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Sustainability beyond Compliance Corners of Law, Business Strategy, and Social Justice in the 21st Century

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Abstract

Sustainability has emerged as one of the challenges of the twenty-first century that requires cooperative efforts of law, business, and society. The present review article critically discusses the convergences of the law system, corporate practices, and sociological approaches to determine whether sustainability practices are still compliance-based or are transformative towards a change. The objective of research is to develop an overarching picture of the available literature, which will demonstrate the gaps in the current effort to achieve successful sustainability and trace the route to its more inclusive variant. The paper utilizes a systematic review approach and is based on over fifty academic sources, combining the results of legal, business management, sustainability, and sociology studies. The review indicates that even though international legal frameworks and domestic laws have established a platform towards sustainability in the corporate world, most business operations still focus on reputational rewards rather than on outcomes. At the same time, authors of sociological studies highlight inequalities, labor rights, and climate justice as key but frequently neglected aspects of sustainability. The results indicate that the only way forward is to go beyond compliance and combine stakeholder interests, legally binding norms, and socially inclusive business strategies. Novelty about the review method is that it is an interdisciplinary approach that can bring legal, economic, and sociological knowledge together to advance a holistic view of sustainability. The paper ends by providing recommendations for further study, future policies, and business practices by placing sustainability as a paradigm shift of global equity and resilience as an alternative to compliance with regulations.

Keywords: Sustainability, Business Law, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG), Social Justice, Governance, Interdisciplinary Studies, Emerging Economies.

1. Introduction

Sustainability has become a critical issue at the intersection of law, business, and society, driven by a growing understanding that ecological degradation, social inequality, and unsustainable economic practices cannot be solved through market forces alone. Historically, corporate sustainability efforts were conformist, created to meet legal requirements such as environmental policies, labor laws, and disclosure mandates. However, researchers argue that a compliance-based model is not optimal because it tends to generate symbolic responses aimed at improving corporate image rather than achieving meaningful change. (Bebbington & Unerman, 2018). The challenge is how to make sustainability not just a legal obligation but also ingrained in the strategic and cultural fabric of businesses, while simultaneously addressing social justice, fairness, and community welfare. (Raworth, 2018).

This research is important in three ways. It first combines various schools of thought, law, business, and sociology, within one framework, and offers an interdisciplinary perspective that the fragmented debate lacks. Second, it contextualizes sustainability amid global challenges of the twenty-first century, including climate change, corporate responsibility, and rising socio-economic inequalities, making it relevant to policymakers, practitioners, and scholars. Lastly, it advocates the normative view that sustainability is not merely about compliance but represents a paradigm shift that aligns the legal compliance, business innovation, and social justice imperatives (Latif et al., 2016). In doing so, this review contributes to ongoing discussions on the future of sustainable development and the role of law and business in building just societies (Mahadzirah et al., 2016).

2. Literature Review

2.1 Law and Sustainability

The regulatory compliance has historically been based on the legal sustainability aspect. International agreements, such as the Paris Agreement (Bodansky, 2016). The biodiversity and labor rights conventions provide states with examples of how to formulate domestic legislation. Regulations in domestic environments, including environmental protection, work regulation, and corporate governance regulation, are the primary measures by which sustainability-related requirements are imposed on corporations (Moukénet et al., 2021). According to legal theorists, these frameworks are necessary to establish minimum standards and to avert environmental degradation or social exploitation. This is because the responsibility of delivering the end-to-end reporting on ESG in the European Union is delegated to the Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD), which, in its turn, enables accountability. (Marwat, 2024).

The usefulness of legal approaches is, however, limited by numerous factors. First, the enforcement systems in most jurisdictions lack strength, especially in the many developing economies, where institutional facilities to oversee compliance are immature (Yasin & Latif, 2025). Second, international law systems are usually not binding. Although the idea of climate commitments is already introduced into the Paris Agreement, the creation of nationally determined contributions will make the agreement, which is voluntary in its character, contribute to the development of lax targets on the part of the states (Bodansky, 2016). Third, the suffocation of innovativeness by focusing on the minimum standard rather than revising the system is a controversial point to make, as is the bringing of (Steurer, 2010) compliance-based models to the table. Consequently, even though the law provides structure, it is not always more than compliance.

2.2 Business Strategy and Corporate Practice

Parallel to this, there has been business research on the strategic alignment of sustainability within business models. Sustainability, as a voluntary effort to take care of the environment and the community, has become the concept of corporate social responsibility (CSR), which emerged prominently in the late twentieth century (Carroll, 1999). Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) frameworks have gained importance as a key determinant of investor decisions in recent times, heralding a transition to sustainability as a business issue (Kotsantonis et al., 2016). Along with circular economy models and impact investing by companies, green supply chain management is being increasingly correlated with long-term profitability (Geissdoerfer et al., 2017).

However, some flaws of business-led sustainability are pointed out in the literature. The first is that it is on the extreme ends of greenwashing when businesses overstate the level of sustainability in their reports to increase their reputation by doing nothing of substance (Delmas & Burbano, 2011). Second, sustainability initiatives are more market-driven and consumer-oriented, and investor-driven rather than being system-oriented like inequality and environmental justice (Banerjee, 2007). Third, emerging economies have small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) that lack the resources to embrace practices associated with sustainability, a factor that causes structural inequalities to become entrenched (Rashid et al., 2024). As much as businesses play a central role, their policies tend to embrace temporary interests as opposed to the transformational policies that would achieve sustainability in the long run.

2.3 The aspects of Sociology and Social Justice

The point of view of sociologists is that sustainability is not only an environmental or economic problem but also a question of justice, fairness, and authority. These concepts all assume distributional elements of sustainability policies, such as climate justice, labor rights, and intergenerational equity (Raworth, 2018). According to scholars, marginalized communities, particularly those in the Global South, are disproportionately disadvantaged by the negative environmental impacts they endure as well as the effects of global warming, despite their least significant contribution to global emissions (Roberts & Parks, 2006). This unfairness shows why social justice has to be introduced into the context of sustainability.

Also, labor issues and working conditions constitute an essential component of sociological discourse. They often have global supply chains that rely on the use of low-wage labor in developing countries, where labor is neither safe nor well-protected (Barrientos, 2019). One instance of how unsustainable business models that focus on profit, at the expense of human rights, are disruptive of sustainability efforts is the 2013 Rana Plaza disaster in Bangladesh, which resulted in the deaths of over 1,100 garment workers (Yasin & Latif, 2025). Hence, there are other intricacies associated with cultural and gendered aspects of sustainability. This would include women who tend to be hindered by social inequalities and the decision-making process regarding management resources (Purohit et al., 2025). These sociological understandings imply that compliance and corporate strategy are insufficient to achieve sustainability; it involves structural transformation of social systems.

2.4 Intersections and Gaps

The nexus of law, business, and sociology provides fertile ground for examining the dynamics of sustainability. Laws can establish boundaries for acceptable corporate conduct, business strategies can encourage sustainability, and sociology critiques the wider societal impacts. However, the literature shows some gaps (Yasin & Latif, 2025).

First, it has no interdisciplinary integration. The analysis of compliance in legal studies does not usually concern the influence of business incentives or social inequalities on the outcome (Moukénet et al., 2021). Business research also focuses on profitability and investor interests rather than on the aspects of justice that sociologists consider (Banerjee, 2007). Despite all the analysis of sociological critiques on inequities, they usually fail to engage in the structural contribution of law and business to the sustainability outcomes (Barrientos, 2019). This breakdown suppresses synthesized knowledge.

Second, the majority of the literature deals with developed economies, and it does not cover emerging economies, where institutional vulnerabilities and social inequalities are the most acute (Geissdoerfer et al., 2017; Iqbal, Ahmad, & Ahmad, 2021). SMEs have certain drawbacks, and the cases of South Asian, African, and Latin American SMEs demonstrate that there is no efficient regulation framework, not all cultures can adopt sustainability, or resources can be controlled by SMEs (Rashid et al., 2024). Such contexts are poorly represented in the popular sustainability discourse.

Finally, the compliance/change dilemma is a problem that sustainability scholarship has not overcome yet. Compared to the more measurable elements and reporting criteria of a legal and business model, sociological critiques emphasize the qualitative aspects of justice and empowerment that are difficult to measure, yet needed to achieve true sustainability (Raworth, 2018). To close this divide, interdisciplinary approaches are needed to bring compliance, strategy, and justice together in one framework.

3. Methodology

The method of structured literature review of exploring intersections of law, business, sustainability, and sociology is critically examined in the current paper. Unlike empirical research, where primary sources of information are employed in the study, review research is synthesized, evaluated, and summarized through the utilization of secondary sources to generate overall knowledge and determine gaps in knowledge (Yasin & Latif, 2025).

3.1 Literature Search Strategy

Major academic databases were searched to conduct the review, such as Scopus, Web of Science, JSTOR, Google Scholar, SSRN, and so on, which provided a wide multidisciplinary coverage. The keywords were: sustainability and law, corporate social responsibility, ESG, sustainability and sociology, sustainability in emerging economies, and business and environmental governance, with various combinations. The majority of peer-reviewed journal articles, books, and policy reports published since 2000 up to 2023 were included in the search, representing both classic literature and the latest discussions (Rahaman et al., 2023).

3.2 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The following criteria were used to achieve quality and relevancy:

Inclusion criteria: (a) peer-reviewed articles, (b) articles with an explicit focus on sustainability in law, business, or sociology, and (c) articles that provided theoretical, empirical, or policy implications.

Exclusion criteria: (a) pieces that were not empirically or theoretically based, (b) articles that were not related to sustainability frameworks, and (c) articles that were not in English.

In this way, a range of close to 50 quality sources was chosen to be analyzed in depth, with interdisciplinary representation.

3.3 Analytical Framework

The thematic analysis was used in analyzing the literature by coding and then placing the studies under common themes that emerged during the analysis process (Braun & Clarke, 2006). There were four dominant themes:

- Sustainability compliance and laws
- Business strategy and corporate practice
- Social justice aspects and sociology
- Cutting edges and crossings between disciplines

The sources have been assessed critically based on their theoretical contribution, methodological rigor, and practical implications. Particular attention was paid to the determination of convergences (examples: the necessity to enforce the law and corporate responsibility) and divergences (examples: the profitability of the business and the imperative of social justice) (Sizan et al., 2022).

3.4 Ethical Considerations

Ethical risks are not a major problem since the present study would be entirely based on secondary data. However, the integrity of the intellectual work was preserved through appropriate citing of all the sources, and no selective presentation of results was reported.

4. Results and Discussion

More than fifty sources on law, business, and sociology are analyzed, which proves that the concept of sustainability is a multidimensional concept and that it is determined by regulatory systems, corporate governance, and which is the social injustice problem. The results show that though both disciplines have their own valuable contribution to make, they treat the issue of sustainability in a rather fragmented manner, which in most cases limits comprehensive knowledge. The results are discussed below in four interrelated themes (Choudhury et al., 2022).

4.1 Law as a Prerequisite but not an Adequate Constituent

Sustainability compliance is an established baseline through legal frameworks. The reason is that businesses have been put in the driving seat by the environmental rules and regulations, the corporate disclosure rules, and other international agreements like the Paris Agreement (Bodansky, 2016). One of the most prominent examples of how legislation can drive business transparency is the European Union's Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD) (Odobaša & Marošević, 2023). However, it is not the only such initiative. Despite its significance, certain limitations remain evident. In many developing economies, compliance continues to be inconsistent, largely due to weak institutional capacity. Moreover, legal mechanisms often function reactively, setting only minimum requirements rather than fostering transformative or structural change (Sizan et al., 2022). In this way, law as a prerequisite is not enough to guarantee sustainability alone.

Table 1. Key Legal Instruments for Sustainability

Legal Framework	Key Features	Limitations	Source
Paris Agreement	Climate commitments through nationally determined contributions (NDCs)	Voluntary commitments; weak enforcement mechanisms	(Bodansky, 2016)
EU Green Deal & CSRD	Binding ESG reporting and carbon neutrality goals	High compliance costs; limited application in developing economies	(Odobaša & Marošević, 2023)
Bangladesh Environmental Conservation Act	National-level environmental protection law	Weak institutional enforcement	(Richardson et al. n.d)
UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights	Voluntary guidelines on human rights in business	Non-binding; dependent on corporate goodwill	(De Schutter, Ramasastry, Taylor, & Thompson, 2012)

4.2 Business Strategies: CSR has transitioned from Voluntary to a necessity on ESG

In business, the findings show a shift of voluntary corporate social responsibility (CSR) to both environmental, social, and governance (ESG) systems. Firms are increasingly conscious of sustainability as a tool to realize long-term profitability across the framework of the circular economy, green supply chains, and impact investment (Geissdoerfer et al., 2017). The review, however, mentions that issues with the concept of greenwashing are rampant, with organizations inflating their sustainability reporting to gain a reputation (Delmas & Burbano, 2011). In addition, sustainability is mostly controlled by the big multinational corporations, and small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), in particular, in the developing world, simply do not have the resources to implement (Rashid et al., 2024). That imbalance provokes important questions of inclusivity and the structural inequity of business-led sustainability programs.

Table 2. Business Strategies and Limitations

Strategy/Model	Insights	Limitations	Source
Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)	Voluntary corporate initiatives for social/environmental impact	Often symbolic; criticized as "greenwashing"	(Carroll, 1999; Delmas & Burbano, 2011)
Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG)	Increasingly important for investors and risk management	Narrow financial lens; excludes equity issues	(Kotsantonis et al., 2016)
Circular Economy	Promotes resource efficiency and waste minimization	Difficult adoption in resource-constrained SMEs	(Geissdoerfer et al., 2017)
Impact Investing	Aligns business growth with sustainability goals	Limited to wealthy investors; lacks mass adoption	(Banerjee, 2007)

4.3 Sociology Dimensions: Equity and Justice

Sociological literature notes that sustainability cannot be limited to compliance and corporate programs, but to equity and justice. Climate justice models also show that the disadvantaged groups experience unequal impacts of environmental degradation despite making little contribution to the global emission of greenhouse gases (Roberts & Parks, 2006). The overall thinking on labor rights is that global supply chains have been keen on availing cheap labor in developing nations, and the recent Rana Plaza blowup in Bangladesh is no exception. Intersectionality has also become a more targeted factor in sociological research to propose the impact of gender, culture, and class on accessibility to policies on sustainability and their benefits (Purohit et al., 2025). This dimension highlights that sustainability is a challenge that cannot only be addressed technically or economically but also socially.

Table 3. Sociological Dimensions of Sustainability

Sociological Lens	Key Insights	Limitations	Source
Climate Justice	Marginalized communities bear disproportionate climate burdens	Often excluded from business/legal discourse	Roberts & Parks (2007)

Labor Rights	Supply chain exploitation (e.g., Rana Plaza tragedy) exposes weak worker protections	Enforcement limited in Global South	Donaghey & Reinecke (2018)
Gender & Equity	Women often excluded from sustainability decision-making	Persistent structural inequalities	(De Schutter et al., 2012)
Intergenerational Justice	Calls for balancing present needs with future generations	Lacks clear implementation pathways	(Raworth, 2018)

4.4 Interdisciplinary gaps and opportunities

The identification of disciplinary silos is the most important outcome of this review. The research question of law is compliance and enforcement, business research is profitability and competitiveness, and the researchers of sociology anticipate a foreground of justice and equity (Bin-Latif et al., 2017). It is not often that research combines these points of view to suggest combined solutions. This breakdown becomes particularly problematic in an emerging economy, where institutional vulnerability and a social imbalance stand against corporate standards and cross-border laws (Barrientos, 2019; Rashid et al., 2024).

As implied in the discussion, research into future sustainability needs to be interdisciplinary. Applying the sociological concept of justice and equity to improve the design of the ESG framework can be considered one option, but adjustments in the law can be informed by business conditions and cultural contexts. This kind of integration would allow the shift of sustainability beyond compliance and incremental change toward transformative impact (Islam et al., 2025).

Table 4. Identified Gaps in Literature

Discipline	Focus	What is Missing	Source
Law	Compliance, minimum standards	Integration with justice and equity	(Richardson et al., n.d)
Business	Profitability, ESG, market reputation	Broader social dimensions; SMEs are underrepresented	(Banerjee, 2007)
Sociology	Justice, equity, power	Weak integration with law/business scholarship	(Barrientos, 2019)
Interdisciplinary	Fragmented approaches	Lack of a unified sustainability framework	(Raworth, 2018)

4.5 Comparison: Developed Economies and Emerging Ones

The other important result is the geographical asymmetry of literature. Developed economies studies are predominant and present a template of regulatory stringency and superior corporate sustainability conduct. Conversely, studies of third-world economies have found that the latter is not enforced, there is no money, and no culture of not doing it (Hossain et al., 2024). This kind of imbalance reduces the generalizability of the available theories. To demonstrate the contradictions, one can mention Bangladesh: on the one hand, global supply chains force the institution to comply with the principles of sustainability; on the other hand, the institution's capacity and the staff safety level in the country are low (Donaghey & Reinecke, 2018). This implies that there should be local structures that consider special institutional and cultural conditions.

Table 5. Comparative Perspectives: Developed vs. Emerging Economies

Context	Strengths	Weaknesses	Source
Developed Economies	Stronger regulatory enforcement, advanced ESG adoption	Risk of superficial reporting, reputation-driven compliance	(Steurer, 2010)
Emerging Economies	Growing policy adoption, strong youth-led activism	Weak institutions, low SME capacity, and limited enforcement	(Barrientos, 2019; Rashid et al., 2024)
Global Supply Chains	Push sustainability into developing markets	Burden shifted to low-cost labor economies	(Hossain et al., 2024)

4.6 Theoretical Contributions

Models like the Triple Bottom Line (Elkington, 1998), or the Technology Acceptance Model (Davis, 1989) can still shape the sustainability and digital adoption discussion as laid out in the review. But they are clearly constrained in the way they approach justice-oriented issues. Theories that seem to provide a viable alternative include new frameworks like Doughnut Economics (Raworth, 2018), which combine planetary boundaries with social foundations, but these are little used in law and business literature. Such a distance creates a necessity to have further theoretical implementation concerning economic, social, and environmental requirements.

5. Conclusion

Throughout this review, it is revealed that sustainability as a posture between law, business, and sociology is both informative and troublesome. The principles of compliance are provided in the law systems, the principles of innovativeness and competitiveness are provided in the business policies, and the principles of equality and equity are provided in the sociological attitudes. However, these strands tend to work in silos and deliver disjointed strategies that inhibit the transformational capabilities of sustainability (Bin-Latif, et al., 2024).

The findings indicate some important points. To start with, the rules and regulations enacted by the law, like environmental laws and corporate reporting laws, are needed but cannot be implemented without enforcement, especially in the emerging economies, where institutions have continued to be weak. Second, as business communities are progressively engaging in ESG, the issues of inclusivity and credibility also persist, particularly in a situation where resource-starved SMEs are unable to compete with the sustainability stories of global companies. Third, sociological explanations demonstrate that sustainability cannot be understood without questions of equity, whereby marginalized communities often carry the heaviest burden of the negative effects of environmental degradation, and such communities are not the greatest beneficiaries of corporate or state-led sustainability efforts (Raj et al., 2019).

An interdisciplinary strategy (compliance, innovation, and justice) is the only way to deal with these gaps. The policymakers are supposed to come up with regulatory systems related to social equity and business realities. Companies need to go beyond shallow CSR and integrate justice and sustainability into their business processes. Researchers, in turn, should urge towards studies that include more than one point of view, especially those of the emerging economies, which are still underrepresented in the world sustainability debate (Yasin & Latif, 2025).

Sustainability does not lie in living law, business, and sociology as parallel walks, but in the development of an ecosystem where compliance, profitability, and justice are mutually enforced (Akhter et al., 2022). Through interdisciplinary dialogue, building and empowering local institutions, and giving a voice to the Global South, sustainability can be reconfigured not only around compliance but also around a transformative paradigm that ensures not only social equity but also ecological resilience.

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