

State-of-the-art and conceptual issues : Agribusiness and sustainability

Sustainability in Agribusiness

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1 State-of-the-art and conceptual issues

Agribusiness and sustainability

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Introduction

Agriculture is at a crossroads. While producers face mounting pressure to produce more food, at the same time, they face climate change, market volatility, pandemics, and shifting nutrition needs, in addition to the increasing physical resources' scarcity (Giovannucci et al., 2012). Furthermore, producers front on pressure to produce *sustainably*, entailing the adoption of behaviors geared toward minimizing environmental impact while maximizing social opportunities (Calicioglu et al., 2019).

According to the FAO 2021SOFA¹ report, fragile agriculture can affect many: it is estimated that 3 billion people cannot afford a healthy diet, and an additional 1 billion might add to this figure if a shock were to reduce their income by one-third. Poverty and hunger are, paradoxically, most evident among people in rural areas who earn a living from agriculture. Eradicating these issues requires measures to support productivity as well as the profitability of agriculture, linking farmers to markets. In addition, women in such contexts tend to experience greater barriers than men and suffer from unequal access to economic opportunities (Calicioglu et al., 2019). Hence, the enhanced resilience of agribusinesses is of paramount importance to ensuring food security, nutrition, livelihoods, and social inclusion for many.

The onset of sustainability represents an increase in the task environment complexity that agribusinesses deal with (Schneider et al., 2017). Firms are expected to expound greater accountability and comply with a new set of social norms and values (Lubin & Esty, 2010). Moreover, it has been suggested that sustainability has shifted societal perceptions of the nature of business in that its role now goes beyond production and commercialization, extending to engaging with tackling grand challenges, and even assuming roles traditionally considered under the public sector (Maak et al., 2016). Moreover, under the UN 2030 SDGs Agenda, business organizations in agriculture have been singled out as critical agents of change under the assumption that governments may take too much time to redress environmental and social ills (George et al., 2015; Howard-Grenville et al., 2014).

In this context, a steadfast interest has emerged in terms of agribusiness sustainability research being found in varied management domains, such as international business, marketing, organization theory, and strategy. Multiple research approaches have, in turn, led to a bewildering collection of findings, such that a coherent body has not yet emerged. Against this backdrop, we take stock of extant literature guided by the following research questions: (1) How is sustainability shaping the institutional environment in which agribusinesses operate? (2) How is sustainability permeating agribusinesses and their inter-organizational contexts at the level of market and supply chains? (3) What are the main outcomes of the implementation of sustainability in the agribusiness context? (4) What are the relevant research avenues to further explore the implementation of sustainability in agriculture business organizations?

Our review findings provide a multilevel framework of agribusiness sustainability linking institutional changes as *antecedents*; organizational and value chain sustainability as *processes*; and the viability and contribution to sustainable development of business as *outcomes*. This effort aims to identify promising research avenues that may guide future research endeavors.

Method for literature review

We conducted our review by selecting relevant literature in the field in an objective and reproducible manner and synthesizing results in a qualitative fashion (Fink, 2014). Our core search terms pertain to agribusiness and sustainability. Our working definition for agribusiness includes any business firm carrying out agriculture-related activities, including growing crops, raising animals, and harvesting fish and other animals from a farm, ranch, or their natural habitats (EPA, 2021²). In addition, we define sustainability as a firm's observable actions encompassing a broad set of stakeholder expectations, including environmental and social objectives (Aguinis & Glavas, 2012). We employed a two-pronged strategy – entailing sampling as well as coding and analysis – as described later.

Sampling. We gathered the state of the art of agribusiness and sustainability at the *organizational* level of analysis. In so doing, we focused on the body of work within mainstream management and organization studies (MOS) publications. We thus limited the search to the leading nine, high-impact MOS journals, following previous reviews (e.g., Hällgren et al., 2018; Locke & Golden-Biddle, 1997; Schnatterly et al., 2018), namely, Academy of Management Journal (AMJ), Academy of Management Review (AMR), Administrative Science Quarterly (ASQ), Journal of International Business Studies (JIBS), Journal of Management (JOM), Journal of Management Studies (JMS), Organization Science (Org Science), Organization Studies (Org Studies), and Strategic Management Journal (SMJ) (Bansal & Song, 2017).

We relied on a pre-defined selection algorithm for sample selection. The search was run using the Boolean phrase “*Results for [All agri*] AND [All sustainab*] within (Publication) Research Article*” using EBSCOhost and ProQuest databases to access our targeted journals. The algorithm considers the family

of stemmed words (e.g., agriculture, agricultural, agribusiness) that were used as the search criteria in the titles, keywords, and abstracts of articles (excluding book reviews, replies, and introductions to special issues). Results covered all published research complying with the former criteria as of June 2021. After review of the abstracts and introduction section of original 591 search results, 64 articles were identified as having implications for either agribusiness or sustainability. We further excluded another 26 articles because they were not strictly within the intersection between agribusiness *and* sustainability.

The final sample thus yielded 38 relevant articles. Figure 1.1 depicts our search strategy. Figure 1.2 depicts the evolution of published articles per year.

Coding and Analysis. Data were analyzed using content analysis. This method reduces data and facilitates the analysis of a large quantum of text (Krippendorff, 2004). We used a formalized and inductively derived codebook for the coding

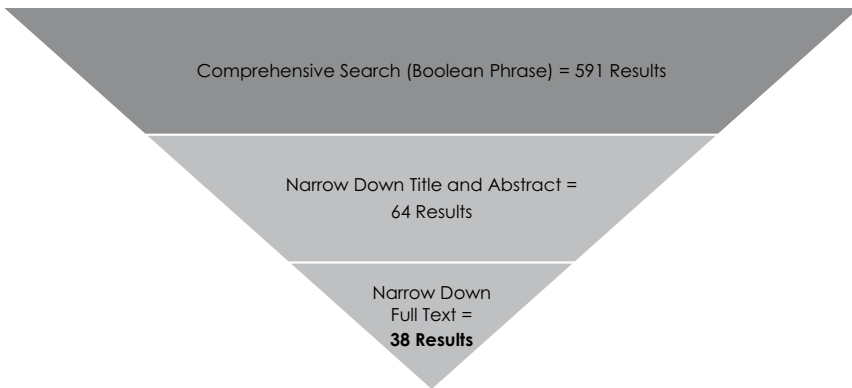


Figure 1.1 Narrowing down the body of work

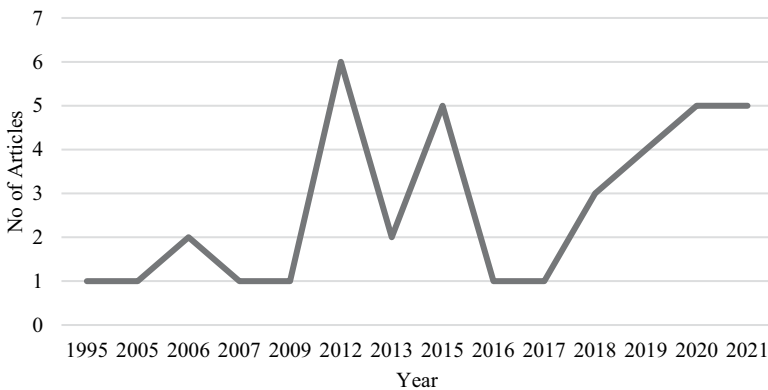


Figure 1.2 Articles per year

process. To ensure plausibility and reliability, multiple rounds of coding were conducted with independent researchers. Differences were to be used as opportunities for clarifying or expanding the codebook. Upon reaching a consensual codebook, within-theme and between-theme comparisons were employed to identify emerging themes (Eisenhardt, 1989).

Disciplinary, methodological, and contextual orientation of agribusiness sustainability research

Disciplinary Orientation. In-sample articles were published in nine leading management publications and four main disciplinary domains, as shown in Figure 1.3. Organizational theory – that is, concerned with the behavior of individuals or groups or subgroups, interacting with each other to perform activities intended toward accomplishing organizational goals – is, by far, the dominant disciplinary focus.

Methodological Orientation. In terms of the methodological approaches, the field is dominated by empirical papers (both quantitative and qualitative). Nonetheless, in-sample articles primarily employed qualitative or mixed methods inquiry (26 out of 38 articles), further reflecting the emerging nature of the field. In this vein, as shown in Figure 1.2, relevant articles exhibit recent steady growth as of 2017.

Contextual Coverage. Regarding geographic settings, unlike the broader management literature where research chiefly has a developed country focus (Aguinis et al., 2020), agribusiness and sustainability show a more balanced focus between Global North (Europe and North America: 18 articles) and Global South (Latin America and other developing countries: 13 articles) countries. Such an unprecedented representation of Global South countries as research settings may be explained by their relative abundance of natural resources and their commodity-based economies (Shapiro et al., 2018).

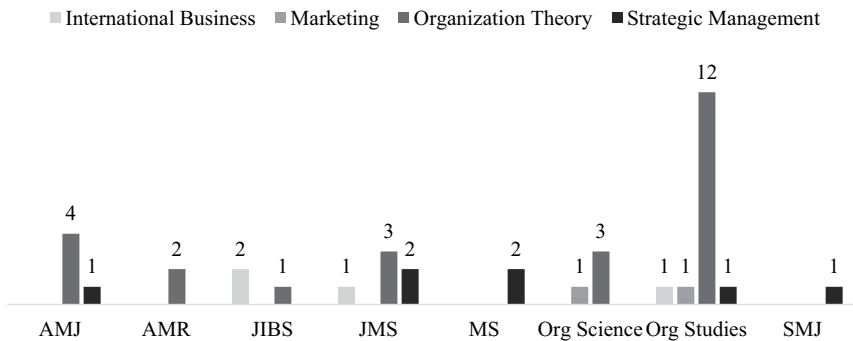


Figure 1.3 Publications per journal and disciplinary orientation

Theoretical underpinnings and major themes

During the systematic review process, we found that the theoretical framework of over one-third in-sample articles ($n = 13$) was based on neo-institutional theory (Scott, 1995). In most cases, it was not used on a stand-alone basis but in combination with other theories, and chiefly with stakeholder theory (Freeman, 1984). The former result is unsurprising since as agribusinesses are at the forefront of numerous environmental and social issues, they are increasingly looked upon by stakeholders to provide stewardship in addressing them through sustainability initiatives (Dauvergne & Lister, 2012).

Review results uncovered five emerging themes addressing the following phenomena: (1) coping with institutional change and legitimacy threats ($n = 7$; 19%); (2) organizational change in light of sustainability ($n = 5$; 13%); (3) engaging in sustainable value chains ($n = 11$; 29%); (4) viability of sustainable enterprise ($n = 10$; 26%); and (5) contributing to sustainable development ($n=5$; 13%).

We synthesize these various strands of conversation into a multilevel framework of agribusiness sustainability. Figure 1.4 depicts the organizing framework. The forthcoming sub-sections describe and integrate the findings of the literature around emerging themes.

Institutional change and legitimacy

Our first theme is reflective of a broader phenomenon concerning the shifting paradigm defining agribusiness legitimacy, pertaining to how sector firms deal with demands to comply with sustainability as new social norm or “institution” affecting their ability to stand as competitive players and even survive (Bansal, 2005).

Specifically, agribusinesses operating in industries such as coffee, chocolate, and tea have been in the spotlight due to frequent social justice and

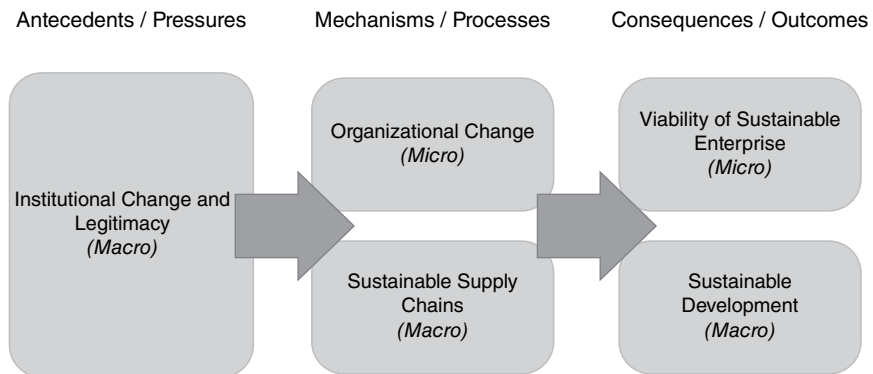


Figure 1.4 Organizing framework

environmental transgressions (Richards et al., 2017). On the one hand, the exclusion of historically marginalized stakeholder groups like Indigenous peoples (George et al., 2016) compels agribusinesses to come up with an explicit understanding of Indigenous perceptions of justice. Whiteman (2009) shows that Indigenous peoples perceive situations as unjust when interactions, procedures, and decisions either are not reflective of their culture or result from contested power relations. In turn, when Indigenous peoples feel relations are unjust, social withdrawal and active resistance against businesses may arise.

On the other hand, agribusinesses have been subject to legitimacy threats related to ecological hazards. Kwon and Constantinides (2017) underscore the role of stakeholder group ideologies and the cognitive framings of ecological crises. Richards and colleagues (2017) find that firms relying on “*civic and green*” communication – exalting collective above individual values, and a harmonious relationship between humans and nature – versus “*domestic*” communication – exalting honoring traditions, personal ties, and family values – as a method of moral legitimization before external stakeholders are more prone to invest in sustainability certification.

Sustainability certifications are an attempt to show a firm’s ethical standing that may potentially enhance a firm’s legitimacy and avoid social withdrawal (Richards et al., 2017). Despite greater international convergence (Waddock, 2008), national institutional structures and political traditions around the world are important factors in explaining variance in how governments, NGOs, and the broader polity implement sustainability in different parts of the world (Matten & Moon, 2008).

Doh and Guay (2006) examined how differences in the institutional environments of the United States and Europe affected expectations about corporate responsibilities toward society concerning the regulation of genetically modified organisms (GMOs). They found that the relatively higher awareness of and support for sustainability in Europe (*vis-à-vis* the United States) created an environment that was more responsive to NGO influence in the GMO trade. In particular, Europe’s greater resistance to GMO technology was related to three perceived environmental risks by NGOs, concerning (1) harm to non-target species, (2) genetic modification of native species, and (3) evolving resistance to protective features. In a similar vein, Voronov et al. (2013) investigated how agribusinesses seeking legitimacy within a global institutional framework manage the pressure to conform to international sustainability standards while also exploiting local distinctiveness. They show that conformity to and distinctiveness from global institutional norms do not represent two ends of the same continuum. Instead, in the case of Ontario fine wine production, conformity and distinctiveness jointly manifest as “*glocalization*,” where global and local elements are combined in the pursuit of legitimacy.

More recently, Lee and colleagues (2017) have explored the complexity associated with attaining both legitimacy and distinctiveness as they examined how a standards-based certification organization balanced concerns related to legitimate organic foods (i.e., a new market category) while retaining a distinctive

identity among members. Authors find that the pursuit of legitimacy involved a standards organization diluting the initial collective identity of the membership. However, by shifting the meaning of “organic” from the producer to the product, the organization was able to strengthen the categorical boundary and enhance its legitimacy (Lee et al., 2017).

The previous discussion suggests that other actors supporting agribusinesses, such as market intermediaries and regulators, are also subject to legitimacy threats. Hiatt and Park (2013) show how powerful stakeholders such as farmers’ associations, big biotechnology corporations (e.g., Monsanto), and peer agencies (e.g., FDA in the United States) influence the rate of regulatory approval of GMO products. Authors find that whereas the influence of powerful stakeholders increased with greater *external* threats to legitimacy (e.g., if congressional electoral competitiveness is high and in the presence of GMO protests), the influence of peer agencies increased with *internal* threats to legitimacy (i.e., in the case of products from non-US firms, and if biotechnology product is novel).

Organizational change

The second theme pertains to variations in organizational responses to emerging institutional demands. Findings point to a complex relationship among stakeholders’ influence, the ambition of organizational goals, the structure of learning, and how that shapes the processes by which organizations engage with sustainability through, for instance, environmental management practices (Roome & Wijen, 2006).

Social movements have been deemed salient stakeholders that, through regular educative activities, may introduce new orders of worth to be used by consumers while shopping to evaluate agricultural products in terms of sustainability-related criteria, such as proximity, less packaging, local production, seasonality, and non-GM-fed (Dubuisson-Quellier, 2013). That said, the existence of new (sustainable) criteria for consumer choices may bring about valuable business opportunities and avenues for greater competitiveness.

In this connection, Valente (2012) finds that “sustaincentric” organizations – defined as firms equitably including interconnected social, ecological, and economic decision-making criteria – demonstrated a capacity for cognitive complexity and developing strong links with interconnected stakeholder groups, fostering sustainable competitive advantages. In particular, sustaincentric agricultural firms show (1) a prevalence of women as income earners resulting in access to education and healthcare; (2) a departure from industry norms of farmer exploitation and provision of fair margins, training, finance, and access to market; and (3) organic practices aimed at mending ecological issues (e.g., deforestation or biodiversity loss).

In turn, Lepoutre and Valente (2012) examined to what extent agribusinesses may become immune to and deviate from dominant institutional logics in the context of contradictory sustainability-related demands. Authors find that immunity emerges from decision-makers’ cognitive maps connecting a

deviating logic with future change. Hence, managerial cognition explains variance in non-conformity at the organizational level. More recently, notwithstanding, scholars are departing from traditional views where agribusinesses are generic catalysts of sustainability-related institutional demands to shed light on how specific biomaterial qualities of agricultural products may affect organizational efforts (Moser et al., 2021).

Sustainable value chains

Given increased expectations of social responsibility not only within organizational boundaries but also along multi-tiered agricultural supply chains, firms have responded by incorporating sustainability concerns into their management, toward standing as sustainable players and, in turn, participating in global value networks (Murcia et al., 2021). Schrempf-Stirling and Palazzo (2016) submit that, in the case of global buyers (chiefly, consumer product multinational firms), the debate shifted from focusing narrowly on “contract responsibility” for monitoring suppliers’ social and environmental hazards, to “full producer responsibility,” expanding responsibility to the whole chain regardless of contracting status.

In this context, also characterized by the absence of international hard law, voluntary standards have mushroomed to address sustainability demands, to the point where multiple social movements and industry-driven standards organizations are both competing and collaborating when it comes to governing global value chains (Reinecke et al., 2012). However, sustainability remains an ambiguous category, posing significant challenges for actors to collectively agree on its contents and desirable outcomes (Reinecke & Ansari, 2015b). Both incumbent businesses and challengers (e.g., NGOs) interact around sustainability practices such that both the meaning and practice of sustainability shift along this process and across different locations (Arnold & Loconto, 2020; Levy et al., 2016).

Recent research has focused on how proliferating sustainability standards may also foster the inclusion and active participation in agricultural supply chains, as well as the self-sufficiency of firms located in the developing world. Developing countries, characterized by commodity-rich economies, have not always been successful in translating such natural wealth into inclusive development (Rodríguez-Labajos et al., 2019). Moreover, Knight and colleagues (2007) find that a firm’s country-of-origin – particularly, in the case of developing world firms – may lead them to face issues of confidence and trust in terms of integrity of local production, certification, and regulatory systems, such that they risk exclusion from value networks. Gammelgaard et al. (2020) argue that the underlying mechanisms explaining developing world firms’ exploitation and exclusion pertain to local consequences being decoupled from global goals through governance gaps in both the horizontal and vertical dimensions of sustainability standards implementation, such that they should be integrated into a single framework of “*transglobal*” value chain governance.

Furthermore, a number of articles discuss the role of NGOs in facilitating both the adoption of global sustainability practices and the actual inclusion of farmers from low-income countries in global agricultural chains. Instead of following prescribed “imported” international standards, findings point to the relative superior effectiveness of approaches that emphasize local experimentation, livelihood and capacity-building, socio-environmental focus, and sensitivity toward historical relationships between the “foreigner” and the locals in order to address key uncertainties associated with locally novel sustainable agricultural practices (Claus et al., 2021; Dyck & Silvestre, 2019; McCarthy & Moon, 2018; McKague et al., 2015; van Wijk et al., 2020).

Viability of sustainable enterprise

The third emerging theme taps into the organizational performance implications of engaging with sustainability. In particular, as new (sustainability-related) institutional demands arise and consumer preferences change, it is worth examining how entrepreneurs make sense of and exploit sustainable agribusiness opportunities (Hiatt & Carlos, 2019). Research finds that the framing contests used by stakeholders may shape an entrepreneur’s cognitive understanding of markets in ways that may enact different guidelines for market activity. In this connection, Negro and colleagues (2015) examined whether membership in a “sustainable” market category may operate as a signal for quality. In the context of sustainable viticulture, authors find that membership in a high-contrast category (i.e., “biodynamic”) sends a stronger market signal relative to a low-contrast category (i.e., “organic”) (Negro et al., 2015).

Moreover, it has been argued that an oppositional identity (i.e., membership in a sustainable market category), a sharply defined identity, is likely to face stigmatization (Siltaoja et al., 2020), and may potentially have to involve small-scale production and limits to organizational growth for such signaling to be “credible” and stable (Sikavica & Pozner, 2013). That said, the participation of established outsider organizations may help in scaling sustainable agricultural markets. In particular, a study by Hedberg and Lounsbury (2021) highlights the role of a cross-sector partnership in bridging local-sustainable and industrial food production logics. They find that such bridging was facilitated by cultural entrepreneurship that initially focused on communications that decoupled the values and practices associated with the local-sustainable food logic, and subsequently, reinfused community values by valorizing stories and activities that recoupled those values after logic conflict was diminished.

In a similar vein, several studies examined whether and when sustainable enterprise forms have a performance advantage over traditional agribusinesses. Boone and Özcan (2016) find that *focused* (vs. diversified) product-market engagement, combined with sufficient investment and careful planning, may render a lower failure rate for sustainable agribusinesses vis-à-vis corporations. In addition, careful planning combined with the adoption of sustainable agricultural practices (e.g., crop rotation) may yield superior results in terms of

profitability and the individual welfare of farmers (Boyabatlı et al., 2019; Hu et al., 2019). More recently, Slade Shantz and colleagues (2020) zoomed in on the role of governance structures in mitigating conflict among organizational members that may lead to failure. Results suggest that formal hierarchical control structures lead to lower levels of collective psychological ownership, which, in turn, results in higher levels of conflict vis-à-vis flat control structures. However, these findings also suggest that the extent to which formal structures influence conflict can be contingent upon the presence of a strong informal hierarchy (e.g., age-based authority) that may diminish conflict (Slade Shantz et al., 2020).

Finally, along their developmental journey, sustainable enterprises may suffer from (present) resource constraints that may compromise their (future) long-term commitment to sustainable development. Kim et al. (2019) contend that previous studies have described the present as a “moment” in time, allowing managers to make intertemporal trade-offs for sustainable development. However, as producers do not see the future as a trade-off with the present and see duration in the present (a “long present”), they may be better placed to identify links among processes, such as resource flows (vs. stocks), inspiring incremental sustainability-oriented actions that may also alleviate resource shortages and enhance enterprise viability.

Contributing to sustainable development

The final merging theme fundamentally acknowledges that agribusinesses play a vital role in reducing poverty and the insecurity of food production; at the same time, they need to become ever more conscious of natural limits to support their growth (Shrivastava, 1995). Moreover, agribusiness's impact on the natural environment is, at the time of this writing, no longer a vague concept, but it can rather be addressed via explicit measurement of planetary boundary processes (Whiteman et al., 2013).

The remaining articles encompassed in this theme focus on how business activities may be harnessed to ameliorate chronic poverty and broader forms of economic exploitation. Peredo and Chrisman (2006) present community-based entrepreneurship as a prospective holistic strategy for the sustainable alleviation of poverty, integrating economic, social, cultural, environmental, and political aspects of the community in question. Of recent, international business scholars have started to focus on the effects of forms of foreign direct investment and the launch of international agribusinesses in developing countries and their interplay with local and even community-level institutions.

Brandl and colleagues (2021) show how land acquisitions from multinational agribusinesses may increase rural poverty via the degradation of community strength (degree to which a community is interdependent and tight-knit). For their part, Parente et al. (2021) survey how local agribusinesses can maintain visibility and the salience of catch-up investments and initiatives subsequent to the entry and dominance of multinationals. Their findings underscore the

critical roles of public sector organizations and public–private networks in technological catch-up. They find that, Embrapa, a public sector organization in Brazil forged partnerships to first develop absorptive capacity and innovation capabilities, and then build a diverse ecosystem to generate and disseminate catch-up outcomes to end users. Embrapa also developed critical knowledge and assets that, along with pursuing environmental sustainability and protecting national interests, remained salient after multinational companies entered the market (Parente et al., 2021).

Sustainability and agribusiness: a future research agenda

The forthcoming discussion of our review results allowed us to identify promising research avenues in each of the categories highlighted in our theoretical framework.

Institutional change and legitimacy. Papers in this category report on the actions initiated by, more generically, single actors to gain legitimacy in the market and society. For instance, the work of Voronov et al. (2013) shows the selective compliance of actors in terms of global norms and the adaptation of these norms to local conditions as two non-mutually exclusive paths followed by actors to seek legitimation in the global context. However, the authors indicated the need for future research examining differences between adaptation to local norms and selective compliance to global norms.

In this connection, Lee et al. (2017) revealed the double-edged nature of legitimacy, presenting the path toward it as made up of a series of trade-offs to be addressed. In this vein, future research drawing on paradox theory (e.g., Smith & Lewis, 2011) may examine how firms can address the various tensions involved in legitimacy-seeking trajectories in new markets, including tensions between values and related logics. Also, future studies may also explore the role of standards organizations in the formation of new markets and successful legitimation.

The work by Whiteman (2009) underscores the importance of effective management of Indigenous stakeholder groups in gaining social license to operate in the natural resources sector. Whiteman (2009) contends that Indigenous cultures conceive justice in a broader fashion, weaving relations that operate in social, ecological, and spiritual spheres. This view can lead to raising new questions and studies: How do organizations interact and impact a variety of complex relations embedded in specific local ecologies? How can organizations restore and repair harmonious relations for themselves and with neighboring peoples?

Richards et al. (2017) discussed moral legitimization at the organizational level. They found that the dominant use of the “domestic world” is negatively related to the firm’s investment in sustainability certifications. Based on this exploratory study, future research can investigate how such firms may still obtain moral legitimization and attract resources. Moreover, research may examine whether the co-existence of multiple worlds may create tensions

within organizations and reveal the conditions under which they may achieve sustainability. Additional work may survey how investments in sustainability certifications relate to a firm's performance.

Kwon and Constantinides (2017) go in greater depth into the micro-foundations of moral reasoning and how this may lead to polarized debates in the context of ecological crises. Being one of the first studies of its kind, future research may further explore how the narratives used by different stakeholders affect the trajectory of a crisis. Additional studies could also verify whether the nature of crisis can affect the way opposing stakeholders react and enact their course of action.

Lastly, Hiatt and Park (2013) also take a micro-foundational approach, studying regulatory agencies as social actors aiming to defend their legitimacy. Future research may explore the influence tactics enacted by third-party actors impacting regulatory decision-making. Table 1.1 summarizes our suggested research avenues.

Organization change. In this category, we have included papers illustrating the impact the natural environment and food materiality *per se* may have on the way firms get organized for food. Along with Moser et al. (2021), we submit to the need to devote more attention to not only the moral issues in food organizing but also the influence global food corporations have on the environment, as well as to the link between food production and consumption and climate change.

The work by Roome and Wijen (2006) lies precisely at the intersection between organizing food and the natural environment. Authors call for more research to enhance our understanding of the role of external agency when it

Table 1.1 Future research avenues within “Institutional change and legitimacy”

<i>Research avenue 1</i>	<i>Unpacking differences between adaptation to local norms and selective compliance to global norms</i>
<i>Research avenue 2</i>	<i>Examining how firms may address the various tensions involved in legitimacy-seeking trajectories in new markets, including tensions between values and related logics using the paradox framework</i>
<i>Research avenue 3</i>	<i>Analyzing the role of standards organizations in the formation of new markets and successful legitimation</i>
<i>Research avenue 4</i>	<i>Investigating how organizations interact and impact a variety of complex relations embedded in specific local ecologies and how organizations restore and repair harmonious relations for themselves and with neighboring peoples</i>
<i>Research avenue 5</i>	<i>Examining how firms relying on different narratives obtain moral legitimization in the public audience and attract resources. Verifying if the co-existence of narratives can create tensions in the organizations and exploring implications for sustainability and performance</i>
<i>Research avenue 6</i>	<i>Exploring how the narratives used by different stakeholders, as well as the nature of a crisis, affect its trajectory</i>
<i>Research avenue 7</i>	<i>Unpacking influence tactics enacted by third-party actors impacting regulatory decision-making</i>

comes to organizing food within firms. Additionally, new studies may explore the mediating effect of the organizational context expressed in terms of organizational ambitions, routines, networks, and the personal attributes of management. In a similar vein, Dubuisson–Quellier (2013) revealed how the centrality of food in people’s lives can help sector firms in shaping new norms and values in the task environment in which firms operate. However, more research is required to better understand social evaluations of food toward inducing more pervasive social change.

Conversely, the work by Valente (2012) proposed an inward-looking approach, bringing up the concept of “sustaincentrism.” This author argues for more new research developing tools to help businesses tackle complexities inherent in bridging various systems and stakeholders in the context of organizational decision-making. Table 1.2 summarizes the relevant research avenues related to this category.

Sustainable supply chains. This category comprises articles describing the challenges firms may face as they attempt to foster supply chain sustainability. A first challenge arises when trying to define the content and substance of sustainability in this context. Studies revealed the complexities involved when attempting “fair” product evaluations and prices that may account for sustainable production (Knight et al., 2007). A series of sensemaking mechanisms by which actors may reach consensus on what is “fair” and thus, ethical has been distilled (see Reinecke & Ansari, 2015a), but future research may develop a deeper understanding of the iterative nature of reflexive and interpretive work by social actors contextualizing and contingently modifying ethical evaluations on an ongoing basis. In addition, difficulties inherent to achieving a common definition of sustainability also manifest in the co-existence of businesses, social movements, and multiple industry-driven standards that compete over supply chain governance (Reinecke et al., 2012). Promising future research avenues pertain to getting to the bottom of the conditions that allow standards markets to work.

The study by Levy et al. (2016) reports on supply chain turbulence created by the presence of competing demands in the coffee sector: while civil society pushed for the adoption of sustainable production practices, mainstream coffee firms defended the status quo. Authors offered a process model of political corporate social responsibility showing how challengers and incumbents

Table 1.2 Future research avenues within “Organization change”

Research avenue 1	<i>Investigating the role of external agency in the organizing of food within firms and the mediating effect of the organizational context</i>
Research avenue 2	<i>Digging deeper into social evaluations to induce more pervasive change in the social order</i>
Research avenue 3	<i>Developing theoretical frameworks and tools to help firms tackle and reduce the complexity of interconnecting various systems and stakeholders in decision-making</i>

cooperated around sustainability practices, and how the practice and meaning of sustainability changed during the process. Future studies can further elaborate on the dynamics of NGO–business interaction in different sectors, allowing for a deeper examination of similarities and differences. Furthermore, current trends toward de-globalization in the context of the COVID-19 crisis and the resurgence of national economic priorities suggest potential government pushback against global standards as they would tend to prioritize domestic industries as national economies struggle to recover (Marques & Eberlein, 2020). Why and how national governments strategically engage with global sustainability standards remains largely unexplored. Future work may also extend the model to contexts where either firms only adopted ceremonial behaviors or challengers have succeeded in implementing substantive change.

The work by Gammelgaard et al. (2020) zooms into how local standards adoption may be dissociated from global goals due to both the horizontal and vertical governance gaps. Arnold and Loconto (2020), for their part, show how local producers in Ghana translate global standards into locally contingent networks. These studies showcase the importance of embracing agency and collective work. Furthermore, Claus et al. (2021) contend that standards adoption across institutionally distant contexts demands strategies enabling cultural detachment and assimilation that may foster respect for local meaning systems. In addition, studies by McKague et al. (2015), as well as Dyck and Silvestre (2019), highlight the relevance of intermediaries like NGOs that may conduct an adequate reading and interpretation of the characteristics of the context and may tackle local changes, such as gender inequality, more effectively (McCarthy & Moon, 2018). In this regard, future research may extend insights here offered to other high-distance translation contexts. Table 1.3 summarizes suggested research avenues.

Viability of sustainable enterprise. Papers in this category have collected information on external and internal drivers for sustainability-oriented firms to achieve sustainable positions in the market. The work by Hiatt and Carlos, (2019) calls for further studies to shed further light on the complex relationship

Table 1.3 Research avenues within “Sustainable supply chains”

<i>Research avenue 1</i>	<i>Developing a deeper understanding of the iterative nature of reflexive and interpretive work by social actors contextualizing and contingently modifying ethical evaluations on an ongoing basis</i>
<i>Research avenue 2</i>	<i>Collecting more papers on the mechanisms allowing the co-existence of different standards markets and the conditions allowing them to work</i>
<i>Research avenue 3</i>	<i>Devoting more attention to the implementation of multiple standards with their consequent translation process enacted by local agents</i>
<i>Research avenue 4</i>	<i>Elaborating on the dynamic processes of NGO–business interaction in different sectors allowing for a deeper examination of similarities and differences</i>
<i>Research avenue 5</i>	<i>Examining how national governments strategically engage with global sustainability standards remains largely unexplored</i>

between the presence of competing stakeholders and organizational as well as market outcomes. Negro et al. (2015) and Siltaoja et al. (2020), for their part, called for more studies on the mechanisms underlying (dis)approval from different audiences in the market, and on how stigma may affect an agricultural category development. In this vein, Sikavica and Pozner (2013) as well as Hedberg and Lounsbury (2021) underscore the importance of cultural entrepreneurship to shape the social identities of businesses and promote their scaling-up. However, more research is required to work out the conditions under which institutional logics can be combined, hybridized, or adapted to favor the creation of new organizational forms and markets.

Some recent studies have offered an inward-looking perspective on how agribusinesses organize their internal structures, processes, and governance forms around sustainability to remain viable (Boone & Özcan, 2016; Boyabathl et al., 2019; Hu et al., 2019). This opens up new opportunities for research since extant studies do not consider the influence of and connections with other business processes, such as resource flows, which might hold important implications for yield management and price and profitability fluctuations that have a tremendous impact on a firm's survival, as well as on extreme resource shortages at the macro-level.

Lastly, some studies focused on identifying viability conditions for cooperatives, a pervasive governance form among agricultural businesses (Boone & Özcan, 2016; Slade Shantz et al., 2020). Slade Shantz et al. (2020) highlighted the relative ability of cooperatives to reduce internal conflicts. Though reduced conflict is a relevant condition, this is only a very basic requisite for a firm's survival. Future research may devote more attention to identifying other structural elements that may foster the survival of cooperatives. In addition, based on Boone and Özcan (2016), forthcoming studies may compare cooperatives with corporations in terms of other performance measures. Table 1.4 summarizes suggested research avenues.

Table 1.4 Research avenues within “Viability of sustainable enterprise”

<i>Research avenue 1</i>	<i>Shedding light on the complex relationship between the presence of competing stakeholders and organizational as well as market outcomes</i>
<i>Research avenue 2</i>	<i>Exploring the mechanisms underlying (dis)approval from different audiences in the market, and on how stigma may affect an agricultural category development</i>
<i>Research avenue 3</i>	<i>Working out the conditions in which institutional logics can be combined, hybridized, or adapted to favor the creation of new organizational forms and markets</i>
<i>Research avenue 4</i>	<i>Considering the influence of other business processes, such as resource flows, which might hold important implications for yield management, price and profitability fluctuations, as well as extreme resource shortages at the macro-level</i>
<i>Research avenue 5</i>	<i>Identifying other structural elements that may foster survival for cooperatives</i>
<i>Research avenue 6</i>	<i>Comparing cooperatives with corporations in terms of other performance measures</i>

Table 1.5 Research avenues within “Contribution to sustainable development”

<i>Research avenue 1</i>	<i>Considering the ecological and systemic foundations for sustainability, drawing on natural sciences and the “planetary boundaries” framework as conducive tools to enhancing the identification of environmental impacts agricultural businesses have on boundary processes</i>
<i>Research avenue 2</i>	<i>Offering novel perspectives on how natural resources and informal institutions interact to promote sustainable local development, also contributing to institutional theory more broadly</i>
<i>Research avenue 3</i>	<i>Conducting interdisciplinary studies that may consider natural resources a constraint to strategic decision-making at both micro- and macro-levels</i>

The contribution of agribusinesses to sustainable development. The seminal work by Shrivastava (1995) brings forth both the ecological problems created by agricultural activities and the role of agribusinesses in achieving ecological sustainability. Similarly, Whiteman and colleagues (2013) stress the importance of future research considering the ecological and systemic foundations for sustainability, drawing on natural sciences and the “planetary boundaries” framework (Steffen et al., 2015), as conducive tools to enhancing the identification of environmental impacts agricultural businesses have on boundary processes beyond the three major threats concerning climate change, the global nitrogen cycle, and rate of biodiversity loss.

The works by Peredo and Chrisman (2006) and Brandl and colleagues (2021) explain how natural resources interact with local cultural and social capital as pillars to creating agricultural entrepreneurial ventures that may foster sustainable community development. These integrated approaches are, however, still embryonic. Future studies can, thus, validate the claims of earlier studies or offer novel perspectives on how natural resources and informal institutions interact to promote sustainable local development, also contributing to institutional theory more broadly. Similarly, Parente et al. (2021) call for more interdisciplinary research on sustainable development that may consider natural resources a constraint to strategic decision-making at both micro- and macro-levels. Table 1.5 summarizes suggested research avenues.

Conclusion

We argue that the agribusiness sector showcases the multidimensionality of sustainability beyond its direct link to the exploitation of natural resources, to also encompass social concerns related to food security and nutrition, and dignified livelihoods for many. In this connection, recent studies have underscored the importance of placing the people at the center of managerial attention, not only as employees but also as members of the community agribusinesses operate in (e.g., Parente et al., 2021). Furthermore, the sector offers a unique entry point to analyzing how firms deal with contestation from social

movements, challenging and broadening the conceptualization of sustainability, pushing for a more substantive contribution to sustainable development from the business world.

The proposed multilevel theoretical framework not only helps in synthesizing the literature that has grown in disparate directions, but also enhances our understanding of how sustainability permeates within-firms, between-firms and broader firms-environment relationships in the sector, suggesting that agribusinesses embracing sustainability may unleash positive systemic change. In this sense, the developed framework may serve as a conducive tool for sustainability studies addressing the peculiarities of agribusiness sector. Furthermore, it contributes to mainstreaming natural resources management to the center of research on wider socio-economic transformations toward sustainable development (George et al., 2015).

Despite efforts to rigorously synthesize the literature, we acknowledge that the scope of this review is limited to a specific sample of a broader body of literature. Nevertheless, we deliberately chose to limit sources to leading mainstream management journals since this can be considered validated knowledge and is likely to have the greatest impact in the field (Bansal & Song, 2017).

Finally, our proposed future research agenda reveals the need to better understand how business boundaries interact with different types of social structures and which are the mechanisms through which actors employ natural resources to reconfigure social structures to support sustainable development. Review results unveil new spaces for contribution with novel research studies that may shed further light on the complex relationship between business strategy and sustainability performance.

Notes

- 1 Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. (2021). *The state of food and agriculture 2021: Making agri-food systems more resilient to shocks and stresses*. www.fao.org/publications/sofa/sofa-2021/en/
- 2 www.epa.gov/regulatory-information-sector/agriculture-sectors-crop-naics-111-and-animal-naics-112

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