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Article

# Missing Attention to Power Dynamics in Collaborative Multi-Actor Business Models for Sustainability

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**Abstract:** Advances within the Sustainability Business Models (SBMs) literature from the perspective of boundary-spanning business models have received limited attention. Further, discourse within the SBMs literature exploring collaborative practices adopts the perspective that collaborative forums are always a ‘force for good’. This paper reviews important theories and relevant literature and calls into question the dearth of research examining business models for sustainability and focuses on the role that power, and power relations, play in the shaping and steering of value creation. In advancing research on sustainable operations, we assess the implications of ignoring uneven power, and draw attention to the affects and consequences of this omission in the study of SBMs. By embracing an alternative, deliberative democracy perspective, we challenge the sub-literature on collaborative multi-actor business models. In taking an inquisitive and critical stance on omnipresent power dynamics, we shine a light on the consequences of uneven power across multi-actor structures by augmenting research with practical insights from selected vignettes. Our proposed concept of a democratic business model for sustainability offers a new strand of theoretical development and a fresh perspective on the sustainability and business models literature.

**Keywords:** sustainable business models; multi-actor collaborative forums; power; deliberative democracy

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## 1. Introduction

Advances within the Sustainability Business Models (SBMs) literature from the perspective of boundary-spanning business models has received relatively limited research attention to date [1]. Our paper seeks to contribute to, and further develop, existing discourse on this topic. Prior to proceeding, it is helpful to clarify that the authors choose to use the alternative expression of Business Models *for* Sustainability (BMS) in preference to the term SBMs, first proposed by [2], and around which research in this field has coalesced. For us, the term Business Models *for* Sustainability highlights the value-laden, normative, social-purpose directionality of the endeavor [3,4], in a way which provides an immediate acknowledgement of the politics of performativity and consequences of ‘framing’ [5–7]. Further, to pragmatically address our preference for an alternative term, we will use the more recognised SBMs acronym while reviewing the extant literature (Section 2.1 below), deviating from it only when we begin to develop an alternative perspective (BMS) and propose a concept of democratic business models for sustainability (dBMS).

In positioning our research we find that research discussions within the SBMs literature which explore collaborative practices assume an overwhelmingly harmonious and unequivocally positive view that collaborative forums are always a ‘force for good’. It is largely unquestionably assumed that by both promoting and enacting a more distributed multi-actor mode of organizational governance, it is taken for granted that more positive

outcomes in terms of concrete sustainability improvements [8] and distributed value creation are achieved. In contrast, SBMs in practice are not well understood [9,10]. In terms of the focus of our paper, we respond to [11], by developing further research on the '*political struggles between stakeholder groups who are involved in the creation of business models for sustainability within or across sectors*' and we offer the parallel observation that there is a dearth of research that specifically investigates the role and influence of power and power relations in the creation of value, and resulting improvements in sustainability outcomes, in collaborative multi-actor SBMs. The concept of multi-actor SBMs draws on the premise that the transition to sustainability cannot be carried out by a single organization in isolation and requires the bringing together of relevant stakeholders, some of which may not have been connected previously [12].

This is not to say that we seek to undermine existing literature. Rather, we acknowledge the role of SBMs in fostering change [13]. What is less clear, and hence where we see a gap in the literature, is an examination of the role of power dynamics and relational asymmetries in multi-actor dialogic processes for value creation. We wish to shed more light on how power influences the outcomes of collaborative forums that are assembled to tackle sustainability challenges; a topic that has received relatively limited attention. We extend the work of [14–16] by questioning how uneven power relations influence processes and outcomes of deliberation, in order to contribute to research on collaborative cross-sector SBMs.

This quest is formed of two parts. First, there is a need to address the absence of sustained systematic attention to power within current research on collaborative cross-sector SBMs. Second, there is a need to undertake empirical research in order to investigate how this scholarly omission translates into practice. We recognise this as an ambitious agenda, and one that is beyond the scope of a single paper. This paper therefore initiates our research agenda and aims to start the ball rolling. First, it seeks to demonstrate the missing attention to power in SBMs research scholarship by bringing it into the conversation through insights from key authors and perspectives from political science, and by highlighting the implications for the former of working at this inter-disciplinary (management/political science and sociology) interface. Second, by developing a systematic research framework and set of questions to guide comparative research across, for example, a suite of organizational case studies, we seek to advance a comparative empirical research agenda which investigates the application of theory to practice.

The paper is structured as follows. Section 2 reviews the theoretical foundations from which we draw, firstly taking stock of scholarship on sustainable business models (SBMs), and secondly summarising insights from key authors on power from political science and sociology. In bringing these two research strands together, we highlight the implications for SBM research of drawing upon key perspectives from the latter. In Section 3, we undertake a mental reflection to extrapolate an 'Ideal Type' model of democratic Business Models for Sustainability (dBMS). In so doing, we initiate enquiry into developing a new concept of dBMS. We use case vignettes from the energy industry in the UK to illustrate how BMS are set up and managed and, how participating actors collaborate. Finally, in Section 4 we discuss and propose a research framework and set of questions that which would be launched to comparatively investigate dBMS in practice. To do this, it would involve exploring the motivations, incentives, perceived benefits, challenges and structural and other constraints faced by actors seeking consciously and reflexively to acknowledge and re-balance uneven power relations in collaborative multi-actor forums.

## **2. Theoretical Foundations**

### *2.1. Materials and Methods*

This study reviews the theoretical foundations of the concepts we draw our attention to. First, it takes stock of scholarship on SBMs and focuses on the discourses that have been formed around the unquestioned, overwhelmingly harmonious views of the role of

collaborative multi-actor business models for sustainability. Second, it reviews the work of key authors on power and focuses on the fields of political science, sociology and organizational institutionalism. In particular, we turn our attention to the theoretical foundations of French and Raven, Gramsci, Foucault, Bourdieu, Habermas, and Callon, to better appreciate the role of performativity and the nature of power. Therefore, our review considers academic studies in the domains of interest “*identifying, describing, and transforming [important] concepts, constructs and relationships...[to build a] higher order of theoretical structure*” [17]. The synthesis of the work is used as a basis in proposing the concept of a democratic business model for sustainability and introduces a new strand of theoretical development within sustainability and business models scholarship.

## 2.2. Collaborative Business Models for Sustainability and Value Creation

For the purpose of our study, we consider sustainability as comprising five dimensions within organizational contexts: (1) *business level application and communication of sustainability activities/performance*; (2) *scope of organizational focus*; (3) *sustainability-oriented innovation*; (4) *economic/ecological-environmental/equity social emphasis*; and (5) *compliance stance* [18]. Emerging from the business models literature that connects concepts of value creation in non-sustainability contexts, to business models for sustainability, the first step is to examine how organizations deliver value to customers (e.g., [16,19,20]). In developing this analysis, SBMs then refer to a system that “*helps describing, analysing, managing, and communicating (i) a company’s sustainable value proposition to its customers, and all other stakeholders, (ii) how it creates and delivers this value, (iii) and how it captures economic value while maintaining or regenerating natural, social, and economic capital beyond its organizational boundaries*” [11].

SBMs adopt both a network-centric and a firm-centric perspective that recognises the mutual interdependencies between those involved in value creation [2]. Important studies consider collaboration and value creation in the context of SBMs. For example, Ref. [21] conducted a case study in the pharmaceutical industry in Taiwan to conceptualise the meaning and dimensions of SBMs. Ref. [22] brought together the business model canvas [15] with the product life cycle and stakeholder perspective to propose a triple-layered business model canvas. Building on design thinking, Ref. [23], introduced a SBMs to enhance value proposition. Combining elements of the business model canvas and the framework for strategic sustainable development [24] offers a new approach to business model innovation and design for strategic sustainable development. Similarly, [25] suggested that SBMs can prove an innovative mechanism for companies that aim to address environmental and social issues, and there is the opportunity here to address Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and their underpinning targets. Therefore, scholars’ recent attention points to understanding how “*an organization adopting a sustainable business model develops internal structural and cultural capabilities to achieve firm-level sustainability and collaborates with key stakeholders to achieve sustainability for the system that the organization is part of*” [2]. Yet recent research revealed a lack of literature that introduces a standard for the sustainability of a shared value-oriented business model [26]. In addition, Ref. [14] highlights the need for further research that considers how sustainable value is created, delivered and captured by the company for various stakeholders, including partners, customers and the natural environment. Ref. [27] presented a conceptual framework for analysing sustainable value creation and considered the different dimensions of sustainability i.e., social, economic and environmental, in different types of sharing economy business models, however this is yet to be tested empirically. Recently, SBMs literature integrated consumer preferences in the SBMs canvas [28] and revealed the important role that paying close attention to heterogeneous consumer group preferences may have on the value proposition, however collaboration was not considered.

Ref. [29] broadened the discussions in the field from value created for stakeholders to value created *with and for* stakeholders (authors’ emphasis). On a similar note, research on the boundary-spanning nature of SBMs innovation showed that to achieve sustainable

value creation, actors should find alignment between normative, instrumental and strategic dimensions [30]. Nevertheless, while the SBMs literature has been steadily growing, research examining how economic, social and ecological value are created for all the participating actors is still relatively under-developed. There is a need to closely examine *value networks* [31] that emphasise mutual value exchanges. In such a process, concepts such as value creation, efficiency and effectiveness should be explored in a collaborative environment between the company, its partners and stakeholders [31].

The co-creation of value through networks that bring together actors from different sectors (public, private and non-profit) with the aim of providing solutions to complex social, environmental and economic issues is what [32] first referred to as the collaborative paradigm of the twentieth century. With their broad scope looking to '*realise benefits for the wider community rather than for special interests*' [33], it is often the result of regulatory and institutional omissions [34] and the magnitude of problems that exceed the capabilities of a single organization. Therefore, it is unsurprising that collaborative cross-sector networks are increasingly gaining momentum in SBMs theory and practice. In the collaborations that emerge through cross-sector networks, actors from two or more sectors work cooperatively to address societal issues [35]. Their central advantage emerges from their joint, diverse resources and capabilities, as well as the exchange of expertise and skills in particular fields that the participating actors mobilize [32,36–40]. A collaborative cross-sector network's main activities revolve around problem-solving, exchange of knowledge and sharing of resources and expertise [41].

The motivations to join a cross-sector collaboration vary. Research suggests that firms can gain competitive advantage [37,42]; governments can collaborate with firms and non-profit organizations and generate public goods innovation [43]; non-profit organizations can devise novel solutions to existing and on-going problems [44] and increase the efficiency and effectiveness of their actions [45,46]. Therefore, it can be argued that collaborative networks provide the foundations for the value generated for stakeholders to be transformed into value that can prove useful for organizations and vice versa [47]. Interestingly, research suggests that cross-sector partnerships that have been developed due to actors' common interests are long-lasting with opportunities for sustainability innovation and business model development [48]. Nonetheless, the plurality of voices, the diversity of interests and motivations that drive actors to join a collaborative network, and conflicts of logics and interests can be highly challenging at times. For instance, research on partnerships criticised the dominant role that private sector actors may hold [49,50] while others questioned the neutrality of cross-sector partnerships and argue that some are strategically organized to meet the objective of actors with more dominant roles [51]. To address this tendency, [52] suggests the introduction of '*formal or informal institutional arrangements of overlapping sectoral segments and/or combinations of governance mechanisms*'. Others claim that the establishment of a common space for communication and interaction that gives actors the opportunity to participate in decision making, share their views and come up with new ideas may foster democratic participation [53]. According to [54], '*a cooperative, inter-organizational relationship that is negotiated in an ongoing communicative process, and which relies on neither market nor hierarchical mechanisms of control*' can be used to overcome some of the rising challenges.

Yet, despite the increased interest in examining the performance or effectiveness of cross-sector partnerships and their impact on supposed beneficiaries [43,55–57], very little is known about the role of power and power relations in the formation and steering of cross-sector collaborative SBMs. In the next section, insights from key authors and perspectives from political science and sociology are drawn upon in order to inform the management perspective on which the SBMs literature is founded; to highlight and elaborate what it means to address the omission of attention to power in collaborative multi-actor forums in SBMs; and provide the theoretical foundations for redressing this omission.

### 2.3. The Role of Power and Power Relations in Collaborative Multi-Actor SBMs

Appreciating the significance, understandings, and analysis of power, its relations, dynamics and affective consequences, has been a long-term, multi-disciplinary challenge [58,59]. Ref. [60] definition of power refers to how a person may influence someone to do something that they would not otherwise do. Organizational and sociological research argues that power conflicts may arise when actors from diverse backgrounds interact [61–63]. Ref. [64] viewed power as a key component of a bureaucratic organization where diverse groups co-exist and interact. Similarly, power plays a significant role in a collaborative cross-sector governance arrangement where expert actors from at least two institutions ostensibly cooperate. For [65] influence and control are central ideas in the definition of power. They claim that influence is a form of change that is induced from one actor to another. In their definition, they acknowledge five important power bases; *reward power, based on B's perception that A has the ability to bestow rewards on him(sic); coercive power, based on B's perception that A has the ability to mete out punishments on him(sic); legitimate power, based on the perception by B that A has a legitimate right to prescribe behaviour for him(sic); referent power, based on B's identification with A; and expert power, based on the perception that A has some special knowledge or expertise not held by B* [65]. According to the above, actor B perceives actor A as capable of influencing them. Nevertheless, having the ability to exert power does not always imply that an actor will exert it. At this point, it is interesting to differentiate between *having* power and *exercising* power. Having power signifies ones' ability to influence others to behave in line with the former's preferences or interests. Exercising power describes an actor's capacity to enforce others to change or adopt their behaviour depending on the former's will [60].

Turning to Gramsci's seminal work on hegemony, he argues that hegemony provides the means to sustain the privileged status of dominant groups [66]. Domination may take different forms. For example, it can be due to institutional power and authority of states, material power flowing from economic dominance and, communication regarding what ought to be 'common sense' that privileges the dominant actor [67]. A dominant group owns a hegemonic position when there is an alignment between institutional, economic and organizational forces [68]. In a similar vein, Gramsci believed that an individual or a group legitimately attains a hegemonic position within a system when they dominate or lead normative assumptions over others who can respond to demands that are significant for the system [66]. Consequently, those holding a hegemonic role have the power to provide directions to other social groups and at the same time manage discontent through passive revolution. For Gramsci, a dominant group acknowledges part of its favourable position in support of its preservation of its dominant role in order to avert from a real revolution. Nonetheless, Gramsci argues that change can be achieved only through a democratic participation between the leaders and the led [69]. Drawing on from this argumentation, a patronizing hegemonic role can manipulate a constructed distinction between (scientific or linguistic) representations of the world and the world itself; what [70] referred to as the concept of performativity. [Organizational] discourses, concepts or models introduce new realities into the world and stimulate its constitution [71].

By contrast, in Foucault's view, power is not always oppressive, and can be productive and a motivating factor that triggers behaviour change [72]. In his opinion, power cannot be owned, but it is strategic and may act and manifest in a particular way between people. In this regard, power is a network of relations that occurs in a societal structure whereby individuals are the *locus* where power, and resistance to power, are exerted [73]. Interestingly, Foucault also believes that power has a multidirectional nature. According to him, power does not flow only from the more to the less powerful, but instead it may emerge from the less powerful, even if it is nevertheless non-egalitarian [74]. Drawing on Foucault's perspective on power, little is known about how power is manifested in cross-sector BMS. Additionally, while research argues that alignment between companies and stakeholder interests is critical [29,31] very little is known about the role of power relations in the creation of value in BMS.

To understand the dynamics of power relations we can also draw on the sociology of Bourdieu, in particular his concept of 'field/practice'. According to Bourdieu, the social world is divided into arenas or 'fields' that contain a unique set of characteristics such as rules or knowledge. Bourdieu claims that while fields are systems of social relations with structured power relations and characteristics that may overlap, each of them is autonomous [75]. The social relations that constitute the field are power relations that may reflect diverse status distinctions such as hierarchical authority or expertise. Reflecting on the implications of Bourdieu's work on field/practice for multi-sector collaborative forums which intentionally bring together actors from different fields in order to enrich diversity, it is precisely this attempt to operate at the intersection of Bourdieusian fields that opens up the question of inter-field power rather than intra-field power. For example, where the logics of intra-field language, rules, norms and power hierarchies do not hold, and therefore the need to re-negotiate these forms and norms of power relations at field intersections arises.

From a different Habermasian point of view, the world looks different and is considerably more optimistic in its implications for multi-actor collaborative forums, than in say a Gramscian or Foucauldian world, and more directly normative than for Callon. For Habermas, communication and decision making among group members of governance networks should be based on an inclusive, competent and respectful dialogue [76,77]. In principle, in a democratic society, the outcome of discussions and negotiations is deemed legitimate only when those affected or their representatives participated in the decision making [78,79]. Therefore, an institution qualifies as democratic, when it hosts inclusive and effective deliberation [80,81]. In this vein, deliberative communication should seek for reciprocity, agreement and critical reflection between the participating members who may have conflicting views on morality and the 'Good Life' [82,83]. Additionally, organizations should be inclusive in terms of interests and be consequential. This is to say, that organizations should be able to generate collective or social outcomes [84]. Yet, the ideal of deliberative democracy is largely procedural in nature and requires normative foundations. As can be extrapolated from a Habermasian world, measures to correct-for power imbalances are largely procedural, and Habermas scholarship is largely silent on how structural and institutional lock-ins and their counterpart, systemic isomorphism held in place by incumbent vested interests can, or would be, used in order to achieve systemic institutional change. Further, there are important implications for whether the introduction of procedural deliberative processes make a difference to concrete sustainability improvements, such as to ecological and natural ecosystem improvements [8].

Within organization studies in particular, the organizational institutionalism literature and perspectives on power [85] have followed other disciplines in taking a *performative turn* [5,86–88]. Through the lens of the concept of *agencements*, Refs. [86,89] theorises the ultimate form of power, where actors unconsciously and unreflexively behave as if the calculative devices through which they operationalise their daily working lives depict an objective truth about the world. In contemporary scholarship on performativity, an oft-cited example is how economists' descriptions of a form of scientific economic rationality comes to be enacted; i.e., actors begin to act *as-if* that were true: economic rationale would *perform* the economy [88]. Processes, which precede, constitute and operate in parallel to the fully performative realm and include processes of *framing and overflowing*. Framing involves influencing the ways problems (and their solutions) are interpreted, discursively represented, and understood by others. Actors who are able to dominate and gain legitimacy and support for a particular problem-framing by articulating the stakes involved and who and how to mobilise a response, will also hold power over overflowing processes; which is where new actors become involved in the construction (and struggles) of a particular discourse as it stabilises. To take a central role in processes of framing, overflowing, and the evolution of a dominant discourse (in terms of the construction of a discursively persuasive 'truth') is to wield power in performative terms. Indeed, Callon undertakes his own reflection on the political implications of his concepts of framing,

overflowing agencement and preformation [90]. Indeed, when legitimacy is opened to question and challenged, alternative actor coalitions are potentially able to take the normative high-ground in any ensuing controversy. They may have an interest in igniting controversy specifically to open up this space, highlighting the harm that incumbent actors have caused, and strategically developing the discursive and performative power to influence how the resulting *hybrid forums* [91] coalesce and in-turn potentially stabilise. ‘Hybrid forum’ is a term from [91] comprising a diversity of actors with an interest or ‘stake’ in a particular controversy or debate.

Hybrid forums comprise businesses, public authorities, academia, and also media, civil society, and not-for-profit organizations, such as consumer associations, where the latter have in common the characteristic that their very externality to the central protagonists enables their views to be trusted as independent, and whose judgements are therefore subjectively evaluated [4]. Hybrid forums and processes of overflowing can be strategically manipulated and are fluid, shifting through different stages of the emergence of new debates or competitive struggles. We can see that to be fully performative is to be fully legitimated, i.e., stabilised and (temporarily) no longer challenged [92]. We can see also that through concepts of framing, overflowing and the influencing of forums, power derives less from objective structural positions (such as in Bourdieu’s fields), and instrumental objective criteria such as uneven access to resources (whether material resources or expert knowledge) [87]; and more from creative capabilities of leadership and influence to operate across fluid boundaries and form effective cross-sector cross-disciplinary relationships [93–95].

These are qualities attributed to institutional entrepreneurs, and this is a world where reflexive institutional entrepreneurship thrives [96,97] and by extension we could say that institutional entrepreneurs are favoured in normative-networks as the new powerful actor of institutionalisation processes [3]. It is a world where power circulates through discourses that reify particular meanings [87]. It is also a world where reputation [98,99] and status are at stake under conditions of institutional pluralism [94]. Indeed, [87] encapsulate this world and its implications for power in the phrase: *putting (discursive) power into (performative) process* (ibid p. 472).

In Table 1, below, we summarise the position of these key authors and schools of thought spanning political science, sociology, and organizational institutionalism, and draw out the implications of each for the study of power in business models for sustainability (BMS).

**Table 1.** Implications for redressing the missing attention to power for business models for sustainability.

Authors	Concept	Implications for Business Models for Sustainability (BMS)
French & Raven (1968)	Power as influence and control over/through: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rewards</li> <li>• Coercion</li> <li>• Punishment</li> <li>• Legitimacy rights</li> <li>• Referent identification</li> <li>• Knowledge and expertise</li> </ul>	Ensure fair and transparent reward system Work to build legitimacy as an intentionally reflexive and explicit dimension of subjective value creation and positive reputation building within collaborative forums. Build reputation for transparent, open and shared knowledge formation and sharing
Gramsci (1971)	Power as the exploitation of dominant hegemonic positions.	Learn to challenge the status quo of the dominant hegemonic position, including challenging the bases of normative discourses
Foucault (1976, 1982)	Power is distributed through a network of relations.	Learn to identify and harness collective network-level capabilities, through reciprocity and co-construction techniques to build and maximise for collective value-



	Power is multi-directional and can flow from less to more powerful actors	proposition, value creation, and value capture, and negotiate a fair distribution and recognition/acknowledgement of shared value, early in the process rather than maximise for the individual.
Bourdieu (1996)	Power is relational within objective and relatively autonomous 'fields'	Understand the symbolic and material structuring of power within relatively autonomous fields, and use this to nourish and build effective cross-field, boundary-spanning relationships and intra- and inter-field benefits in terms of value-propositions, value creation and value capture.
Habermas (1996)	Power is distributed as an outcome, by virtue of deployment of shared and inclusive input processes and procedures. The outcome of discussions is deemed democratic only when those affected or their representatives participate in the decision-making.	Develop early-stage open, transparent fair and respectful co-constructive (input) deliberative processes in order to ensure democratic decision making and outputs/outcomes that are more constitutive of the wishes and insights of all actors. In order to reach a mutual understanding of value proposition, creation and capture.
Callon (1998, 2001, 2002, et al. 2007, 2009, 2011), Butler (2010)	Power under the 'performative turn'. Performativity becomes the ultimate form of power, where framings, overflows and hybrid forums are stabilised; no disruptive actors or actor-positions enter the arena and discourses are no longer reflexively opened up to question or challenged.	Understand and recognise the significance of framing, overflowing, and performativity in political struggles across different framings of a sustainability problem-solution space. By understanding power as relational and inter-subjective, seek to understand how power-relations are perceived by different actors in multi-actor collaborative forums.
Organizational Institutionalism perspectives Nilsson (2015); Greenwood et al. (2008); Hardy and Thomas (2017)	Power as relational and inter-subjective. Brings forth the potential of institutional entrepreneurs as intermediaries and change agents.	All cross-sector actors (private, public and non-profit) to commit to nurturing an internal capability for reflexive institutional entrepreneurship and learning, by undertaking continuous internal identification, monitoring, and responsiveness to the causes, affects (including positive affects) and consequences arising from uneven power relations between an organization and its external constituencies of diverse actors.  Consciously and explicitly seek to empower and capacity-build weaker actors in order to facilitate their full and fair participation in shared-value proposition, creation and capture processes.

### 3. Proposing a Research Agenda on Democratic Business Models for Sustainability (dBMS): An 'Ideal-Type' dBMS

In the previous section, we put the SBMs literature into conversation with political sciences to highlight and support our thesis of 'missing power' in SBMs scholarship to date. Our next step, and the purpose of this current section, is to progress a new research agenda on BMS, starting this task by reflecting on what would constitute an 'ideal type' of dBMS. To support our proposed concept, we use vignettes from the UK energy industry that portray the principles of dBMS. Findings to support the vignettes included in this

section have been accessed through OFGEM's official website, DNOs' official websites and, stakeholder testimonies.

Actual worlds of practice are messy and multi-faceted, with a number of factors influencing power dynamics residing outside the control of individual organizations or even outside the control of multi-actor coalitions of cross-sector actors, for example regulatory differences across industries and countries. Further, dBMS seek an ideal world where power asymmetries no longer exist. As Foucault acknowledges, a '*society without power relations can only be an abstraction*' [100]. We can, however, take [29] as our jumping-off point since they already broadened [11] definition, which understood SBMs as a system that '*helps describing, analysing, managing and communicating (i) a company's sustainable value proposition to its customers, and all other stakeholders (ii) how it creates and delivers this value, and (iii) how it captures economic value while maintaining or regenerating natural, social, and economic capital beyond its organizational boundaries*' (i.e., essentially a firm-centric approach); to [29] re-conceptualisation which emphasises a move from value created for stakeholders to value created *with and for* stakeholders. [31] also shift the firm-centric approach to a multi-actor focus in order to closely examine *value networks*; a move which brings into the frame the political question of *value distribution* across multiple and diverse actors. Nevertheless, it is [11] who provide us with the driving question for the current paper, and the impetus to propose an ideal-type dBMS by calling for further research on '*the political struggles between stakeholder groups who are involved in the creation of business models for sustainability within and across sectors*' (Ibid p8). We now introduce *Vignette One* below to provide a practical example of the impetus for establishing cross-sector collaborations for sustainability.

- Electricity Distribution Network Operators (DNOs) *Vignette One*—Setting up cross-sector collaborations for sustainability

The role of DNOs in the UK electricity industry are a near-invisible yet paradoxically a highly significant industrial actor. Key characteristics of the DNO sector are the monopolistic conditions under which companies operate and, hence, a market that is usually non-competitive due to policy and regulation. DNOs play a key role in the maintenance of the network and the distribution of electricity to industrial and domestic customers however, they have an 'invisible' identity; customers only come across them in cases of a power failure or network development. The consequences are twofold: from a company's point of view, DNOs lack the opportunity to directly communicate with their external environment; at the same time, companies can easily 'hide' behind their own responsibilities towards stakeholders and avoid change. Since 2015, the Office of Gas and Electricity Markets (OFGEM) that regulates the entire industry made cross-sector collaborations for sustainability compulsory for DNOs. This is to say that the dominating position of OFGEM in the industry has been the key incentive that 'put pressure' on DNOs to strategically initiate cross-sector collaborations and, therefore, build relationships with external actors whilst at the same time coordinating their relationships with the regulator.

We begin our formulation of an ideal-type dBMS by highlighting the need for democratic discourse concerning value at each of the three components of BMS. For example, for a fair, even and democratic process, all actors or representatives of the actors who comprise a dBMS should be provided with the opportunity to participate in the process of defining value creation, with reference to a particular sustainability setting, embedded within a specific sustainability problem-solution context around which the coalition of actors has been mobilised. Indeed, the very specification of who the relevant actors of a particular hybrid forum are and *ought* to be, and how this would be translated into governance arrangements aimed at creating systematic actions to ensure inclusive engagement of a wider range of societal actors and interests in the process of collective propositioning, creation, capture (and distribution) of value, would need to be conditions of a dBMS, through what Habermas calls a '*peaceful coordination of action*' [101]. *Vignette Two* below provides an example of the power relationships evident in collaborative forums.

- Electricity Distribution Network Operators (DNOs) Vignette Two—Managing collaborative multi-actors for sustainability

The formation of a cross-sector network by DNOs provides evidence of the role of power relations in collaborative fora. After the regulator declares the obligation of the company to form collaborative relations with actors, the company is responsible for contacting and engaging with social actors. Considering that the company already has a pre-set agenda of actions that may fulfil the regulator's expectations before they form the network, they are in a favourable position to instrumentally select the actors who will join and contribute. Furthermore, the company maintains the gate-keeping role in its communications with the regulator. This is to say that while all participating actors contribute to the network discussions, it is only the company who will decide the final agenda that will be communicated to the regulator. Therefore, the company holds a dominant position over other social actors.

dBMS is by default an environment which favours cooperative work between participating actors. And yet, since dBMS is also characterised by a normative commitment to participative democracy, it would acknowledge, as a pre-condition, a requirement to empower weaker voices in order to enable their effective participation. Alongside strategic policy-level commitment to re-balancing uneven communicative and participatory power asymmetries, would come a commitment to designing and implementing governance instruments which would, for example, recognise the need for measures such as providing resources for (voluntary) actors to travel to participatory meetings; holding meetings at times and locations that enable all interested parties to attend; and providing prior training to build confidence and knowledge for interested parties to effectively engage. Thus, dBMS goes beyond a simple invitation to participate. It extends to direct measures to facilitate, encourage and enable participation. Yet at the same time, and simultaneously, dBMS necessarily involve the ceding of a degree of objective hierarchical power and control of the kind described by [65] or implicated in Gramsci's hegemonic theory [66]. *Vignette Three* below provides an example of how collaborative forums can be utilised for stakeholder mutual benefit.

- Electricity Distribution Network Operators (DNOs) Vignette Three—Democratizing discourses within collaborative multi-actors for sustainability

Stakeholders who have initially been invited to engage in cross-sector collaborations with DNOs and other participants, recognise the dominant role and the political pressures DNOs are under to form collaborative forums for sustainability. Nevertheless, this is an emerging opportunity for stakeholders to join the discussions for sustainability with DNOs. DNOs also recognise the benefits resulting from cross-sector networks; as a result of the monopolistic nature of the DNOs sector, they had previously considered value proposition, value creation and, value capture through a very narrow lens. Therefore, participation in cross-sector collaborative forums for sustainability allow space for DNOs to broaden their interpretation of value proposition, creation and capture by developing an understanding of key stakeholder requirements. At the same time, stakeholders can use this space as a way to raise their concerns and challenges and, engage in discussions with DNOs. Therefore, collaborative forums are dynamic, take the role of communication platforms that aim to increase direct interaction and participation across companies and external groups and, eventually develop mutually beneficial actions for those involved.

Inside the powerful organization, the implications of ceding direct individual power to a more distributed form of collective power potentially initiates or exacerbates conflicts of institutional logics [102]. For example, a conflict between more inward-looking hierarchical power, typical of bureaucracy [64], and a more outward-looking normative appeal to social and environmental justice, potentially reaping longer-term organizational benefits, such as elevated reputational value and resilience. Where the organization makes a conscious decision (or is driven by other motivations, such as regulatory pressure as illustrated by the three vignettes) to organizationally shift towards a dBMS, this conscious

decision would need the support of senior management to build values of diversity, inclusivity and social and environmental justice into organizational policy, strategy, governance arrangements and practice. dBMS can also be affected by the presence of values-driven institutional entrepreneurs with skills and capabilities to engage in (internal) horizontal and vertical relationship-building; and (external) cross-sector relationship building thus bridging internal strategy with an accompanying commitment to external value-sharing.

At the level of coalition-to-coalition, or network-to-network, competitive struggles where different coalitions of diverse actors bring together researchers and scientists, producers, distributors, consumers and other actors involved in processes of framing and overflowing [6] power struggles will centre on which coalition(s) can more effectively capture discursive and performative stakes [86,87]. As research suggests “*entities achieve their form as a consequence of the relations in which they are located*” [103] and are thus, relational. Based on this view, actors acquire their properties in relation to others. As [104] points out, “*power is composed here and now by enrolling many actors in a given political and social scheme, and is not something that be stored up and given to the powerful by a pre-existing ‘society’*” (1986, p. 26). Considering that a dBMS results from the interlocking of different business models “*that an organizational unit uses to create, deliver, capture, and exchange sustainable value for, and in collaboration with, a broad range of stakeholders*” [23], we argue that the close collaboration of actors with diverse characteristics may shape the outcome of dBMS and contribute to a more democratic and fairer conceptualisation and implementation of value creation.

#### 4. Developing an Empirical Research Agenda

Our conceptual proposition highlights the significance of democratic participation in BMS, and illustrates how a systematic empirical investigation is now required to study the formation and steering of dBMS in practice. In doing so, it would be interesting, for example, to investigate whether in practice, actor participation, power relations and the consequences of power unevenness differ, or are similar, during each of the phases of value proposition, creation, capture and distribution, and whether these factors make a difference to concrete sustainability outcomes. Furthermore, we suggest future research adopts a comparative case study design and focuses on a range of industrial sectors and geographical locations (we have used DNOs as illustrative vignettes in this paper and acknowledge that significant further empirical work is required). This will allow for a deeper understanding of different dBMS and will shed light on how power relations manifest in different industries and different countries. For instance, it would be interesting to explore how value creation is conceptualised in regulated and in non-regulated industries to develop a thorough understanding of how power asymmetries between the participating actors affect the conceptualisation of value. Our next step therefore is to propose a set of questions to drive an empirical agenda to assist in the development of theory and practical evidence on the nature and consequences of power relations in business models for sustainability, and further develop and refine the concept of dBMS. In terms of generating a standardised set of questions in order to systematically interrogate dBMS empirically, we recommend the following:

*At the level of the multi-actor forum:*

- a. Do different actors share a common view on who should participate in the forum? Which additional actors do they think should join/leave the conversation? Is there a common or disparate view on who is framing the problem-solution(s) that different coalitions of actors are addressing? Do different actors agree on the dominant framing? If not, how would they wish to see the problem (re)framed?
- b. Do different actors hold a common (network level) view on value proposition, value creation, value capture, and the distribution of value across and between actors of the network? Do different actors perceive that their views and inputs are respected

in network-level decision making and development or do they feel silenced or disregarded in processes of negotiation of value proposition, creation, capture and distribution?

- c. Are power relationships, and the causes, effects and consequences of uneven power perceived and experienced differently across different actors involved in participative processes, whether formalised or informal participation (including antagonistic or critical participation)?
- d. Can actors point to evidence where deliberations in-practice have had a bearing on concrete sustainability improvements (economic/environmental-ecological/social equity and justice)?

*At the level of a primary organization:*

- a. Is the organization motivated to initiate and/or participate in the establishment of participative multi-actor forums to collectively and co-constructively negotiate value proposition, creation, capture and distribution?
- b. Is the organization able to translate the co-ordination of such forums into formal governance arrangements? If yes, how are these organized and run in practice?
- c. Is the organization motivated to go beyond regulatory or voluntary policy compliance? And, if there is the motivation to do so, is it able to go beyond compliance?
- d. Is the organization reflexively conscious about the effects and consequences of asymmetrical power within the framing and scoping of the problem that the forums are established to address?
- e. Is the organization consciously aware of any problems concerning the way the forums are constituted or organized that might be exacerbating uneven power between actors (for example gender or other diversity imbalances)?
- f. Is the organization consciously motivated and able to launch an internal organizational reflexive process on the benefits (and challenges) of identifying and re-balancing uneven power in multi-actor forums, both procedurally and in terms of sustainability outcomes?
- g. Does the organization feel equipped with the tools, techniques, capacities, capabilities and resources of a learning organization, able to be continually and reflexively adaptive and responsive through iterative processes of observation, evaluation, correction, and adaptation? Is it motivated to learn and critically reflect on current practice and adopt change (give evidence)?
- h. Does it have the structures, knowledge and expertise to embrace dBMS?
- i. In an ideal world, what do different actors within the organization view as democratic participation in a BMS? What are the benefits (and challenges) for the organization and the range of external constituencies of actors would stem from it?

## 5. Concluding Remarks

Our paper explored the role of power and power relations in the shaping and steering of value creation in BMS and found that, whilst a key consideration, there is a dearth of literature that examines the role of power in business models for sustainability. In building on this finding, and the associated gap in extant research, our study contributes to the literature by proposing the concept of democratic Business Models for Sustainability (dBMS). In developing dBMS we recognise the contributions of scholars to the existing literature on SBMs who recognise the importance and opportunities for the study of power [11,23,27,29] yet note how they do not explicitly seek to further this stream of research. We therefore aim to bridge this gap by offering a new research agenda around the theory and practice of dBMS. The proposed concept of dBMS offers interesting directions for the development of a future research agenda. Considering the role of socio-political influences on the conceptualisation and materialisation of value creation, further work is necessary to empirically investigate the role that different social, political or/and economic conditions, as well as a diverse group of actors, will have on the creation of value through

collaborative cross-sector business models. Following on from the proposed concept of dBMS, we therefore provide a set of questions that can support the development of an empirical research agenda and assist practitioners in ensuring democratization, and fruitful outcomes, in BMS. We believe that the proposed questions can be used as guidelines and principles in the formation of collaborative business models where different voices are evenly acknowledged, appreciated and respected.

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