


ESR 11

Project title and research strand:	Developing a common language for biobased value circles. Strand 4: Methodology.	
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Abstract

Operationalizing sustainability in corporations remains challenging. Existing studies are predominantly niched and focus on sustainability professionals or top-level managers to comprehend the practical hurdles experienced in sustainability projects, overlooking broader perspectives. Therefore, this research examined the viewpoint of practitioners from various levels and departments within a multinational corporation (MNC) to unveil challenge patterns encountered in sustainability projects, as well as potential implications for the organization. Through a systems lens, this research dives deeper into system structures that promote such challenge patterns, as well as on mental models that generate such structures. Overall, the results highlight the dynamic and interconnected nature of the identified challenges. Results also indicate that the proliferation of symbolic activities is an important practical implication of the challenges presented in this study, being rooted in system structures that are boosted by the focus on short-term benefits. In general, this study offers an interdisciplinary and integrative perspective on barriers to the implementation of sustainability in a corporate context, emphasizing the need for a systems approach to better comprehend the interplay between company and individual factors in business transformations towards sustainability.

Sustainability in practice: unveiling intraorganizational challenges through a systems perspective

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background Businesses are experiencing increasing pressure to accelerate their transition toward more sustainable practices.¹ Still, operationalizing sustainability in a corporate context remains challenging.



However, literature in the field of corporate sustainability still has relevant limitations^{4,5}

- Diverse perspectives are overlooked
- Limited empirical understanding and original data gathering from multinational corporations (MNC)
- Fragmented and niched research

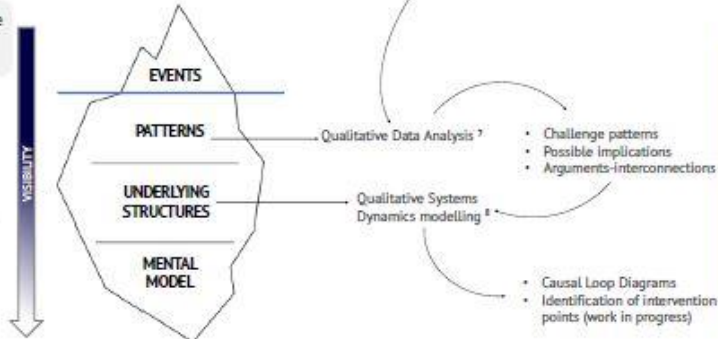
Case Study
MNC (Life sciences industry)

51 data points
9 semi-structured interviews
39 valid survey responses
6 validation interviews
+ Sustainability Report (2022)

Diversity
Background, years working for the company, geographic regions, hierarchy levels...

To address literature gaps and provide in-depth and integrative insights, this study employed an interdisciplinary theoretical foundation, mostly grounded in systems theory.⁶

- What are the most pressing challenges experienced by employees involved in sustainability-related projects?
- What are the possible practical implications of such challenges for the organization?
- What are the causal links that support the proliferation of symbolic sustainability activities in the case company? How do such structures affect employee engagement in sustainability?
- Which mental models may generate such structures?



methodological approach

main findings

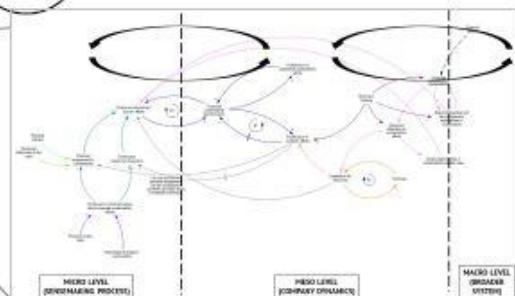
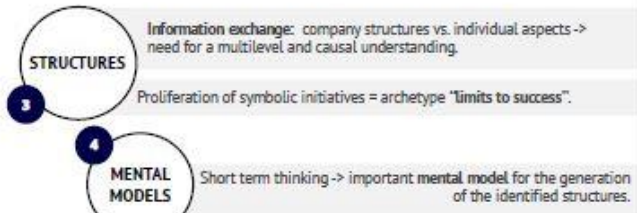
Challenge patterns are related to different contextual levels, spanning from company to teams and individuals.



Challenge patterns are interconnected, possibly reinforcing the proliferation of symbolic sustainability activities.

Symbolic sustainability activities play an ambiguous role in employee's engagement: while some feel inspired, others become increasingly skeptical.

¹ Symbolic sustainability initiatives allow companies to manage their reputation under a low budget while keeping their business, public and structures mostly the same.⁷



concluding remarks

- A multilevel and systems perspective is necessary when approaching challenges related to the implementation of sustainability in a corporate context -> Assistance on decision-making, identification of leverage points, avoiding or predicting rebound effects.
- Contribution to the fragmented research field of corporate sustainability -> interdisciplinary and integrative research approach.
- Further studies: information exchange across company levels; sense-making vs. sense-giving; trade-off management between short- and long-term thinking.