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An Empirical Exploration, Typology, and Definition of Corporate Sustainability

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Abstract: The relationship between business and society is evolving. On the one hand, social, environmental, and long-term economic issues subsumed under the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development are inspiring intergovernmental organizations, governments, NGOs, NPOs, foundations, and civic society to legislate and regulate corporate behavior toward a greater concern for the wellbeing of groups, regions, or entire societies. On the other, a growing trend toward protectionism, nationalism, and populism may be the consequence or expression of a dissatisfaction with the perceived dissociation of the private sector from society. As a form of self-regulation, corporate responsibility deals with the complex responsibilities businesses have toward society. However, it tends to be hampered by an emphasis on theology and philosophy-based business ethics, which are difficult to integrate into day-to-day business operations or to translate between national or corporate cultures. In this article, we argue that corporate sustainability could be a more useful concept to help improve on how government, the private sector, and academia understand the links between business and society, and how to translate the interdependence between business and society from one culture to another. For this purpose, we empirically analyzed the relevant academic literature on corporate sustainability, using Content Configuration Analysis. Our analyses revealed three conceptual types and nine subtypes of corporate sustainability. Based on their assessment, we suggest conceptual preferences and a definition of corporate sustainability, which fulfil criteria that may render the concept more useful to global political and socioeconomic negotiations among stakeholder groups for the long-term benefit of business and society.

Keywords: corporate responsibility; business ethics; globalization; culture; business and society; sustainability; UN SDGs; Agenda 2030

1. Introduction

The UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (UN SDGs), and its associated 169 targets were unanimously adopted by all 193 member states at the 70th session of the United Nations General Assembly on 25 September 2015 [1]. This seminal event represents a paradigm shift, ushering in a new era of global development. If the achievements of the United Nation's Millennium Developmental Goals (UN MDGs), its predecessor, are anything to go by, the next decades will bring enormous socioeconomic development for hundreds of millions of people around the world. During their 15-year tenure, the UN MDGs contributed to lifting more than one billion people out of extreme poverty (Goal 1), the global mortality rate of children under the age of five declined by more than half (Goal 4), tens of millions of lives were saved through the prevention, diagnosis, and treatment interventions of tuberculosis, malaria, measles, and HIV/Aids (Goals 4 & 6), and more than two billion people worldwide gained access to improved drinking water and sanitation (Goal 7) [2].

The most important difference between the UN MDGs and the UN SDGs relates to inclusiveness in at least three ways: first, instead of dividing the world into donor and recipient nations, the UN SDGs implicate all nations in achieving the 17 UN SDGs; second, the UN SDGs require commitment from governments, the private sector, and civil society; and, third, achieving these goals is based on close national and international partnerships (Goal 17).

The astonishing backing displayed by the national governments toward the UN SDGs is timely: water and food insecurities loom large as rapid and uneven population growth, scarcity of resources, environmental degradation, and geopolitical power shifts are unbalancing fragile ecological and social systems. Political uncertainty, instability, and conflict create and exacerbate migrant flows and humanitarian crises. Sectorial changes and inequalities, and the thus resulting underemployment generate ambiguities about what our world will look like a decade from now, and what we can do to combat or sometimes even prosper from massive transitions.

Such global developments defy the financial and management capacities of any national or regional civic institution as governments strain under public pressure, insufficient revenue, and high national debt. However, global transitions may also present immense opportunities for—and much needed partnerships between—individuals, social groups, regions, governments, and the private sector. Indeed, without the private sector, it will be impossible to reach any of these goals, and failing to advance toward the goals endangers the prosperity of both business and society.

To date, reflections on the responsibilities of business toward society from a self-regulatory perspective tend to fall under the rubric of business ethics, specifically addressed by corporate responsibility (e.g., [3–5]) and its derivatives, including corporate responsiveness (e.g., [6,7]), corporate performance (e.g., [8,9]), corporate governance (e.g., [10]), and corporate citizenship (e.g., [11,12]). As we will argue in this article, corporate responsibility in its traditional form is no longer suitable for the purpose of understanding the interdependent relationship between business and society, mainly because its academic pendant places philosophy-derived business ethics in the center of the debate, because it is difficult to integrate into a universalistic debate on ethics the necessary cultural and contextual nuances, because it struggles with being relevant and applicable to a competitive and global business climate, and because an ethics-based debate about corporate responsibility is often detached from essential economic, social, and environmental parameters (e.g., [13–15]). However, to promote and fund sustainable development based on an agenda driven by society and the private sector—to the benefit of business and society—the largest commitment and change has to either come from, or be imposed on, societies and their business sectors. As we will show in this article, even a strong commitment to corporate responsibility in the classical sense may not contribute adequately to sustainability in a globalized world.

To make this point, let us first juxtapose two clearly identifiable positions in the debate on corporate sustainability: one, which emphasizes that "corporations are the fundamental cell of modern economic life, [shaping] the physical and social world in which we live" [16] (pp. 3–4); another, which emphasizes that corporations gain their wealth and power by drawing from the resources of the planet and its people [16]. Indeed, "strong markets and strong societies go hand in hand" [17] (p. 29), and the UN SDGs are inviting us to rethink the multiple roles and expectations of corporations and societies in ways that explore their potential contributions to business and society. This is because sustainable development as connotatively defined by the UN SDGs is based on the interdependence between economic, social, and environmental dimensions, shadowing the key notions behind the triple bottom line (TBL) [18,19] and the three overlapping spheres model of sustainability. Sustainability as an increasingly important driving force in politics and society will put pressure on regional, national, and international business to adopt a more sustainable business model, which is likely to differ for different business sectors, regions, political systems, and corporate cultures. It could be argued that the recent rise of isolationism, nationalism, and populism on the political left and right may be due in part to a dissociation of social concerns and economic interests. The recent political and socioeconomic dynamics that can be observed in Britain and the US—but also in France, Germany, and the Netherlands, among others—illustrate this point. Thus, the pressing questions in this regard are: How does corporate responsibility, as an established concept, connect to sustainability in general and corporate sustainability in particular?, and How can corporate sustainability be captured in ways that will encourage change-oriented and policy-relevant business practices in the interest of both business and society?

In this article, we develop a typology of corporate sustainability to be used in research and business, to identify, systematize, and formalize corporate sustainability strategies.

2. Methods

To develop a typology of corporate sustainability, we selected as our data topical overview chapters and review articles on corporate sustainability from different sub-disciplines, including business management, economics, sustainability, environmental management, business ethics, leadership, and organizational behavior. Based on theoretical sampling, we identified and analyzed articles iteratively to explore variations in conceptualizations associated with corporate sustainability. As a first step, we identified a subset of 10 relevant review articles and conducted an exploratory, inductive analysis to identify all the concepts associated with corporate sustainability mentioned in them. Next, we sorted and classified these concepts thematically and developed a typology of corporate sustainability based on our data. We then used this typology as an analytic framework to conduct a quasi-deductive analysis on consequent articles. New, additional concepts identified during this part of the analysis were used to refine the typology until it accounted for all mentions of corporate sustainability. Data collection ended with saturation, i.e., when newly sampled texts no longer contributed to the refinement of our results. Details of the studies on corporate sustainability on which this analysis is based can be found in [16,17,20–32]. The conceptual space in these articles and chapters was explored by Content Configuration Analysis (CCA) [33,34]. CCA is a systematic method of analysis for all non-numeric data, including documents and, in this case, academic articles and book chapters. It combines aspects of qualitative content analysis and thematic analysis. For this paper, CCA was used to identify the concepts and ideas associated with corporate sustainability, and to synthesize these into a typology of corporate sustainability. Our typology is based on types of corporate sustainability gleaned from the literature, where authors cover overlapping conceptualizations of corporate sustainability. Of course, authors are not altogether consistent within and between texts. In different parts of a single text, authors may adopt different stances toward corporate sustainability as they take position toward various debates in the literature. However, there also exist many overlaps within and between texts. This is especially true for theoretical, review, and overview chapters, which form the bulk of the literature analyzed for this paper. In other words, it is not unusual to identify dozens of varying positions on corporate sustainability within one single text. For this reason, our synthesis of different ideas on corporate sustainability crosscuts many texts, and it is therefore not possible to clearly attribute a specific position to single authors or texts. Instead, we aimed at creating a typology of corporate sustainability based on different sets of ideas and positions within and between texts. Thus, our analyses were guided by our intention to disassemble the positions in the overall debate on corporate sustainability into its constituent parts, to reflect on their nature and potential meaning, and to reassemble them into a typology that may be a useful guide toward theory, empirical research, and application.

3. Typology of Corporate Sustainability

Based on our analyses of the academic literature on the conceptualization of corporate sustainability, we identified three types and nine subtypes:

1— Corporate sustainability in relation to corporate responsibility (*CS&CR*)

  1a Corporate sustainability is similar to corporate responsibility (cs $\approx$ cr)
  1b Corporate sustainability is different from corporate responsibility (cs $\neq$ cr)

- 1c Corporate responsibility leads to corporate sustainability (cr $\rightarrow$ cs)

2— Mono-focal corporate sustainability (*CS1*)

- 2a Corporate sustainability as moral leadership (cs/moral)
- 2b Corporate sustainability as a strategy (cs/strategic)

3— Inclusive approaches to corporate sustainability (*CSn*)

- 3a Corporate sustainability as a holistic concept (cs∞)
- 3b Corporate sustainability as part of the triple bottom line (csTBL)
- 3c Corporate sustainability as a financial incentive (cs$)
- 3d Corporate sustainability as an indexing exercise (cs/index)

3.1. Connecting Corporate Sustainability with Corporate Responsibility (CS&CR)

The first major type connects corporate sustainability to the established literature on corporate responsibility (*CR&CS*) by positing different kinds of relationships, such as an overlap or contrast between corporate sustainability and corporate responsibility. As the predominant conceptualization of corporate sustainability in the literature, *CS&CR* tends to emphasize either the similarities to, or differences with, the reference construct, corporate responsibility.

The subtype that focuses on similarities to corporate responsibility (cs $\approx$ cr) usually lists shared characteristics between the constructs and, based on this overlap, they are considered similar, even synonyms. Here are two examples:

> In general, corporate sustainability and CSR refer to company activities—voluntary by definition—demonstrating the inclusion of social and environmental concerns in business operations and in interactions with stakeholders. This is the broad—some would say "vague" definition of corporate sustainability and CSR [. . .] In the past, sustainability related to the environment only and CSR referred to social aspects, such as human rights. Nowadays many consider CS and CSR as synonyms [31] (p. 102).

> In summary, corporate sustainability (CS) and corporate social responsibility (CSR) are referred to as voluntary business activities, including social and environmental concerns, so as to interact with stakeholders [26] (pp. 346–347).

A second subtype of *CS&CR* conceptualizes corporate sustainability in opposition to corporate responsibility (cs $\neq$ cr). Distinctions are usually drawn based on differential historical roots or interest groups they purport to serve. From this perspective, corporate responsibility is associated with its normative tradition, for instance by framing workers' rights as an ethical issue. Its proponents tend to draw on philosophy and theology, frequently viewing shareholder interests and value creation as antagonistic to corporate responsibility. Within this subtype, corporate sustainability is based on environmental management, and its roots are traced to the environment-focused sustainable development literature. As a relatively new concept, and in contrast to corporate responsibility, corporate sustainability from this perspective does not typically engage with business ethics in detail. Instead, this variant connects to notions associated with TBL, particularly its economic and environmental components. While the association between corporate sustainability and TBL will be covered in detail later, important for this subtype is that corporate sustainability is defined in opposition to corporate responsibility, the former based on especially environmental principles, and the latter on socio-ethical principles. Here two examples:

> Just as scholars and practitioners concerned with sustainable development have focused mainly on environmental management, those concerned with corporate social responsibility (CSR) have focused on social and ethical issues such as human rights, working conditions and philanthropy [35] (pp. 205–206).

> While corporate responsibility refers to social aspects such as human rights, sustainability is usually related to the environment [26] (p. 346).

The third subtype of *CS&CR* describes an evolving, at times causal relationship, where corporate responsibility imbricates corporate sustainability (cr → cs). One recurring notion in the literature is that corporations need to undergo a transition from currently unsustainable toward increasingly sustainable practices by implementing corporate responsibility strategies. According to this variant, integrating corporate responsibility elements into corporate strategies and actions will ostensibly lead to corporate sustainability. Here an example from the literature:

> Some would argue of the "vagueness" between CS and CSR, but recently there are more and more studies trying to clear the lines between these two concepts. Wempe and Kaptein [36] indicate that CS is the ultimate goal, with CSR as an intermediate stage where companies try to balance the Triple Bottom Line (profit, people and planet) [26] (p. 347).

The three subtypes of *CS&CR*, emphasizing similarity, dissimilarity, and progressive development between corporate responsibility and corporate sustainability illustrate the burgeoning debate among business ethicists, particularly their attempt to position corporate sustainability in relation to the dominant parent construct, corporate responsibility. Whether emphasis is placed on similarities, differences, or their developmental evolution, they largely occupy the same conceptual space. Although formulating corporate sustainability in relation to the entrenched corporate responsibility literature has the advantage of providing access to a wide and well-established range of concepts and theories, this strategy may also be considered a weakness in this type of theorizing, particularly for corporate sustainability. Corporate responsibility is often criticized for being vague and contested, inapplicable, or unfriendly to the actual business environment (e.g., [37]). This inheritance, as an unintended consequence of a union of both concepts, may render corporate sustainability as unwieldy and contested as its parent concept.

3.2. Mono-Focal Corporate Sustainability (CS1)

The second type of conceptualization of corporate sustainability emphasizes one specific dimension. In contrast to *CS&CR*, the predominant focus of *CS1* is on either ethics or management issues. Corporate sustainability as an ethical approach (cs/moral) advances the idea that corporate sustainability is chiefly about the morality of corporate behavior. It is argued here that, instead of focusing on profits, for example, a corporation's most important concern ought to be on values. The literature highlights this type of corporate sustainability in two ways: The first concerns the ethical values and principles of individual decision makers because, it is argued, corporate culture and its sustainability are dependent on, and a reflection of, the values of its leadership. Corporate sustainability is thus defined as the embodied ethical values of a corporation and its leadership. According to this type, corporate sustainability is made up of the range of implicit and explicit ethical principles, which are or should be applied in corporate contexts. Usually rooted in the ethics of morality, many discourses in *CS1* tend to relate to Eurocentric theological and philosophical principles. Here are some examples:

> It is evident in many of the definitions and concepts that they contain an implicit appeal to values and/or self-transcendent behaviour, i.e., that we should be contributing to something or helping someone beyond our selfish concerns, or acting in the interests of the common good [32] (p. 4).

> For any company seeking to be sustainable, it begins with operating with integrity [. . .] Responsible businesses enact the same values and principles wherever they have a presence, and know that good practices in one area do not offset harm in another [17] (pp. 8, 11).

> [Corporate sustainability] is aspirational in nature, a meta-ideal, one inherently infused with societal values of justice, integrity, reverence, respect, community and mutual prosperity [38] (p. 18).

A second mono-focal subtype of *CS1* is oriented toward business strategy (cs/strategy), conceptualizing corporate sustainability in relation to management issues. Here, corporate sustainability entails the manner in which a corporation's sustainability priorities are defined, implemented, and communicated. On the one hand, corporate sustainability in this sense relates to the capabilities and capacities of managers to implement the strategies that would make a corporation more sustainable. Connected to this is the role that leadership plays in envisioning sustainability strategies at an executive level. On the other, this type of corporate sustainability is concerned with the way corporate responsibility is extended globally as senior managers and executives influence supply chains and industry at large. Here are some examples to illustrate this type of corporate sustainability:

> Epstein and Roy [39] (p. 589) presented a framework that should assist managers in operationalizing corporate sustainability strategies based on economic rationale [28] (p. 31).

> Effecting change begins with the company's leadership. A public commitment by the chief executive, with support from the Board of Directors . . . Leaders also recognize they cannot shift systems alone, working with others to shatter barriers and increase the odds of success. Sustainability requires a long-term vision and commitment to ongoing efforts, both to ensure progress and keep pace with a rapidly changing world [17] (p. 9).

> Business "statesmanship" is essential for raising the urgency of sustainability issues at the global and local levels. Advocacy by business leaders can influence peers, consumers and, importantly, governments on the need to tackle societal crises and how responsible business practices can help. In the realms of carbon pricing and transparent public procurement, for example, the collective voice of business can encourage policy makers to move rapidly in the right direction [17] (p. 31).

While attempts to define corporate sustainability in this mono-focal, moral manner are more distinct in purpose and outcome, compared to the *CS&CR* approach, their appropriateness in a multicultural, business-oriented, and globalized corporate world is questionable. Ethical principles, for example, can vary widely between and within countries, cultures, and contexts, and the generic prescription of a fairly narrow set of morals may be considered inappropriate or inapplicable across national cultures or business contexts. A similar argument can be made about managerial strategies. Business strategies are essential for achieving sustainability, but success is dependent on their appropriateness for the particular business sectors and context. Approaches which successfully implement corporate responsibilities or develop a sustainable corporation in one setting may not be applicable or appropriate in others. However, *CS1* often implicitly assumes that this is indeed possible, even necessary. Far from proposing cultural relativity, we argue for a more subtle and differentiated approach, where applicability and appropriateness of most corporate actions within cultures and contexts need to be assessed in situ; some are never acceptable, some are always permissible, and some—probably the largest proportion—need to be negotiated. Although *CS1* approaches to corporate sustainability draw our attention to the potential contribution a moral focus could make to the benefit of business and society, the extent to which *CS1* can be generalized across cultures and contexts, or be successfully transferred into globalized business practice, remains unclear.

3.3. Inclusive Approaches to Corporate Sustainability (CSn)

So far, we have covered conceptualizations on corporate sustainability in relation to classical corporate responsibility and in relation to a single focus. The third type of corporate sustainability conceptualizes the construct inclusively by integrating multiple, interdependent dimensions (*CSn*).

Here, corporate sustainability is understood as an inclusive concept. Four subgroups of *CSn* can be identified in the literature. Most ambiguously, corporate sustainability is used as a holistic umbrella term, a catch-all phrase for concepts and theories relating to corporate responsibility, stakeholder theory, environmental management, sustainability, corporate citizenship, and organizational theory (cs∞). Here some examples:

> Aside from creating profit, sustainable company leaders capture other qualitative, non-financial criterion as references for their performance, such as quality of management, corporate governance structures, reputation, human capital management, stakeholder relations, environmental protection and corporate social responsibility [26] (p. 345).

> Szekely and Knirsch [40] define sustainability for corporations as 'sustaining and expanding economic growth, shareholder value, prestige, corporate reputation, customer relationships, and the quality of products and services. It also means adopting and pursuing ethical business practices, creating sustainable jobs, building value for all corporation's stakeholders and attending to the needs of the underserved' [29] (p. 181).

> Corporate sustainability is a contested concept, which to a greater or lesser extent (depending on the author) draws from and overlaps with notions of sustainable development, corporate citizenship, corporate (social) responsibility, environmental management, business ethics and stakeholder management [32] (p. 1).

Although inclusive, the scope and ambiguity of the subtype cs∞ makes it one of the least applicable variants of corporate sustainability.

A more focused way to define corporate sustainability within *CSn* is in reference to its association with the sustainability concept (csTBL), especially in relation to Elkington's TBL and a tripartite, overlapping spheres model of sustainability. This approach recognizes the interdependence between economic capital in relation to social and environmental resources. Given the concurrent emergence of TBL and corporate sustainability, some authors argue that they represent the same idea. Conceptualized in this manner, corporate sustainability concerns the development of a new model of corporate behavior, which sustains not only itself, but also society and the environment. Here are some examples:

> The connection between the bottom line and a company's environmental, social and governance practices is becoming clear. The well-being of workers, communities and the planet is inextricably tied to the health of the business [17] (p. 7).

> [Corporate sustainability is] the field of thinking and practice by means of which companies and other business organisations work to extend the life expectancy of: ecosystems (and the natural resources they provide); societies (and the cultures and communities that underpin commercial activity); and economies (that provide the governance, financial and other market context for corporate competition and survival) [41] (p. 133).

> The mainstream of the literature on corporate sustainability follows the win-win paradigm, according to which economic, environmental and social sustainability aspects can be achieved simultaneously; indeed, corporate sustainability has often been defined by the intersection of these three areas [24] (p. 217).

> The fully sustainable organization, that is, an organization that is itself sustainable because its stakeholders, including its employees, will continue to support it. But it is also a sustaining organisation because it is sustaining the wider society and the ecological environment [16] (p. 13).

> Historically, corporate sustainability has evolved as a result of economic growth, environmental regulation-stewardship, and a push for social justice and equity [20] (p. 158).

In its original form, TBL was used as the entry-point to develop the business case for social and environmental inclusion, the so-called win-win strategy, whereby new and more sustainable ways of doing business were said to benefit corporations, its customers, and the environment [18,42,43]. The understanding behind the subtype csTBL is to invite corporations to reconsider their role within society and to realign their practices in a way that would bring balance and simultaneous benefits to all.

A related variant to csTBL assumes a positive relationship between the value of a firm and its social and environmental investment (cs$). Despite a considerable investment in resources, attempts to demonstrate a clear causal link between a corporation's financial performance and its environmental and social investment have not been demonstrated at a level that would convince many corporate decision makers [44,45]. As the business case was taken up by academia, environmental organizations, NGOs, consultancies, and the corporate sector, the 'win-win paradigm' has become one of the most widely adopted approaches to the justification of corporate sustainability [45–50]. Integrating social and environmental dimensions into business practices to enhance the long-term shareholder value of a corporation is the main driver behind the subtype cs$. Here are some examples:

> Ultimately, according to the win-win paradigm, corporate sustainability boils down to a business approach that creates long-term shareholder value by embracing opportunities and managing risk from three dimensions: economic, environmental and social dimensions [26] (p. 346).

> Even though more recently some scholars have followed a more contingent approach to the business case for sustainability [51,52], the ultimate focus is still on the identification of situations and strategies in which environmentally friendly and/or socially responsible corporate behaviour pays off financially [24,53] (p. 218).

> The DJSI covers the top 10 percent of the biggest 2500 companies in the Dow Jones Global Index that pursue economic, social, and environmental reporting [54]. Dow Jones defines corporate sustainability as 'a business approach that creates long-term shareholder value by embracing opportunities and managing risks deriving from economic, environmental and social developments'. According to them, leading sustainability companies display high levels of management competence in addressing global and industry challenges dealing with economic, environmental, and social opportunities and risks that can be quantified and screened for investing purposes [20] (pp. 162–163).

The most prominent critique leveled against the overly optimistic win-win paradigm is based on the limitations it imposes on corporate sustainability strategies because of the tendency to focus on achieving simultaneous benefits as corporations attempt to balance economic, social, and environmental objectives. Hahn and colleagues [24] (p. 219) argue that, by only seeking out corporate responsibilities that lead to explicit gains, corporate sustainability "turns a blind eye to conflicts and trade-offs between different aspects of corporate contributions to sustainable development" by ignoring the complexity and diversity of many of these issues in favor of a win-win solution. According to them, trade-off situations are the norm rather than the exception but, given the pervasiveness of the win-win paradigm, trade-offs tend to be overlooked, thereby limiting the potential and types of contributions corporations could make.

The final subtype of *CSn* connects a range of sustainability guidelines and principles to the measurement of effectiveness of corporate strategies. Even though it is not possible to cover in detail this rapidly expanding branch in the literature, sustainability reporting and the indicators involved in this process is another noteworthy way of defining corporate sustainability (cs/index). This understanding of corporate sustainability is embedded in indexing initiatives, such as the FTSE4Good Index Series, the Dow Jones Sustainability Index, the Global Reporting Initiative and its precursor, the MSCI Global Sustainability Indexes, or the Shanghai Stock Exchange Indices for

Sustainable Development Industries and Social Responsibility. The largest of these initiatives is the United Nations Global Compact. Since its launch in 2000, the Global Compact has expanded to include approximately 12,000 signatories in more than 170 countries at the time of writing [55]. According to the Global Compact, corporate sustainability comprises five defining features: principled business, strengthening society, leadership commitment, reporting progress, and local action. Based on these features, the Global Compact's corporate sustainability initiative developed ten principles, which include human rights and labor issues, the environment, and governance [17]. Using these as a foundation, this initiative and cs/index more generally provide a framework to assist corporations to implement corporate sustainability regardless of their size, complexity, or location. Here are some examples:

> Corporate sustainability is imperative for business today—essential to long-term corporate success and for ensuring that markets deliver value across society. To be sustainable, companies must do five things: Foremost, they must operate responsibly in alignment with universal principles and take actions that support the society around them. Then, to push sustainability deep into the corporate DNA, companies must commit at the highest level, report annually on their efforts, and engage locally where they have a presence [17] (p. 7).

> Increasingly, companies are understanding that they must collaborate and coinvest in solutions to shared, systemic challenges. In a major shift over the past 15 years, stakeholder groups—including business, investors, governments, UN, civil society and labour—are increasingly joining forces on common objectives covering all societal goals from poverty alleviation and peace, to disaster relief, environmental protection and equality. For business, this also means a willingness to move beyond first-mover approaches and embrace partnerships and collective action efforts that pool resources, share risks and aim to find solutions faster [17] (p. 31).

Even though cs/index initiatives, such as the Global Compact, go beyond TBL to also include ethical and legal dimensions, the vast majority of these approaches are based at least in part on TBL (although some stock market indices are mainly based on environmental indicators, while others evaluate corporations largely on social investment). As a relatively new and emerging approach to corporate sustainability, the adequate measurement of constructs, standardization of indicators, assessment tools, and benchmarking still need work, possibly the largest drawback of this subtype of corporate sustainability. Furthermore, measurement, indexing, and reporting may diverge from larger sustainability issues, reduce complex constructs or systems to a narrow number of unrepresentative indicators, and indexing exercises may not take into consideration important national, cultural, and contextual variations of firms and industries. Although many corporations participate in indexing exercises, actively measuring and reporting on their activities, a generally acceptable delimitation of corporate sustainability based on a set of indices remains elusive.

Nevertheless, our preference for a conceptualization of corporate sustainability that attaches explicitly to sustainability with its three interdependent spheres—economic development, social development, and environmental management, rests on the following: Corporate sustainability (a) should relate to corporate responsibility but offer something that goes well beyond ethics-based considerations; (b) should integrate and embrace economic concerns, instead of opposing them; (c) should take into consideration the dependence of economic concerns on societal and environmental interests and impacts; (d) should allow negotiations between different stakeholder groups about conflicts, trade-offs, and contradictions that have scope for application beyond academic debates; (e) should be understandable and transferrable across different contexts and cultures; and (f) should provide a basis upon which corporate sustainability can be assessed, measured, reported, and improved. Thus, our preference rests with the third type, an inclusive approach to corporate sustainability (*CSn*) and the subtypes associated with TBL (csTBL), with an attempt to demonstrate a positive relationship between the value of a firm and its commitment to social and environmental concerns (cs$), or with an indexing approach that aims at measuring, ranking, and reporting corporate sustainability practices beyond financials (cs/index).

From these considerations, we propose the following definition:

> *Corporate sustainability refers to a systematic business approach and strategy that takes into consideration the long-term social and environmental impact of all economically motivated behaviors of a firm in the interest of consumers, employees, and owners or shareholders.*

Considering furthermore the political and cultural influence in the negotiation process between stakeholder groups on the scope and content of corporate sustainability, a strong argument could be made to include politics and culture as important components of corporate sustainability. We argue to include politics and culture not as additional spheres but, transversally, as influences on corporate behavior in specific contexts when negotiating between the three sustainability spheres—economic development, social development, and environmental management.

4. Conclusions

Corporate sustainability forms many strong links to the well-established literature on corporate responsibility and its derivatives, whether or not the business literature makes these associations explicitly. Both concepts are neither indistinguishable, nor are they orthogonal. It would be pointless to conceptualize corporate sustainability independently of corporate responsibility, as it would be futile to consider corporate sustainability independently of at least economic, social, and environmental dimensions. The question we are pursuing in this article is not whether there is an association between corporate sustainability and corporate responsibility but, instead, how to make this link without inviting the same conflagration of concepts and theories, which have burdened corporate responsibility, and which have created confusion and circularity.

In this article, we proposed a typology of corporate sustainability that could be useful for research and business applications—to identify, systematize, and formalize corporate sustainability strategies and behaviors. By examining the differences between sets of ideas on corporate sustainability, we were able to classify them according to their action potential for corporate practices. Through this process, we were able to propose a definition of corporate sustainability that includes the most important qualities that distinguishes it from its parent concept, and that may be more useful, considering the burgeoning demands from governments and civil societies on the private sector.

We are living in times where economic, social, and environmental concerns can no longer be treated as separate and independent. Whatever the position toward the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its associated 17 UN Sustainable Development Goals, they will find their way into executive, legislative, and judiciary branches of governments; they will fund and inspire NGOs, NPOs, foundations, and intergovernmental organizations; and they will be part of an increasing sensibility among voters, consumers, and civic and civil societies around the world. We are observing a growing trend toward further blending of business interests and government politics. As a consequence, and to counteract trends toward protectionism, nationalism, and populist anger, stronger concepts, theories, tools, and actions are needed to capture the interdependence between business and society. Corporate sustainability, carefully conceptualized and strategically applied, could be useful in this respect. It is our hope that corporate sustainability will enhance and encourage change-oriented and policy-relevant research and applications for the purpose of creating a more sustainable future for business and society.

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