



Mainstreaming Sustainability?

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Skema Business School, Paris

Sustainability has reached the corporate boardroom. While concerns about sustainability have long been part of companies' operational practices, such as health, safety, and environment, the climate emergency has significantly raised the strategic urgency of sustainability for business. Companies have come to realize that sustainability will have an impact on their (long-term) performance and survival. References to "businesses going green" are ubiquitous in corporate communications, marketing campaigns, business models, and in governments' industrial strategies. Nowadays, open any corporate website and the ambition to go net zero, contribute to the energy transition, or become circular is prominently displayed. Using renewable energy, reducing waste, tackling pollution have all become business practices that companies emphasize in their value propositions for customers. Moreover, the ESG movement has changed investment criteria in the world of finance. Green sells! So, we have arrived then? Or have we only begun the journey?

At the GRONEN 2024 Conference, we want to interrogate the mainstreaming of sustainability and its impact on business, society, and the environment.

We invite submissions in all areas of sustainability research, and we particularly encourage submissions on the promises and pitfalls of the mainstreaming of sustainability. There is a lot of talk about sustainability but there is still a lot of work to do. Questions on what mainstreaming is, what impact it has, and by whom and for whom we mainstream sustainability are abundant. How can sustainability become accepted as normal practice by most firms, managers, and consumers? How can firms integrate sustainability in all aspects of their business operations? How can they align their practices with their communications on sustainability? What type of impact does mainstreaming have and how we can measure it? And, what if mainstreaming fails? What are downsides to mainstreaming and how to handle those? Submissions may address, but are not limited to these questions and the following themes:

Mainstreaming sustainability, what does it mean?

Clearly, sustainability is now part of the corporate lexicon. Companies mention their initiatives to tackle social and environmental challenges across all their communication with stakeholders. It is common practice for companies to commit to net zero and widely publicize their climate ambitions. Investment in green technology has also become a key part of the race between countries to stimulate their economies and recover from the pandemic. The US and the EU are currently in a race to provide subsidies for green technologies such as

hydrogen and battery technology, while China has been a game changer in the scaling up of renewable energy, especially solar PV. But what is being mainstreamed here? Communication seems to precede concrete action. While net-zero targets are everywhere, the implementation of plans to achieve these targets is in an early stage. For quite a few companies, sustainability merely seems a fad or fashion, not a strategy to break with business-as-usual. Moreover, mainstreaming predominantly concerns the climate emergency. While climate change is indeed a serious concern, there are many other social and environmental issues such as biodiversity protection, deforestation, inequality, and animal and human welfare that could get marginalized in its trail. People tend to equate sustainability with carbon emissions, although there are more planetary boundaries that we are currently crossing. For example, although a circular economy will have climate benefits, closing resource loops can address many other social and environmental issues, too, such as the negative impact of mining for Indigenous communities. Hence, there is a need to examine what mainstreaming sustainability means in terms of the practices that are being adopted and which social and environmental problems these initiatives are addressing.

Mainstreaming sustainability, how will it impact the environment?

Green products and services are everywhere. People can buy sustainable pet food made from MSC-certified seafood, or drink carbon neutral Scotch whiskey from distilleries that switched to 100% green electricity. While the availability of green alternatives has been booming, the impact of their market success for the social and environmental problems they aim to address is less clear. There are serious concerns about the effectiveness of mainstreaming sustainability in business for the environment and society. Circular-economy and low-carbon products can create rebound effects when they are very successful in the market. Green products often supplement, rather than replace, traditional product lines. While these products might be more sustainable, they will still drive a further increase in overall production and thus worsen the related social and environmental impacts. Similarly, people who have made the switch to an electric vehicle might no longer feel constrained in their driving behavior when they use green electricity to recharge. No more climate guilt! However, such increased car use will aggravate many other social and environmental problems such as the need for more roads, the competition for green space, the spread of fine particles and the impacts of producing and dealing with waste generated by the automobile and battery industries. The market success of green products and services could well overshadow the circular or climate benefits due to the negative impacts that are not prevented with these green solutions. It is important, therefore, to critically examine what effective mainstreaming of sustainability is and how it prevents society from further crossing planetary boundaries. In addition to analyzing when a net positive environmental impact can be achieved, and how rebound, overproduction and unintended consequences can be averted, more research is needed on what impact means for businesses and how to measure it. Interdisciplinary research will need to provide new insights on how the mainstreaming of sustainability by businesses impacts carbon emissions, ozone depletion, depletion of natural resources, toxicity, and land and water use. Finally, we also should consider what happens when sustainability mainstreaming does not materialize, or results in adverse effects such as in rebound situations. How could the process of mainstreaming be guided, (re-)directed or accelerated and who should do that?

Mainstreaming sustainability, by whom and for whom?

Mainstreaming sustainability presents varied and complex challenges across different contexts: it is often supported where the market for green products and services has matured, while scarce resources, minimal support, or outright resistance to 'going green' can

lead to an unequal application of sustainable practices across different regions and sectors. Companies often find themselves entangled in differing viewpoints surrounding sustainability. They risk becoming reactionary to stakeholder pressure and the prioritization of locally recognized issues, rather than building an integrated, global strategy. What is mainstreaming sustainability worth when it is only done in direct response to stakeholder pressure and not as part of a global strategy? In France, for example, McDonald's has switched to re-usable tableware due to regulatory pressure, but it has not (yet) diffused this practice to other countries, thus limiting its impact. Moreover, who is benefiting from the mainstreaming of sustainability? Western companies tend to respond to stakeholder pressure in their home countries with the consequence that they only address issues that people in these countries are aware of. In the UK, there has been criticism of companies' reliance on carbon offsets to meet their net-zero targets which has led to a slowing down of the voluntary carbon market. However, for local communities in low and middle-income countries carbon credits from offsets are an important source of funding for development projects that benefit them. When companies pay lip service to those that are most critical, they thus risk solving some social and environmental problems while worsening others. So, a perspective that goes beyond a focus on higher-income economies alone is important to get a better understanding of the impact of mainstreaming sustainability in business and society. There is a need for a comprehensive perspective, which transcends individual economies and acknowledges the diverse impacts of mainstreaming sustainability on business, society, and the environment.

Program and submission details

GRONEN 2024 will combine a range of session formats to provide a suitable platform for academic exchange on research at different stages. All sessions will be chaired by members of the GRONEN community and other thought leaders to facilitate active discussion and idea development.

Submissions will undergo a double-blind review process prior to acceptance. We expect submissions of full papers. Prizes will be awarded for the Best Conference Paper and the Best PhD Student Paper.

In addition, a special issue of *Organization & Environment* that will focus on the conference topic is being planned. A PDW during the conference will discuss the special issue.

PhD Days

PhD Days limited to approximately 20 PhD students will take place before the main conference, starting in the morning of 27 May 2024. The PhD Days offer a platform for PhD students to discuss their projects and concerns openly with each other and with more senior researchers in the field. Participants can expect an inclusive atmosphere and opportunities to interact more informally with members of the GRONEN community. In addition to ensuring valuable feedback and career advice, participation in the PhD Days is a great way to meet fellow conference attendants before the official conference starts.

The PhD Days are open to PhD students at any stage. PhD students must apply separately for the PhD Days; the application deadline is the same as for the main conference, but early applications are strongly encouraged. Applications must include an extended abstract and a one-page motivation letter. Instructions for how to apply are available on the conference website.

Key dates

A link to the electronic submission system is posted on the conference website. The selection process, notification of acceptance, and registration of participants will follow the schedule below:

December 4, 2023 Submission system opens
January 31, 2024 Deadline for submissions
March 15, 2024 Notification of acceptance
April 30, 2024 Deadline for registration
May 27 and 28, 2024 PhD Days
May 28 - 30, 2024 GRONEN Research Conference

Conference web page and details regarding the call for papers

Please check the conference website for more information and subsequently regular conference updates: www.gronenonline.com/_gronen1/gronen-2024-research-conference/



For any questions, please contact: gronenconference2024@gmail.com

We look forward to welcoming you to Paris in 2024!

The organizing committee:

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