

# **Einreichung: Momentum Kongress 2025**

## **“Whose sustainability, whose prosperity?”**

### **How hegemonic interpretations of sustainability hinder effective transformation**

By Anna Maria Rath

Vienna University of Economics and Business

Research and Teaching Assistant (predoc)

Institute for Ethics in Management

#### **1. Research rationale**

The concept of sustainability, despite its contested meaning (Williams und Millington 2004), has become a pivotal “boundary object” (Star und Griesemer 1989) in climate governance, facilitating collaboration across diverse social settings. It is mobilized across various societal domains—from science and the corporate world to activism—each drawing on different vernacular interpretations. These interpretations vary, particularly in how they relate sustainability to prosperity and economic growth. While some see sustainability as uniting environmental responsibility and prosperity by further ensuring economic growth (Ekins 2002) others highlight a fundamental contradiction in that relationship. From this latter perspective, achieving environmental sustainability requires rejecting economic growth as the sole pathway to prosperity, necessitating a new understanding of what prosperity entails (Jackson 2009). Understanding the nexus between these three concepts—sustainability, prosperity, and growth—is therefore critical in unpacking how different interpretations of sustainability are formed and interrelated.

While debates around how we should define and achieve sustainability—such as whether growth is compatible with it—remain highly relevant, this project shifts focus. Rather than engaging in normative discussions, it examines how sustainability is constructed, with a particular emphasis on the power dynamics that render some conceptions more enduring and influential than others. Specifically, this research investigates vernacular interpretations of sustainability held by various actors (e.g. Archer 2022; Lippert et al. 2015; Freidberg 2013). By doing so, it seeks to empirically uncover the values and practices embedded in particular constructions of sustainability.

This approach also holds normative potential: by analysing how theoretical concepts unfold in practice, it can expose cases where dominant interpretations may fall short of delivering on their promises. Moreover, this allows us to identify the embedded values, assumptions, and politics that underpin these interpretations—an essential step for developing a robust critique, especially in light of the evolving nature of sustainability practices.

Drawing inspiration from ethnographic methods, this project “studies up” (Souleles 2018), focusing not on marginal or alternative enactments of sustainability, but rather on the corporation as a central actor in

capitalist organisation and, by extension, in contemporary society. Observing how sustainability is interpreted and enacted by such powerful actors is especially important, as they may wield greater influence in shaping future notions of sustainability. Consequently, this project explores hegemonic versions of sustainability and asks: Whose sustainability is being enacted and whose prosperity is being ensured

## **2. Methodology**

This research adopts an ethnographically inspired case study approach (Watson 2012), focusing on a medium-sized cleantech corporation. Given its industry focus, the company maintains a distinct relationship with the climate crisis and, in this sense, already embodies a particular version of sustainability.

The study follows the corporation's process of implementing the Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD)—a policy that itself promotes a specific interpretation of sustainability. Within this process, video recordings of key meetings involved in *doing sustainability* are collected as central data. These meetings revolve around the sustainability manager, who not only plays a central role in the CSRD implementation but also serves as a key figure in this research, embodying the core agent managing the corporation's environment (Lippert et al. 2015).

## **3. Expected results**

The expected results may include insights into the ongoing contestations around the meaning of sustainability, revealing how different interpretations come into conflict during the implementation of the Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD). The process appears as a negotiation over which version of sustainability becomes dominant—a struggle to establish a shared narrative that enables action but is shaped by underlying power dynamics.

This project will likely identify which versions of sustainability gain traction and which remain marginal, shedding light on how capitalist-compatible interpretations often become hegemonic. However, these are not uniform and may draw on varied ideological foundations.

The research also explores the role of quantification in corporate sustainability practices, contributing to ongoing critical discussions around how enumeration shapes what counts as *sustainable*. In doing so, it will provide a nuanced view of the ethical implications of sustainability reporting (Espeland und Yung 2019).

An important expected outcome is a clearer view of how prosperity is implicitly defined and enacted within corporate sustainability practices. The research highlights how dominant interpretations often tie prosperity to economic growth, sidelining social and ecological dimensions. By asking *whose prosperity is being ensured*, the study opens space for more inclusive and just visions of sustainability that move beyond growth-centred visions of the *good life*.

# References

- Archer, Matthew (2022): How to govern a sustainable supply chain: Standards, standardizers, and the political ecology of (in)advertence. In: *Environment and Planning E: Nature and Space* 5 (2), S. 881–900. DOI: 10.1177/25148486211014505.
- Ekins, Paul (2002): *Economic Growth and Environmental Sustainability*: Routledge.
- Espeland, Wendy; Yung, Vincent (2019): Ethical dimensions of quantification. In: *Social Science Information* 58 (2), S. 238–260.
- Freidberg, Susanne (2013): Calculating sustainability in supply chain capitalism. In: *Economy and Society* 42 (4), S. 571–596.
- Jackson, Tim (2009): *Prosperity without growth?: The transition to a sustainable economy*.
- Lippert, Ingmar; Krause, Franz; Hartmann, Niklas Klaus (2015): Environmental management as situated practice. In: *Geoforum* 66, S. 107–114. DOI: 10.1016/j.geoforum.2015.09.006.
- Souleles, Daniel (2018): How to Study People Who Do Not Want to be Studied: Practical Reflections on Studying Up. In: *PoLAR* 41 (S1), S. 51–68. DOI: 10.1111/plar.12253.
- Star, Susan Leigh; Griesemer, James R. (1989): Institutional ecology, translations' and boundary objects: Amateurs and professionals in Berkeley's Museum of Vertebrate Zoology, 1907-39. In: *Soc Stud Sci* 19 (3), S. 387–420.
- Watson, Tony J. (2012): Making organisational ethnography. In: *Journal of Organizational Ethnography* 1 (1), S. 15–22.
- Williams, Colin C.; Millington, Andrew C. (2004): The diverse and contested meanings of sustainable development. In: *Geographical Journal* 170 (2), S. 99–104. DOI: 10.1111/j.0016-7398.2004.00111.x.