Sustainability as a Living Process: Learning, Leadership and Continuous Improvement in Swedish Organisations

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Abstract: Sustainability is increasingly recognised as a strategic and operational priority, yet many organisations struggle to translate sustainability ambitions into coherent practice. Swedish organisations, operating within a trust-based and participatory context, offer valuable insights into how sustainability processes evolve across sectors. This study explores how sustainability processes are structured, implemented, and led within Swedish organisations. It examines how sustainability develops from strategic intent to everyday practice and identifies the leadership and learning mechanisms that support progress from compliance toward transformation. A qualitative multiple-case study of 30 organisations across public, private, and non-profit sectors was conducted. Data were collected through document analysis, interviews, and process mapping, and were analysed thematically to identify patterns in process maturity, leadership, and organisational learning. Three maturity stages emerged: reactive, integrative, and transformative. While most organisations had moved beyond basic compliance, few achieved systemic integration. Ecological initiatives were generally the strongest, whereas social and economic dimensions remained underdeveloped. Participatory and trust-based leadership was associated with higher maturity, deeper learning, and shared responsibility. Conversely, fragmented systems and diffuse accountability hindered sustainability progress. The study proposes the Continuous Sustainable Improvement (CSI) model, linking quality management with regenerative learning to conceptualise sustainability as an ongoing organisational process. Practitioner-based cases provided authentic insights but limited longitudinal assessment. The findings reframe sustainability as a continuous, learning-oriented practice rather than a compliance exercise. Organisations should integrate sustainability into core systems, balance structural discipline with cultural engagement, and utilise feedback mechanisms and cross-sector partnerships to support innovation. This approach strengthens trust, inclusivity, and collective responsibility, enhancing both organisational capability and social resilience.

Keywords: Organisational Sustainability, Sustainability Processes, Leadership And Learning, Continuous Sustainable Improvement (CSI), Systems Thinking, Sustainability Maturity, Swedish Organisations

1. Introduction

Over the past two decades, the discourse on organisational sustainability has undergone a profound transformation. What was once viewed as a peripheral ethical initiative or a marketing device has increasingly become a central pillar of strategic management and leadership across public, private, and non-profit sectors. Swedish organisations, in particular, have long been recognised for their early and relatively comprehensive engagement with sustainability, reflecting broader Nordic values of environmental stewardship, social equality, and trust-based governance (Hofstede, 2001; Broman & Robèrt, 2017). Yet, despite this favourable institutional context, a persistent implementation gap continues to separate sustainability rhetoric from actual practice (Lozano, 2015; Benn, Edwards & Williams, 2014).

Across Europe, organisations are aligning with frameworks such as the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI, 2021), and the EU's Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD). These frameworks strengthen demands for accountability and transparency, shifting sustainability from a largely voluntary corporate social responsibility (CSR) activity toward a mandate for strategic integration. However, the presence of sustainability policies and reports does not necessarily ensure that sustainability becomes embedded in day-to-day organisational routines.

A growing body of research highlights that sustainability efforts often remain fragmented, driven more by compliance requirements or individual enthusiasm than by systemic process design or organisational learning (Baumgartner & Ebner, 2010; Dahlgaard-Park & Dahlgaard, 2019). This disconnect between strategy and practice lies at the core of the present study. Here, sustainability is examined not as a static end state but as a set of evolving processes embedded within social, cultural, and institutional contexts. Investigating these processes provides insight into how organisations learn, adapt, and transform under increasing ecological and societal pressures.

Sweden offers an especially valuable context for examining sustainability in practice. The country consistently ranks among global leaders in renewable energy, environmental policy, and social equity (OECD, 2022). Swedish management traditions, characterised by low power distance, participatory leadership, and consensus orientation (Hofstede, 2001), foster trust, dialogue, and collaborative innovation (Pruzan, 1998; Senge, 1990). At the same time, these participatory norms can obscure lines of accountability. Sustainability work may become "everyone's responsibility and therefore no one's responsibility," a paradox documented across

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both public and private sectors (Oxenswärdh, 2020; Oxenswärdh & Persson-Fischier, 2020) and further illustrated in studies of Swedish tourism enterprises (Oxenswärdh, 2023). Understanding how organisations manage this tension between distributed participation and managerial accountability offers insights with international relevance.

While substantial research has addressed sustainability reporting, stakeholder engagement, and performance metrics, considerably fewer studies examine the processual dimension of sustainability, how sustainability is operationalised within organisational systems. Process mapping, for instance, reveals how strategic goals translate into workflows, decision-making routines, and everyday actions (Dahlgaard-Park & Dahlgaard, 2019). Viewing sustainability through a process lens also bridges management system literature with organisational learning theory. It positions sustainability as a continuous improvement journey, one involving sense-making, experimentation, and reflection rather than one-off implementation (Deming, 1986; Argyris & Schön, 1996). This view aligns with Senge's (1990) concept of the learning organisation, in which shared vision, feedback, and systems thinking facilitate the navigation of complex societal and ecological challenges. In this study, "processes" include both formal mechanisms (e.g., ISO 14001, CSR programmes) and informal routines, leadership practices, and cultural patterns that shape how sustainability gains meaning within organisational contexts.

Despite Sweden's strong tradition in environmental management and social welfare, relatively little is known about how sustainability is practised across different organisational types. Prior studies often focus on large corporations or specific policy sectors, leaving small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), public agencies, and non-profit organisations comparatively underexplored (Lozano, 2015; Dyllick & Muff, 2016). Moreover, existing research tends to rely on external assessments or surveys, while insider perspectives on how employees and managers themselves experience sustainability processes remain limited. This study addresses these gaps through an exploratory, practice-based approach that synthesises thirty case studies conducted by professionals within their own organisations. By combining document analysis, interviews, and process mapping, participants generated authentic, context-specific insights into how sustainability structures function in practice. The dataset spans diverse sectors, including manufacturing, construction, education, healthcare, hospitality, and agriculture, enabling comparative analysis across organisational size, industry, and governance structure.

The overarching aim of this paper is to explore how sustainability processes are structured, implemented, and led within Swedish organisations, and to identify the maturity patterns, leadership practices, and learning mechanisms that influence their development. Three research questions guide the analysis:

1. How are sustainability processes structured and integrated within Swedish organisations?

2. What factors enable or hinder the development of coherent and systemic sustainability practices?

3. How do leadership and organisational culture shape the depth and direction of sustainability work?

These questions connect operational realities with broader theoretical concerns regarding learning, leadership, and systemic change.

The study makes three key contributions. First, it provides an empirical overview of how sustainability is operationalised in 30 Swedish organisations, offering insights into actual organisational processes rather than normative aspirations. Second, it advances a theoretical synthesis that integrates process-based management, institutional context, and learning-oriented leadership within a unified analytical framework. Third, it proposes the Continuous Sustainable Improvement (CSI) model, which links the procedural discipline of quality management with the adaptive and reflective capabilities of learning organisations.

The paper proceeds as follows: Section 2 outlines the theoretical framework, drawing on sustainability integration, institutional theory, systems thinking, and leadership for transformation. Section 3 presents the qualitative methodology and case composition. Section 4 details the empirical results, including sustainability maturity levels and key enablers and barriers. Section 5 discusses the findings in relation to theory, highlighting how structural and cultural dynamics shape sustainability outcomes. Section 6 concludes by summarising implications for research, policy, and organisational practice. Through this structure, the paper seeks to bridge academic and practitioner perspectives, offering both conceptual insight and practical guidance for organisations aiming to embed sustainability as a dynamic, living process rather than a compliance exercise.

2. Literature Review

Understanding how sustainability processes evolve within organisations requires a multidisciplinary theoretical foundation. Sustainability integration is not simply a technical or procedural undertaking; rather, it represents a complex socio-cultural process shaped by institutional pressures, organisational systems, leadership behaviours, and learning dynamics. Drawing on management studies, organisational theory, and sustainability research, this review synthesises key perspectives that inform the analytical framework of the present study.

2.1. Conceptualising Organisational Sustainability

The foundational concept underlying contemporary sustainability discourse is Elkington's (1997) Triple Bottom Line (TBL), which argues that organisational success must balance environmental integrity, social equity, and economic viability. Although the TBL has become widely adopted, empirical studies consistently show that sustainability dimensions develop unevenly in practice. Environmental initiatives often dominate due to clearer measurement systems and stronger regulatory incentives, while social and economic sustainability remain less institutionalised (Lozano, 2015; Dyllick & Muff, 2016).

To address this imbalance, scholars emphasise systemic and strategic approaches to sustainability integration. The Framework for Strategic Sustainable Development (FSSD) developed by Broman and Robèrt (2017) promotes *backcasting from sustainability principles*, envisioning a desired future and aligning organisational processes accordingly. This approach positions sustainability as proactive and design-oriented rather than reactive or compliance-driven.

Other contributions highlight the need for deep organisational transformation. Doppelt (2017), for example, argues that achieving sustainability requires reshaping the underlying mental models, values, and assumptions that drive decision-making. In this view, sustainability becomes fundamentally a process of organisational learning rather than a set of technological or

policy interventions. Such perspectives resonate strongly with the Swedish context, where participatory governance and ethical management traditions create conducive conditions for reflective, values-based sustainability work.

2.2. Institutional and Cultural Dimensions

Institutional theory provides a second stream of insights into the development of sustainability practices. Organisations are shaped by coercive pressures (e.g., regulations such as CSRD), normative pressures (professional standards), and cognitive pressures (shared cultural beliefs) (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Scott, 2014). Over time, these drivers promote isomorphism, whereby organisations adopt similar sustainability structures such as certification systems or reporting frameworks.

However, the interpretation of institutional pressures is mediated by organisational culture. Swedish organisational culture, characterised by egalitarianism, dialogue, and high interpersonal trust (Hofstede, 2001), supports openness and collaboration but can simultaneously obscure accountability. As Pruzan (1998) notes, values-based management must carefully balance collective responsibility with clear leadership commitment.

Through an interpretive lens (Alvesson, 2011), culture is not merely an internal variable but the medium through which sustainability gains meaning. Actions such as recycling routines, equality policies, or ethical guidelines serve symbolic and identity-forming functions. Extending this perspective, the concept of cultural sustainability (Soini & Dessein, 2016) highlights how cultural values and practices both shape and reflect an organisation's approach to sustainability. This is particularly relevant in Nordic contexts, where collective identity, community orientation, and cultural heritage are intertwined with sustainability initiatives.

2.3. Process-Based Management and Systems Thinking

A third body of literature focuses on the processual nature of sustainability integration. From this standpoint, sustainability is embedded in the interconnected activities through which organisations create value. Management standards such as ISO 9001 and ISO 14001 emphasise a process-based approach, promoting consistency, traceability, and formalised improvement cycles (Dahlgaard-Park & Dahlgaard, 2019).

Central to these systems is Deming's (1986) Plan–Do–Check–Act (PDCA) cycle, which provides a structured mechanism for continuous improvement. However, sustainability requires more than procedural control. Drawing on organisational learning theory, Argyris and Schön (1996) distinguish between single-loop learning (adjusting actions within existing assumptions) and double-loop learning (challenging underlying norms and values). Sustainable organisations rely on the latter, using feedback not only to correct errors but to question existing habits, beliefs, and organisational priorities.

Systems thinking complements these perspectives by situating organisations within broader ecological and social systems (Capra & Luisi, 2014; Meadows, 2008). It emphasises interdependence, delays, nonlinearity, and feedback loops, factors that complicate sustainability implementation. Sterman (2012) highlights how "policy resistance" often emerges when sustainability initiatives fail to account for hidden system structures. Accordingly, systems thinking helps identify leverage points where interventions can support meaningful, long-lasting change.

Together, these process-based and systemic perspectives underscore the importance of understanding sustainability not as a set of isolated activities but as a dynamic organisational process involving adaptation, learning, and cultural alignment.

2.4. Leadership for Sustainability Transformation

Leadership forms the cultural infrastructure through which sustainability values are enacted and translated into organisational practice (Maak & Pless, 2006). Traditional command-and-control leadership models are insufficient in sustainability contexts characterised by complexity, uncertainty, and the need for ethical judgement. Instead, more adaptive and relational leadership paradigms have gained prominence. Transformational leadership (Burns, 1978; Bass & Riggio, 2006) inspires shared purpose and motivates employees to engage in long-term change, while servant leadership (Greenleaf, 1977) emphasises humility, service, and care for the broader system. In the sustainability domain, responsible leadership (Pless & Maak, 2011) synthesises these perspectives by positioning leaders as mediators across diverse stakeholder interests and values.

Effective sustainability leaders cultivate trust, foster dialogue, and bridge economic and moral priorities. Swedish research particularly highlights the relevance of relational and reflective leadership, where leaders facilitate meaning-making, collective learning, and participatory engagement rather than exerting top-down control (Oxenswärdh, 2020, 2023). This aligns with Senge's (1990) concept of the learning organisation and with experiential learning approaches (Kolb and Kolb, 2017), both of which position leaders as enablers of inquiry, reflection, and systemic understanding.

Emerging theoretical developments, such as regenerative and transformative leadership (Laloux, 2014; Waddock, 2020), extend beyond traditional sustainability approaches by emphasising the creation of conditions for social and ecological flourishing. Leadership, in this paradigm, is not merely about steering sustainability initiatives but about participating in living systems and fostering interdependence, empathy, and long-term stewardship. These ideas resonate strongly with studies of Swedish SMEs, where relational and reflective leadership styles support sustainability learning in everyday organisational practice (Oxenswärdh, 2020, 2023, 2024).

2.5. Organisational Learning and Maturity

Organisational learning provides a developmental lens for understanding how sustainability evolves over time. Baumgartner and Ebner (2010) conceptualise sustainability maturity as a progression from compliance (meeting regulatory requirements), to efficiency (optimising processes), to strategic integration (embedding sustainability in the organisational core), and ultimately to transformational practice (reshaping organisational identity and purpose). However, this trajectory should not be viewed as linear or uniform. Learning occurs through iterative cycles of experimentation, feedback, and adaptation (Kolb and Kolb, 2017), and organisations may move back and forth between stages depending on context and capability.

Mature sustainability organisations cultivate adaptive capacity, the ability to respond effectively to disturbances while maintaining strategic coherence (Folke et al., 2010). They integrate sustainability into decision-making, evaluation, and innovation systems (Benn, Edwards & Williams, 2014), embedding it into the fabric of organisational operations rather than

treating it as an isolated initiative. This study adopts a dynamic interpretation of maturity, recognising that sustainability develops through the interaction of three co-evolving elements: Structure (formal systems and processes), Leadership (agency, commitment, and relational practices), and Culture (shared meaning, norms, and values). Sustainability maturity thus emerges from continuous feedback among these elements, resulting in diverse trajectories rather than a single universal pathway.

2.6. Complexity, Change, and Regeneration

Sustainability challenges, such as climate change, biodiversity loss, and social inequality, are widely recognised as wicked problems (Rittel & Webber, 1973) characterised by uncertainty, interdependence, and the absence of straightforward solutions. Addressing these challenges requires a shift from linear planning to sense-making, adaptation, and context-sensitive leadership (Weick, 1995; Snowden & Boone, 2007).

Complexity theory suggests that stability and change coexist through dynamic equilibrium, and that organisations must navigate inherent paradoxes, such as balancing efficiency with resilience, short-term demands with long-term sustainability, and control with emergent learning (Smith & Lewis, 2011). Within this paradigm, sustainability leadership focuses on enabling experimentation, dialogue, and self-organisation rather than imposing prescriptive solutions.

The literature on regenerative sustainability (Mang & Reed, 2020; Wahl, 2016) further advances this perspective by advocating for practices that restore and enhance the vitality of social and ecological systems. Regenerative leadership emphasises place-based relationships, authenticity, and stewardship, qualities strongly reflected in Nordic organisational contexts (Horlings et al., 2020; Oxenswärdh, 2023). From this viewpoint, sustainability becomes less a matter of compliance and more a relational process of cultivating connections among people, places, and ecosystems.

2.7. Synthesis: A Multi-Level Model for Analysis

Drawing together these theoretical perspectives, this study conceptualises sustainability integration as unfolding across three interdependent layers: Structural Layer – Formal systems, strategies, standards, and management tools (e.g., ISO frameworks, CSR systems, SDG alignment) that provide order, accountability, and operational clarity. Cultural Layer – Values, identities, leadership styles, and communication patterns that shape motivation, meaning-making, and organisational coherence. Learning Layer – Reflexive capacities that enable adaptation, innovation, and regeneration through feedback, dialogue, and shared inquiry.

The interaction among these layers shapes the organisation's sustainability maturity. Structural integration without cultural engagement tends to lead to stagnation or superficial compliance, whereas cultural enthusiasm without process discipline risks inconsistency and fragmentation. Organisations that successfully balance these dimensions are better positioned to engage in Continuous Sustainable Improvement (CSI), a hybrid approach that links process management with reflective and regenerative learning. This multi-level framework positions sustainability not as a fixed end state or a technical management system but as a living, evolving process in which people, structures, and ideas continuously co-adapt within complex institutional and ecological environments.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design and Rationale

This study adopts a qualitative, exploratory, and interpretive research design to examine how sustainability processes are organised, enacted, and experienced within diverse organisational settings. Rather than focusing on performance indicators or quantifiable outcomes, the study seeks to interpret meaning, structure, and learning as they emerge in practice. This approach aligns with a social constructivist epistemology, which assumes that organisational realities are co-created through interaction, interpretation, and continuous sense-making (Alvesson, 2011; Weick, 1995). The empirical material derives from thirty organisational case studies undertaken during the autumn semester of 2025 as part of a postgraduate programme on sustainability leadership at a Swedish university. Each participant studied their own organisation, functioning simultaneously as practitioner and insider researcher. Such positioning enables unique access to tacit organisational dynamics that are often inaccessible to external investigators (Coghlan & Brannick, 2014). Because the aim of the research was to capture depth, variation, and contextual richness rather than statistical representativeness, a multiple-case study design was adopted. This design supports analytical generalisation by allowing comparison of recurring patterns and divergences across a range of organisational forms. Moreover, this participatory and practice-based model reflects earlier traditions in sustainability education and place-based learning, which emphasise lived experience and reflective inquiry as valuable modes of knowledge production (Oxenswärdh, 2020, 2021).

3.2. Sampling and Case Composition

The study draws on a heterogeneous dataset representing a broad cross-section of Swedish organisational life, including private firms, public institutions, and non-profit organisations. This diversity encompasses a wide spectrum of sectors such as manufacturing, construction, logistics, biotechnology, hospitality, agriculture, and public administration, as well as cultural and community-based organisations. Organisational size also varied substantially, ranging from microenterprises with fewer than ten employees to corporations employing more than one thousand staff. Such variation allows for meaningful comparison between smaller organisations with limited resources and larger institutions with formalised sustainability structures. Cases were selected through purposeful sampling (Patton, 2015), based on participants' access to internal documents and key personnel. The insider role provided rich contextual insight into informal routines, leadership interactions, communication practices, and decision-making patterns, dimensions that are rarely accessible through external audits or traditional research designs. Consequently, the dataset reflects a nuanced and contextually grounded representation of sustainability practices across Swedish organisational settings.

3.3. Data Collection

Data collection followed a common research protocol to ensure consistency while allowing adaptation to the specific organisational contexts. Three main forms of qualitative material were generated. First, participants conducted document analysis, reviewing both internal and publicly available materials, including sustainability reports, policy documents,

environmental plans, quality manuals, and staff guidelines. These documents provided a foundational understanding of the organisation's formal structures and sustainability narratives. Second, semi-structured interviews were carried out with individuals responsible for sustainability, such as environmental coordinators, managers, HR personnel, or executive leaders. In many cases, informal conversations with team leaders or employees supplemented the interviews, offering additional insights into everyday sustainability practices. Interview guides addressed internal definitions of sustainability, communication patterns, embedded processes, leadership roles, perceived barriers and enablers, and follow-up mechanisms. Third, participants were asked to map sustainability processes by visualising workflows, responsibilities, and activities, often producing flowcharts or narrative process descriptions. Each report also contained a reflexive commentary in which participants documented their own interpretations, assumptions, and observations. This reflexive dimension enriched the dataset by uncovering meaning-making processes beyond formal structures. Altogether, the empirical material amounted to approximately 600 pages of reports, interview notes, and process maps.

3.4. Data Analysis

The analysis followed an iterative and interpretive process informed by thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and cross-case synthesis (Yin, 2018). Analysis began with a period of familiarisation, during which all thirty reports were read to identify salient patterns and contextual nuances. The material was then coded inductively, generating categories related to sustainability processes, organisational gaps, leadership practices, integration levels, barriers, enablers, cultural characteristics, and learning mechanisms. These codes were subsequently refined into broader thematic clusters representing different degrees of sustainability maturity, such as reactive, integrative, and transformative development. To deepen interpretation, cross-case comparisons were undertaken to examine how organisations engaged with ecological, social, and economic sustainability dimensions. Finally, the themes were connected to the theoretical framework established in Section 2, allowing the empirical insights to be interpreted through the lenses of systems thinking, leadership theory, organisational learning, and institutional dynamics. NVivo software supported thematic clustering and coding consistency, while analytical rigour was enhanced through peer debriefing and triangulation across interview data, process maps, and documentary sources.

3.5. Researcher Positionality and Reflexivity

Given that participants investigated their own organisations, the study constitutes a form of insider research. This positionality offers considerable advantages, including access to informal routines, organisational language, and tacit knowledge, as well as the trust required to explore sustainability practices in depth. However, insider research also brings challenges related to potential bias, role duality, and difficulties in maintaining analytical distance. To address these concerns, participants engaged in structured reflexive journaling throughout the research process, documenting their assumptions, emotional responses, and potential biases. Supervisors supported this reflexive practice by guiding participants in sustaining critical distance and methodological transparency. Consequently, reflexivity became a central component of the research design, consistent with interpretive qualitative traditions (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2017).

3.6. Ethical Considerations

Ethical standards were upheld in accordance with national research guidelines issued by the Swedish Research Council (2017). Informed consent, anonymity, and confidentiality were ensured throughout the research process. Organisational names were anonymised and replaced with descriptive substitutes to protect identities. The insider context demanded particular attention to confidentiality, especially concerning sensitive organisational information. Therefore, proprietary data, financial information, and internal performance metrics were excluded from the analysis. Participation in the study was voluntary, and materials were shared only with supervisors within the educational programme, ensuring that no harm or unintended consequences would arise for the organisations or their employees.

3.7. Reliability, Validity, and Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness in qualitative research encompasses credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In this study, credibility was strengthened through triangulation across documents, interviews, and process maps, as well as through participant reflexivity. Transferability was enhanced by detailed contextual descriptions that allow readers to evaluate relevance for other settings. Dependability was supported through transparent documentation of coding decisions and analytical procedures, which enabled consistent application of the research protocol across cases. Confirmability was promoted through reflexive practices and supervisory review, reducing the risk of researcher bias influencing interpretation. Although the sampling strategy was non-probabilistic, the combination of methodological transparency and cross-case analysis enhances confidence in the findings.

3.8. Limitations

Despite its strengths, the study faces several limitations. The data were generated by practitioners enrolled in an educational programme rather than by professional researchers, and therefore, the depth and analytical sophistication of the cases vary. Moreover, the insider role, while offering access to valuable contextual knowledge, may compromise critical distance despite reflexive safeguards. Additionally, the research captures sustainability processes at a single point in time, meaning that longer-term developments, changes, or outcomes cannot be assessed. However, these limitations are balanced by the empirical richness of the material and the authenticity of insider perspectives, which together illuminate how sustainability is enacted, or struggles to be enacted, within everyday organisational practice in Sweden.

4. Results

The empirical analysis of the thirty organisational cases revealed substantial variation in how sustainability is interpreted, structured, and practised across Swedish workplaces. Although the organisations differed considerably in size, sector, and ownership, clear cross-case patterns emerged concerning the maturity of sustainability processes, the relative emphasis on different sustainability dimensions, the role of leadership and culture, and the factors that either hindered or facilitated integration. The results presented in this section are organised around five overarching themes: levels of process maturity, patterns across sustainability dimensions, leadership and organisational culture, barriers to integration, and enablers of progress.

Together, these themes provide an overview of how sustainability processes evolve within Swedish organisations and how they are shaped by structural and cultural conditions.

4.1. Sustainability Process Maturity

Across the dataset, organisations could be broadly grouped into three levels of sustainability maturity, reactive, integrative, and transformative. These categories align with the conceptual framework proposed by Baumgartner and Ebner (2010) and reflect differences in system development, leadership engagement, and organisational learning capacity. Although the boundaries between stages were not always clear-cut, the model provides a useful lens for understanding developmental patterns across the cases.

At the reactive stage, ten organisations demonstrated limited and compliance-driven sustainability engagement. Sustainability activities were typically fragmented, operational, and initiated in response to external requirements from customers, regulators, or investors. Common practices included basic waste sorting, targeted energy-reduction campaigns, or mandatory occupational safety training. One manager in a small logistics company described this orientation by stating, *"We do what is required by law and our customers, but we don't really have a plan beyond that."* In these organisations, sustainability lacked a strategic anchor and was often perceived as an add-on rather than a component of core operations. Designated sustainability roles were rare, and internal monitoring systems were minimal. Nevertheless, several respondents expressed a personal desire to "do the right thing," indicating cultural commitment at the individual level despite limited structural support. This suggests that, while reactive organisations face systemic constraints, they may possess latent potential for future development.

The majority of organisations, fifteen in total, were situated in the integrative stage. These organisations had implemented formal quality or environmental management systems, most commonly ISO 9001 or ISO 14001, and regularly produced sustainability or annual reports. Responsibilities for sustainability were typically assigned to middle managers or cross-functional teams, and processes were documented in formal procedures. However, although structures were well defined, they were not always consistently enacted in daily practice. As a project leader in a construction company noted, *"We have great documentation and procedures, but the challenge is to make everyone use them."* Integration tended to be more advanced in ecological and quality-related areas, such as materials management, energy efficiency, and waste reduction, while social and economic dimensions received comparatively less attention. Learning processes in these organisations were largely triggered by audits and formal reviews rather than reflection or dialogue, highlighting a technocratic approach to sustainability. Therefore, although these organisations displayed stronger structural integration than reactive ones, cultural alignment and learning capacity remained uneven.

A smaller group of five organisations exhibited characteristics of transformative maturity, where sustainability was embedded as a strategic and ethical core rather than a discrete initiative. In these cases, leadership commitment and employee participation created a shared sense of purpose that extended beyond compliance and operational efficiency. Examples included a rural retreat and education centre in southern Sweden that emphasised ecological regeneration and community learning; a national public agency that integrated sustainability into governance, digitalisation, and equity strategies; and a family-owned agricultural enterprise that linked environmental ethics with biodiversity goals and cultural heritage. In such settings, sustainability was described as "a way of being," shaping decision-making across organisational levels. One respondent stated, *"We don't talk about sustainability as a separate thing; it's simply how decisions are made."* Transformative organisations fostered reflection, experimentation, and boundary-crossing collaboration, often maintaining strong ties with local communities and educational institutions. In addition, these organisations tended to function as living laboratories where sustainability principles were tested, adapted, and refined in practice. This pattern mirrors earlier research on Swedish microbusinesses and tourism enterprises, which highlights the prevalence of ecological engagement and the ongoing challenge of integrating social and economic dimensions in a balanced manner (Oxenswärdh, 2020, 2021).

Across all three maturity levels, it was evident that sustainability development is shaped by the interplay between structural systems and cultural dynamics. While reactive organisations relied largely on individual motivation, integrative organisations emphasised formal structures, and transformative organisations managed to harmonise structure, culture, and learning. These findings illustrate how sustainability processes evolve along a continuum, influenced not only by organisational size or sector but also by leadership practices, values, and opportunities for collective learning.

4.2. Patterns Across Sustainability Dimensions

The cross-case analysis revealed distinct patterns in how organisations approached the ecological, social, and economic dimensions of sustainability. Although all three pillars were present to varying degrees, their levels of development differed markedly, reflecting broader trends identified in sustainability research.

In the ecological dimension, environmental initiatives were the most institutionalised and widely implemented across the cases. Organisations frequently reported measures such as energy efficiency programmes, recycling systems, sustainable procurement practices, and emissions reduction targets. Several cases demonstrated concrete achievements; for example, a medium-sized manufacturing company documented a 20 per cent reduction in CO_2 emissions between 2022 and 2024 through process optimisation. However, these successes were often limited to isolated projects rather than embedded within systemic, organisation-wide strategies. Ecological work also tended to be perceived as a technical domain managed by designated specialists, rather than as a shared organisational responsibility. This tendency reflects earlier research suggesting that environmental initiatives frequently become the "default mode" of sustainability because they are comparatively easier to quantify, regulate, and communicate.

The social dimension was present in most organisations, yet it displayed considerable variation in sophistication and scope. Public institutions and large companies typically had formalised policies addressing equality, inclusion, well-being, and occupational health. Municipal administrations often linked social sustainability to citizen participation and public health initiatives, whereas industrial organisations emphasised workplace safety and employee welfare. In contrast, smaller organisations expressed social sustainability in more implicit and cultural terms, often describing it as "a caring workplace" or "treating people well." However, these values were seldom translated into measurable goals or structured follow-up processes.

As one HR coordinator observed, *"We see ourselves as a family; we help each other. But we have never written this down as a sustainability target."* Social engagement beyond the organisational boundary, such as community partnerships or social innovation, was relatively uncommon, although emerging in a few transformative cases. Therefore, while social sustainability was acknowledged conceptually, its operationalisation remained underdeveloped.

The economic dimension was the least clearly defined and most inconsistently interpreted across the dataset. Many organisations equated economic sustainability primarily with profitability, cost control, or operational efficiency. Only a few cases explicitly connected it to long-term resilience, risk management, or broader stakeholder value creation. Consequently, several managers expressed uncertainty about how to integrate this dimension meaningfully, asking, for example, *"We think about costs and savings, but is that really sustainability?"* This general ambiguity reflects a persistent imbalance among the three dimensions of the triple bottom line, reinforcing theoretical claims that the ecological pillar remains dominant while social and economic aspects continue to lag behind (Elkington, 1997; Dyllick & Muff, 2016). Therefore, integrating social and economic sustainability holistically and strategically remains a significant developmental challenge for Swedish organisations.

4.3. Leadership and Organisational Culture

Leadership emerged as a decisive factor shaping the depth, coherence, and maturity of sustainability practices across the cases. Organisations in which leaders demonstrated commitment, communicated purpose clearly, and modelled sustainable behaviour tended to cultivate higher levels of employee engagement and cross-functional learning. When leaders actively linked sustainability to organisational identity and long-term goals, initiatives were more likely to gain traction. Conversely, symbolic or distant leadership frequently resulted in stagnation and what several respondents described as "checkbox sustainability." As a sustainability officer in a manufacturing firm noted, *"When management only asks for the report once a year, people lose interest."* This illustrates how weak leadership engagement can undermine even well-designed systems.

Leadership styles consistent with Sweden's participatory governance culture were particularly effective in advancing sustainability. Leaders who encouraged dialogue, invited contributions from employees, and distributed responsibility across teams fostered greater ownership and innovation. One respondent described this dynamic by explaining, *"Our CEO invites anyone to suggest improvements. Sustainability is everyone's space to experiment."* Such inclusive leadership created environments where sustainability practices could evolve iteratively through shared learning rather than through top-down directives.

Organisational culture further shaped the speed and coherence of sustainability development. Organisations characterised by high levels of internal trust, open communication, and collaborative norms progressed more rapidly than those dominated by silo thinking, cost-control logics, or hierarchical structures. These findings reinforce the theoretical position that sustainability integration requires both structural systems and cultural meaning. While systems provide direction and accountability, culture shapes motivation, engagement, and the willingness to reflect and adapt. Therefore, leadership and culture jointly form the foundation upon which sustainable practices can either flourish or falter.

4.4. Barriers to Integration

Although many organisations demonstrated progress in developing sustainability practices, several recurring barriers hindered deeper integration. Resource constraints were particularly evident in small and medium-sized enterprises, where limited time, staffing, and financial capacity restricted systematic sustainability work. As one entrepreneur explained, *"We are too small for a full-time sustainability manager."* In addition, responsibility for sustainability was often described as diffuse, with several organisations emphasising that sustainability was "everyone's responsibility." However, this inclusivity frequently resulted in ambiguity, as dispersed responsibility meant that sustainability became no one's primary task.

Fragmented management systems also impeded progress. Many organisations operated parallel structures for quality, environmental management, and human resources, with minimal integration across these domains. This fragmentation created inefficiencies, weakened coherence, and contributed to internal confusion about priorities. A related challenge concerned limited competence and training. Employees often expressed uncertainty about key sustainability concepts, terminology, and organisational expectations, with one participant noting, *"People want to contribute, but they don't know how."* Furthermore, weak follow-up mechanisms restricted organisational learning. Few organisations employed robust indicators or feedback loops capable of connecting actions to outcomes, and evaluation practices tended to remain descriptive rather than analytical. Collectively, these barriers echo earlier research highlighting the persistent implementation gap between sustainability ambition and practice (Benn et al., 2014; Doppelt, 2017).

4.5. Enablers of Progress

Despite the challenges identified, several enabling conditions supported the advancement of sustainability integration. Leadership engagement emerged as a critical factor; when senior managers communicated a clear vision and modelled sustainable behaviour, organisational momentum increased significantly. In addition, sustainability initiatives gained strength when they were aligned with the organisation's core mission, strategy, and performance systems, thereby reinforcing their legitimacy and operational relevance.

Employee participation further contributed to progress. Organisations that involved staff through workshops, innovation labs, suggestion schemes, or cross-functional teams reported heightened engagement and creativity. Communication and storytelling also played an important role, as internal narratives helped translate sustainability ambitions into everyday meaning. Partnerships with suppliers, municipalities, NGOs, and educational institutions expanded organisational capacity, offering new perspectives and resources. Finally, organisations with an established culture of continuous improvement were better equipped to review, adapt, and refine sustainability initiatives over time. A national public agency, for example, described monthly sustainability dialogues in which staff collectively reflected on challenges and innovations, illustrating the type of double-loop learning described by Argyris and Schön (1996). Organisations that combined these enablers consistently demonstrated the highest levels of sustainability maturity.

4.6. Cross-Sectoral Comparison

While private, public, and non-profit organisations shared many similarities, the analysis revealed several sector-specific patterns. Private sector actors were generally motivated by market reputation, customer expectations, and opportunities for cost efficiency. Their sustainability processes tended to be more formalised, yet narrower in scope, often focusing on environmental performance and compliance. Public sector organisations, by contrast, placed greater emphasis on social equity, inclusion, and long-term societal value. However, they frequently struggled with bureaucratic rigidity and slower organisational responsiveness, which limited innovation. Non-profit organisations displayed strong value-driven commitments to sustainability, although their limited resources often constrained strategic planning and the development of measurable indicators.

Despite these differences, cross-sector collaboration emerged as an important catalyst for innovation. Municipalities, for instance, partnered with SMEs to pilot circular economy projects, while NGOs collaborated with public institutions to enhance social inclusion. These partnerships blurred traditional sector boundaries and encouraged systemic learning, illustrating how sustainability challenges can stimulate collective problem-solving across organisational domains.

5. Analysis and Discussion

The findings from the thirty Swedish organisational cases provide a nuanced understanding of how sustainability processes evolve in practice. Although most organisations have progressed beyond reactive, compliance-driven approaches, few have achieved full systemic integration where sustainability permeates strategy, culture, and everyday routines. Interpreting these findings through the theoretical frameworks presented earlier reveals five interrelated analytical dimensions: sustainability as organisational learning; leadership as cultural infrastructure; the interplay between structure and culture; the challenges of complexity and systemic integration; and the emergence of regenerative and continuous sustainable improvement. Together, these dimensions illuminate the developmental dynamics shaping sustainability in Swedish organisations and clarify why progress remains uneven across sectors and maturity levels.

5.1. Sustainability as Organisational Learning

The empirical material clearly demonstrates that sustainable development is fundamentally a learning-driven process. Rather than emerging from isolated technical solutions or compliance with external standards, sustainability evolves through cycles of reflection, experimentation, and adaptation. This pattern strongly aligns with Senge's (1990) concept of the learning organisation, where shared vision, systemic feedback, and collective inquiry enable long-term transformation. In the more mature cases, such as the rural retreat, the national public agency, and the agricultural enterprise, internal routines supported ongoing experimentation and dialogue, functioning as feedback loops that enabled double-loop learning (Argyris & Schön, 1996). Employees regularly revisited assumptions about what sustainability meant for their operations and adjusted their strategies accordingly. As one sustainability coordinator explained, *"Our understanding of sustainability keeps changing. Every time we learn something new, we revise our way of working."* This illustrates learning not only within organisations but by organisations, as they collectively redefine their goals in response to new insights.

In contrast, organisations at lower maturity levels tended to equate learning with external audits or certification reviews. These practices generated compliance-oriented "single-loop learning," where errors were corrected without questioning underlying assumptions. Therefore, learning remained reactive rather than generative. The results support Kolb's (1984) experiential learning model, in which concrete experiences feed into processes of observation, reflection, conceptualisation, and experimentation. Across the cases, sustainability learning cycles occurred when employees tested new approaches, evaluated their outcomes, and interpreted their meaning in relation to organisational purpose. Importantly, these cycles unfolded iteratively rather than linearly, blending formal structures such as ISO procedures with informal conversations, improvisations, and collective sense-making. Consequently, organisational learning emerged as a central driver of sustainability maturity, yet one that relies heavily on cultural as well as structural conditions.

5.2. Leadership as Cultural Infrastructure

Leadership played a decisive role in shaping the cultural conditions that enable sustainability integration. The findings reinforce the notion of responsible leadership (Maak & Pless, 2006), which positions leaders as moral agents, connectors, and sense-makers who bridge diverse stakeholder interests. Within Swedish organisations, leadership practices were deeply influenced by Nordic traditions of participatory governance and high interpersonal trust (Hofstede, 2001; Pruzan, 1998). However, the effectiveness of these practices depended on their visibility and authenticity. In cases where managers engaged actively with sustainability by participating in discussions, modelling sustainable behaviours, or articulating values, employees demonstrated stronger engagement and commitment. As one respondent from a regional public body noted, *"When the director personally attends our sustainability meetings, everyone pays attention. It tells us it matters."* Leadership, therefore, did not operate merely through directives but through the creation of meaning and the cultivation of shared purpose.

Transformational and servant leadership theories (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Greenleaf, 1977; Spears, 2010) offer valuable insights for interpreting these patterns. Leaders who combined ethical vision with participatory practices, empowering employees, encouraging dialogue, and demonstrating care, were more successful in embedding sustainability into organisational routines. This finding resonates strongly with Scandinavian studies by Oxenswärdh (2020, 2023, 2024), which show that organisational "frontrunners" tend to have leaders who act as facilitators of meaning rather than controllers of behaviour. Such leaders bridge operational actions with broader societal and ecological values, thereby enhancing coherence between individual motivation and collective purpose. In this sense, leadership constitutes the cultural infrastructure upon which learning, engagement, and transformation depend, underscoring that sustainability cannot flourish without relational, reflective, and context-sensitive leadership practices.

5.3. Balancing Structure and Culture

One of the most striking findings concerns the dynamic relationship between formal systems and informal organisational culture. Organisations with well-developed ISO-based structures demonstrated greater procedural consistency, clearer routines, and stronger accountability. However, these same organisations often struggled with employee engagement and intrinsic

motivation, suggesting that structural sophistication alone is insufficient for sustainability integration. Conversely, organisations characterised by vibrant participatory cultures frequently generated enthusiasm and creativity but risked fragmentation when structural discipline was lacking. This tension reflects the duality articulated in Dahlgaard-Park and Dahlgaard's (2019) Excellence 4.0 framework, where technological precision and process control must be balanced with humanistic learning and cultural alignment.

Interpreting the findings through the tri-layer model introduced earlier helps clarify this balance. The structural layer offers clarity, measurement, and continuity; the cultural layer provides meaning, trust, and commitment; and the learning layer enables adaptability and innovation through reflection. In practice, sustainability integration requires organisations to hold these layers in productive tension. Processes must be sufficiently codified to ensure reliability and accountability, yet flexible enough to accommodate evolving understanding and emergent challenges. The most successful organisations in the study achieved this balance through what can be described as dialogue-based control systems. These systems combined formal routines, such as audits, reporting cycles, and quality procedures, with open forums for reflection and discussion. One manufacturing firm, for instance, organised quarterly sustainability dialogues in which employees analysed audit results, shared experiences, and collectively proposed improvements. Such hybrid approaches demonstrate how process-based management can coexist with participatory learning, allowing structure and culture to reinforce rather than undermine each other.

5.4. Complexity, Systems Thinking, and Institutional Context

Sustainability unfolds within complex adaptive systems characterised by non-linearity, uncertainty, and interdependence. The findings indicate that Swedish organisations increasingly recognise this complexity; however, many continue to operate using linear project logics focused on target-setting and output measurement. While such linear approaches are useful for operational control, they are limited in addressing sustainability challenges that span supply chains, communities, and ecosystems (Meadows, 2008; Capra & Luisi, 2014). Some transformative cases illustrated an emerging systems-thinking orientation, particularly those engaged in cross-sector collaborations. For example, a partnership between a municipality and a local SME aimed at waste reuse demonstrated how actors can co-create circular systems through mutual learning and shared responsibility. These initiatives align with Sterman's (2012) argument that sustainable change depends on recognising feedback loops and cultivating relationships that extend beyond organisational boundaries.

From an institutional theory perspective (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Scott, 2014), Swedish organisations operate under strong normative pressures for sustainability, shaped by public expectations, cultural norms, and regulatory developments such as the EU's CSRD directive (EU, 2022). These pressures clearly support sustainability adoption; however, they also contribute to isomorphic tendencies, whereby organisations mimic others' practices without embedding bigger cultural or strategic change. This helps explain why many organisations rely heavily on ISO certification as a symbolic proxy for sustainability rather than a transformative mechanism. Cultural factors further interact with these institutional dynamics. Sweden's egalitarian and high-trust culture encourages participation and openness, yet it may inadvertently diffuse responsibility. One participant captured this paradox: *"Sustainability belongs to everyone, which makes it easy to assume someone else will take care of it."* This illustrates the challenge of maintaining distributed accountability in contexts where hierarchical control is minimal. Effective sustainability integration, therefore, requires organisational governance models that translate shared responsibility into clear roles, coordinated action, and ongoing learning.

5.5. Integrating the Three Dimensions: Beyond the Ecological Bias

The findings further reveal a persistent imbalance among the ecological, social, and economic dimensions of sustainability. Environmental processes, being more measurable and regulated, have become the most formalised and institutionalised across organisations. In contrast, social and economic sustainability remain comparatively underdeveloped, often lacking structured processes, indicators, and strategic coherence. This pattern reflects the "triple bottom line myopia" identified by Elkington (1997) and extended by Dyllick and Muff (2016), whereby the ecological pillar becomes a surrogate for holistic sustainability.

However, the transformative organisations in the dataset offer evidence that more integrated approaches are achievable. In these cases, social and economic dimensions were not treated as secondary considerations but were woven into organisational purpose and daily practice. For example, a family-run agricultural enterprise combined biodiversity preservation with youth employment initiatives, thereby generating ecological, social, and economic value simultaneously. These examples illustrate how sustainability integration can deepen when anchored in local relationships, employee well-being, and community value creation. Moreover, they resonate with the principles of regenerative development (Mang & Reed, 2020; Wahl, 2016), which emphasises mutual flourishing between human and natural systems rather than balancing trade-offs between them.

Achieving such integration requires narrative coherence within the organisation. Sustainability must resonate not only at the policy level but also in the stories employees tell about their work and the meaning they assign to organisational activities. When sustainability becomes part of the organisational narrative, social and economic dimensions gain relevance alongside environmental ones. Therefore, moving beyond ecological bias involves reframing sustainability as intertwined social–ecological–economic practice, supported by shared meaning and collective identity.

5.6. Managing Paradox and Embracing Complexity

A recurring theme across the cases was the presence of organisational paradoxes, particularly tensions between cost efficiency and long-term resilience, between structural discipline and cultural freedom, and between control and trust. Rather than viewing these contradictions as problems to be eliminated, the more mature organisations demonstrated an ability to navigate and work constructively with them. This capacity aligns with Smith and Lewis's (2011) theory of organisational paradox, which argues that competing demands must be balanced rather than resolved, as well as with Snowden and Boone's (2007) Cynefin framework, which highlights the need for adaptive decision-making in contexts characterised by complexity and ambiguity. Leaders who acknowledged uncertainty, encouraged experimentation, and accepted the iterative nature of sustainability work were more successful in sustaining motivation and fostering innovation. By contrast, leaders who sought full predictability or rigid control often generated scepticism, resistance, or fatigue among employees. The findings, therefore, underscore the importance of complexity-aware leadership, leadership capable of facilitating dialogue, enabling collective sense-making, and supporting reflective practice under uncertain conditions. These capabilities are particularly relevant in the Swedish context,

where decentralised decision-making and high levels of interpersonal trust provide fertile ground for adaptive experimentation. However, the analysis also shows that cultural strengths such as autonomy and trust must be complemented by clear coordination mechanisms and follow-up routines to avoid inertia. As such, the effective management of paradox requires a continuous recalibration between flexibility and structure.

5.7. Toward Continuous Sustainable Improvement (CSI)

Synthesising the analytical insights across the cases leads to the development of a model of Continuous Sustainable Improvement (CSI), which serves as a conceptual bridge between process management and regenerative learning. Drawing inspiration from Deming's (1986) PDCA cycle and the tri-layer framework outlined in Section 2, the CSI model conceptualises sustainability development as an iterative and multi-dimensional process. In this model, organisations begin by defining their sustainability purpose in alignment with strategic intent and stakeholder needs (Plan). They then implement cross-functional processes to embed sustainability in everyday routines (Do). Subsequently, they evaluate not only quantitative indicators but also qualitative dimensions such as engagement, reflection, and learning (Check). This evaluation informs collective meaning-making and the translation of insights into new practices (Act). Finally, organisations renew their systems, values, and identities by embedding these learnings into long-term structures and cultural norms (Renew), thereby initiating the next cycle.

Unlike conventional continuous improvement models, CSI incorporates reflexive learning and regeneration as core drivers of development. It acknowledges that sustainability is not a static achievement but an evolving process shaped by shifting contexts, emerging insights, and changing organisational identities. The cases illustrate varying positions along this CSI continuum. Reactive organisations tend to prioritise the Plan and Do phases, integrative organisations extend their efforts into the Check phase, while transformative organisations consistently engage in Act and Renew, linking feedback directly to identity formation and cultural evolution. This cyclical pattern reflects the principles of regenerative leadership (Waddock, 2020; Oxenswärdh, 2020, 2023), in which sustainability becomes an emergent cultural process sustained by curiosity, reflection, and shared meaning. The CSI model, therefore, extends prior research on continuous improvement and distributed responsibility (Oxenswärdh, 2011) by emphasising the interplay between structural discipline, cultural engagement, and organisational learning.

5.8. Synthesis: From Compliance to Co-Creation

Taken together, the findings indicate a broader shift in how sustainability is conceptualised within Swedish organisations, from compliance toward co-creation, from isolated systems toward relational integration, and from time-bound projects toward ongoing cultural practices. Although this shift is uneven and incomplete, it reflects a growing recognition that sustainability is not merely a technical obligation but also a domain of collective learning and innovation. The transformation observed in many cases appears to be driven by the interaction of three interdependent forces. Institutional drivers such as the CSRD, ISO standards, and the SDGs provide legitimacy, direction, and shared reference points that encourage organisations to take sustainability seriously. Leadership agency then translates these frameworks into purposeful action, shaping organisational narratives and mobilising employee engagement. Finally, cultural learning enables organisations to reflect, adapt, and innovate in ways that are grounded in local context and meaning.

When these forces interact synergistically, sustainability becomes a management system and a social movement within the organisation. This duality reflects the transition identified by Benn, Edwards, and Williams (2014) from "corporate greening" to organisational sustainability, a shift that integrates ethical, strategic, cultural, and relational dimensions. The Swedish cases illustrate that this transition is emergent rather than linear and that it depends profoundly on an organisation's capacity to integrate structure, culture, and learning into a coherent whole. As such, sustainability evolves not simply through compliance with external frameworks but through the co-creation of shared purpose and continuous improvement across all organisational levels.

5.9. Concluding Reflections on Analysis

The empirical and theoretical synthesis presented here underscores that sustainability integration is neither linear nor uniform. Swedish organisations reveal a dynamic landscape where structural systems, leadership values, and learning capacities evolve together. This co-evolution supports the central proposition of the paper: that *sustainability is best understood as a living process of continuous improvement, learning, and regeneration*. In this view, the question is not whether organisations are sustainable but *how they sustain their capacity to learn, adapt, and contribute to thriving socio-ecological systems*. The following section concludes by summarising key insights, practical implications, and future research directions.

6. Conclusions and Implications

This study examined how sustainability processes are organised, led, and developed within Swedish organisations across private, public, and non-profit sectors. Drawing on thirty qualitative cases, the research offers a multi-layered understanding of sustainability as both a structural and cultural phenomenon. Most organisations demonstrated progress beyond basic compliance toward varying forms of integration; however, only a small subset exhibited the transformative characteristics associated with deep sustainability. The analysis shows that sustainability emerges not as a fixed end state but as a living, learning-oriented process shaped by the interaction between systems, values, leadership practices, and organisational culture. In synthesising these findings, the study introduces the Continuous Sustainable Improvement (CSI) model, which conceptualises sustainability development as an iterative cycle evolving from procedural alignment toward reflective, regenerative practice.

6.1. Theoretical Contributions

The study makes several theoretical contributions. First, it advances a processual view of sustainability by framing it as an evolving organisational practice embedded in everyday routines and shaped through reflection and learning. This interpretation is consistent with theories of organisational learning and double-loop reflection (Argyris & Schön, 1996; Senge, 1990) and with systems thinking perspectives that emphasise interdependence between organisations and their ecological and social environments (Capra & Luisi, 2014; Meadows, 2008). Second, the study extends leadership theory by demonstrating that effective sustainability leadership is grounded not in command-and-control mechanisms but in sense-making, dialogue, and

ethical coherence. Leaders who cultivated trust, facilitated collective meaning-making, and modelled sustainable behaviours were instrumental in accelerating sustainability integration, findings that align with responsible and regenerative leadership scholarship (Maak & Pless, 2006; Oxenswärdh, 2020, 2023). Third, by linking institutional and cultural theory with process management, the study highlights how Swedish organisational culture, characterised by egalitarianism, trust, and decentralisation, shapes how organisations interpret external frameworks such as the CSRD, ISO standards, and the SDGs. These contributions collectively support a shift in sustainability research from compliance-driven approaches to a reflexive-regenerative paradigm grounded in learning, context, and ethical interdependence.

6.2. Managerial and Practical Implications

The findings have several implications for managers and practitioners seeking to deepen sustainability integration. Sustainable development becomes most effective when embedded within core organisational processes, including procurement, HR, operations, and finance, through clearly defined responsibilities and regular dialogue. Moreover, formal systems such as ISO certifications should be complemented by reflective practices that encourage continuous sense-making and double-loop learning. Organisations benefit when leaders adopt participatory approaches, involving employees in identifying goals and sharing ownership of sustainability initiatives, which strengthens cultural embedding. In addition, cross-sector partnerships, such as collaborations with municipalities, SMEs, and civil society organisations, expand organisational capacity and stimulate innovation. Achieving meaningful integration requires a balance between formalisation and flexibility; excessive bureaucratisation can hinder creativity, while insufficient structure may weaken accountability. Finally, moving toward a regenerative mindset encourages organisations to shift from reducing harm to actively enhancing social and ecological well-being, fostering empathy, creativity, and systemic awareness in line with regenerative development principles (Wahl, 2016; Waddock, 2020).

6.3. Policy and Educational Implications

The study also offers insights for policymakers and educators. As the CSRD expands requirements for ESG reporting and strategic sustainability integration, smaller organisations will require targeted support through regional, vocational, and sectoral programmes. Policy interventions that combine regulatory clarity with capacity-building may help bridge the gap between compliance and meaningful change. Educational institutions, particularly universities, play a critical role in enabling such development by engaging practitioners as co-researchers. Approaches such as action learning (Revans, 1982) and participatory inquiry (Reason & Bradbury, 2008) can cultivate reflective capabilities and strengthen the practical relevance of sustainability education. Therefore, bridging regulation with learning-oriented support structures becomes essential for advancing sustainability in Swedish organisational contexts.

6.4. Limitations and Future Research

Although practitioner-based case studies offer rich, contextual insights, they also introduce the risk of subjective interpretation, particularly because participants analysed their own organisations. Nevertheless, this insider perspective provided access to tacit knowledge and lived organisational practices rarely visible through external methods. Future research could strengthen these findings through longitudinal designs that trace sustainability development over time or through cross-national comparisons that illuminate cultural influences more explicitly. Further investigation into the economic dimension of sustainability, an area consistently underdeveloped in the present cases, would also be valuable for understanding how organisations balance financial resilience with ecological and social commitments.

6.5. Toward a Reflexive–Regenerative Paradigm

Overall, the findings support a shift toward a reflexive–regenerative paradigm in which sustainability is understood as a dynamic capability emerging through the interaction of structure, culture, and learning. When these elements align, organisations develop reinforcing systems that sustain purpose, innovation, and resilience (Mang & Reed, 2020; Oxenswärdh, 2023). The CSI model operationalises this paradigm by conceptualising sustainable development as a cycle of planning, action, reflection, and renewal. Rather than viewing sustainability as a compliance exercise, the CSI framework positions it as an ongoing, evolving practice that adapts as contexts, values, and knowledge change.

6.6. Concluding Reflection

Ultimately, sustainability is relational, linking people, organisations, and ecosystems in shared responsibility for the future. Swedish organisations, rooted in traditions of trust, collaboration, and participatory governance, are well-positioned to lead this transition. However, doing so requires sustained learning, intentional leadership, and moral coherence. By embracing complexity, nurturing reflective cultures, and strengthening the connection between organisational purpose and societal well-being, organisations can transform sustainability from a procedural obligation into a living practice that contributes meaningfully to regenerative futures.

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