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RESEARCH ARTICLE

## The role of built environment practitioners in driving the socio-economic sustainability aspects of sustainable regeneration

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### ABSTRACT

In the United Kingdom (UK), over the past three decades efforts have been made to ensure adequate promotion of sustainability objectives through various policy initiatives. However, despite the effort and the existence of these policy initiatives, sustainability projects in particular, regeneration projects are yet to deliver their intended sustainability objectives. While there is a rise in demand for higher sustainability benefits by stakeholders such as clients, communities and policy makers, the delivery of sustainability benefits from sustainability regeneration projects are yet to meet the expectations of these stakeholders. This article provides an overview of sustainability benefits within the context of the sustainable regeneration projects in the UK from a study that examines the roles and sustainability drivers of construction practitioners towards the promotion of sustainability on their regeneration projects. To do so, a qualitative research approach is adopted using a semi-structured interview technique for the study. The data obtained was analysed using content analysis. The findings revealed that out of the eight socio-economic sustainability drivers presented to practitioners, enhancement of reputation was the most important 'socio-economic' sustainability driver while the least important driver was legislative and legal requirement. The findings further revealed that majority of practitioners/ organisations were promoting the socio-economic sustainability driver they believed will enable them to meet their own corporate business objectives.

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**Construction organisations, Socio-economic sustainability drivers, Sustainable regeneration.**

## INTRODUCTION

The UK is one of the first developed nations to produce a national strategy on the sustainable development and regeneration concept (Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA), 2011; Department of Trade and Industry (DTI), 2004). The UK government took the lead in implementing most of the sustainable development principles as highlighted in the Agenda 21 action plan (DEFRA, 2011). However, available evidence suggests that the delivery of sustainability projects, such as regeneration projects, which have been designed specifically to promote socio-economic and environmental sustainability benefits has been faced with numerous challenges (Erbey and Erbas, 2017; Winston, 2009). For instance, different construction organisations involved in the delivery of sustainable regeneration projects are seen to be promoting the sustainability principles based on their individual understanding, perceptions and interests (Akotia, Opoku and Hafiz, 2017; Evans and Jones, 2008). The process of delivering sustainable regeneration projects requires an innovative approach different from the traditional approach usually deployed by practitioners to the delivery of construction projects (Perovic and Šestovic, 2019). It has been acknowledged that a significant number of regeneration initiatives which have been undertaken over the years have been based on practitioners' priorities for the projects (Akotia, Opoku and Hafiz, 2017; Erbey and Erbas, 2017). Similarly, the over reliance on environmental sustainability drivers has also played a significant part in limiting the integration of social and economic sustainability principles into mainstream practices (Akotia and Sackey 2018). The delivery of sustainable regeneration projects requires adoption of sustainability practices and the promotion of social and economic sustainability principles beyond the current consideration given to these core sustainability principles by practitioners on their projects. To achieve this goal means that, practitioners will have to move away from their current practices of delivering regeneration projects to a more 'sustainability focus' one that enables projects to deliver their core socio-economic sustainability objectives.

It is suggested that social and economic principles are deeply rooted in our community set up, and for that reason, focusing on the promotion of the core sustainability drivers such as the socio-economic ones has the potential to drive regeneration projects towards the attainment of their sustainability objectives. The growing demands on national and local governments to meet the sustainability needs of society through sustainable regeneration initiatives, particularly for deprived communities makes the call for the delivery of socio-economic regeneration timely. It is believed that meeting society's social and economic sustainability needs is one major means by which society can become truly vibrant and sustainable (Boyle, Michell and Viruly, 2018; DEFRA, 2011). If future regeneration projects are to make a greater sustainability impact on communities, then the current regeneration projects' priorities and drivers will have to be altered to meet the socio-economic sustainability needs of these communities in a holistic manner (Boyle, Michell and Viruly 2018; Raco and Henderson, 2009). Hence, the pursuit of the delivery of sustainability objectives calls for a fundamental change towards the promotion of socio-economic sustainability drivers by practitioners thereby making the regeneration projects wholly sustainable.

It is also argued that social change can be the determinant of economic change, given that many of the social features of sustainability co-exist with the economic features of sustainability

in regeneration (DEFRA, 2011; Communities and Local Government (CLG), 2010). The principles underpinning the socio-economic sustainability requirements seek to provide collaboration between individuals' social progress and economic prosperity, which are in-tune with the sustainable regeneration agenda. Accordingly, regeneration projects which have been designed to deliver social and economic sustainability well-being of people are more likely to deliver tangible sustainability benefits (Haran et al., 2011; CLG, 2008).

Therefore, this study examines the most important socio-economic sustainability drivers for regeneration projects in the UK. Firstly, it examines the literature on sustainable development and regeneration. Secondly, it conducts an examination of empirical data obtained through semi-structured interview from 24 practitioners (four construction organisations) within the UK construction industry. The paper does not purport to draw definitive conclusion of the findings but identifies and draws attention to the key sustainability drivers of sustainable regeneration projects and calls for a new approach towards the consideration and promotion for core socio-economic sustainability drivers of regeneration projects.

## SUSTAINABLE REGENERATION DRIVERS

The construction industry has been recognised as a major partner in the delivery of the UK sustainable development and regeneration agenda (Department for Business Innovation and Skills (DBIS), 2013; Department for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform (DBERR), 2008). The UK government's strategy to deliver sustainable construction sets the agenda and challenged the construction industry to drive its operations in a manner that deliver sustainable products to achieve the sustainable development and regeneration objectives for society's benefits. The industry is being called upon to shift from its traditional way of delivering sustainability projects to a more modernised one which will ultimately lead to an improvement of the sustainability performance of its projects (DBIS, 2013).

Traditionally, the construction industry has been driven by cost, time and quality objectives (Cruickshank and Fenner, 2007), and the consideration of sustainability adds to these objectives. The promotion of the sustainable construction concept also has the potential to drive the regeneration process towards the attainment of sustainable development objectives as well as the agenda 21 developmental goals. It has been argued that many sustainable regeneration initiatives share many sustainability goals with the sustainable development objectives. Hence, the attainment of sustainable regeneration can serve as an indicator of sustainable development goals attainment (Boyle, Michell and Viruly, 2018).

The UK government's White Paper published in 2000 on community renewal which sets out the government's plans to drive community regeneration recommended the need to improve the social and economic sustainability growth of society with the sustainable regeneration initiatives (CLG, 2008). Generally, the performance of regeneration projects is demonstrated by many of the numerous opportunities created by these regeneration projects. In a series of stakeholder consultation events reported in CLG (2008), the majority of participants suggested that socio-economic development should be seen as a key driver for sustainable regeneration outcomes. The participants emphasised the need for sustainable regeneration to pay a greater attention to deliver tangible sustainability benefits form the sustainable regeneration initiatives.

It has been acknowledged that a significant number of regeneration projects have been driven by a number of factors (CLG, 2010). Some influencing factors which have been reported to be driving most practitioners' organisations in promoting sustainability in the UK

include: availability of incentive mechanisms, compliance with government policy frameworks and regulations on green buildings, image/reputation improvement, meeting ethical and moral obligations, as well as an improvement in the overall economic fortune of their organisations (Turcsanyi and Sisaye, 2013; Häkkinen and Belloni, 2011; CLG, 2010; Pitt *et al.*, 2009; Bennett and Crudgington, 2003). Also, Pitt *et al.*, (2009), identified financial incentives, building regulations, client awareness and demand as the most influential factors that were driving many construction industry organisations to promote sustainability on their projects.

The socio-economic sustainability strategies of many construction organisations involved in the delivery of regeneration projects in the UK have focused on financial gains (Henderson, 2011; Smyth, 2008). A study conducted by Smith and Sharicz, (2011) on organisation sustainability and profitability revealed that, nearly 51 percent of respondents who took part in the study believed that adopting sustainability into their organisations' business operations would help build the economic future of their organisations. Similarly, Parida and Wincent (2019), Okoro, (2012) and DBERR, (2008), were of the view that pursuing such sustainability principles will enable such organisations to improve their image as 'sustainable organisations', which in turn, enables them to increase their profitability and remain in business for a long time.

However, integrating the core elements of sustainability into regeneration processes and practices offers a considerable opportunity for construction organisations to run a responsible business. For example, integrating the principle of corporate social responsibility (CSR) in an organisation's strategy and practice will enable the organisation to deliver socio-economic sustainability benefits for the stakeholders, enhance its reputation from its stakeholder and gain competitive advantage (Saeed and Kersten, 2019) from its competitors.

A Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) study carried out by Turcsanyi and Sisaye (2013, p. 16) suggested that the overall economic performance of an organisation "can be sustained for a long time if economic performance is effectively integrated with social and environmental goals into business strategic plans". In supporting the assertion above, Lee, Kim and Roth, (2019), Baharudin and Nik Azman (2019), Cheng, Ioannou and Serafeim (2014), Mason and Simmons (2014) and Lankoski, (2008) indicated that, the integration of CSR and other sustainability objectives into an organisation's business practices provides a better chance of enhancing its economic performance. They also posited that such integration confers a certain degree of competitive advantage over peers economically, and also are more likely to gain competitive advantage over their compatriots in the market place. Adopting CSR principles is now seen as a means through which many organisations are promoting their social and economic sustainability objectives (Pitt *et al.*, 2009).

Similarly, it is argued that adopting and implementing CSR principles such as education and training/apprenticeships, job opportunities etc., on regeneration projects can equally be seen as a means of promoting ethical and moral obligations in the society (Agirreazkuenaga, 2019; ODPM, 2006). A round table report on CSR by the European Commission (2004), identified many small and medium enterprise (SMEs) organisations who have incorporated CSR principles into their business practices due to the ethical values and beliefs held by their owners and employees. Apparently, it is believed that the integration of sustainability principles into business plans for many organisations will enable them to "position and differentiate themselves as ethically responsible and committed in order to increase their global competitiveness" (Okoro 2012, p.684). Moreso, this confers these organisations with a competitive edge over their main competitors thereby allowing them to continue to win future contracts from prospective clients (Kraus and Britzelmaier, 2012; Lankoski, 2008). The CSR principles of sustainability in construction business terms is about achieving a long-

term competitive advantage and economic benefits for construction organisations and their stakeholders involved in the delivery of the projects (Shen *et al.*, 2010).

According to Weber (2008), promoting good sustainability practices has the potential to lead to cost savings and reductions in financial risk for the organisations in the long term. Similarly, the achievement of higher sustainability performance standards in an organisation can influence the attraction and retention of employees (Turcsanyi and Sisaye 2013; Kraus and Britzelmaier, 2012). A good organisational reputation and image can boost the morale of employees working for such organisations. Corroborating this perspective, Lankoski, (2008, p.540) observed that an organisation's "ability to hire and retain high-quality staff as well as improve worker health and morale" may be informed by its sustainability reputation.

Seemingly, the quest to promote sustainability principles also calls for commitment from key practitioners and their organisations, clients and other major stakeholders. Because without such commitment, it would be impossible to genuinely and adequately promote the principles and the core values of sustainability, to realise the expected stakeholders' benefits in a particular regeneration project. A widely held view is that commitment from an organisation's top managements can be a major driving force towards the adoption of sustainability into the organisation's business practices (Turcsanyi and Sisaye 2013).

Commitment from top management and the nature of inherent governance structures within the organisations are other factors, which are often cited as major influencing drivers towards the promotion of sustainability practices by many organisations (Turcsanyi and Sisaye 2013; Smith and Sharicz, 2011). It is believed that regeneration projects would make greater sustainability impacts when genuine commitment is obtained from the top management of construction organisations and when they are truly committed to championing its core values. In that way, greater attention will be given to incorporating its principles into their governance and business operations and not just merely attracting a mention in their mission statements on organisational websites.

It is also argued that the nature of clients' and stakeholders' demands can be a determining factor for promoting sustainability principles by organisations (Kraus and Britzelmaier, 2012; Häkkinen and Belloni 2011). This is because often, clients and their stakeholders initiate and provide the financial resources to undertake these regeneration projects. Turcsanyi and Sisaye, (2013) further argued that prevailing economic conditions has made clients and other key stakeholders are increasingly becoming cautious and are demanding more details and transparency from organisations before entering into any form of investment or partnership with them. To buttress these assertions, the Green Paper report of the Commission of the European Communities, (CEC, 2001, p.3) observed that a number of organisations operating within the European Union were engaged in promoting their sustainability principles "as a response to a variety of social, environmental and economic pressures" from their clients and other key stakeholders.

## RESEARCH METHOD

The study sets out to explore eight of the most cited socio-economic sustainability drivers for sustainable regeneration practitioners in the UK, identified through literature review. In order to enable an in-depth appraisal of the drivers, a qualitative research method was adopted for the study. Plano Clark (2010) suggested that the application of a qualitative research approach presents advantages to viewing a phenomenon in its real social context, and by so doing offers a greater depth of understanding and flexibility to explore social matters. According to Petty, Thomson and Stew, (2012), the major advantages associated with the qualitative research

approach include its capacity to produce more detailed explanations of human phenomena as well as in-depth analysis of complex human and cultural dynamics in a way that cannot be fully captured with a numerical measurement approach. A further strength identified by Harrison and Reilly (2011) is the depth of knowledge and understanding a researcher obtains through the exploration of experiences from participants in their natural settings.

To begin the qualitative data collection process, four construction organisations were selected through a purposive sample technique, from the list of top construction organisations with the experience of delivering sustainable regeneration projects in the UK. Letters were sent out to the selected organisations for permission to use their projects, followed by proposals to further explain the purpose and the context of the study to the selected organisations. Face-to-face in-depth semi-structured interviews were then conducted with the 24 practitioners, made up of, six (6) practitioners from each of the four selected construction organisations, with each interview lasting between 50-60 minutes. The practitioners were selected through a purposive sampling from a list of construction organisations published in the 2018 edition of Building Magazine in the UK with the experience and knowledge of delivering sustainable regeneration projects. The interviews were conducted in an interactive and open manner with a minimum interview structure in an attempt to obtain detailed information and also to gain a deeper appreciation of the issues with practitioners (Denzin and Lincoln, 2008). The interview questions explored the core socio-economic sustainability factors that were driving the promotion of sustainability in their sustainable regeneration projects. All the semi-structured interviews were recorded and later transcribed. Open coding approach was undertaken on the transcribed data thereby enabling the transcribed data to be examined sentence-by-sentence. The text segments containing relevant information were manually coded to discover patterns/themes, which were subsequently used for analysis. Specific text segments identified as key recurring themes were also coded for use as quotations (Basit, 2003) to highlight salient references identified during the analysis of interview findings. The semi-structured interview transcription and coding processes undertaken for the study is illustrated in Figure 1 below. Table 1 presents the profiles of practitioners who participated in the semi-structured interviews of the study while Table 2 presents the results of the interviews (based on the response of importance given the drivers by practitioners).

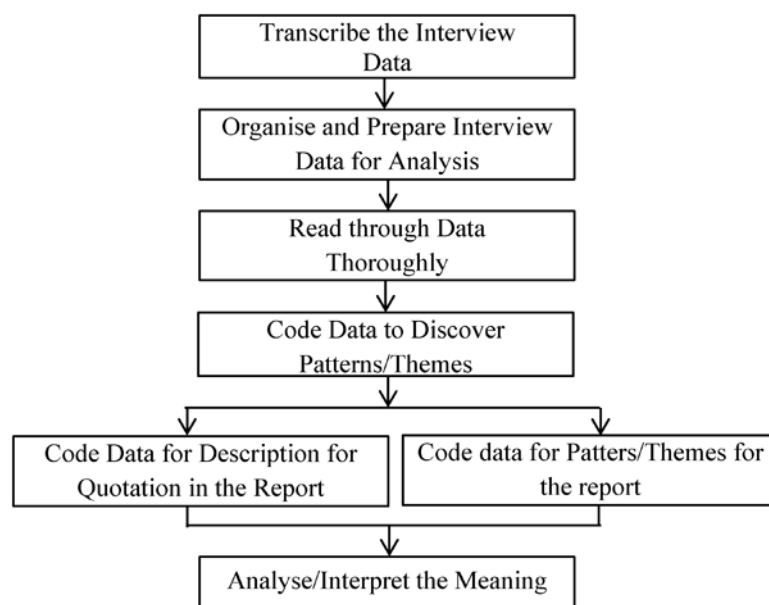


Figure 1 Semi-structured interview transcription and coding processes

**Table 1** The profiles of interviewees

| Construction Organisation | Organisation 1 -Main contractor    | Organisation 2 - Main contractor   | Organisation 3 - Main contractor   | Organisation 4 - Main contractor   |
|---------------------------|------------------------------------|------------------------------------|------------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| Practitioners Role        | Project development manager (PDM1) | Project development manager (PDM2) | Project development manager (PDM3) | Project development manager (PDM4) |
|                           | Architect (ARC1)                   | Architect (ARC2)                   | Architect (ARC3)                   | Architect (ARC4)                   |
|                           | Commercial manager (CM1)           | Commercial manager (CM2)           | Commercial manager (CM3)           | Commercial manager (CM4)           |
|                           | Project manager (PM1)              | Project manager (PM2)              | Project manager (PM3)              | Project manager (PM4)              |
|                           | Sustainability manager (SM1)       | Sustainability manager (SM2)       | Sustainability manager (SM3)       | Sustainability manager (SM4)       |
|                           | Community liaison manager (CLM1)   | Community liaison manager (CLM2)   | Community liaison manager (CLM3)   | Community liaison manager (CLM4)   |

The twenty-four (24) interviewees presented their views on the eight socio-economic sustainability drivers presented to them during the semi-structured interview sessions. A notable observation from the initial analysis was the indication of multiple responses by practitioners concerning the drivers as shown in Table 2. The drivers were prioritised based on the level of importance interviewees attached to each of the drivers. For example, while some drivers were considered as very important, others were considered less important in driving their socio-economic sustainability agenda of their organisations. The results are presented and discussed accordingly.

**Table 2** Semi-structured interview results of the socio-economic sustainability drivers

| Drivers  | Response importance of drivers | ORGANISATION<br>Total N = 24 |                         |
|--|--------------------------------|------------------------------|-------------------------|
|  |                                | No. of Response              | Percentage (%) Response |
| Enhancement of reputation as a 'sustainable' organisation (ERSO) | 1                              | 24                           | 100%                    |
| Competitive advantage (CA)                                       | 2                              | 19                           | 79%                     |
| Clients requirements (CR)  | 3                              | 17                           | 71%                     |

Table 2 continued

| Drivers                                       | Response importance of drivers | ORGANISATION<br>Total N = 24 |                         |
|---|--------------------------------|------------------------------|-------------------------|
|   |                                | No. of Response              | Percentage (%) Response |
| Corporate social responsibility (CSR)         | 4                              | 14                           | 58%                     |
| Stakeholders demands (SD)                     | 5                              | 10                           | 42%                     |
| Ethical and moral obligation (EMO)            | 6                              | 8                            | 33%                     |
| Commitment to sustainability objectives (CSO) | 7                              | 7                            | 29%                     |
| Legislation and legal requirement (LLR)       | 8                              | 5                            | 21%                     |

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### ENHANCEMENT OF REPUTATION AS A 'SUSTAINABLE' ORGANISATION

The potential for regeneration projects to provide socio-economic sustainability benefits has been recognised. From the study, enhancement of reputation came out as the most important driver identified by practitioners. The results in Table 2 reveal that all the practitioners (interviewees) unanimously indicated that enhancement of reputation was an important driver for them to promote sustainability principles on their regeneration projects. All interviewees were of the view that enhancing their reputation was a major driving factor for their organisations to pursue sustainability principles on regeneration projects.

To buttress their views, a typical response given by an interviewee (ARC1) concerning the sustainability principles that were driving the promotion of socio-economic sustainability on their regeneration projects was: *...For us, adopting sustainability helps to enhance our reputation as a sustainable organisation. It makes us more appealing to future clients. ... They know that we will be able to fulfil the promises that we make when we tender for work.*

Corroborating the previously expressed views, another interviewee (SM2) said: *... Obviously, as an organisation, taking on sustainability enables us to build our brand and reputation as an organisation. We are seen as the best company of choice and we get more recognised as the provider of best practice in terms of sustainability and that gives us a real advantage over our competitors.*

All interviewees strongly believed that the adoption of sustainability principles by their organisations was the best way of improving their organisations' reputations, which was vital to making them continuously appealing to their present and prospective clients.

This finding has been corroborated by Cheng, Ioannou and Serafeim (2014), Turcsanyi and Sisaye (2013) and Smith and Sharicz, (2011). These scholars have argued that the majority of organisations were adopting and implementing sustainability principles as a means of improving their reputations to remain in business. With this finding, it can be suggested that a sizeable number of practitioners delivering sustainable regeneration projects hold the view that



there is a good business case for their organisations to promote socio-economic sustainability principles on their projects. Obviously, the quest to be termed ‘sustainable organisations’ has been largely premised on the fact that, currently, most of the local and national governments’ contracts are being awarded to organisations that are seen to be delivering sustainability benefits for communities. Hence, from the above findings, it can also be inferred that the majority of these practitioners may only be pursuing sustainability principles to enable them to be branded as ‘sustainable organisations’, to enable them to attract and win more contracts.

Hence, practitioners who may be involved in the delivery of such sustainable regeneration projects may only be seen, superficially, to be promoting the socio-economic sustainability principles, while in a real sense, they may only be projecting their own interests and objectives. This outcome could have an adverse impact on the attainment of the United Nation (UN) sustainable development goals (SDG 1) of addressing poverty and promoting economic growth for all. Many of the misunderstandings associated with the current promotion of sustainability principles for regeneration projects can be seen as the direct product of practitioners’ interests and prioritisation of sustainability benefits for their organisations. Such vested interests and approaches have contributed considerably to the difficulties inherent in the current practices and delivery of socio-economic sustainability of regeneration projects.

A study conducted by Häkkinen and Belloni (2011) found a linkage between practitioners’ drive to pursue sustainability issues and the potential resulting outcomes for their organisations. This view concurs with the views expressed by Parida and Wincent (2019) and Okoro (2012) wherein they argued that reputation enhancement was what most organisations were relying upon to enable them to pursue their business ambitions. However, it is suggested that “organisations which have a reputation for trading fairly”, and respecting and protecting the interests of other stakeholders, are more likely to attract public services and support for their activities (DETR, 2000, p.14). Also, they are better able to provide sustainable jobs, promote and economic growth as outlined in the United Nation (UN) sustainable development goals (SDG 1).

## COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE

Table 2 indicates that gaining competitive advantage was ranked as the next most important sustainability driver by majority of the interviewees.

The result obtained from the interview indicated that 19 interviewees opined that promoting sustainability factors was a major means for their organisations to gain advantage over their competitors. Considering the economic climate, it will not be out of place to assume that the majority of practitioners’ organisations will be attempting to integrate sustainability objectives into their business practices, to enable them gain competitive advantage over their peers, to stand a better chance of winning future work from their clients. This point was highlighted by an interviewee (PM3): *... Seeing our organisation to be delivering socio-economic sustainability benefits, gives us a real potential advantage over our competitors, especially looking at the current situation we are in now, because we know exactly how it works, how much it costs and how much value our clients place on it.*

This comment was also echoed by another interviewee (CM4): *... From the business point of view, and with the current economic climate, it definitely gives us advantage over our competitors who are not taking advantage of it...*

According to Parida and Wincent (2019) and Okoro (2012), gaining a competitive advantage presents a significant approach by which corporate organisations can continue to

receive recognition over their main competitors. It is suggested, for example, that, the provision of certain key services seen to be over and above the services provided by other organisations has the potential to offer a competitive edge to such organisations providing those key services. Similarly, integrating sustainability principles, such as corporate social responsibility in the organisation's strategies and practices, can also enable such organisation to gain competitive advantage and to continue to win more contracts from prospective clients.

Drawing from this finding, it is observed that most of the current interviewees involved with the delivery of sustainable regeneration projects may be motivated to promote sustainability because they believed that by doing so, it will enable them to remain competitive in their marketplace. According to Kraus and Britzelmaier (2012); Henderson (2011) and Lankoski (2008), the idea of gaining competitive advantage has been the goal of private sector practitioners looking to maximise their returns by outperforming their competitors in some key areas of their activities. But, focusing solely on gaining competitive advantage can have long term sustainability implications for the projects. For instance, whilst trying to obtain such competitive advantage, practitioners may be tempted to adopt short term practices (cut corners especially during the tender stages) to win over their competitors, which may potentially result in a long term negative impact on the attainment of socio-economic sustainability benefits expected from the projects. Such practices may lead to an overt concentration on 'winning more contracts' to increase turnover and profit margins for practitioners' organisations at the expense of delivering enduring socio-economic sustainability benefits for the community. Adamowicz, (2003) is of the view that it is only when practices that are promoted are focused on such core sustainability principles, that a number of practical problems associated with the current delivery of socio-economic sustainability of regeneration projects can be overcome.

## CLIENTS' REQUIREMENTS

Client requirements play a salient role in promoting the implementation of sustainability on regeneration projects. The quest to meet these requirements often serves as a significant driver for the practices adopted and implemented by practitioner organizations on regeneration projects. For example, clients who may want their projects to be completed within a specific time frame will require practitioners to meet these time requirements. This will also call for the promotion of practices that could lead to practitioners making a trade-off between other clients' requirements, such as cost, quality and sustainability. It has been argued that clients' requirements are essential requirements which cannot be ignored by practitioners who have undertaken to deliver on those requirements.

The results from the interviews (Table 2) reinforced the above positions as it revealed that clients' requirement was considered as the third most important sustainability driver by interviewees. Most interviewees (n=17) believed that the client requirements was a major driver for promoting socio-economic sustainability factors whenever their organisations were involved in the delivery of sustainable regeneration projects. It became apparent that a sizeable number of practitioners were only promoting the socio-economic sustainability factors to meet their clients' requirements, to enable them to win their (clients) projects. To confirm the above position, an interviewee (PM1) during the course of the interview emphasised this by stressing that:

*...Of course, we've got to prove to the client that we can do what he wants us to do for him to give us the contract. That's how it works. So to be honest, if the client wants us to employ from the locality we deliver that and if we do that then there is a good chance that we are going to get a repeat business from the client.*

These findings resonate with the findings of Akadiri, Chinyio and Olomolaiye (2012), Kraus and Britzelmaier (2012) and Häkkinen and Belloni (2011). These authors suggested that organisations promoting sustainability principles were doing so because the contracts required them to do so. Within the construction industry, for example, clients are the ones who generally initiate, provide the financial resources and also decide what they require from their projects. Hence, their requirements can play a crucial role in determining the sustainability factors they want to be promoted by practitioners involved in the delivery of their projects. Consequently, clients can be instrumental in influencing the practitioners they hire to deliver their projects, to promote the socio-economic sustainability factors on their regeneration projects. However, this can only happen when clients who are undertaking such regeneration projects, understand sustainability issues and, are fully aware of the long term benefits accruable to them and their stakeholders. Equally, practitioners who are involved in undertaking such projects should also be seen not only to be reacting to clients' requirements. Rather, they should be prepared to act on practices that they truly believe will enable them to deliver the socio-economic sustainability benefits required of regeneration projects. In that case, they will be better placed to advise their clients on channelling their sustainability requirements towards the promotion and subsequent delivery of socio-economic sustainability of their regeneration projects.

#### CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

The promotion of sustainability principles requires practitioners to fulfil their corporate social responsibility (CSR) obligations. Delivering sustainable regeneration also places an important emphasis on a reasonable distribution of socio-economic sustainability benefits to all the stakeholders concerned. Although the primary objective of a company is profit-making, companies can at the same time contribute to sustainability objectives, through the incorporation of a CSR strategy into their core business strategy (CEC, 2001, p.4). Generally, the performance of sustainable regeneration is demonstrated and defined by the social and economic opportunities created by these projects. It is suggested that discharging CSR objectives through regeneration projects provides a salient means of building a sustainable society (Ela Palmer Heritage (EPH), 2008), and ensuring fairness and equitable distribution of wealth to society (Moisescu, *et al.*, 2020). This conforms to the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 1 and 8) which espouses the promotion of a productive society and a sustainable economic growth for all. From the interviews as the discussions developed it was refreshing to note that a considerable number of the practitioners were giving prominence to corporate social responsibility issues as a means of meeting their organisations' corporate sustainability objectives. Notably, it was considered as the fourth most important socio-economic sustainability driver by 14 interviewees (Table 2).

The views expressed by the interviewees concerning the importance of CSR as a driver is corroborated by Zahidy, Sorooshian and Hamid, (2019) and Pitt *et al.* (2009). In their works, these scholars argued that the organisations who were committed to promoting sustainability practices were adopting CSR as a way of achieving their sustainability objectives. These organisations were not only mentioning sustainability principles in their mission statements on their websites, but were genuinely giving considerations to sustainability issues by promoting the socio-economic sustainability principles through jobs creation and skill development programmes. It is believed that organisations which are seen to be genuinely adopting CSR principles will stand a better chance of their businesses remaining sustainable whilst improving their economic performance and growth (Shen *et al.*, 2010). This position was shared by one of the practitioners (PDM2) during the interview:

*...I think it's a win-win kind of thing really. As we help to provide these local jobs and all kinds of skills training schemes for young people, the long term benefit for us is that, it keeps us in business. ...And that also helps our long term economic growth as well.*

The finding is consistent with the United Nation's agenda of promoting employment, training and skills, and decent work through sustainable development projects (United Nations, 2018). It also agrees with the works of Häkkinen and Belloni (2011) and Lankoski (2008). According to these scholars, organisations that are genuinely committed to promoting the shared goals and benefits associated with sustainability principles were more likely to remain relevant, increase their turnover and achieve sustained economic growth. Turcsanyi and Sisaye (2013) concurred with these findings, and reiterate that the economic performance of organisations can be well sustained when such organisations integrate CSR into their business plans.

### STAKEHOLDERS' DEMANDS

The quest to promote sustainability practices on sustainable regeneration projects can also be dictated by demands from other stakeholders such as community organisations and end users. One of the major drivers towards the adoption and implementation of sustainability are the stakeholders who determine the sustainability benefits they desire from the projects (Pitt *et al.*, 2009), particularly for the state sponsored projects. According to Lankoski (2008), demands from stakeholder groups play a major role in dictating the promotion of sustainability issues by an organisation. From Table 2, out of the 8 drivers presented to practitioners, demands' from stakeholders was ranked as the fifth most important driver by interviewees. A further examination of the interview findings (Table 2) revealed that 10 of the 24 practitioners opined that demand from stakeholders was the key driver for their organisations towards the promotion of sustainability principles on their regeneration projects. This was evident in a response given by interviewee (PDM3):

*...Absolutely, yes we do. It has always played a major part in our decision to promote sustainability on our regeneration projects. ....Their demands determine what social and economic sustainability factors we take or we can take on for a particular project. If our funders for example want us to take on local labour on the project, we go with their demand.*

Largely, this finding suggests that a significant number of practitioners are still not committed to genuinely pursuing sustainability principles on their own without being tasked to do so. Such lack of genuineness could partly be responsible for the seeming inability of many sustainable regeneration projects in the UK to realise their socio-economic sustainability objectives. Authors such as Brandon and Lombardi (2011) and Evans and Jones (2008) have attributed this phenomenon to the lack of understanding of sustainability principles by many construction industry practitioners. The understanding of sustainability, in particularly the socio-economic ones by practitioners is crucial to the promotion of its core and associated benefits. It is suggested that greater sustainability impacts can be achieved if practitioners recognise the potential benefits of promoting the sustainability agenda to themselves and to their stakeholders and accordingly, respond to such demands (SDC, 2008).

### ETHICAL AND MORAL OBLIGATION (EMO)

EMO was the sixth most considered socio-economic sustainability driver by practitioners towards the promotion of their sustainability agenda. The principles underpinning the delivery of socio-economic sustainability of regeneration projects aim to promote a common goal

between regeneration practitioners and their beneficiaries. Significant progress towards the delivery of sustainable regeneration can be achieved when practitioners are inclined towards discharging ethical and moral obligations in the promotion of the sustainability principles on their projects. The United Nations, for instance, has underscored the need for organisations to pursue ethical and moral obligations in the discharge of the sustainable development goals for the communities' benefit (United Nations, 2010, 2018). Many construction organisations who are currently involved in the delivery of sustainability projects are being called upon to contribute their quota to the development of the communities in which they operate (Lynch and Mosbah, 2017). They are being urged to look beyond the conventional profit-oriented approach often adopted by organisations towards a more generous approach, which is aimed at investing in other equally important things on which their organisations' survival also depends. From the perspective of delivering sustainable regeneration projects, it means that the sustainability practices of construction organisations should be inclined towards the delivery of a wide range of socio-economic sustainability benefits for communities in which the projects are located. Doing so implies that they are contributing to the enhancement of the communities, while at the same time discharging their ethical and moral responsibilities towards such communities. The views obtained (Table 2) from practitioners revealed that some practitioners were being driven by ethical and moral consideration to promote social and economic sustainability factors on their sustainable regeneration projects. This was evident as 8 (33%) of the 24 practitioners (Table 2) indicated that discharging their ethical and moral obligations constituted a major driver for the promotion of the socio-economic sustainability factors on their projects. Contributing to the discussion during the interview, CLM2 outlined his organisation's ethical and moral responsibilities saying:

*...As regeneration practitioners, we hold it as an obligation to give something back to the community where we operate. ...We do this by providing supports and services to individuals and communities in areas where we work, and that's how we discharge our ethical and moral obligations as practitioners to society.*

Surprisingly, this finding falls below the authors' expectation since all the practitioners who took part in the study have acknowledged the importance of delivering sustainability benefits to their communities. The literature review has revealed that many practitioners who advocate sustainability principles find it very difficult to put them into practice (Van Bueren and De Jong, 2007). However, it should be acknowledged that this is often the case for many commercially minded organisations to focus on commercial aspects and, hence, tend to neglect their ethical and moral obligations which enjoin them to promote sustainability benefits on their projects (Rickey and Houghton, 2009). For example, by adopting sustainability principles to promote job opportunities, etc., then that organisation can be seen to be discharging the ethical and moral obligations for societal advancement (United Nations, 2018, 2010; Mason and Simmons, 2014; Martinuzzi *et al.*, 2011; ODPM, 2006). Equally, there are also benefits for practitioners' organisations as well. According to CLG (2008), organisations that are mindful of their ethical and moral obligation towards for communities are more likely to win the support of such communities.

### COMMITMENT TO SUSTAINABILITY OBJECTIVES

Of crucial importance for promoting socio-economic sustainability is the attitude and commitment required from practitioners. Without such commitment, it would be very difficult, if not impossible to genuinely and effectively promote the core principles of

sustainability in any particular regeneration project, to realise its potential benefits. It is widely argued that commitment from the top management of an organisation can be a major driving force towards the adoption of sustainability into an organisation's practices. For sustainability projects, such commitment requires that practitioners commit their efforts and resources in a manner that transcend the commitment usually given to sustainability principles during the delivery of traditional construction projects.

With the right attitude and commitment, practitioners will be able to prioritise the key social and economic sustainability deliverables beyond any other consideration or constraints associated with the project. It is believed that regeneration projects, for instance, would achieve greater sustainable impacts when genuine commitment is obtained from the top management of construction organisations, and when they are truly committed to championing its core principles on the projects. To achieve sustainability objectives, the United Nation agenda 2030 charter also calls for genuine commitment from leaders. Largely, the commitment to promote sustainability principles on sustainable regeneration projects has being influenced by the perception of increasing costs which is usually associated with the implementation of sustainability principles (Pitt *et al.*, 2009). This perception to a very large extent has undermined practitioners' commitment to fully promote sustainability factors on their regeneration projects. From the semi-structured interview results (Table 2), it was discovered that out of the twenty-four (24) who were interviewed for the present study, surprisingly, only 7 (29%) practitioners have cited commitment as an important driver for their organisations to promote socio-economic sustainability on their projects. Although this result seems not encouraging, it is refreshing to note that at least 'a third' of the practitioners who participated in the study are being driven by commitment to promote the socio-economic sustainability issues on their projects. A notable comment made by interviewee (CLM4) was:

*... We see it as part of our commitment to provide services on our projects that will benefit the community socially and economically. We pretty much take on apprentices on our regeneration projects and provide young people with jobs and skills for the future. These are some of the things we always try to do. ... As organisation, we are very much committed to all our sustainability responsibilities to the communities, because we think that's the right thing to do.*

The finding is in line with findings from the literature review wherein it was suggested that the issues relating to commitment were some of the drivers which were influencing some practitioners to promote sustainability practices on their projects (Turcsanyi and Sisaye, 2013; Smith and Sharicz, 2011; Häkkinen and Belloni, 2011). It can be inferred that the lack of adequate commitment demonstrated by this result could be due to the conventional way the achievements of an organisations' performance is assessed. Generally, organisations are 'seen to be successful' when they have made enough profits from their business operations. As such, most practitioners who want to be 'seen as successful' will be more inclined to promote practices that will enable them make profits for their organisations. Similarly, it can also be deduced that the perceived cost of sustainability might have negatively influenced the commitment levels of practitioners in their quest to promote socio-economic sustainability factors on the regeneration projects. This position is supported by Presley and Meade (2010), who observed that the commitment and attitude of practitioners towards sustainability principle was a direct product of the entrenched financial bottom-line practices of their organisations. Authors like Smith and Sharicz (2011) have admonished organisations, not to only take into account the profit-oriented practices of their operations, but to rather adopt and

implement practices that help to deliver the core principles of sustainability for the projects. It is widely said that the potential for any sustainable regeneration project to deliver a broad range of socio-economic benefits will be elusive if practitioners limit their commitments to cost and profit related issues of the projects.

## LEGISLATION AND LEGAL REQUIREMENT

Previous studies have shown that regulation through legislation has the potential to drive a construction project's sustainability agenda (Ramírez and Palos-Sánchez 2018; Häkkinen and Belloni, 2011). Legislations are fundamental for establishing and driving the requirements that are necessary for a greater achievement of sustainability objectives on projects. Without such legislative requirements to regulate the practices of practitioners, there is likelihood that practitioners will follow practices that fit within their own agenda. In the UK, for instance, such legislation and legal requirements have been employed to promote and drive the green agenda within the construction industry (CLG, 2008). Their introduction has compelled many practitioners to pursue sustainability practices towards the delivery of the green requirements for their projects. In pursuing the delivery of sustainable regeneration objectives, legislation and legal requirements can generally be considered as important and significant driver towards the promotion of socio-economic sustainability on regeneration projects. However, the results obtained (Table 2) indicate that legislation and legal requirements was the least considered driver of the 8 drivers as only 5 (21%) out of the 24 practitioners have indicated that legislation and legal requirements influenced the promotion of socio-economic sustainability issues on their projects. Some of the interviewees (who considered legislation and legal requirements as a driver) were of the view that, meeting the legislation and legal requirements was the best way to continue to attract the attention of the highly placed people in authority. For instance, PM3 observed that:

*... Obviously, legislation and legal requirements play a major part in what we do on our regeneration project. ... Because we have to comply with procurement laws, health and safety regulations and others set out by the local government, particularly in the areas we work to meet their socio-economic sustainability requirements of the projects. That helps us to attract their attention for future works.*

However, majority of interviewees agreed that their sustainability practices were not regulated by any legislation but rather what the projects were set out to achieve, as SM2 noted:

*... Legislation is not the main thing we look at... what we try to look at is the project requirements...*

This result clearly shows that legislation and legal requirements are not playing a significant role in the way and manner in which practitioners decide to promote the socio-economic sustainability factors on their projects. One of such reasons which can be attributed to this finding could be the absence of legislation to ensure the promotion of social and economic sustainability issues on the project. However, with the findings obtained in relation to the other seven drivers, it can be argued that the absence of such 'legislation and legal requirements' to drive practitioners towards the promotion of socio-economic sustainability can have implications for the successful delivery of sustainability benefits from the projects. According to Ramírez and Palos-Sánchez (2018) and Littig and Griebler (2005), the current problems associated with conceptualising sustainability factors for any project are partly due to the absence of legislative and legal frameworks to help conceptualise the incorporation

of sustainability factors into projects. Accordingly, practitioners then tend to prioritise sustainability factors that best suit their interests and objectives. It has been said that the way sustainability issues are conceptualised on many projects by practitioners hinders sustainability “from being standard industry practice” (Matar, Georgy and Ibrahim 2008, p. 263).

Evidence from the literature review has shown that construction projects can be delivered well if there are legislation and guidelines in place to direct practitioners (Ramírez and Palos-Sánchez 2018; Häkkinen and Belloni, 2011; Pitt *et al.*, 2009; Bennett and Crudgington, 2003). For instance, the introduction of health and safety requirements and regulations within the practices of the UK construction industry for instance, has had a profound positive impact in reducing accidents on many construction projects.

Doing so has also helped towards the promotion of wellbeing of people within the industry and communities as prescribed in SDG 3. It is believed that sustainability can be better promoted by practitioners if there are requirements and legislations in place to regulate standards and performance (Häkkinen and Belloni, 2011).

## CONCLUSION

The study explored eight socio-economic sustainability drivers influencing the promotion of socio-economic sustainability benefits by construction organizations working on regeneration projects in the UK. From the finding, it emerged that all the interviewed practitioners unanimously indicated that enhancement of reputation was the most important socio-economic sustainability driver towards the promotion of sustainability principles on their regeneration projects. They were of the view that enhancing their reputations as ‘sustainability organisation’ was a means to continue to secure contracts from their potential clients who wanted such ‘sustainability organisations’ to bid for their projects. The findings further revealed that a sizeable number of practitioners were promoting socio-economic sustainability principles into their business practices because they believed that this was giving them the opportunity to gain advantage over their competitors. It was observed that the primary objective for some of practitioners was to prove to their clients that they were meeting their requirements, to enable them to win the projects. It was clear from the findings that a significant number of practitioners were still not committed to genuinely pursue sustainability principles on their own without being asked to do so. However, the authors are of the view that the lack of adequate commitment demonstrated by the findings could be due to the conventional way the success of an organisation’s performance was assessed. Another inference drawn from the findings was the perceived cost of sustainability, which was possibly influencing the commitment levels of practitioners to adopt and implement its principles in their regeneration projects. Lastly, legislation and legal requirement was the least most important driver for practitioners to promote sustainability principles on their regeneration projects. From this finding it can be seen that the few practitioners who cited legislation and legal requirement as a driver may only have been promoting it so as to enable them to satisfy certain ‘green construction’ requirements and regulations set out by the ‘awarding’ bodies/clients. Based on the findings from other drivers, it was suggested that ‘legislation and legal requirement’ was very important to drive practitioners towards the promotion of socio-economic sustainability factors on their regeneration projects.

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