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## Achieving sustainability together

Eikelenboom, Manon

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# **Achieving sustainability together**

**Stakeholder collaboration for corporate sustainability  
and the circular economy**

**Manon Eikelenboom**



# Achieving sustainability together

Stakeholder collaboration for corporate sustainability and the circular economy

**PhD thesis**

to obtain the degree of PhD at the  
University of Groningen  
on the authority of the  
Rector Magnificus Prof. C. Wijmenga  
and in accordance with  
the decision by the College of Deans.

This thesis will be defended in public on  
Thursday 3 February 2022 at 16.15 hours

by

**Manon Eikelenboom**

born on 8 February 1994  
in Renkum

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**Supervisor**

Prof. G. de Jong

**Co-supervisor**

Dr. T.B. Long

**Assessment Committee**

Prof. J.M.L. van Engelen

Prof. J.C. Brezet

Prof. J.M. Cramer

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## Preface

Growing up in the natural area of the Veluwe in the Netherlands increased my appreciation for nature. Experiencing how natural areas around the world are degrading, including issues such as pollution, biodiversity loss and deforestation, has had a great impact on me. For me, it is unacceptable that we, as humans, are depleting and destroying natural areas around the world. Therefore, from a young age I have always wondered how we can better protect and restore the natural world. However, I also realized that not only the natural world is suffering, as citizens around the world are encountering many difficulties such as dealing with poverty, migration and wars. Therefore, I have become increasingly motivated to explore how we can create a balance between environmental and social elements. Social and environmental elements are co-dependent, meaning that if we want to address environmental issues, we also have to take social elements into account, and vice versa.

During my studies, I learned that enterprises can play a key part in restoring the balance between the human and natural world through their interactions with both social and environmental elements. However, I also realized that doing so is an enormous challenge for many enterprises. While the concept of sustainability holds great promise for the future, most enterprises are still far from achieving this promise. Finding a balance between economic, social and environmental goals is not a straightforward task and requires making difficult decisions. What is beneficial for one goal, for example environmental protection, can be detrimental to another goal, for example the income of local fisherman. How can one enterprise make decisions about topics in which many different aspects, actors and consequences are involved? In my opinion, the answer to this question is that this is impossible. One organization cannot decide what is best and address all different aspects of sustainability by itself. Sustainability challenges are complex, involving many actors, including their interrelationships and interdependencies. Therefore, to address the sustainability challenges we face today, enterprises need to increasingly interact and collaborate with different stakeholders including businesses, governmental organizations, NGOs, citizens and knowledge institutions.

I noticed during my studies that shifting to a focus on collaboration is difficult for many enterprises, which are often used to operate in price competitive environments and focussed on capturing individual firm value. Furthermore, when starting my PhD, I discovered that there is not much literature that opens up the 'black box' of collaboration for sustainability. While collaboration among a diverse set of stakeholders is often seen as fundamental for developing sustainable solutions, doing so in practice is not always easy. The following quote, resulting from an interview I did for this thesis, reflects this issue:

*While we all realize we have to collaborate and cooperate to successfully implement circular solutions, doing so remains a very frustrating and challenging process often not resulting in the desired outcomes.*

While collaborations are often initiated with the best intentions, many fail due to conflicts such as disagreement and power imbalances. During the early stages of my PhD, I also noticed that there seems to be a reluctance among enterprises to interact and collaborate with diverse stakeholders, especially with local communities, due to a lack of faith in positive outcomes resulting from these collaborations. For me, this is a major concern as I expect that not collaborating with local communities may lead to a situation where sustainability is solely available and interesting for the 'elite' of society. I believe that if we want to make a change towards a society that is sustainable and inclusive, interacting and collaborating with local communities is essential.

This thesis includes my efforts in making steps to address the challenges enterprises face when interacting and collaborating with diverse stakeholders for sustainability. This thesis has also provided me with experience, competencies and knowledge concerning successful collaboration for sustainability. Not only enterprises have to figure out how to collaborate with diverse stakeholders, also academic scholars have to increasingly collaborate with diverse societal actors to assist in addressing sustainability challenges. This thesis provided me with the opportunity to do so, collaborating with fellow academics but also with businesses, governmental institutions and local communities.

I hope that this PhD thesis will offer readers new insights and guidelines regarding the causes and consequences of collaboration among enterprises and diverse stakeholders for sustainability. In the future, I would be open to new collaborations with academics and practitioners alike to further explore these topics and help to achieve sustainability together.

## Table of contents

Acknowledgements	iii
Preface	v
Table of contents	vii
List of figures	x
List of tables	xi
List of appendices	xii
List of abbreviations	xiii
<b>Chapter 1</b>	<b>15</b>
1.1 Introduction	16
1.2 Key concepts and interactions	20
1.2.1 Societal sustainability	20
1.2.2 Corporate sustainability	20
1.2.3 The circular economy	21
1.2.4 Integrating the principles of corporate sustainability and the circular economy in enterprise strategy	23
1.2.5 The need for interacting and collaborating with diverse stakeholders	24
1.2.6 How to collaborate with diverse stakeholders: a stakeholder view	26
1.3 Research aim and questions	28
1.4. Research Paradigm and Methodology	30
1.4.1 Working within mode 1 science	30
1.4.2 Shifting to mode 2 science	31
1.4.3 Combining mode 1 and 2 science	32
1.5 Outline of the chapters	33
<b>Chapter 2</b>	<b>37</b>
2.1 Introduction	39
2.2 Literature and hypotheses	40
2.2.1 Dynamic capabilities and sustainability performance	40
2.2.2 Dynamic capabilities driving sustainability performance in SMEs	42
2.2.3 Managerial attributes influencing integrative dynamic capabilities in SMEs	44
2.3 Data and method	46
2.3.1 Research design	46
2.3.2 Participants and procedures	47
2.3.3 Measures	48
2.4 Results	50
2.4.1. Alternative model specification	54
2.4.2 Robustness tests	55

2.5 Discussion	55
2.5.1 Managerial implications	57
2.5.2 Limitations and future research	58
2.6 Conclusion	59
<b>Chapter 3</b>	<b>61</b>
3.1 Introduction	63
3.2 Literature and hypotheses	65
3.2.1 The circular economy	65
3.2.2 Managerial interpretations of circularity	67
3.2.3 Circular network interactions	69
3.2.4 Manager's holistic thinking	72
3.3 Data and method	73
3.3.1 Research design	73
3.3.2 Participants and procedures	74
3.3.3 Measures	76
3.3.4 Data analysis	78
3.4 Results	78
3.4.1 Robustness checks	86
3.5 Discussion	89
3.5.1 Managerial implications	91
3.5.2 Limitations and future research	92
3.6 Conclusion	95
<b>Chapter 4</b>	<b>97</b>
4.1 Introduction	99
4.2 Literature	101
4.2.1 Circular strategies	101
4.2.2 The circular economy in the building sector	102
4.2.3 Community relationships in circular strategies	103
4.3 Case description	104
4.4 Method	105
4.4.1 Identifying circular strategies	107
4.4.2 Situating the strategies within the network	108
4.4.3 Interviewing actors in the network	109
4.4.4 Analyzing the data	109
4.4.5 Evaluating the outcomes	110
4.5 Results	110
4.5.1 Circular strategies for social housing associations	110
4.5.2 Relationships with communities in circular strategies	112
4.6 Discussion	121

4.6.1 Limitations and future research	123
4.7 Conclusion	124
<b>Chapter 5</b>	<b>127</b>
5.1 Introduction	129
5.2 Literature	132
5.2.1 Multi-stakeholder network theory	132
5.2.2 The circular economy	135
5.3 Method	137
5.3.1 Case description	137
5.3.2 Action research approach	139
5.4 Results	146
5.4.1 Diagnosing step - initial challenges	146
5.4.2 Action planning & taking step: the initiative	151
5.4.3 Evaluation & specifying learning step - challenges encountered during the planning and execution of the initiative	153
5.4.4 Evaluation & specifying learning step - outcomes of the initiative	157
5.5 Discussion	158
5.5.1 Uncertainty	159
5.5.2 Disagreement	160
5.5.3 Domination-consensus-focussed management	161
5.5.4 Conclusion: creating a balance to involve communities in multi-stakeholder initiatives	162
5.5.5 Limitations and future research	164
<b>Chapter 6</b>	<b>169</b>
6.1 Introduction	170
6.2 Summary of the findings	171
6.3 Answering the main research questions	175
6.4 Theoretical contributions	177
6.5 Practical contributions	180
6.6 Limitations and future research	184
6.7 Concluding remarks	187
<b>Appendix</b>	<b>189</b>
Appendix A Survey for chapter 2 (in Dutch)	190
Appendix B Survey for chapter 3 (in Dutch)	193
Appendix C Interview protocol chapter 4	196
Appendix D Focus group script chapter 4	197
Appendix E Interview protocols chapter 5	198
References	201
Nederlandse samenvatting	218
Curriculum vitae	224

## List of figures

<b>Figure 1.1</b>	The butterfly model of the circular economy	22
<b>Figure 1.2</b>	Multi-stakeholder vs. organization-focussed networks	27
<b>Figure 2.1</b>	Research model	46
<b>Figure 2.2</b>	Summary of the study results	53
<b>Figure 2.3</b>	Summary of the study results with alternative model specification	54
<b>Figure 3.1</b>	Research model	74
<b>Figure 3.2</b>	Summary of the study results	80
<b>Figure 3.3</b>	Effect of the interpretation of circularity as an opportunity on circular network interactions contingent on holistic thinking (including 95% confidence intervals)	87
<b>Figure 4.1</b>	Key housing association stakeholders	106
<b>Figure 4.2</b>	Method overview	107
<b>Figure 4.3</b>	Data structure	111
<b>Figure 4.4</b>	The network for 'extending product value'	115
<b>Figure 4.5</b>	The network for 'industrial symbiosis'	116
<b>Figure 4.6</b>	The integration of social and ecological elements in circular strategies	122
<b>Figure 5.1</b>	The phases of issue-focused stakeholder management	133
<b>Figure 5.2</b>	Time-line of the research activities	141
<b>Figure 5.3</b>	Data structure	147
<b>Figure 5.4</b>	The phases of the initiative	151
<b>Figure 5.5</b>	Balancing three factors to involve communities in multi-stakeholder initiatives	163

## List of tables

<b>Table 1.1</b>	Overview of research questions, levels of analysis, thematic focus, contexts, theories and methodologies included in this PhD thesis	19
<b>Table 1.2</b>	Characteristics of mode 1 and 2 science	30
<b>Table 2.1</b>	Descriptive statistics and correlation matrix	52
<b>Table 2.2</b>	Summary of the study results	53
<b>Table 3.1</b>	Barriers firms face in the implementation of circular principles	66
<b>Table 3.2</b>	Descriptive statistics and correlation matrix	79
<b>Table 3.3</b>	Summary of the OLS estimation results	82
<b>Table 3.4</b>	Semi-partial correlations for model 3 and 6	84
<b>Table 3.5</b>	Summary of the conditional process analysis results	85
<b>Table 3.6</b>	Rotated factor matrix for the items of circular network interactions and the integration of circularity in a company's strategy	88
<b>Table 4.1</b>	Circular strategies	102
<b>Table 4.2</b>	Focus group participants	108
<b>Table 4.3</b>	Interviewees	109
<b>Table 4.4</b>	Circular strategies for social housing associations	113
<b>Table 5.1</b>	Observations during the diagnosing, action planning, action taking and evaluation steps	141
<b>Table 5.2</b>	Interviewees diagnosing step	143
<b>Table 5.3</b>	Stakeholders involved in action taking	144
<b>Table 6.1</b>	Overview of the research questions and main findings of the chapters	172



## List of appendices

<b>Appendix A</b>	Survey for chapter 2 (in Dutch)	190
<b>Appendix B</b>	Survey for chapter 3 (in Dutch)	193
<b>Appendix C</b>	Interview protocol chapter 4	196
<b>Appendix D</b>	Focus group script chapter 4	197
<b>Appendix E</b>	Interview protocols chapter 5	198

## List of abbreviations

AOM	Academy of Management
B2B	Business-to-Business
B2C	Business-to-Consumer
CFA	Confirmatory Factor Analysis
CE	Circular Economy
CS	Circular Strategy
EURAM	European Academy of Management
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
OLS	Ordinary Least Squares
NBM	New Business Models
NGO	Non-governmental Organization
RENT	Research in Entrepreneurship and Small Business
SD	Standard Deviation
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
SEM	Structural Equation Modelling
SME	Small and Medium-sized Enterprise
VIF	Variance Inflation Factor