 2002). Examples are the work of Palazzo and Richter (2005), Hoffman and Bazerman (2007), Hahn and Figge (2011) and Mitchell et al (2012), who all critique the managerialist literature but engage with it constructively. There is also likely scope for further debate between critical and pragmatic researchers, particularly of the sort which privileges resolution over dissent (e.g. Tinker and Gray, 2003).

At the heart of this study has been an attempt to explore in detail the conceptual “middle ground” between the managerialist and critical literatures. In particular, this was expressed through the “menu” of sustainability at an organisational level (see Chapter Six). In this way, the development of the menu was a valuable exercise, allowing the subtleties of the “discursive struggle”, the contradictory arguments of, for example, Gladwin et al (1995) compared to Starik and Rands (1995), to be engaged with in a uniquely empirical way. In turn this allowed some of the characteristics of business which may or may not “work” to emerge, and opened up an alternative space of possibility, wherein the idea of “human organisations” developed.

However, the menu itself proved to be a rather unrefined research instrument. It was arguably too conservative, skewed towards the more managerialist ideas of Porritt (2005) and Starik and Rands (1995). As the discussion in the previous chapter on “human organisations” indicates, it was in fact the more radical work of Gladwin et al (1995), and to a lesser extent Young and Tilley (2006), which proved most helpful in exploring “alternative” narratives of the sustainability-organisation relationship.

It is suggested that future research could benefit from more nuanced engagement with the subtleties of the “contested middle ground”, drawing perhaps at a critical level from the insights of sociology and organisation studies (e.g. from the work of Dryzek (2005), Foster (2012), or

Burrell and Morgan (1979), and also from the more enlightened “semi-managerialist” work e.g. Hoffman and Bazerman (2007), Starik and Kanashiro (2013). For example, in the latter category, a number of scholars emphasise some more “alternative” issues such as organisational change and “adaptation”. Shrivastava (1995) speaks of avoiding “organisational inertia”, while Jennings and Zandbergen (1995) advocate “sweeping changes” in organisations, and “changes in learning systems” in particular. It may also be useful to engage with the work of, for example, Newton (2002) on “interdependency networks” and Starkey and Crane (2003) on introducing new narratives in organisations. Exploring issues such as these, e.g. change, networks, could potentially contribute to reconciliation of the conflicting discourses within the contested middle ground.

Moving on, another point is that, as discussed in Chapters Ten and Eleven, the issue that many people do not “get” sustainability is significant, and as others have also suggested, there is much scope in the management field for further work on how to promote a “more critical educational process” (Thomson and Bebbington, 2004; see also Tinker and Gray, 2003). Scholars could take inspiration from the work of Gladwin et al (1997), who consider the possible components of a “sustainable mind”, and conclude their paper by outlining a comprehensive and thought-provoking research agenda. Or there is the work of Hoffman and Bazerman (2007), where the authors examine the cognitive and organisational biases preventing behaviour change and suggest how organisational researchers can work to overcome these. As a case in point, Chabrak and Craig (2013) offer a stimulating account of their attempts to induce “transformative” cognitive dissonance among students, which hints at the potential for the kind of “social conflicts” and, ultimately, “ideological transitions” called for by Tinker et al (1991).

12.4.2 Different Types of Organisation

Returning to pragmatic matters, there is much scope for social and environmental accounting research with “non-business” organisations such as social or co-owned enterprises, along the lines of that of Dey (2007), Lamberton (2000) and Bebbington et al (2009). The findings of this study suggest that these types of organisation are more likely than larger companies to engage with radical narratives of sustainable development e.g. Gladwin et al’s (1995). Therefore, it may be that researchers will find them more willing to consider work which produces the “wrong

answer”; then allowing the tensions arising to be analysed, and potentially resolved (e.g. see Bebbington and Gray, 2001).

In addition, as Davies (2012) suggests, social accounting may help smaller organisations to raise awareness, particularly for the purposes of attracting investment and, from a broader perspective, to lobby for regulatory changes. On this point, the research findings highlighted the structural constraints faced by small sustainability-focused organisations, and it is suggested that future research focus on how these organisations could individually and collaboratively effect structural change. Owen (2008) stresses that researchers must remember the “necessity of holding the powerful accountable for their actions” and advocates work with organisations such as NGOs or trade unions (Owen, 2008:255). It is suggested that similar work is required with values-based enterprises and the networks they form. Once again, it is noted that if this study had begun with a strong conviction that “business” is inextricably linked with and in fact controls much of the unsustainable system, interviews with the “non-business” representatives could have focused fruitfully on these “big issues”.

Related is the idea of networks of small, sustainability-focused organisations. Although this is perhaps more an implication for practice rather than research, there is scope and indeed need for theoretical basis for such collaborative ambitions. Currently in the sustainable entrepreneurship literature there is talk of competitively-focused theories such as “creative destruction” and “transformation of industries” (e.g. Schaltegger and Wagner, 2011). Perhaps alternative theories might be Newton’s (2002) “interdependency network perspective”, or Gnyawali and Madhavan’s (2001) framework for “simultaneous cooperation and competition” based on a “structural embeddedness” perspective. Murray et al (2010) also offer interesting thoughts on collaboration between different types of organisation. It could be useful in addition to study relevant inter-organisational networks which already exist, such as the Global Alliance for Banking on Values or Social Enterprise UK (e.g. see Davies and Mullin, 2012).

12.5 Implications for Practice

In keeping with the pragmatic element of this study, it is suggested that the findings have a number of implications for practice. These are grouped loosely into two categories.

12.5.1 Collaboration and Co-operation

Looking first at large PLCs, there is much scope for these highly-resourced organisations to collaborate further with academia in the areas of social and environmental accounting and reporting. In the environmental accounting field, the work of Bebbington (2007) with BP on full cost accounting is a useful template. In terms of social reporting, while recent research with large businesses is rare (Adams and Larrinaga-Gonzalez, 2007), the work of Bebbington and Gray (2001) and Dey (2007) with smaller organisations offers inspiration. The findings of the content analysis suggest that most organisations produce limited “sustainability” reports far from the comprehensive documents of, say, the Co-operative Group and Traidcraft. There is significant scope for organisations to set new norms and standards and lobby government to regulate for their peers to meet them. Lessons here come from the Co-operative Group’s level of activism for higher social and environmental standards, both publicly and within the companies it holds shares in, and its stance against traditional (e.g. Beder, 2002) anti-sustainability corporate lobbying (Co-operative Group, 2009).

Perhaps the big challenge for PLCs, however, is shareholder expectations. Without government intervention, it is likely that revising expectations from short-term to long-term, if possible, will be a slow process. Based on the findings of this study (see Chapters Nine and Ten), it is suggested that hastening (or even beginning) the process will require strong leadership, employee engagement, educating shareholders, transparent reporting, and a clear vision which does not rely on the business case. Again, there may be lessons to be learned from how large co-owned businesses, for example the John Lewis Partnership or the Co-operative Group, attract the “right” sort of members/partners and manage their expectations.

For smaller organisations, as has been suggested already, it may be useful to form networks of influence, helping them to raise awareness and perhaps lobby for regulatory change. For example,

bodies such as the EUCLID network (www.euclidnetwork.eu) and its UK antecedent ACEVO (www.acevo.org.uk) bring social enterprises together to lobby for change. There is also a role for social/environmentally-focused organisations to play in stretching the discourse in larger organisations. Several interviewees from social enterprises spoke of their attempts to educate their larger customers; one CEO suggested that most effective was “talking to their senior level management about the environment, about CSR in broader terms, trying to get them to think beyond a very narrow perspective” (CEO, Social Enterprise, Recycling).

Furthermore, it is suggested that small organisations can cultivate a balance of both competition and collaboration with their larger peers (e.g. Hockerts and Wustenhagen, 2010). One of the individuals interviewed, from a large social enterprise which had cultivated partnerships with both peers and large multinationals, suggested that “a partner in one thing could obviously be a competitor in another, it’s just about sensible relationship management” (Head of Sustainable Development, Social Enterprise, Community Services).

12.5.2 Reality Checks

As explained in Chapter Six, the organisations sampled for this study were selected on a “best practice” basis, and this is reflected in the largely positive tone of the data presentation chapters; many of the public utterances analysed and individuals interviewed offered considered visions of how business organisations can support sustainable development. However, even with this best practice sample, there were still occasions of Promethean denial and faith in the “invisible hand”. It is suggested that, given the exigencies of sustainability, and the “painfully slow” progress of society towards it (Sustainable Development Commission, 2011; Jackson, 2009), for many individuals and organisations it is time for some reality checks.

Looking first at corporate reporting, the close reading revealed a tendency to use “sustainability” as an indiscriminate pronoun, preceding, say, “achievements”, or “strategy”, or “vision”. More specific and indeed more accurate might be to speak of “sustainability-related” issues, or for example, achievements “related to social and environmental issues”. Liberal use of “sustainability” and “sustainable” contributes to its “capture”, thereby reducing the concept, in

the eyes of both the readers and writers of the report, to a simple, manageable issue and implicitly avoiding conflict or tension (Tregidga and Milne, 2006). Instead, organisations could consider the following approaches/phrasing:

“[We] conduct our business in a manner which reflects the principles of stewardship and environmental sustainability” (Shared Interest, 2009:81)

“We believe in encouraging behaviour and building both physical and social structures that lead to a sustainable lifestyle with a positive environmental impact and that use only our fair share of the planet’s resources” (Ethical Property Company, 2009:1)

Similar cautions apply to the use of the “journey” and “building” metaphors by many organisations. Alternative possibilities here are to acknowledge that “change on this scale requires a fundamental transformation, not incremental improvement” (BT, 2010:6), or that “we firmly believe business as usual is no longer a credible, long-term option...we need to change finance more fundamentally” (Triodos Bank, 2009:11).

Another popular but problematic metaphor, particularly for aspiring “triple bottom line” organisations, is that of “balancing”. It is suggested that organisations need to be aware of the limitations of this metaphor and avoid relying on it as the sole basis of their approach to sustainable development. Individuals are advised to think about what is actually being balanced and whether or not it is appropriate to place minimum/maximum limits on one or more of the three bottom lines. For example, in order for the organisation to remain in business, the financial bottom line must be maintained at a certain level. The work of Sundin et al (2010) may be helpful here, and Henriques and Richardson (2004) offer very useful insight, from a variety of perspectives, on the triple bottom line. In terms of remaining in business, entrepreneurs may be interested in the work of Holt (2011), which offers some insight into why some “ecopreneurs” succeed where others fail, while the work of Borschee (2006) could be helpful for social entrepreneurs struggling with financial stability.

Related to the triple bottom line is the “win-win” ethos of the business case. A key message throughout this thesis has been the inevitability of trade-offs and “painful choices” (UNWCED,

1987). However, while a small number of interviewees acknowledged “win-lose” situations, most remained convinced of the business case. It is suggested that it may perhaps be helpful for those individuals who are personally aware of the exigencies of sustainability and privately sceptical of win-win solutions to bring some of that pessimism to their role as a “businessman”. Assistance may come from organisations such as Forum for the Future or SustainAbility, or perhaps through engagement with different types of organisations, which may help in introducing new ideas and discourse within the organisation “beyond the business case”. Ultimately, it is imperative for large organisations in particular to change their behaviour substantively, and it is to be hoped that the individuals therein can come to acknowledge this.

12.6 Limitations of the Study

The purpose of this section is to identify elements of the research study which may have been inadequate or inappropriate, and to consider how, if repeating the process, the study could be improved upon.

12.6.1 The Research Topic

In the first instance, it is noted that any “knowledge” generated by the study was limited by the broad nature of the research topic. The ultimate objective of the research was to explore if and how business organisations could support sustainable development, a sizeable task for a PhD thesis. This breadth meant that the depth of analysis was inevitably restricted, and the literature review and empirical analysis was not as detailed as would have been ideal.

If more time had been available, the study could have been enhanced in a number of ways. For example, it may have been useful to conduct case studies of some of the organisations sampled, such as those completed by Young and Tilley (2006) or Kearins et al (2010). This would likely have offered further insight into the barriers to “sustainable enterprise”. Another option would have been to interview individuals outside of business organisations, such as people working in government, NGOs or sustainability-focused business consultancies, along the lines of the work done by Dresner (2008). Finally, it may have been useful to expand the geographical range of the

study, and perhaps look at business organisations operating under different political and regulatory conditions. This could have provided further insight into the relationship between business and government.

Perhaps most influentially, and as has been discussed already, it is reiterated that this thesis may have looked very different if the hypothesis that the nature of business means that it cannot in its current form support sustainable development had been proposed at the beginning of the study. This would likely have resulted in “interesting” interview questions, and potentially stimulating conclusions.

A final note is that the study may perhaps have benefitted from more engagement with research on ecological sustainability (as Whiteman et al, 2013, suggest). While the related exigencies have been touched on, the focus of this study has been a human one. In particular, the notion of “human organisations” is wilfully anthropocentric. More thorough engagement with the ideas of “weak” and “strong” sustainability (Turner, 1993), in terms of bringing them through to the menu for example, may have counteracted this. In addition, the study focuses only on the developed world, thus excluding many potential “alternative” narratives of sustainability (Banarjee, 2003).

12.6.2 Sample Size and Composition

Choosing the sample for this study was a complicated process (see Chapter Six), and there are a number of issues with the final selection. The sample size of 40 chosen for the public utterances analysis was a compromise: a larger sample would have been more appropriate for the content analysis and a smaller one for the close reading. The related limitations are exposed in the results of the analysis. In the case of the content analysis, the small sample size meant that the results were not tested for statistical significance, and also that conclusions could not be reached as to the impact of organisation type. For the close reading, the relatively large sample size, combined with time constraints, meant that a longitudinal analysis of public utterances, as conducted for example by Tregidga and Milne (2006), could not be completed.

The composition of the sample is also an issue. The population was dominated by PLCs, and the sample for both the public utterance analysis and the interviews was skewed towards these organisations. Furthermore, the sample is not representative of the population i.e. “best practice” organisations, as selection was based on the information available, largely from the internet. It is likely that there are countless “best practice” organisations which were not included in the sample simply because they did not come up in internet searches. Finally, it is not claimed that the views of the interviewees represent those of all individuals in business organisations; they and the analysis thereof are specific to those individuals and the conversations had with them. Therefore, no claims are made that the sample is representative and the findings generalisable.

12.7 Concluding Remarks

Looking back on this thesis, it reflects something of a “journey”: from determined pragmatism to inevitable critique. The conclusion reached above, that “business” in its’ current form cannot support sustainable commercial activity, is in many ways a reluctant one. In fact, much was done to avoid confronting this possibility. As Chapter One illustrates, the focus of the study was firmly on practical issues, on barriers and options and what *must* happen.

However, as the insights from the literature review and the empirical investigation gradually came together, the contention that business *could* come to support sustainable development began to unravel. Frustration with the pervasive win-win business case narrative of much of the literature was exacerbated by the misappropriation of language identified in the public utterances analysis, and the denial of the existence of “trade-offs” by some of the interviewees. Conversations with individuals in small, sustainability-focused organisations supported suggestions in the existing literature that the “world economic order” is profoundly unsustainable. Combining these findings with the insights of the more radical literature led, as this chapter has discussed, to the eventual conclusion that some essential elements of “business” e.g. competition, growth, its obligations to the whims of its owners, make it fundamentally incompatible with sustainable development.

The role of this study, however, has not been solely to castigate “business” and the “system”; it is not an exclusively critical exercise. In developing the “menu” and exploring the possibilities

offered by “different types” of organisations, a tentative picture has emerged of what some of the elements of “sustainable”, or “less unsustainable”, commercial activity might look like in some approximation of a “sustainable” future. It may be that such activity could be undertaken by “human organisations” designed for collaboration, compromise and transparency, and with a purpose beyond the financial gratification of a particular group of people.

Finally, one striking feature of the interviews conducted was the contradiction between many individuals’ optimistic views of their organisation’s contribution to sustainable development, and their pessimistic personal predictions for the future of humanity. There was little room for doubt in their professional role. Consider this observation for a moment in the context of the literature on business and sustainability. This study has engaged with both the more critical and managerialist literature and, while not suggesting that both are characterised by optimism, one element they do often have in common is a sense of certainty, a conviction that the point of view expressed is expressly the “correct” one. Again, doubt rarely plays a role. Perhaps a sense of reflexivity, a willingness to let go of certainty and to accept “doubt”, is key to developing a research agenda with the potential to transform the nature of business.

The case for doubt is more elegantly put by Beck (1994). Discussing reflexive modernisation and ecological crisis, he argues that the “ambivalence forced upon us by the civilisation of threat” means that conventional, positivistic approaches of scientific enquiry are inappropriate; what is required is a different “rationality of science”. To this end, Beck suggests the cultivation of “doubt”:

“Doubt, for instance, which not only serves science but now, applied reflexively, disrupts and destroys the latter’s false and fragile clarities and pseudo-certainties, could become the standard for a new modernity which starts from the principles of precaution and reversibility. Contrary to a widespread mistake, doubt makes everything – science, knowledge, criticism or morality – possible once again, only different, a couple of sizes smaller, more tentative, personal, colourful and open to social learning” (Beck, 1994:33)

Consider these comments in the context of this thesis, which has ultimately come to a conclusion which precipitates a rather daunting research agenda: we are asked to consider how the nature of

business may be transformed, and confront the possibility that such a transformation may be out of our reach. However, if we can take this knowledge and move forward with a sense of reflexivity, of doubt, as Beck suggests, this “makes everything possible once again”. Some elements of the “human organisations” featured in this study offer a little hope that perhaps in the future, commercial activity can be “different, a couple of sizes smaller, more tentative...” Perhaps eventually it can be “sustainable”.

Appendices

APPENDIX A – Decision Rules

Categories and sub-categories	Model	Researcher interpretation	Decision rules
Natural resources			
Ensure that all mined materials are used efficiently within cyclic systems and systematically reduce dependence on fossil fuels - use renewable resources instead.	FFF	Aim to use more and more renewable energy and less and less fossil fuels every year	Reference to renewable energy/clean energy/alternative energy, particularly combined with "increasing" Reducing reliance on fossil fuels Reducing overall energy use
Using infrastructure, technologies and processes in a way that uses resources most efficiently.	FFF	Eco-efficiency	"Eco-efficiency", "energy efficiency" Reducing resource consumption per unit
Substitute naturally scarce materials with those that are more abundant.	FFF	Using renewable instead of non-renewable materials	Reference to using renewable materials "Sustainable sources" "Scarce" materials
Use natural resources no faster than either (1) rates of renewal, (2) rates of recycling, or (3) rates at which ecosystems' regenerative capacities will not have been exceeded by the time technological change and conversion to sustainable resources has occurred	S&R	Use natural resources no faster than at a rate which they can be renewed, recycled or regenerated	Recycling and reusing resources i.e. water, material Reference to limiting resource use to rates of renewal Reference to ecosystem regeneration capacity
Design and utilize mechanisms that sense, accurately interpret, and promote corrective action upon negative/pro-sustainability feedback from nature.	S&R	Respond appropriately to both positive ecological feedback i.e. reappearance of species, improvements in worker health because of removal of pollutants; and negative feedback, i.e. quality of process water, disappearance of animal and plant species, and increases in workplace illnesses	Species "conservation" Reducing deforestation and pollution Reference to changes made in response to ecological feedback
Carrying capacity limits - approaching	Glad	The ecosystem is finite and limits, such as food production, are already being approached	Reference to natural "limits" Ecosystem or resources as "limited" "Finite", "scarce resources", "shortage" Reference to the potential impact of climate change

Human vs. natural capital - partial substitutes	Glad	Critical natural capital is non substitutable i.e. ozone layer, biodiversity; but less critical natural capital can be converted into man-made capital with equivalent welfare generating capacity	"Critical natural capital" Reference to substitution of natural capital with human capital
Natural capital - conserve/maintain	Glad	Critical natural capital should remain intact and be conserved	"Preservation", "conservation" of resources "Biodiversity" Reference to maintenance of (critical) natural capital Reference to the importance/value of natural resources
Eco-effectiveness - ultimately requires industry to reinvent itself so that the new ways of doing business result in regenerative, not depletive practices	Y&T	Reducing natural resource use and waste production in total, along with eco-efficiency; cradle to cradle manufacturing and industrial ecology	Reference to reducing net resource use and waste production "Cradle to cradle" Decoupling
Environmental stability - The positive forces being exerted on the environment to stabilize and where necessary restore the various ecosystem functions, e.g. climate change	Y&T	Taking measures to stop climate change; restoring damaged ecosystems	Reference to taking measures to address climate change Reclaiming, restoring, remediating land
Supply chain			
Source materials ethically and treat suppliers, customers and citizens fairly.	FFF	Use ethical suppliers, support suppliers	Mention of ethical sourcing/purchasing/screening policy Supplier audits Support of FairTrade Ethical training/info for suppliers
Honour relationships with suppliers	FFF	Pay suppliers on time; be loyal to suppliers	Mention of treating suppliers fairly Supplier relationships Paying suppliers on time
Technology			
Improvement in product systems (eco-efficiency and eco-innovation)	FFF	Eco-innovation; designing more eco-friendly production systems	"Eco-innovation", "innovative new [eco]technology" Making products or processes more eco-friendly

Faith in technology - skepticism	Glad	Not antitechnology, but not uncritical of it; as opposed to technocentric faith in the role of science in environmental management; new technology should be subject to stringent assessment	Any negative comments about technology
Technological pathways - benign/decoupled	Glad	Technology should be just and humane, on an appropriate scale; still playing a role but carefully managed, not taking over	Reference to technology being only part of the solution/partially effective
Risk			
Severity of problems - consequential	Glad	Problems are grave with severe consequences for inaction	Reference to the importance/significance/gravity /severity of environmental problems "Severe consequences"
Urgency of solutions - great/decades	Glad	Solutions are urgent and problems must be acted on quickly	"Urgent", "pressing" solutions Need to act quickly
Risk orientation - precaution	Glad	The precautionary principle should be adopted to avoid irreversible damage	"Precautionary"/"precaution"/"irreversible" Reference to minimising risks e.g. of climate change
Management			
Modular manufacturing systems.	FFF	Reuse machinery; less complex manufacturing systems; standardised methods and machinery	Reusing machinery Simpler manufacturing systems Standardising methods and machinery
Reverse logistics and re-use and re-manufacturing systems	FFF	Re-use waste or by-products	"By-products", "re-use" Closed-loop manufacturing Anaerobic digestion
Industrial ecology - looking at synergistic production systems where one organisation's waste streams are another's resources	FFF	Industrial ecology - looking at synergistic production systems where one organisation's waste streams are another's resources	Industrial ecology arrangements
Biomimicry - mimicking nature and natural processes in industrial processes and industrial systems design	FFF	Biomimicry - mimicking nature and natural processes in industrial processes and industrial systems design	"Biomimicry", "natural models" Reference to biomimical technology
Sustainable construction techniques when looking at new infrastructures or offices	FFF	Considering sustainability when building	Reference to sustainability-related specifications of buildings i.e. energy efficiency, BREEAM rating, environmental design "Sustainable construction"

Ensure financial measures reflect the value of other capitals.	FFF	Use metrics to value human and natural capital; consider the real cost of things	Any references to valuing or costs of natural/human/social resources
Internalise environmental and social costs and assigning an economic value to them.	FFF	Do not externalise environmental and social costs; recognise their cost and attempt to value it	Reference to environmental and social costs Life-cycle analysis, balanced scorecard
Effective management of risk and corporate governance issues.	FFF	Risk management policies; effective corporate governance	Risk management policy Reference to corporate governance (sustainability-related or otherwise) Reference to Combined Code
Promote the value of environmental protection and sustainable organizational performance, instill norms for environmental sensitivity in all decisions, and develop role-specific expectations for environmental performance.	S&R	Developing sustainability norms and values throughout the organisations	"Integrating", "embedding" sustainability Reference to engaging employees with sustainability issues
Consider all of their principles, policies, and practices from the standpoint of long-term ecosystem viability and vitality and will develop and implement strategies so that they act in ecologically sustainable ways.	S&R	Developing environmentally oriented missions and objectives and ecologically sensitive strategies, develop more complex organizational objectives and strategies for reducing population and consumption	Reference to environmental missions and strategies Mention of larger scale strategies to reduce population and consumption
Encourage national and international governmental bodies to adopt national income accounts that incorporate environmental impacts; also, they will develop and institute full-environmental-cost accounting procedures.	S&R	Develop full-environmental-cost accounting procedures	"Full cost accounting", "environmental accounting"
Policy and legal			
Respect and comply with local, national and international law.	FFF	Respect and comply with local, national and international law.	"Compliance" with legislation Reference to obeying laws and regulations
Prompt and full payment of taxes and support of social infrastructure	FFF	Pay taxes, work with local government	Work with government, local authorities Reference to paying taxes
Contribute to open, transparent and fair governance systems	FFF	Anti-corruption; encourage fair governance systems	Policies against corruption, bribery, working with undemocratic governments Policy against political donations

Take political action to promote the adoption of laws and regulations that "raise the floor" of environmental performance.	S&R	Lobbying for pro-sustainability legislation	Reference to efforts to promote sustainability-related legislation "Lobbying"
Promote market-based governmental environmental-policy approaches over traditional command-and-control approaches.	S&R	Promoting carbon trading permits and emission taxes	"Carbon trading", "cap and trade", "carbon pricing" Reference to the benefits of open markets and competitiveness
Encourage national and international governmental bodies to adopt national income accounts that incorporate environmental impacts; also, they will develop and institute full-environmental-cost accounting procedures.	S&R	Encourage governments to include environmental costs in national income accounts	Any mention of national income accounts
Work to move peak organizations to support pro-sustainability governmental policies.	S&R	Encourage industry bodies to lobby for pro-sustainability policies	Reference to working with industry/national/global bodies on sustainability
Work to remove anti-sustainability subsidies, and/or to institute pro-sustainability subsidies.	S&R	Lobby for pro-sustainability subsidies and for the abolition of anti-sustainability subsidies	Any mention of lobbying government to introduce pro-sustainability subsidies i.e. renewable energy subsidies
Economic structure - green economy	Glad	As opposed to the free market, ecological and social externalities must be internalised and policy instruments are required to temper market control of resource use and the provision of basic human needs; taxation and other public policies should favour labour intensity over capital intensity and promote income and saving as oppose to energy/matter throughput	Negative comments about the free market Any reference to radical changes to economic system
Product and customers			
Minimisation of the negative social impacts of products and services [or maximisation of the positive]	FFF	Minimisation of the negative social impacts of products and services [or maximisation of the positive]	Reference to the social benefits of products "Product stewardship"
Product to service shifts, for example leasing products on a continual service contract rather than a sell and forget approach.	FFF	Making products into services if possible; shifting to a service economy instead of a goods-based one	"Dematerialisation" Any reference to product to service shifts
Research and development and administrative processes in ESOs will facilitate the development	S&R	Develop more sustainable products/services which can be sustainably disposed of/recycled	Reference to R&D of more sustainable products/services

and/or redesign of goods and services that will have sustainable use and disposal/recycling characteristics.			Sustainability-related product innovations i.e. recycled packaging, eco-labeling
Adopt marketing and procurement policies emphasizing sustainable products, in part to create and enlarge markets for such products.	S&R	Try to increase the market for sustainable products	Reference to promotion of more sustainable products
Sufficiency - rather than fuelling the demand for more unsustainable products, firms might try to channel demand towards the less problematic areas	Y&T	Promoting sustainable consumerism	Reference to "sustainable consumerism" Negative comments on consumerism Any reference to producing and selling less Any mention of "sufficiency" in relation to products/services
Treat customers fairly.	FFF	Customer refund policies; procedures for recalling damaged products etc	"Treat customers fairly" Mention of responsible marketing Reference to customer feedback and management of customer complaints
Honour relationships with suppliers and customers/citizens	FFF	Give customers value for money	Reference to "customer satisfaction", "product quality", customer relationships Mention giving customers value for money
Profits and growth			
Demonstrate a positive stance on, and management of, sustainability issues to improve access to financial capital	FFF	Recognise the value of sustainability policies in attracting investors	Reference to the positive impact of sustainability on shareholder returns Reference to a link between sustainability and business success
Ensure the wealth created is fairly distributed	FFF	Explain where the profits go i.e. back into the business, dividend, taxes, charity	Reference to distribution of profits
Growth pattern - logistic	Glad	Growth patterns must be logistic; as opposed to technocentric view that growth is good and more growth is better	Making "sufficient", "fair", "reasonable", "optimal" returns Reference to long-term growth combined with "steady", "slow" or "stable"
Role of growth - mixed/modify	Glad	Growth cannot go on forever; it is necessary in developing countries	Any reference to limiting growth of the business or remaining small

		but growth must be reduced in developed countries	Any negative comments in relation to economic or business growth
Economic equity - distribution of economic wealth fairly between existing generations as well as future generations	Y&T	Fair distribution of economic wealth	Any reference to wealth redistribution Mention of creating wealth in developing countries instead of developed ones Any mention of economic wealth in future generations
Waste			
Eliminate the accumulation of manmade substances and products in nature - substitute all persistent and unnatural compounds with substances that can be easily assimilated and broken down by natural systems	FFF	Do not use polluting chemicals; use biodegradable materials	Avoiding the use of polluting chemicals i.e. HFCs, pesticides Use of non-toxic materials
Eliminate waste, reuse or recycle where possible	FFF	Reuse and recycle as much as possible	Reference to reducing, reusing and/or recycling waste
Zero waste and zero-emissions production systems	FFF	Aim to produce zero waste and emissions, rather than just minimising	"Zero waste", "zero-carbon", "100%" recycling Mention of "carbon neutral"
Generate outputs in forms and amounts that are assimilable and either useful or ecologically neutral.	S&R	Limit waste and make it non-toxic	Any reference to reducing emissions and/or carbon footprint
Society			
Respect human rights throughout its operations and geographical regions.	FFF	Respect human rights throughout its operations and geographical regions.	"Human rights" Reference to equality, fairness, justice Reference to respecting people
Understand and respect human values and their different cultural contexts.	FFF	Work with indigenous people; employee diversity	"Diversity", "inclusion" Reference to work with vulnerable/marginalised/excluded people, disadvantaged areas Mention of cultural contexts/differences
Use health promotion and education to support a high standard of health.	FFF	Use health promotion and education to support a high standard of health.	Reference to health-related initiatives

Assess the wider economic impacts of the organisation's activities, products and services on society e.g. in creating wealth in the communities in which the organisation operates	FFF	Economic impact on society	Reference to economic impact on/benefits to society
Attempt to affect social-cultural elements in order to increase the strength of pro-sustainability values.	S&R	Encourage people to prefer sustainable products; educate people on sustainability	Any reference to educating people on sustainability or raising awareness of sustainability
Become involved with educational institutions in activities designed to increase "environmental literacy."	S&R	Work with universities and schools on sustainability	Reference to working with schools/universities on sustainability
Seek out and disseminate information from stakeholders with diverse cultural backgrounds.	S&R	Take the views of stakeholders everywhere into account i.e. in both developed and developing countries	"Stakeholder engagement" Reference to communication with stakeholder groups i.e. customers, communities, employees
Ethical grounding - broad homocentric	Glad	Ethics are broadly homocentric, grounded in the good of both human and nonhuman nature	Any reference to the good of human/nonhuman nature
Logic/reason - vision/network	Glad	Considering intragenerational equity; reasoning considers needs of others as opposed to the self; logic is visionary as opposed to instrumental and linear	Reference to putting the needs of others over self People working together for common good
Population size - stabilise soon	Glad	Population size must be stabilised through the participation and equity of women in development	Reference to women in developing countries Any mention of population size
Primary objective - quality of life	Glad	The economic system is underpinned by the ecological one; humans appreciate the life support value of this and aim to maximise quality of life rather than efficient allocation of resources	Any reference to valuing quality of life/people/nature over money "Quality of life"
The good life - postmaterialism	Glad	Preoccupation with materialism is reduced and humans appreciate the value of nonmaterial needs	Any negative comments about materialism and/or positive comments about non-materialism
Human nature - homo sapient	Glad	Humans appreciate the full value of nature and other people, not just the economic value	Any reference to the value of people/nature which is not associated with economic value
Poverty alleviation - equal opportunity	Glad	Poverty alleviation should be achieved through both providing basic health and social services to the poor i.e. nutrition, education and through promoting the	Any reference to empowering the poor Encouraging enterprise in poor areas i.e. microfinance, Fairtrade

		productive use of labour; as opposed to the technocentric belief that growth will trickle down and benefit the poor without any sacrifices required by the rich	
Trade orientation - national	Glad	As opposed to global economic integration, uncontrolled capital mobility, which may lower workers remuneration and environmental health and safety standards, is to be avoided; international commerce must not lead to economic, ecological or social inequities	Any reference to supporting local trade
Political structure - devolved	Glad	International trade must be carefully regulated and local development encouraged in developing countries; as opposed to the technocentric view that globalisation and the free market maximise welfare; but not going as far as the ecocentric view that development is best achieved in a decentralised, bioregional manner	Any negative comments about international trade and globalisation "Decentralise"
Socio-efficiency - continuing commitment by business to behave ethically and contribute to economic development while improving the quality of life of the workforce and their families as well as of the local community and society at large	Y&T	Practicing CSR	"Social responsibility" Any reference to charitable donations, philanthropy Mention of CSR
Socio-effectiveness - organisations having a social mission, which have a sustained positive impact on society	Y&T	Having a social mission	Declaration of a social purpose or mission
Ecological equity	Y&T	Eco-justice; the rights of people to environmental resources	"Environmental justice", "eco-justice" Any reference to equity and environmental resources Mention of the impact of environmental issues on developing countries
Social responsibility - where companies and individuals take responsibility and are accountable for direct and indirect, negative and positive impacts on existing generations	Y&T	Taking responsibility and being accountable for its impacts on society	"Accountability", "transparency" Any reference to doing business responsibly

Community			
Support the development of the community in which the organisation operates (including economic opportunities)	FFF	Support the development of the community in which the organisation operates (including economic opportunities)	Any reference to support of local communities
Employees			
Give employees (and where possible other stakeholders) access to training, development and life long learning and capture and sharing knowledge.	FFF	Employee training and development	Reference to employee training and development
Ensure adequate health and safety arrangements, incorporating physical and mental wellbeing	FFF	Employee health and safety	Reference to employee health and safety
Provide a reasonable living wage and fair remuneration for employees and business partners.	FFF	Provide a reasonable living wage and fair remuneration for employees and business partners.	Reference to above average/minimum wages Mention of employee benefits "Fair" wage/remuneration
Create opportunities for varied and satisfying work	FFF	Employee development and promotional structures	"Employee satisfaction" Reference to personal development of employees
Allow for and enhance recreation time and support individual's active involvement in society	FFF	Encourage employee volunteering and other similar initiatives	Any reference to employee volunteering
Provide safe, supportive living and working conditions, including family friendly policies.	FFF	Employee health and safety; feedback mechanisms, flexitime etc	Mention of employee diversity/equality policies Flexitime, whistleblowing, dignity at work policies Supportive facilities i.e. recreational
Effective communication systems throughout the organisation, reflecting shared values and objectives	FFF	Employee feedback; communicating values to employees	Mention of employee surveys, feedback, communication
Include ecological sustainability considerations and criteria in job design, recruitment and selection, and training and development systems.	S&R	Consider sustainability in employee job design, recruitment and training	Sustainability-related training for employees Considering sustainability when recruiting Sustainability-related criteria in job descriptions
Design their budgeting and reward systems, communication systems,	S&R	Empower employees to be ecologically innovative	Sustainability-related incentive schemes

organizational structures, and decision-making systems in order to empower individuals to engage in sustainability-oriented innovation.			Appoint sustainability "champions"
Characterized by numerous cultural artifacts such as slogans, symbols, rituals and stories which serve to articulate and reinforce for their members the importance of ecologically sustainable performance.	S&R	Embed sustainability policies throughout the organisation through communication in different ways	Reference to communicating sustainability policy to employees Raising awareness in the organisation through slogans, meetings etc
Increase attention to the overall "spiritual well-being" of their members and will include attention to environmental stewardship as part of this effort.	S&R	Encourage employees' spiritually-based values i.e. respect for nature and society	Any reference to encouraging employees to respect nature and society Any reference to spiritual values of employees
Future generations			
Time/space scales - multiscale	Glad	Intergenerational moral obligation not to reduce the liberties, opportunities or welfare-generating potentials available to future generations below the present level	Reference to people in the future or future generations
Discount rate - low/complement	Glad	The maximisation of present value should be subject to a constraint that future generations are not made worse off; the view is taken that productivity may not increase as natural resources may become scarcer; therefore low discount rates are more appropriate	Any reference to low discount rates
Inter-generational equity - economic welfare of future generations being taken into account in company decisions and operations	Y&T	Considering the impact of company actions on the economic welfare of future generations	Any reference to the economic status of future generations
Futurity - social well-being of future generations being taken into account in company decisions and operations	Y&T	Considering the impact of company actions on the social well-being of future generations	Any reference to the social well-being of future generations
Nature			
Metaphor of earth - life support system	Glad	Humans need the earth for survival and welfare	Nature/ecosystem as "life-support" Any reference to humans/organisations needing the earth

Perception of earth - home/managed	Glad	The earth is humanity's home and must be properly managed to be kept clean and healthy	Any reference to the earth as "home"
System composition - parts and wholes	Glad	Humanity is neither separate from the earth nor entirely part of it; there are no wholes and parts, they are nested	Reference to a "holistic" or "connected" system
System structure - holoarchial	Glad	The whole/parts communicate in both an upward and a downward way; there are feedback mechanisms working both ways	Any reference to feedback from nature
Humans and nature - interdependence	Glad	Human activities are inextricably linked with nature	Mention of "interdependence", "dependence" on nature Reference to links between humans and nature
Human role - stewardship	Glad	Humans are the stewards of nature, but not the masters of it	"Stewardship", "stewards" of nature
Value of nature - inherentism	Glad	Humans appreciate the inherent value of nature and other species	Any reference to the inherent value of nature, other species
Resilience of nature - varied/fragile	Glad	Natural systems have a varying and limited ability to absorb human-caused disruptions	Nature or natural resources as "vulnerable", "precious", "fragile" Negative comment about the resilience of nature
Use renewable resources only from well-managed and restorative ecosystems	FFF	Maintain and conserve the ecosystem you're working in; do not damage it irreparably	Any reference to protecting the ecosystem Reference to not operating in protected areas, areas with high biodiversity Reference to avoiding irreparable damage
Environmental sustainability - The long-term sustainability of the environment being taken into account in company decisions and operations	Y&T	Considering long-term consequences to environment of company actions	Reference to environment in combination with the future/future generations
Other organisations			
Initiate and be involved in numerous environmental partnerships of different forms, which will involve different issues and various external stakeholder organizations.	S&R	Partner with the environmental efforts of other organisations, governments and NGOs	Any reference to partnerships with various sustainability orientated bodies, NGOs, governments
Be the target of few, if any, protests by environmental activists.	S&R	Be the target of few, if any, protests by environmental activists.	Any mention of not being targeted by environmental activists

Frequently utilize conflict-resolution practices regarding the natural environment.	S&R	Resolve any conflicts over the environment with NGOs and other organisations	Mention of working with stakeholders to resolve any environmental conflicts
Devote extensive administrative resources to developing and implementing sustainability strategies involving interorganizational cooperation.	S&R	Develop networks for sustainability information exchange between actors including other organisations and government	Mention of encouraging organisations, governments to work together on sustainability
Attempt to create sustainability-oriented self-regulatory programs within their respective peak organizations.	S&R	Work with industry bodies to develop sustainability-orientated self-regulatory programs	Any reference to working with other organisations to develop sustainability-related self-regulatory mechanisms i.e. accountability guidelines, product standards
Participate in peak organizations designed to encourage and assist other organizations to simultaneously adopt sustainability-oriented actions and achieve economic success.	S&R	Work with organisations promoting the business case for sustainability	Working with organisations such as WBCSD, BITC, GRI

Appendix B: Interview Guidelines

Interview Guidelines

Interview (open) questions

1. What do you understand by sustainable development and the role of your organisation therein?
2. What do you see as the barriers faced by your organisation in its path towards sustainable development?
3. How do you see your organisation's involvement in sustainable development progressing in the future?
4. What would be the single biggest change you would like to see that would have the greatest impact on your ability to drive further towards sustainable development?

Appendix C – Detailed Interview Guide

[Approaches – Barriers – Future directions]

Introduction

Good morning and thank you very much for agreeing to participate in the research.

Thank you for returning the consent form and can you confirm that you are happy for me to record the interview?

Before we begin, do you have any questions I can help you with?

If you have any questions at all during the interview, please stop me at any stage.

Brief explanation of research

What we're looking to get at is: what role can business organisations play in sustainable development. So we want to find out:

What you think [*ORGANISATION NAME*]’s role is in sustainable development

The possible limits to that role – any barriers that you think might be stopping you from doing more to contribute to sustainable development. And how you might get around those barriers.

And finally, where you see [*ORGANISATION NAME*]’s involvement in sustainable development going in the future

I hope that makes sense and you feel comfortable with it?

1. If we can start with the first general topic, what do you understand by sustainable development and the role [ORGANISATION NAME] can play?

What do you think it means to be a ‘sustainable organisation’? Do you think [ORGANISATION NAME] is a sustainable organisation?

Is a sustainable organisation possible at all?

Why is it not possible?

What would need to happen/what would you need to do right now, to make [ORGANISATION NAME] sustainable?

Does sustainability mean the same or different things for every organisation?

Do you think [ORGANISATION NAME] is more or less sustainable than other organisations?

Why/why not?

What do you think is the extent of [ORGANISATION NAME]’s involvement in sustainable development?

And of the role of business organisations in general?

2. The next major topic I want to ask you about is the barriers to [ORGANISATION NAME]’s involvement in sustainability; what do you think are the barriers, if any, to you contributing further to sustainable development?

At the moment would you say that you are at the limits of what you can do to contribute to sustainable development, or do you want to do more?

What is stopping you from doing more?

What do you find challenging?

Do these things come more from inside or outside the organisation?

Do you think that you can influence/change these things or not?

Which ones?

Why/why not?

How do you plan to get around these barriers?

Do you ever come across instances where you have to choose between sustainability and economic considerations?

What happens in these cases?

Do you have any examples?

If this is not an issue for you, why not?

3. The next, and really the last major issue I want to talk about is what you think the future might hold for *[ORGANISATION NAME]*'s involvement in sustainable development? And when it comes to the barriers you've mentioned, how you think you might overcome these in the future?

If the organisation continues to grow, do you think it will have an impact on your approach to sustainability?

What do you think the impact is likely to be?

Do you want to grow as much as you can as fast as you can? Or not?

Do you want to grow on a global or local scale?

Do you think that natural limits to growth might affect the organisation?

To what extent do we need to consider the needs of future generations?

4. Finally, what would be the single biggest change you would like to see that would help *[ORGANISATION NAME]* contribute to a more sustainable future?

What kind of economy would enable you to make a greater contribution?

What kind of government policies/regulations would help?

Do you think technology has a big role to play?

Does anything need to change at all?

Are you confident in what the organisation is doing or are you uncertain about any of it? [i.e. that what you're doing now can contribute to a sustainable future]

Are you optimistic about the future [of the planet/society]?

Closing discussion

Is there anything else you would like to discuss that I haven't asked you about?

Do you have any questions at all?

Further information:

I can provide a debriefing sheet (c. 6-9 months) with preliminary findings

I can provide a written (few weeks) or audio (few days) transcript

I can provide a brief summary of the topics we discussed (few weeks)

I can provide the latest abstract for the study

If these are unsatisfactory, what would you like?

Was there anything you would change about the interview e.g. the questions asked/consent/info forms/guidelines/style of interviewing etc?

If I have any follow-up questions, can I email you?

And if you have any further follow-up questions for me, please feel free to contact me at anytime.

Finally, thank you so much for your time and patience, you have been very helpful and we really appreciate your assistance.

Appendix D – Formal Letter

[First name] [Surname]
[Position in organisation]
[Organisation name]
[Address 1]
[Address 2]
[Address 3]

[Date]

Dear [Title] [Surname],

I would like to request your participation in a research project on the role of business organisations in sustainable development. The aim of the research is to explore how innovative organisations are developing the possibilities of what it might mean to be a sustainable enterprise. The research itself is being undertaken by my doctoral student Aideen O’Dochartaigh.

If you were so kind as to agree to participate, this would ideally take the form of an interview of approximately one hour or less. Please find enclosed an outline of the interview structure.

I would be extremely grateful if you or one of your colleagues could possibly give Aideen an hour of your time on a convenient date over the next few months.

Our particular hope is that we might gain a more detailed and practical insight into the barriers that organisations face in their path towards sustainable development and help us to understand how business organisations can and do get around these apparent barriers. What is needed to help business organisations make the greatest possible contribution to a sustainable future?

We hope to be in contact with you shortly to discuss this request further, or please feel free to contact us at the details below. You contact me on rhg1@st-andrews.ac.uk or Aideen on ao323@st-andrews.ac.uk at any time.

Thank you for your time. We look forward to hearing from you, at your convenience.

Yours sincerely,

Professor R. H. Gray
Director of The Centre for Social and Environmental Accounting Research

Appendix E – Participant Information Sheet

Project Title

The possible role of business organisations in sustainable development: approaches, boundaries and future directions

What is the study about?

We invite you to participate in a research project on the role of business organisations in sustainable development. The aim of the research is to explore how innovative organisations are developing the possibilities of what it might mean to be a sustainable enterprise. We hope to gain detailed and practical insight into the barriers that organisations face in their path towards sustainable development and how business organisations can and do get around these apparent barriers.

This study is being conducted as part of my PhD Thesis in the School of Management.

Do I have to take Part?

This information sheet has been written to help you decide if you would like to take part. It is up to you and you alone whether or not to take part. If you do decide to take part you will be free to withdraw at any time without providing a reason.

What would I be required to do?

You will be asked to participate in a semi-structured interview of approximately one hour or less, with the exact timing at your discretion.

Will my participation be Anonymous and Confidential?

Material gathered during this research will remain anonymous. Extracts from it may be used for future scholarly purposes.

Storage and Destruction of Data Collected

Your data will be stored in an anonymised format on a computer system, or, if applicable, in a locked storage cupboard, for a period of at least 3 years before being destroyed.

What will happen to the results of the research study?

The results will be finalised by 2012 and written up as part of my PhD Thesis

Questions

If you have any questions in relation to any aspect of the study, please do not hesitate to contact Aideen O'Dochartaigh or Prof. R.H. Gray at any time at the contact details below.

Consent and Approval

This research proposal has been scrutinised and been granted Ethical Approval through the University ethical approval process.

What should I do if I have concerns about this study?

A full outline of the procedures governed by the University Teaching and Research Ethical Committee is available at [://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/utrec/complaints/](http://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/utrec/complaints/)

Contact Details

Researcher: Aideen O'Dochartaigh
Contact Details: ao323@st-andrews.ac.uk
+44 (0)75 51596484

Supervisor: Prof. R.H. Gray
Contact Details: rhg1@st-andrews.ac.uk
+44 (0)1334 462799

Appendix F – Participant Consent Form

Project Title

The possible role of business organisations in sustainable development: approaches, boundaries and future directions

Researcher Name

Aideen O'Dochartaigh
ao323@st-andrews.ac.uk
+44 (0)75 51596484

Supervisor's Name

Prof. R.H. Gray
rhg1@st-andrews.ac.uk
+44 (0)1334 462799

The University of St Andrews attaches high priority to the ethical conduct of research. We therefore ask you to consider the following points before signing this form. Your signature confirms that you are happy to participate in the study.

Consent

The purpose of this form is to ensure that you are willing to take part in this study and to let you understand what it entails. Signing this form does not commit you to anything you do not wish to do and you are free to withdraw at any stage.

Material gathered during this research will remain anonymous. Extracts from it may be used for future scholarly purposes.

Material gathered will be retained and securely stored in an anonymised format on a computer system, or, if applicable, in a locked storage cupboard for a period of at least 3 years before being destroyed.

Please answer each statement concerning the collection and use of the research data.

- | | | |
|---|------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| I have read and understood the information sheet. | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> No |
| I have been given the opportunity to ask questions about the study. | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> No |
| I have had my questions answered satisfactorily. | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> No |
| I understand that I can withdraw from the study at any time without having to give an explanation. | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> No |
| I understand that material gathered during this research will remain anonymous. | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> No |
| I wish to remain anonymous in any subsequent publications or use of the material from this interview. | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> No |
| I wish my role within the organisation to remain anonymous in any subsequent publications or use of the material from this interview. | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> No |
| I wish the organisation to remain anonymous in any subsequent publications or use of the material from this interview. | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> No |
| I understand that my data will be stored for a period of 3 years before being destroyed. | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> No |
| I have been made fully aware of the potential risks associated with this research and am satisfied with the information provided. | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> No |
| I agree to take part in the study | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> No |

With your consent, part of my research involves taking tape recordings. These recordings will be kept secure and stored anonymously with no identifying factors i.e. consent forms, for a period of at least 3 years before being destroyed.

- I agree to being tape recorded Yes No
- I agree for tape recorded material to be published as part of this research Yes No
- I agree to the interviewer taking notes during the interview Yes No

Participation in this research is completely voluntary and your consent is required before you can participate in this research. If you decide at a later date that data should be destroyed we will honour your request in writing.

Name in Block Capitals _____

Signature _____

Date _____

Appendix G: Participant Debriefing Form

Project Title

The Possible Role of Business Organisations in Sustainable Development: Approaches, Boundaries and Future Directions

Researcher Name

Aideen O'Dochartaigh
ao323@st-andrews.ac.uk

Supervisor's Name

Prof. R.H. Gray
rhg1@st-andrews.ac.uk
+44 (0)1334 462799

Nature of Project

The purpose of this research project was to explore the possibilities by which business organisations could come to support sustainable development. There was a particular focus on related barriers and how they may be overcome in the future.

Semi-structured elite interviews were conducted with twenty-seven individuals in twenty-seven business organisations in a variety of industries. To obtain a range of perspectives on the sustainable development-business relationship, a number of “different types” of organisation were sampled, in the form of social enterprises, large PLCs, SMEs and co-owned businesses.

The key research findings are outlined in the Appendix overleaf.

Storage of Data

As outlined in the Participant Information Sheet your data will now be retained for a period of 3 years before being destroyed. Your consents regarding the exact usage of the data, as agreed in the Participant Consent Form issued prior to the interview, will be honoured.

What should I do if I have concerns about this study?

A full outline of the procedures governed by the University Teaching and Research Ethical Committee are outlined on their website://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/utrec/complaints/

Contact Details

Researcher: Aideen O'Dochartaigh
Contact Details: ao323@st-andrews.ac.uk

Supervisor: Prof. R.H. Gray
Contact Details: rhg1@st-andrews.ac.uk
+44 (0)1334 462799

Appendix to the Debriefing Form: Key Findings

The research findings suggest that engagement with sustainability in organisations varies widely. In many cases, “sustainability” was considered in a broad sense, incorporating an awareness of the related environmental and social exigencies. For some, it was defined in a relatively narrow sense as the commercial sustainability of the organisation, with the term “sustainability” often used rather indiscriminately. In general, engagement with a broader sense of sustainability was more frequent in the smaller organisations sampled i.e. social enterprises, SMEs, co-operatives.

In relation to barriers preventing organisations from contributing further to sustainable development, a number of key issues were identified:

- Engaging top management and the need to make a “business case” for sustainability
- Short-term, financially-focused shareholder expectations (for PLCs)
- Remaining financially stable (for smaller organisations)
- Government policies
- Many people, within and outside of the organisation, do not understand or care about sustainability

Another frequently cited barrier was that the “system” is currently unsustainable, and that an individual organisation cannot hope to be “sustainable” within an unsustainable system. A number of interviewees also suggested that large business organisations play a significant role in perpetuating this unsustainable system.

Ultimately, these findings suggest that difficult decisions lie ahead for business organisations. Looking to the future, many interviewees spoke of partnership with government and other organisations. A more “sustainable” system based on more collaborative lines, however, will likely require a level of compromise and sacrifice from business organisations. It is suggested that the key to transforming commercial activity along more sustainable lines is to first acknowledge the unsustainability of the current system and, for some organisations, the role they play in maintaining it.

In terms of practical recommendations, it is suggested that smaller enterprises may benefit from forming networks with peers, which may facilitate increased awareness and a more influential lobbying presence. In relation to larger organisations, there is scope for informed individuals to continue their work in transforming attitudes within their organisation. These individuals are urged to recognise that some organisations must change their behaviour substantively if they are to support sustainable development, and to seek to cultivate this awareness among Executives, Boards and, ultimately, investors.

Appendix H: All Codes

Category	Sub-category	Code title	Code description
Understandings			
	Defining sustainability		
		S-D	Sustainable development is difficult to define
		S-W	Term sustainability is used in different ways
		S-CSR	Sustainability and CSR
		S-UKG	Sustainability is UK Gov definition
		S-UK	Sustainability is different in different countries
		S-M	Measuring sustainability is important
		S-LAR	Sustainability should be about large projects, not small ones
	Language		
		S-B	Sustainability is a buzzword
		S-JA	There's a lot of jargon around sustainability
		S-SL	Sustainability needs to be explained to people in simple language
		S-LAN	Language around sustainability is not universal
	Balancing		
		S-TBL	Triple bottom line
		S-BAL	Sustainability is about balancing
		S-HOL	Sustainability should be holistic & embedded
		S-LT	Sustainability is about thinking long-term
		S-SE	Environmental and social issues overlap
	Natural resources		
		S-LG	Sustainability is about staying within resource limits
		S-DEC	Decoupling
		S-FG	Sustainability is about thinking about future generations
	Entity-focused		
		S-O	Sustainability means the sustainability of the organisation

		S-SUST	Sustainability has to be sustainable
		S-FS	Business needs to be financially sustainable to be sustainable
		S-PUB	Need to publicise what the organisation does about sustainability more
		S-PP	Peer pressure to look at sustainability
		S-J	On a journey to sustainability
		S-SBUS	Social enterprises are commercially minded
	Business case		
		S-OP	Sustainability is an opportunity
		S-V	Sustainability adds value
		S-N	Sustainability is necessary to keep the business going
		S-BC	The business case
		S-DIFF	Sustainability as competitive advantage in social enterprises
	Direct impact		
		S-DI	Sustainability is about the direct impact of the business
		S-UP	What profits are used for
	Sustainable organisation		
		S-SO	Sustainable organisation or not
		S-SS	An individual organisation cannot be sustainable
		S-SG	Sustainable growth
		S-EX	Should the organisation exist
		S-NC	Easier to build a new company around sustainability than retrofit an existing one
	Relative role of organisation		
		S-S	Businesses make a positive contribution to society
		S-MM	Organisations don't exist only to make money
		S-SH	Shareholders have a responsibility too
		S-I	Impact of customers is greater than impact of organisation

	Ownership structure		
		S-OWN	Ownership structure is important to sustainability
	Organisational culture		
		S-OC	Organisational culture helps with sustainability
Role			
	Change agent		
		R-M	Organisation is a role model
		R-A	Role of the organisation is to offer a more sustainable alternative
		R-E	Role is educating people about sustainability
		R-C	Connecting people to the business
	Partnership		
		R-OTH	Role is to work with others
		R-L	Limits to what organisation can do
Barriers			
	Individuals in the organisation		
		B-M	Getting buy-in from top management
		B-TM	Top management is key to what gets done on sustainability
		B-EE	Engaging employees
		B-ST	Set stretching targets in company
		B-MBC	Must make the business case to get senior management buy-in
		B-MEA	Measuring sustainability is difficult
		B-E	Education in the organisation
	Size		
		B-S	Being small is a barrier, growth is important
		B-GRO	Danger of growing
		B-LAR	Being a large company
	Finance		

		B-F	Finance as a barrier
		B-RES	Not having enough resources
		B-P	Constrained by profit motive
		S-EXS	Shareholder expectations
		B-TO	Trade-offs or not
	External		
		B-I	Infrastructure as a barrier
		B-CUL	Cultural barriers to sustainable development
		B-G	Impact of government policy
		B-DWC	Must take developing world culture into account
		B-SCA	Scale of change required
		S-L	Attitude to legislating companies in relation to sustainability
		S-FC	Impact of financial crisis
	Industry		
		B-IND	Affected by industry
		B-ISS	Barriers are specific to issues
	No limits		
		B-NO	No limits to what organisation can do
Changes			
	Behaviour change		
		C-BC	Behaviour change is required
		C-E	People need to be educated to change behaviour
		C-FB	People need to see financial benefits to change
		C-POS	Need to be positive about sustainability to encourage people to change
		C-PC	People don't care about sustainability
		C-SC	Sustainable consumption needs to happen
		C-G	Globalisation will make people more aware of sustainability
	Government role		
		C-GOV	Government policies that need to change

		C-GP	Need a big push from government
		C-R	Need more conformity on reporting
		C-AP	Policy decisions should be made apolitically
	Business role		
		C-GLOB	Business is too globalised
		C-BUS	Business needs to do more
		C-BR	Need more regulation of business
		C-CA	There is more corporate accountability now
		C-ACC	Need more accountability
		C-COMP	Competition is important
		C-CE	Solutions need to be cost-effective
		C-MIS	Mistakes are ok
	Collaboration		
		C-C	More collaborative approach to solutions needed
		C-TOG	People getting together will lead to change
	Local		
		C-SW	Hard to imagine a sustainable world but can imagine sustainable small areas
		C-LOC	Changes must happen locally first
	System change		
		C-STEP	A step-change is needed
		C-FUND	Funding mechanisms will need to change
		C-CI	We need to challenge institutions
		C-CM	Sustainability is about change management
		C-GE	Global equity
		R-SS	To think about a sustainable system
		C-PM	Power of the market
	Optimism/Pessimism		
		C-OP	Optimistic or pessimistic for change

Appendix I: Ethics Approval Form

9 February 2011
Aideen O'Dochartaigh
School of Management

Ethics Reference No: <i>Please quote this ref on all correspondence</i>	MN7237
Project Title:	The possible role of business organisations in sustainable development: approaches, boundaries and future directions
Researchers Name(s):	Aideen O'Dochartaigh
Supervisor(s):	Professor Rob Gray

Thank you for submitting your application which was considered by the School of Management's Ethics Committee on Date. The following documents were reviewed:

1. Ethical Application Form 20 January 2011
2. Participant information sheet 20 January 2011
3. Participant consent form 20 January 2011

The University Teaching and Research Ethics Committee (UTREC) approves this study from an ethical point of view. Please note that where approval is given by a School Ethics Committee that committee is part of UTREC and is delegated to act for UTREC.

Approval is given for three years. Projects, which have not commenced within two years of original approval, must be re-submitted to your School Ethics Committee.

You must inform your School Ethics Committee when the research has been completed. If you are unable to complete your research within the 3 three year validation period, you will be required to write to your School Ethics Committee and to UTREC (where approval was given by UTREC) to request an extension or you will need to re-apply.

Any serious adverse events or significant change which occurs in connection with this study and/or which may alter its ethical consideration, must be reported immediately to the School Ethics Committee, and an Ethical Amendment Form submitted where appropriate.

Approval is given on the understanding that the 'Guidelines for Ethical Research Practice' (<http://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/media/UTRECguidelines%20Feb%2008.pdf>) are adhered to.

Yours sincerely

Convenor of the School Ethics Committee
cc Shona Deigman
Rob Gray

Appendix J: The “Other” Category

Chapter Seven focussed primarily on comparing the public utterances of the organisations sampled to the models from the literature, identifying the items which the organisations did and did not address. However, there is another dimension to the content analysis; it allows us to ask the question: if organisations are not talking about sustainability (as represented by the models from the literature) what are they talking about?

With this in mind, and as discussed in Chapter Six, when conducting the content analysis for each organisation, every comment relating to sustainability which did not match to an item in the menu was designated as “Other”. These comments were gathered together in one spreadsheet which was then analysed to identify patterns and themes. The issues which appeared most frequently are discussed below.

Shareholder Value

The concept of “maximising shareholder value” features in the public utterances of several of the organisations sampled, particularly the PLCs. Also popular are phrases such as “sustainable shareholder value” (RBS, 2009:5) and “growing profit” (Co-operative Group, 2009:8). The four models from the literature, on the other hand, do not refer at any point to shareholders or financial returns.

The narratives of sustainability at the organisational level proposed by Gladwin et al (1995), Starik and Rands (1995), Forum for the Future (2005) and Young and Tilley (2006) were chosen because they offered an alternative to the dominant “business case” perspective, which privileges the financial benefits of sustainability. They contrast with the “triple bottom line” approach, wherein the economic bottom line often outweighs the social and environmental (Gray and Milne, 2004). However, in neglecting to acknowledge an organisation’s responsibility to its shareholders (whether this is to “maximise” wealth or not), they perhaps leave themselves open to criticism from authors such as Friedman (1970).

Financial Stability

Related is another issue frequently referred to in the public utterances of the smaller organisations sampled, most often the social enterprises: the difficulty of remaining financially stable. They find it a challenge to remain a “sustainable commercial business” (Cafedirect, 2009:35), to build a “sustainable ethical position in a competitive market” (Good Energy, 2009:9) and to ensure the “sustainability of the organisation’s income” (Unlimited Potential, 2010:17). These financial issues have been noted in much of the existing literature on small, sustainability-oriented organisations (Parrish, 2010; Kearins et al, 2010, Barter and Bebbington, 2010).

A few of the larger organisations also highlight that the “first priority for a company is to ensure that it is financially sustainable” (Royal Bank of Scotland, 2009:4). For example, Unilever refers to the difficulty of “getting an economically sustainable margin” (Unilever, 2009:13) on the products it sells at a low cost in developing countries, and GSK highlights the necessity of “remaining competitive in order to sustain our business” (GlaxoSmithKline, 2009:9). All of this points to a general, not unexpected, tension between sustainability and financial stability.

Role Models

Another regular feature of the public utterances of the smaller, sustainability-orientated organisations was the expression of a desire to “see ourselves as an example for others to follow” (Ethical Property Company, 2009:1). They wish to be “a model that others can learn from” (Triodos Bank, 2009:10), a “pioneering ethical company” (Guardian News and Media, 2010a:3) and an “inspirational” business (Cafedirect).

We have seen that Starik and Rands (1995) suggest that organisations should “attempt to affect social-cultural elements in order to increase the strength of pro-sustainability values” (1995:926), focussing on how organisations can influence individuals. The quotes above suggest that this item could perhaps be extended to include influencing other organisations.

Technocentric Language

Gladwin et al (1995) argued that technocentrism is the dominant paradigm guiding organisations, and its influence was clearly evident in the language used by some of the large PLCs sampled. The oil companies, Shell and BP, sound particularly technocentric in their discussions on fossil fuels:

“Coal is the most abundant and cheapest fossil fuel and is expected to remain a major energy source for decades to come” (Royal Dutch Shell, 2009:25)

“The share of energy derived from renewable sources will certainly increase in the future, and carbon capture technology could be deployed at scale. However, the IEA anticipates fossil fuels still being the dominant source of energy in 2030...” (BP, 2009:2)

Shell’s use of the word “abundant” suggest a technocentric “tough/robust” and “no limits” approach to nature and natural resources, while BP’s dismissal of renewable energy and 2030 prediction is resonant of a “little/wait” approach to the “urgency of problems” (Gladwin et al, 1995). Elsewhere, Tesco’s public utterances show signs of a technocentric “good/necessary” approach to growth; the organisation aims to use its “size as a force for good” (Tesco, 2010:2).

Continuous Improvement

Many of the organisations declare a commitment to “continual environmental improvement” (Unlimited Potential, 2009:111). It is suggested that although “we know we don’t have all the answers” (Marks and Spencer, 2009:42), “every small positive change is a step in the right direction” (Innocent Drinks, 2010b). These words are resonant of the incremental “journey” approach to sustainability highlighted by Milne et al (2006).

Appendix K: Content Analysis Incidence Figures

Natural resources	Model	Total incidence	% incidence
Ensure that all mined materials are used efficiently within cyclic systems and systematically reduce dependence on fossil fuels - use renewable resources instead.	FFF	37	93%
Using infrastructure, technologies and processes in a way that uses resources most efficiently.	FFF	36	90%
Substitute naturally scarce materials with those that are more abundant.	FFF	31	78%
Use natural resources no faster than either (1) rates of renewal, (2) rates of recycling, or (3) rates at which ecosystems' regenerative capacities will not have been exceeded by the time technological change and conversion to sustainable resources has occurred	S&R	37	93%
Design and utilize mechanisms that sense, accurately interpret, and promote corrective action upon negative/pro-sustainability feedback from nature.	S&R	31	78%
Carrying capacity limits - approaching	Glad	23	58%
Human vs. natural capital - partial substitutes	Glad	0	0%
Natural capital - conserve/maintain	Glad	29	73%
Eco-effectiveness - ultimately requires industry to reinvent itself so that the new ways of doing business result in regenerative, not depletive practices	Y&T	30	75%
Environmental stability - The positive forces being exerted on the environment to stabilize and where necessary restore the various ecosystem functions, e.g. climate change	Y&T	38	95%
Supply chain			
Source materials ethically and treat suppliers, customers and citizens fairly.	FFF	38	95%
Honour relationships with supplier and customers/citizens	FFF	28	70%
Technology			
Improvement in product systems (eco-efficiency and eco-innovation)	FFF	34	85%
Faith in technology - skepticism	Glad	9	23%

Technological pathways - benign/decoupled	Glad	7	18%
Risk			
Severity of problems - consequential	Glad	25	63%
Urgency of solutions - great/decades	Glad	16	40%
Risk orientation - precaution	Glad	22	55%
Management			
Modular manufacturing systems.	FFF	4	10%
Reverse logistics and re-use and re-manufacturing systems	FFF	21	53%
Industrial ecology - looking at synergistic production systems where one organisation's waste streams are another's resources	FFF	9	23%
Biomimicry - mimicing nature and natural processes in industrial processes and industrial systems design	FFF	2	5%
Sustainable construction techniques when looking at new infrastructures or offices	FFF	16	40%
Ensure financial measures reflect the value of other capitals.	FFF	16	40%
Internalise environmental and social costs and assigning an economic value to them.	FFF	19	48%
Effective management of risk and corporate governance issues.	FFF	29	73%
Promote the value of environmental protection and sustainable organizational performance, instill norms for environmental sensitivity in all decisions, and develop role-specific expectations for environmental performance.	S&R	30	75%
Consider all of their principles, policies, and practices from the standpoint of long-term ecosystem viability and vitality and will develop and implement strategies so that they act in ecologically sustainable ways.	S&R	15	38%
Encourage national and international governmental bodies to adopt national income accounts that incorporate environmental impacts; also, they will develop and institute full-environmental-cost accounting procedures.	S&R	4	10%
Policy and legal			
Respect and comply with local, national and international law.	FFF	31	78%
Prompt and full payment of taxes and support of social infrastructure	FFF	25	63%

Contribute to open, transparent and fair governance systems	FFF	21	53%
Take political action to promote the adoption of laws and regulations that "raise the floor" of environmental performance.	S&R	32	80%
Promote market-based governmental environmental-policy approaches over traditional command-and-control approaches.	S&R	8	20%
Encourage national and international governmental bodies to adopt national income accounts that incorporate environmental impacts; also, they will develop and institute full-environmental-cost accounting procedures.	S&R	0	0%
Work to move peak organizations to support pro-sustainability governmental policies.	S&R	26	65%
Work to remove anti-sustainability subsidies, and/or to institute pro-sustainability subsidies.	S&R	10	25%
Economic structure - green economy	Glad	11	28%
Product and customers			
Minimisation of the negative social impacts of products and services [or maximisation of the positive]	FFF	39	98%
Product to service shifts, for example leasing products on a continual service contract rather than a sell and forget approach.	FFF	3	8%
Research and development and administrative processes in ESOs will facilitate the development and/or redesign of goods and services that will have sustainable use and disposal/recycling characteristics.	S&R	37	93%
Adopt marketing and procurement policies emphasizing sustainable products, in part to create and enlarge markets for such products.	S&R	24	60%
Sufficiency - rather than fuelling the demand for more unsustainable products, firms might try to channel demand towards the less problematic areas	Y&T	7	18%
Source materials ethically and treat suppliers, customers and citizens fairly.	FFF	33	83%
Honour relationships with supplier and customers/citizens	FFF	35	88%
Profits and growth			
Demonstrate a positive stance on, and management of, sustainability issues to improve access to financial capital	FFF	28	70%
Ensure the wealth created is fairly distributed	FFF	19	48%

Growth pattern - logistic	Glad	19	48%
Role of growth - mixed/modify	Glad	27	68%
Economic equity - distribution of economic wealth fairly between existing generations as well as future generations	Y&T	18	45%
Waste			
Eliminate the accumulation of manmade substances and products in nature - substitute all persistent and unnatural compounds with substances that can be easily assimilated and broken down by natural systems	FFF	28	70%
Eliminate waste, reuse or recycle where possible	FFF	40	100%
Zero waste and zero-emissions production systems	FFF	16	40%
Generate outputs in forms and amounts that are assimilable and either useful or ecologically neutral.	S&R	40	100%
Society			
Respect human rights throughout its operations and geographical regions.	FFF	28	70%
Understand and respect human values and their different cultural contexts.	FFF	38	95%
Use health promotion and education to support a high standard of health.	FFF	24	60%
Assess the wider economic impacts of the organisation's activities, products and services on society e.g. in creating wealth in the communities in which the organisation operates	FFF	33	83%
Attempt to affect social-cultural elements in order to increase the strength of pro-sustainability values.	S&R	39	98%
Become involved with educational institutions in activities designed to increase "environmental literacy."	S&R	29	73%
Seek out and disseminate information from stakeholders with diverse cultural backgrounds.	S&R	37	93%
Ethical grounding - broad homocentric	Glad	18	45%
Logic/reason - vision/network	Glad	26	65%
Population size - stabilise soon	Glad	9	23%
Primary objective - quality of life	Glad	22	55%
The good life - postmaterialism	Glad	7	18%

Human nature - homo sapient	Glad	23	58%
Poverty alleviation - equal opportunity	Glad	23	58%
Trade orientation - national	Glad	25	63%
Political structure - devolved	Glad	10	25%
Socio-efficiency - continuing commitment by business to behave ethically and contribute to economic development while improving the quality of life of the workforce and their families as well as of the local community and society at large	Y&T	34	85%
Socio-effectiveness - organisations having a social mission, which have a sustained positive impact on society	Y&T	30	75%
Ecological equity	Y&T	26	65%
Social responsibility - where companies and individuals take responsibility and are accountable for direct and indirect, negative and positive impacts on existing generations	Y&T	35	88%
Community			
Support the development of the community in which the organisation operates (including economic opportunities)	FFF	40	100%
Employees			
Give employees (and where possible other stakeholders) access to training, development and life long learning and capture and sharing knowledge.	FFF	33	83%
Ensure adequate health and safety arrangements, incorporating physical and mental wellbeing	FFF	25	63%
Provide a reasonable living wage and fair remuneration for employees and business partners.	FFF	17	43%
Create opportunities for varied and satisfying work	FFF	30	75%
Allow for and enhance recreation time and support individual's active involvement in society	FFF	22	55%
Provide safe, supportive living and working conditions, including family friendly policies.	FFF	33	83%
Effective communication systems throughout the organisation, reflecting shared values and objectives	FFF	30	75%

Include ecological sustainability considerations and criteria in job design, recruitment and selection, and training and development systems.	S&R	34	85%
Design their budgeting and reward systems, communication systems, organizational structures, and decision-making systems in order to empower individuals to engage in sustainability-oriented innovation.	S&R	21	53%
Characterized by numerous cultural artifacts such as slogans, symbols, rituals and stories which serve to articulate and reinforce for their members the importance of ecologically sustainable performance.	S&R	31	78%
Increase attention to the overall "spiritual well-being" of their members and will include attention to environmental stewardship as part of this effort.	S&R	2	5%
Future generations			
Time/space scales - multiscale	Glad	37	93%
Discount rate - low/complement	Glad	0	0%
Inter-generational equity - economic welfare of future generations being taken into account in company decisions and operations	Y&T	17	43%
Futurity - social well-being of future generations being taken into account in company decisions and operations	Y&T	21	53%
Nature			
Metaphor of earth - life support system	Glad	13	33%
Perception of earth - home/managed	Glad	0	0%
System composition - parts and wholes	Glad	4	10%
System structure - holoarchial	Glad	2	5%
Humans and nature - interdependence	Glad	17	43%
Human role - stewardship	Glad	8	20%
Value of nature - inherentism	Glad	11	28%
Resilience of nature - varied/fragile	Glad	11	28%
Use renewable resources only from well-managed and restorative ecosystems	FFF	35	88%
Environmental sustainability - The long-term sustainability of the environment being taken into account in company decisions and operations	Y&T	27	68%

Other organisations			
Initiate and be involved in numerous environmental partner-ships of different forms, which will involve different issues and various external stakeholder organizations.	S&R	40	100%
Be the target of few, if any, protests by environmental activists.	S&R	0	0%
Frequently utilize conflict-resolution practices regarding the natural environment.	S&R	14	35%
Devote extensive administrative resources to developing and implementing sustainability strategies involving interorganizational cooperation.	S&R	31	78%
Attempt to create sustainability-oriented self-regulatory programs within their respective peak organizations.	S&R	24	60%
Participate in peak organizations designed to encourage and assist other organizations to simultaneously adopt sustainability-oriented actions and achieve economic success.	S&R	19	48%

Appendix L: Other Barriers

Measuring Sustainability

While not a key theme, a number of interviewees suggested that “the ability to identify and measure sustainable value creation” was a “barrier to greater efforts being made” (Head of Sustainability, PLC, Tobacco). Discussing the business case, one individual stressed the need for “tangible results” to “justify increased investment in certain areas” internally (Head of Sustainability, PLC, Tobacco). He explained that “financial measures” were required to quantify the “intangible benefits” of “sustainability initiatives”, because “that’s what our shareholders would respond to” (Head of Sustainability, PLC, Tobacco).

Another interviewee discussed the difficulty of measuring the “balance” his company endeavoured to maintain between the triple bottom line elements; he explained that “one of the reasons that it’s difficult to measure is there’s not a right or a wrong balance, there’s an appropriate balance for different things that you’re doing and under different conditions” (Policy & Research Director, PLC, Energy). This comment highlights one of the weaknesses of the “balancing” concept; the contention that there is no “right or wrong balance” suggests that unlimited trade-offs are possible between the three elements, meaning that there is no need to recognise, say, finite environmental limits (Barter and Bebbington, 2010).

This interviewee went on to argue that it would be inappropriate to have an “absolute measure” for sustainability “that you can point to and say, right, you’ve ticked all those boxes and that’s it” (Policy & Research Director, PLC, Energy). He suggested that measures can “become an end in their own right, rather than a means to assess progress or to set targets” (Policy & Research Director, PLC, Energy). Another respondent disagreed, however. An Executive from a large PLC explained that they liked to set “stretching” sustainability-related targets, such as the organisation’s ambition to source 100% of materials sustainably by 2020 (Global VP for Sustainability, PLC, Manufacturing). She suggested that “if you look at the way that business people work, they are set business targets...when you set more ambitious targets, people find a way to get there, they’re more inventive” (Global VP for Sustainability, PLC, Manufacturing).

Infrastructure

A number of interviewees cited infrastructure issues as a barrier. It was suggested that, while positive new regulations relating to sustainability have been put in place in the UK, as yet there is insufficient “knowledge and education” to support them (Sustainability Manager, Social Enterprise, Housing). The representative of a social enterprise cited renewable energy technology as an example, pointing out that “we’ve got these great mechanisms coming out of government, but actually there aren’t that many people qualified to install these renewable technologies, or that know enough about them, to make it happen” (Sustainability Manager, Social Enterprise, Housing). The CEO of a building society indicated in similar vein that “the biggest barrier to the degree that we can affect progress of sustainable development” is the lack of infrastructure to support new building codes and energy efficiency regulations, such as monitoring of adherence and training of builders (CEO, Mutual, Financial Services). All of these interviewees agreed that it was government’s, rather than business’ role to “change the infrastructure” (Head of Sustainable Business, PLC, Retail).

For the multinational companies sampled, these issues with infrastructure extended to developing countries. One individual, representing a pharmaceutical company, suggested that there are “endless barriers” relating to infrastructure in developing countries, such as poor drug distribution systems or lack of sufficient healthcare workers (VP for Corporate Responsibility, PLC, Pharmaceuticals). Another, from a large telecommunications PLC, suggested that “fundamental infrastructure” must be put in place in developing countries before “they can focus on these higher level things that are sustainable development type opportunities” (Head of Sustainability, PLC, Telecoms).

Industry

A small number of interviewees suggested that its industry had an impact on their organisation’s approach to sustainable development, and was sometimes a barrier. For example, the representative of a small telecommunications organisation described the industry as a “difficult area”, in terms of making the organisation’s sustainability policies “visible” (Membership and

Co-op Affairs Manager, Co-operative, Telecoms). She remarked that “you can’t go and buy a Fairtrade version of a mobile phone or something like that” (Membership and Co-op Affairs Manager, Co-operative, Telecoms). Another interviewee, from a large energy company, observed that “I can’t think of any other area of industry or commerce... where the conflicts between, and the tensions between the three [TBL elements] are so palpable as they are at the moment in the energy debate” (Policy & Research Director, PLC, Energy).

In contrast, a couple of individuals cited industry as an enabler rather than a constraint. The Head of Sustainability at a large telecommunications company suggested that, in terms of partnering with other organisations, “by virtue of being a communications company... it opens the door more for us than somebody who’s in a production or extraction environment” (Head of Sustainability, PLC, Telecoms.). Another interviewee, from a financial services organisation, noted that “there are some companies in clearly very challenged sectors, where arguably the product itself isn’t sustainable by everybody’s definition. I’m thinking tobacco... banking’s not in that category” (Head of Sustainability, State-owned PLC, Financial Services).

The Financial Crisis

Finally, some respondents suggested that a big problem was “all this being done when there’s considerable short-term economic uncertainty in the world” (Head of Sustainable Business, PLC, Retail). The Head of CSR at a state-owned bank remarked that sustainability was “certainly not on the agenda at the moment” in the organisation, and that “we’ve got a whole world that’s scared of everything that’s going on, so they’re not really paying much attention to anything else” (Head of CSR, State-owned PLC, Financial Services). At a more specific level, an Executive from an FMCG company noted that “consumer interest in products which help to reduce environmental impacts...has gone lower down the hierarchy, versus concerns about how to make ends meet” (Global VP for Sustainability, PLC, Manufacturing).

However, one interviewee suggested that in the long-term, the financial crisis may have a positive impact on sustainable development, if it results in a new, more “soundly-based” model of banking. He noted wryly that “when somebody gets a big fright, they tend to be more careful in the future” (CEO, Private Company, Financial Services).

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