

Challenging Dominant Green Perspectives: How Sustainability Agents Understand Development and Why Transformation Stalls

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Abstract

Despite global attention to the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals, efforts to meet them remain insufficient. This study examines how professionals working in international sustainability roles understand and articulate the concept of sustainable development. Drawing on longitudinal qualitative research with 20 participants, including interviews and a visual mapping technique, the study reveals a shared reliance on widely adopted models, such as the SDGs and the Triple Bottom Line. While these models offer structure, they often limit alternative thinking by promoting a future-focused and human-centered narrative. This can restrict possibilities for broader, more immediate shifts. The analysis identifies three major issues within these prevailing interpretations: a tendency to postpone sustainability as a long-term aim instead of addressing it as a present-day necessity; an emphasis on human priorities that overshadows ecological perspectives; and an approach that favors globally uniform solutions shaped by dominant cultural and institutional norms, particularly those from WEIRD societies. Rather than promoting transformation, these patterns may contribute to ongoing stagnation. The paper advocates for replacing the current model with more flexible, inclusive, and locally grounded approaches that prioritize ecological relationships and practical action. The findings aim to open new directions for thinking and acting on sustainability beyond conventional frameworks.

Keywords: Sustainable Development, Sustainability Agents, Imaginaries, Hospicing

1. Introduction

The year 2030 is fast approaching, and with it, the deadline for the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). With 17 goals and 169 targets aimed at transforming our world in terms of people, planet, prosperity, partnerships, and peace, now is the time to take stock (United Nations General Assembly, 2015). Yet, as we approach this milestone, the outlook is increasingly grim. Rather than advancing toward the SDGs, we are witnessing regression (Shulla & Filho, 2022). By 2024, six out of the nine planetary boundaries have been exceeded, and only 17% of SDG targets are on track, implying that a staggering 83% are not (Richardson et al., 2023; UN DESA, 2024). These figures translate into tangible consequences: over 333 million children live in extreme poverty, monitored wildlife populations have declined by 73% over the past 50 years, and microplastics have infiltrated even the most remote Arctic regions (Goßmann et al., 2023; Rae, 2024; WWF, 2024). Such alarming statistics signal that something (or many things) within the Sustainable Development Agenda is not functioning as intended (Leal Filho et al., 2023).

Much of the sustainable development literature has attributed this stagnation to inadequate funding, political inaction, and entrenched systemic and social barriers (Klees, 2024; Weitz et al., 2023). While highlighting all these drawbacks, this paper does not seek to dismiss progress or undermine best practices that have been achieved for sustainable development (SD). Rather, it arises from a place of critical inquiry: the first author, too young to have witnessed the publication of the Brundtland Report (WCED, 1987), yet old enough to have observed the adoption of the SDGs in 2015, now looks toward 2030 with growing concern. The challenges associated with SD have been acknowledged for decades, with numerous publications from 10, 20, and even 40 years ago remaining highly relevant today (Elkington, 1997; Orr, 1992). Moreover, contemporary discourse increasingly characterizes these challenges as a 'polycrisis' with the language of emergencies and survival becoming integral to the sustainability agenda

(Hunter Lovins, 2016; Lawrence et al., 2024). This also compels organizations to recognize their dual role in SD challenges, both as contributors and as impacted stakeholders, ultimately embedding sustainability into boardroom discussions. Nevertheless, merely discussing sustainability does not guarantee its integration into decision-making processes, underscoring the necessity for intentional reframing (de Bakker et al., 2024). While accordingly, we as a society have broadly recognized sustainability challenges and have many proposed solutions, the persistent lack of integrating large-scale systemic SD suggests deeper structural and cognitive barriers (Fazey et al., 2020; O'Brien et al., 2023).

While structural limitations are widely acknowledged, an underexplored yet fundamental dimension of the sustainability crisis may lie in how SD itself is imagined, conceptualized, and internalized by the very professionals tasked with its mainstreaming. In this context, we look at sustainability agents as individuals who aim for SD transformations within or outside their respective organizations (Van Poeck et al., 2017). This is consistent with previous research, where the individual level of driving SD has gained significant traction in better understanding enablers and drivers (Aguilera et al., 2021; Egri & Herman, 2000). In this context, mental processes and structures that influence how leaders interpret and ultimately approach SD become vital (Hahn et al., 2014). Understanding these personal perspectives is important as they fundamentally influence the framing and effectiveness of SD efforts. Current studies on sustainability agents focus largely on their organizational roles, competencies, and behaviors (Ayers et al., 2023; Onkila et al., 2023; Schaltegger et al., 2024), yet they often overlook the deeper cognitive processes that form and shape sustainability agency (Buhr et al., 2023). The missing piece may lie in understanding the imaginaries and, therefore, high-level thinking patterns of sustainability agents. This research aims to explore these imaginaries, offering a new perspective on the cognitive dimensions of sustainability agency.

The focus of this research is on sustainability agents' imaginaries of SD as infrastructures that map possible futures (Sismondo, 2020). Imaginaries are conceptualized here as cognitive constructs encompassing shared symbols, values, and meanings through which sustainability agents form and understand their realities (see Taylor, 2004). These imaginaries can influence the narratives, policies, and strategies that determine whether SD is truly integrated or remains a peripheral concern at an organizational level (Jasanoff & Kim, 2009). To that end, the purpose of this research is to explore: *What are the dominant SD imaginaries among sustainability agents, and how do these shape SD mainstreaming?*

By extension, another objective of this study is to identify opportunities for future research and ways of organizing to accelerate SD. We explored these questions through a time-lagged study involving 20 sustainability agents from diverse global contexts. Through a mind mapping exercise conducted approximately 8 months apart with each sustainability agent, we uncovered a surprising and strikingly uniform conceptualization of SD across gender, geography, organizational affiliation, and professional tenure. We contend that this homogeneity may be unintentionally hindering the acceleration of SD.

Our exploratory study makes several key contributions to SD research. First drawing on the mind mapping methodology, we find that the dominant SD imaginary, largely shaped by WEIRD frameworks (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, Democratic) (Henrich et al., 2010), frisks reinforcing a one-size-fits-all approach that mirrors colonial mindsets and perpetuates paralysis (see Telleria & Garcia-Arias, 2022). Second, we take a critical perspective on the future-oriented nature of SD, both described in its core definition and perceived by our participating sustainability agents. We critically reflect that by consistently envisioning SD as a future aspiration, we risk overlooking that the future is already present. Finally, we argue that the current human-centric perspective of SD imaginaries limits progress, advocating instead for a nature-plurality approach. By illustrating the dominant SD imaginary from the perspective

of sustainability agents, we create a pathway to critically examine and reimagine the taken-for-granted assumptions that shape how SD is mainstreamed (Markham, 2021). Introducing the notion of *hospicing* as a possible pathway for releasing and reevaluating current mainstream imaginaries of SD, we hope to create space for new ways of organizing for SD.

The structure of this paper includes a brief review of imaginaries in SD, followed by the analysis of mind maps, key themes, and challenges, and finally, offering practical implications and future research directions for organizational and environmental studies.

2. Imaginaries of Sustainable Development

The concept of imaginaries has been widely explored across the social sciences to explain how meanings, symbols, and narratives shape collective life (Milkoreit, 2017; Taylor, 2004). Unlike social beliefs or ideologies, individual imaginaries function at the intra-subjective or sub-personal level, thereby supporting the internalized process of how individuals understand their roles within society, what they consider legitimate forms of action, and how they interpret historical trajectories and possible futures (see Jasanoff & Kim, 2009). It is important to note here that at the sub-personal level, imaginaries can shape and be shaped by both social and individual factors. That is, simultaneously shaping and being shaped by individuals' thoughts, feelings, and actions, encompassing both factual elements (what is) and normative dimensions (what should be) (Bajde, 2012; Smith, 2009). This correlation is also impacted by power dynamics that influence what is considered legitimate, desirable, or even possible (Jasanoff, 2002). The imaginaries that dominate a given discourse determine the boundaries of action and thought, reinforcing certain ways of seeing the world while marginalizing others (Gorichanaz, 2023). Consequently, imaginaries can differ or even create conflict among different groups across society (Baasch et al., 2024).

Individual-level imaginaries are dynamic, evolving frameworks that influence decision-making processes and contributions to public discourse. These personal imaginaries shape how individuals perceive and engage with governance, policymaking, and societal narratives, thereby affecting the collective direction of societal development (see Jasanoff & Kim, 2009). For instance, the imaginary of economic growth as a driver of human progress underpins global governance structures and policymaking, often sidelining alternative imaginaries such as degrowth or post-growth economies (Adams et al., 2015; Beckert, 2017).

On the one hand, imaginaries allow us to interpret past events and frame historical narratives, reinforcing certain continuities while obscuring others (Jasanoff, 2002). In the case of SD, the dominant imaginary often portrays modern development as a linear progression, positioning industrialization and technological advancements as inevitable steps toward prosperity (Blomsma et al., 2023). On the other hand, with their future orientation, imaginaries can structure how we prepare for and respond to challenges such as climate change, biodiversity loss, and resource scarcity (Beckert, 2017). For example, the widespread imaginary of “green growth” assumes that sustainability can be achieved through market-based solutions, technological innovation, and efficiency improvements, despite growing evidence of ecological overshoot (Hajer & Versteeg, 2019).

In sustainability research, imaginaries offer a pathway in explaining how different actors conceptualize and engage with environmental and social challenges (Moore & Milkoreit, 2020). Scholars have used the concept to examine climate and energy transitions (Baasch et al., 2024; Chateau et al., 2021), entrepreneurship, and education (Laine & Kibler, 2022; Wadhwani & Viebig, 2021), as well as development paradigms (Hajer & Versteeg, 2019; Waddock, 2024b).

The imaginary of SD itself has remained largely uncontested since the publication of the Brundtland Report in 1987, which framed sustainability as a balance between economic growth, environmental protection, and social well-being (WCED, 1987). This imaginary has been institutionalized through frameworks like the SDGs and the Triple Bottom Line, guiding global efforts toward SD (Elkington, 1997; United Nations General Assembly, 2015). Yet, in practice, it has failed to deliver the promised developments (UN DESA, 2024).

While the dominant imaginary of SD is rooted in institutional frameworks, less is known about how sustainability agents themselves conceptualize and internalize sustainability in their work (Onkila et al., 2023). Riedy and Waddock (2022) conclude that sustainability agents lack a clear mental map to challenge the dominant neoliberal capitalist narrative. Their findings underscore the urgent need to better understand how sustainability practitioners conceptualize SD, especially beyond the minority world context (Buhr et al., 2023). Building on this, our study examines a diverse cohort of sustainability agents, shedding light on the imaginaries that shape their perceptions and agency. While imaginaries can be performative through material practices (Chateau et al., 2021), we focus on how they are mentally structured, articulated, and reinforced through dominant SD frameworks.

3. Methodology

3.1 Data Collection and Research Context

This study is based on data collected as part of a 4-year research project in the context of a global leadership program for societal transformation. The global leadership program brought together 20 leaders/managers from diverse sectors, including government, education, non-profits, small businesses, and multinational enterprises {Program goal: Facilitate co-creation to develop leadership competencies for transformative social development}. We argue that a diverse cohort of sustainability agents is essential for this research, as SD is a global challenge

that requires input from multiple stakeholders, each bringing unique perspectives and strategies to effectively mainstream it across diverse contexts (WCED, 1987). Moreover, our participants are not only deeply committed to implementing SD but also hold decision-making power within their respective organizations. As key sustainability agents, they are uniquely positioned to influence and mainstream SD within their fields, making their imaginaries and approaches particularly relevant for understanding the future trajectory of SD. An overview of participant demographics can be found in Appendix A (see Table 1).

Participation in the program was free of charge, and applicants were selected from a competitive pool by independent program organizers based on the diversity and complexity of their SD project proposals they intended to advance during the program. This prerequisite ensured that all participants possessed a proficient understanding of sustainability concepts and their practical applications. Participants provided written informed consent for participation, data collection, and publication as part of this research. All data were anonymized using pseudocodes.

3.2 Data Collection Process

To explore participants' cognitive representations of SD, we conducted two rounds of time-lagged (t, t+8 months approx.) mind mapping exercises, held once at the beginning of the program and once at its conclusion. As part of these individual sessions, participants were invited to construct a mind map depicting their understanding of SD, both within and beyond organizational contexts. Mind mapping can act as a valuable tool for reflective thinking (Eden, 2004), and fosters imagination and brainstorming (Crowe & Sheppard, 2012), thereby aiding in the contextualization of SD pertinent to this study.

The mind maps were conducted in both physical (using sticky notes) and virtual settings (using Google Slides), depending on participants' availability and geographic location. The mind

mapping task was deliberately kept open-ended to allow participants to express their understanding without constraints, for example, regarding different levels of SD. Participants were given the following instructions:

“Please take as many of these blank sticky notes as you like and note key aspects of your understanding of sustainable development in and beyond organizations. You may arrange and group them as you see fit to best represent your perception of the concept. There is no right or wrong approach; our goal is to learn about your understanding of sustainable development.”

Once participants had mapped out the concept, they were asked to interpret their representations verbally, explaining the relevance of each concept, potential relationships among them, and any sequential or hierarchical structures they perceived. The majority of participants stated that all concepts carried equal importance and did not establish a fixed order or hierarchy.

3.4 Data Analysis

Our analytical approach was initially planned to be guided by established methods in cognitive mapping research, where differentiation and integration are often examined to assess how individuals structure their conceptual understanding of complex topics (Preuss et al., 2024; Whyte & Lamberton, 2020). Typically, cognitive maps are analyzed based on the density of connections, clustering of concepts, and hierarchical structuring (Eden, 2004). However, as our sustainability agents created mind maps resembling unstructured brainstorming rather than complex and structured cognitive maps, we moved away from a strictly structural analysis toward an emphasis on the meaning and content of participants' mind maps of SD (see Byrch et al., 2007).

We adopted a data-driven thematic analysis approach (Clarke & Braun, 2017), to systematically identify patterns within participants' conceptualizations of SD. All mind maps were transferred

into NVivo v.14 for systematic coding. This included transcribing verbal descriptions accompanying the maps. An inductive, open-coding approach was employed to capture the raw terminology used by participants. At this stage, we remained as close as possible to the participants' wording, avoiding premature categorization (see Figures 4 and 5 in Appendix B for example mind maps). Codes were then grouped into higher-order conceptual clusters based on semantic similarities and participants' voiced perceptions of relationships between concepts. Overarching themes were constructed by synthesizing clusters into broader, more abstract categories representing the emerging SD imaginary among participants (see Figure 2 in Findings).

Moreover, we conducted a descriptive comparison of first- and second-round cognitive representations to assess whether the number of recalled categories differed across time. We also explored whether individual characteristics such as gender, tenure, type of organization, and country, reflected in participants' conceptualization of SD. Specifically, we explored the possibility of variations in the frequency and type of concepts across these demographics.

4. Findings

Looking at the diversity in demographics among our research participants, we were expecting to receive a wide range in the represented conceptual focus areas when it comes to the imaginary of SD. However, no observable differences in the number of categories were found across time and demographics. Here, we acknowledge that the lack of observable differences at the beginning and end of the leadership program does not necessarily indicate a lack of learning of the leadership program participants but rather suggests that sensemaking around SD is deeply embedded in prior cognitive and institutional frameworks (Hahn et al., 2014). Participants' representations largely function as terminological brainstorming rather than structured hierarchies or relational maps, reinforcing the notion that SD is conceptualized as

an encompassing yet somewhat abstract domain. Furthermore, while our cohort represents diverse professional backgrounds, regional origins, and organizational affiliations, their conceptualizations of SD display a high degree of commonality, adhering closely to dominant global sustainability frameworks such as the SDGs and the TBL logic. This leads us to the presentation of a uniform and structured imaginary of SD in the following (see Figure 1) with an emphasis on the Future, Equality and Justice, Collaboration, as well as Governance and Leadership, as emergent themes from the analysis of the time-lagged mind maps. Figure 2 captures the open coding of participants' sticky notes to clusters and themes.



Figure 1: SD mind map core themes as discussed by SD agents across time

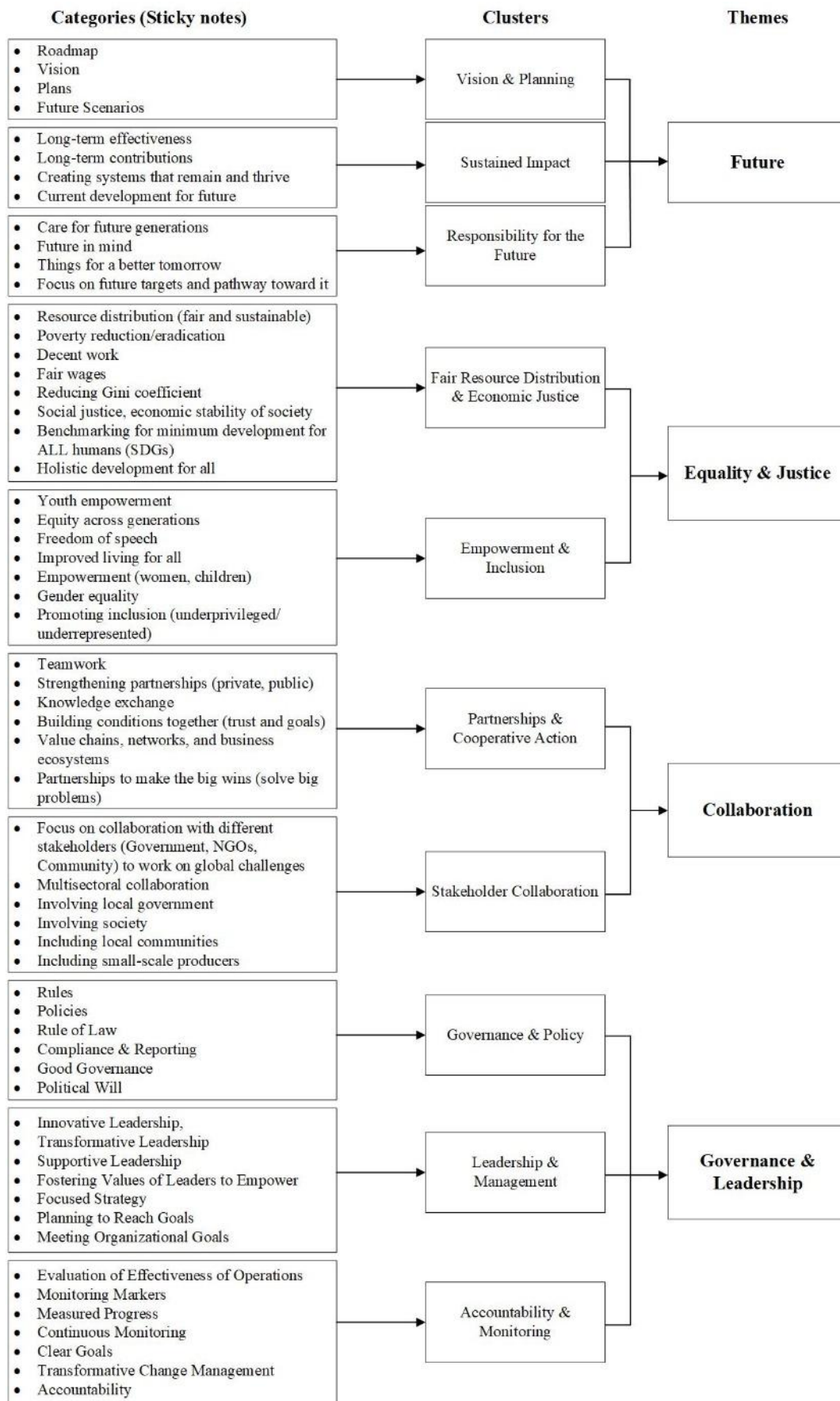


Figure 2: Data Structure

A future-oriented, long-term perspective emerged as a defining characteristic of how participants framed SD, echoing the Brundtland Report's foundational definition of development that meets present needs without compromising future generations (WCED, 1987). Participants speak of roadmaps, visions, and plans for a better future in their mind maps. They highlight the need for systems building with a long-term perspective that allows continuity in the pursuit of SD.

This temporal framing emerged together with a strong emphasis on equality and justice, suggesting that participants view SD primarily through a human-centric lens. While environmental concerns were not absent, they were often subsumed under broader discussions of climate change and resource management rather than framed as standalone imperatives. Our sustainability agents emphasize a strong focus on female empowerment and inclusion of marginalized groups, clarifying that 'all people' need to be part of a sustainable society.

Collaboration, understood as the inclusion of different stakeholder groups, emerged as a reflection of SDG 17's emphasis on partnerships as a cornerstone of SD efforts. Within the evolving imaginary of SD, it becomes evident that diverse stakeholders must be engaged across multiple levels according to our sustainability agents. In doing so, development is perceived as a cooperative process that thrives on shared efforts and responsibility.

Lastly, governance and leadership emerged as integral parts of the SD imaginary. Sustainability agents highlight the need for structures such as policies and laws that set a strong framework for SD. From a managerial point of view, these external structures shall be paired with leadership and monitoring practices to ensure the achievement of SD and organizational goals. Notably, personal values, ethics, and emotions were absent from mind maps. Participants seldom expressed an internalized sustainability ethos or viewed themselves as central agents

of transformation. This suggests that SD is conceptualized as something to be implemented or facilitated at an organizational or institutional level rather than being personally embodied.

In summary, the mind maps reveal a cohesive yet constrained imaginary of SD that is future-oriented, anthropocentric, governance- and leadership-driven, and collaboratively framed. While participants articulate SD in alignment with widely accepted frameworks, their representations lack the plurality of perspectives and alternative visions that might drive more profound SD transformation. This finding prompts critical questions about how the mainstream sustainability imaginary influences the thinking of those tasked with leading change and what alternative ways of organizing for SD might look like. We further explore these themes in the discussion section.

5. Discussion

Our findings reveal that despite the diverse backgrounds of participants, the imaginary of SD remains remarkably uniform. The persistent alignment with dominant frameworks, particularly the Brundtland Report and the SDGs, suggests that sustainability agents primarily operate within established, globally sanctioned imaginaries, reinforcing a mainstream sustainability paradigm rather than embracing more radical or alternative visions of SD. Given the global prominence of frameworks such as the SDGs, it is unsurprising that they function as imaginary building blocks, shaping and constraining the sustainability discourse (Arora-Jonsson, 2023).

However, our participants' imaginaries thereby obscure important power dynamics of such frameworks. If SD is imagined as a universal good, we must critically ask for whom the development is occurring and whose interests are being served (Chaigneau et al., 2022; Esquivel, 2016). The fact that our globally diverse participants exhibited little deviation in their imaginaries suggests that SD remains largely shaped by WEIRD epistemologies, reinforcing an implicit coloniality of sustainability thought (Novelli, 2023). While global frameworks have

created a shared language for sustainability efforts, they may also limit more situated, context-specific approaches that reflect diverse ways of knowing and engaging with sustainability (Fergus & Rowney, 2005). The lack of diversity among agents' imaginaries highlights a missed opportunity for fostering plurality in SD, which could open a space where diverse perspectives can drive innovative solutions (Baasch et al., 2024).

Building on these insights, we now turn to a critical reflection on two limiting assumptions underpinning current SD imaginaries. The goal is to open new pathways for organizing and accelerating SD through the lenses of the *temporal paradox* and the *human-centric bias*. We then conclude the discussion by introducing *hospicing* as a strategy to reshape the mainstream SD imaginary of sustainability agents and beyond.

5.1 The Temporal Paradox in Sustainable Development

At the heart of SD lies a particularly powerful imaginary, which envisions a better future, shaped by human intervention, guided by global frameworks, and governed through policy and strategy (Hajian & Jangchi Kashani, 2021; Hunter Lovins, 2016). Yet, the future, when deferred, remains a roadmap, never a destination.

The tendency towards future-oriented sustainability is not accidental. It can be observed in the organizational structures that govern sustainability efforts. Today, SD relies on a widespread and often unsuitable variety of metrics, benchmarks, and indicators (Wilson et al., 2007), creating a paradox where sustainability professionals are incentivized to set distal targets in lieu of enacting urgent change. In the same vein, our data suggest that sustainability agents continue to imagine SD as something distant, reinforcing a mindset of postponement.

If SD is always projected into the future, it risks becoming an unreachable horizon, something we are always working toward but never within reach. With this finding, we add to the recent conversations on the temporality of SD. We extend on studies focused on the drawbacks of past

perspectives (e.g., Bansal et al., 2025) by highlighting the limitations of future thinking. In doing so, we address the calls to balance engagement in immediate, present-focused actions with a multi-paradigm perspective that transcends the dichotomy of short- and long-time frames (see Kim et al., 2019; Morales-Raya & Muñoz, 2024).

Instead of an SD imaginary centered on future development, we propose imagining sustainability as an ongoing process embedded in the present and informed by the past. This shift acknowledges that sustainability is not a distant goal but a continuous practice, actively performed, negotiated, and reshaped in response to evolving challenges. By focusing on lived practices, we recognize both the urgency and uncertainty inherent in SD efforts. This perspective moves beyond the assumption of progressive, linear development and instead embraces periods of disruption and recalibration as integral to SD. Reconsidering SD through the metaphor of life's pursuit reveals an imaginary spanning various spatial and temporal scales, where the dynamic, ever-evolving planetary web of life continuously shapes the conditions for future flourishing (Dahlmann, 2025). For individual leaders within organizations, such reframing necessitates expanding current SD measurement practices to include qualitative insights, narratives, and lived experiences that shape sustainability cultures and decision-making processes.

Finally, it might appear paradoxical to critique SD for its persistent future orientation while using the lens of imaginaries, which are themselves inherently future-oriented (Milkoreit, 2017). However, we argue that the issue is not the presence of future-oriented thinking, but rather the way SD has been imagined as an ever-distant objective (Whyte & Lamberton, 2020). If SD is understood primarily as a roadmap toward a vague and idealized future, it risks limiting its mainstreaming and impactful action, as evidenced by recent reports (*ibid*).

5.2 The Anthropocentric Bias in Sustainable Development

Another key observation is the overwhelmingly human-centered nature of sustainability agents' SD imaginaries, which confirms previous research (Milkoreit, 2017). Nature appeared in the periphery rather than as an intrinsic part of SD in the mind maps, which instead emphasized justice, equality, leadership and governance structures.

This suggests that, even among championing sustainability agents, dominant SD discourses reinforce a separation between humans and nature rather than embedding ecological interdependence at the core. The emphasis on governance and leadership reflects an understanding of sustainability that prioritizes managerial and policy-driven interventions over ecological and relational perspectives. If sustainability agents themselves find it challenging to transcend anthropocentric framing, this raises critical questions about the broader prospects for SD.

For instance, climate science, in its pursuit of stabilizing knowledge through empirical rigor and authoritative facts, simultaneously unsettles traditional human-nature relationships, potentially alienating societies from more embedded ways of engaging with nature (Jasanoff, 2010). Likewise, while the SDGs are positioned as a universal roadmap for sustainability, their anthropocentric orientation has been critiqued for reinforcing human-nature dualism (Adelman, 2018). This anthropocentric perspective assumes that nature must be managed and developed to sustain human well-being while neglecting its identity as a self-sustaining system in which humanity is embedded (Banerjee, 2003). Challenging the narrative of human stewardship, we propose that SD imaginaries recognize nature as an active force that sustains human life.

Indeed, principles of reconnecting with nature have been around under various terminologies, connecting, for example, with strong sustainability (Landrum & Ohsowski, 2018). Current

academic discussions emphasize the shift from exploitative and extractive models toward coevolutionary and reciprocal relationships with nature (Arjaliès & Banerjee, 2024; Vlasov, 2021). One emerging concept, regeneration, extends beyond conservation, advocating for nature's intrinsic capacity to restore, adapt, and thrive (Hahn & Tampe, 2021; Muñoz & Branzei, 2021). In the meantime, the dominant SD imaginary might have attempted to put the cart in front of the wheel. Epistemological boundaries that separate human agency from ecological embeddedness seem to be maintained both by our frameworks and imaginaries.

Moving beyond this paradigm requires not only conceptual shifts but also institutional and systemic changes that allow for relational, reciprocal, and regenerative approaches to SD (Muñoz & Branzei, 2021; Wahl et al., 2016). With regenerative and eco-centric frameworks emerging as promising steps toward re-envisioning the human-nature relationship, we seem to be slowly shifting on a conceptual level. However, these concepts remain marginal in mainstream sustainability discourse (Fischer et al., 2024).

Perhaps, instead of continuing to focus primarily on technocratic solutions to “fix” the environment, it is time to address the underlying drivers of ecological degradation by critically examining humanity's role in the crisis. Environmental harm is not merely an unintended consequence of industrialization; it is deeply rooted in dominant value systems, economic structures, and societal imaginaries that position nature as external, separate, or subordinate to human progress (Bonnedahl et al., 2022; Richardson et al., 2023). If mainstreaming SD is to move beyond incremental adjustments, it must also involve a fundamental development of how humans conceptualize and relate to the natural world.

Nature, often framed as the 'other' to the social, is not merely in jeopardy but entangled in a crisis of meaning (Vetlesen, 2015). How individuals imagine nature, whether as a resource to be managed, a pristine wilderness to be preserved, or an integrated living system, shapes

environmental policies, sustainability strategies, and governance approaches. It is therefore imperative to critically examine the diverse and often conflicting imaginaries of nature embedded in modernity (Adams et al., 2015; Dahlmann, 2025). If sustainability efforts continue to be guided by imaginaries that reinforce human-nature dualism, the systemic challenges underlying ecological degradation will persist.

Reframing the SD imaginary requires a deeper interrogation of the cultural and epistemological assumptions that sustain unsustainable practices. This means shifting from a human-centered, managerial approach to one that embraces, for example, regenerative principles, recognizing that SD is not just about doing less harm but about actively restoring and enhancing ecological and social systems (Wahl et al., 2016).

5.4 Hospicing Sustainable Development: A Way Forward

For decades, the dominant imaginary of SD has shaped how individuals as part of societies conceptualize and pursue sustainability. It has provided a framework for thinking about progress that, at its core, tries to balance economic aspirations with ecological and social concerns. It set a firm direction for mainstreaming SD. Yet, despite its widespread adoption, this imaginary has struggled to drive the transformative change it promises. If an imaginary no longer generates new possibilities but instead maintains the status quo, we wonder if it has reached the limits of its usefulness.

Following Stein et al. (2020), we propose that the SD imaginary may need to be *hospiced* – *letting go of current thoughts and practices that no longer serve their purpose*. Hospicing an imaginary does not mean rejecting sustainability as a goal, but rather acknowledges that this particular way of imagining SD may no longer serve as a meaningful guide for action. A hospice approach allows us to reflect on its legacy, understand why it is failing, and, most

importantly, create space for alternative imaginaries to emerge. The goal is to take the lessons learned and move on, simultaneously honoring and critiquing legacy, thoughts and processes.

As Antonio Gramsci famously stated, ‘The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum, a great variety of morbid symptoms appear.’ (Ratcliffe, 2017). In the case of the SD imaginary, these morbid symptoms manifest in persistent contradictions of the growing gap between sustainability rhetoric and reality, the inability to break free from economic growth paradigms, and the increasing frustration of sustainability practitioners who feel trapped in structures that resist meaningful change (Jaganjac et al., 2024; Robra et al., 2025). These tensions suggest that the SD imaginary, as it currently exists, is no longer generative. Perhaps it has reached an interregnum, caught between its declining relevance and the uncertainty of what might replace it.

As we hospice the SD imaginary, we must carefully attend to both what is being lost and what might come next. The challenge is not simply to replace one overarching imaginary with another but to cultivate a plurality of sustainability imaginaries (Waddock, 2024a). These need to live up to the contextual, dynamic, and responsive complexities of the world. In Figure 3, an evolutionary spiral represents the trajectory from a dominant SD imaginary to pluralistic and multiscale approaches in the hospicing process. In the following sections, we explore future research directions and practical implications for this transformation toward new SD imaginaries and ways of organizing to accelerate SD beyond the current mainstream.

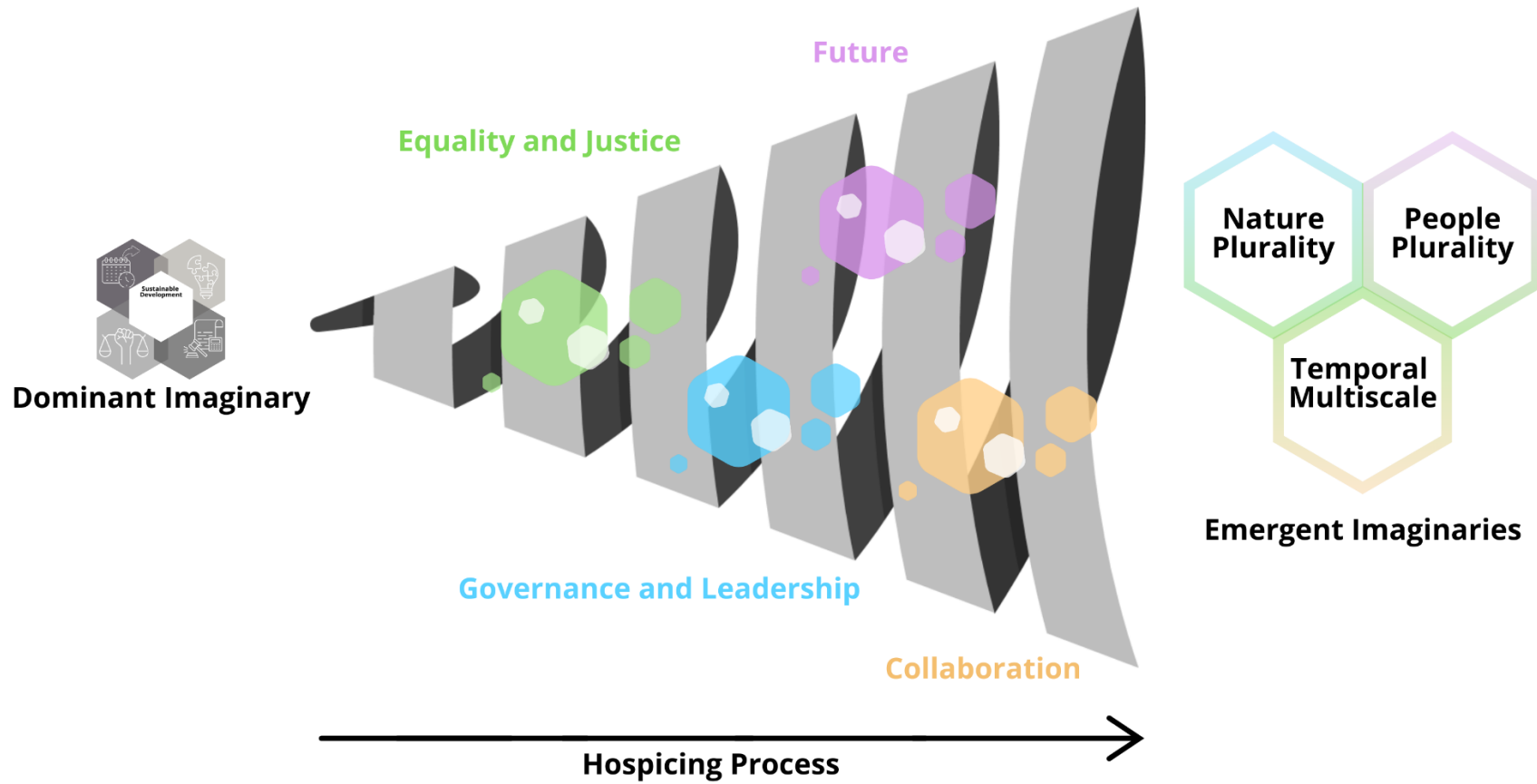


Figure 3: Trajectory of Sustainable Development Imaginaries: The Hospicing Process from Dominant to Emergent Imaginaries

6. Limitations, Implications, and Future Research Directions

6.1 Limitations

One limitation of this study is the use of mind mapping as a methodological tool to capture participants' imaginaries or cognitive maps. Such a structured approach, typically associated with Western meaning-making strategies, doesn't do justice to the diversity of our participants and potentially connected alternative ways of knowing. Another limitation of this study is the relatively small number of participants, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings. While descriptive analysis suggested stability in cognitive representations, it is important to acknowledge that this may be due to the limited participant numbers and the inherent complexity of conceptual change (Nadelson et al., 2018). This is also applicable to the representation of cultural backgrounds. Although our cohort was diverse, not all cultural backgrounds were represented, which may limit the cultural inclusivity and applicability of the findings. Additionally, the participants were self-selected sustainability agents, potentially leading to a bias in the types of perspectives and experiences represented. Future research could address the limitations identified by exploring alternative methodological tools to capture participants' imaginaries, potentially enhancing the depth and clarity of data collected. Larger and even more diverse participant pools are recommended to improve the inclusivity and applicability of insights. Additionally, employing a selection process for participants that includes a wider variety of roles and perspectives within sustainability could mitigate bias and enrich the study of imaginaries in SD.

6.2 Theoretical Implications

This study contributes to sustainability and organizational theory by highlighting how sustainability imaginaries shape mainstreaming efforts, reinforcing both a temporal paradox and an anthropocentric bias that may limit transformative change. Our findings suggest that the

dominant framing of SD as future-oriented can inadvertently lead to sustainability inertia, where urgent action is continuously deferred in favor of long-term targets and institutionalized frameworks. Moreover, human-centered thinking embedded in these imaginaries risks overlooking sustainability as an interdependent, relational process between human and non-human systems. To address these tensions, we propose two key theoretical advancements: (1) a reframing of urgency, shifting sustainability action from crisis response to ongoing care, and (2) the further development of a theory of human-nature plurality, which expands sustainability beyond human-centric frameworks.

Finally, we propose that hospicing can serve as a framework for building adaptive capacity in sustainability leadership. In contrast to rigid, linear models of sustainability transformation, hospicing invites leaders to engage with complexity, uncertainty, and the necessary transformation of outdated paradigms. Rather than viewing transformations solely as the adoption of new frameworks, we highlight the cognitive and organizational work required to let go of entrenched imaginaries fostering “business-as-usual”.

6.3 Practical Implications

For policymakers and organizations, the findings of this study underscore the need to reconsider how SD is conceptualized, operationalized, and therefore mainstreamed. Sustainability agents are not just implementers of top-down policies; they are deeply embedded experts with specialized knowledge of their fields and regions (Süßbauer et al., 2019). Organizations should empower these agents to shape SD efforts in ways that align with their lived realities rather than expecting conformity to standardized templates. This requires a shift in how SD expertise is valued within organizations.

Sustainability agents should be granted greater autonomy to act in alignment with their core competencies, fostering a more authentic and value-driven engagement with sustainability

challenges. Rather than being confined to rigid frameworks, they need the freedom to integrate their place-based wisdom into decision-making. This includes creating spaces (e.g., partnerships with local conservation projects, outdoor team retreats, company gardens) for agents to reconnect with nature in a professional arena, drawing insights from ecological systems, and embracing more participatory approaches to SD. Expanding the action space of SD agents will require a deliberate reassessment and, in some cases, a decluttering of existing sustainability strategies (e.g., cross-functional teams to review sustainability guidelines and practices, feedback loop mechanisms to suggest enhancements to sustainability efforts). Many policies and frameworks, while once useful, may now constrain rather than enable transformative action.

Consequently, a yet overlooked aspect of sustainability work is the ability to intentionally let go of outdated or ineffective practices. We discussed this process earlier under the term *hospicing*. Organizations and policymakers must create mechanisms for acknowledging, critically assessing, and ultimately phasing out SD approaches that have run their course (e.g., sunset clauses that trigger reviews, engaging diverse stakeholder panels). This does not mean abandoning sustainability efforts; it means the opposite. The goal is to create space for experimenting with emerging approaches (e.g. pilot programs, innovation, and living labs) while recognizing when certain narratives and ways of doing have become counterproductive or stagnant.

Ultimately, breaking the inertia of SD's dominant imaginary requires both structural and cognitive shifts. Sustainability efforts must balance the need for global coherence with the flexibility to accommodate diverse ways of knowing, acting, and imagining sustainable futures. By doing so, we may move closer to an SD paradigm that is not just broadly accepted but also deeply meaningful and effective in practice. In other words, we're mainstreaming a new understanding of SD.

6.4 Future Research Directions

Building on classic literature within the social imaginary sphere, we aim to echo the call for not a single modernity (imaginary), but for setting the goal of many new modernities (imaginaries) as the citizens of the world can responsibly envision (Jasanoff, 2002). Following our previous discussion, we suggest several critical avenues for future research. As science is continuously involved in the shaping of SD imaginaries, our language and the lenses we take are vital. It matters who we include in our work and whose voices stay mainly silent. It matters if we shed light on SD practices in WEIRD societies or other parts of the world. It matters if we close our doors to other forms of knowledge and meaning-making as accepted in traditional academic forums (Buckton et al., 2023). This is a conversation starter.

6.4.1. Asking What Comes Next: Shifting Toward a Present-Focused Approach

As Agenda 2030 approaches its endpoint, questions about the future of global sustainability mainstreaming become increasingly urgent. Exploratory research could address the following questions: *What should come after the SDGs? How do sustainability practitioners, policymakers, and local communities conceptualize and envision SD beyond 2030?* While much attention has been given to assessing SDG progress (Leal Filho et al., 2023; Mishra et al., 2024), less is known about the emerging imaginaries, visions, and tangible future scenarios of SD beyond 2030. The prevailing sustainability discourse remains locked in a “not yet” temporality. This raises the need for research that examines alternative ways of conceptualizing SD timelines, potentially with a multi-scale lens, that allows an enacted present rather than a deferred future. Further studies could ask: *How might SD be enacted in the present rather than continuously projected as a future goal? What timelines are needed in SD and how can those be effectively interwoven in practice?*

6.4.2 Asking Where Nature Comes: Shifting Toward Ecological Embeddedness

Despite growing discourse on regeneration and reciprocity, dominant SD frameworks remain deeply anthropocentric and managerial (Fischer et al., 2024). In alignment with this perspective, future research could explore *How are sustainability professionals trained to think about nature, and how does this shape their ability to act?* The connected human-centered imaginary reinforces separation between humans and nature, positioning SD as a set of policies, technologies, and governance mechanisms rather than a relational practice (Ives et al., 2018). It would be interesting and timely to explore the question, *What if SD was framed through kinship rather than control? What would a nature-as-kin imaginary look like?* Even within progressive sustainability efforts, thinking remains *about* instead of *as* nature (Waddock, 2024a). A key question, then, is not just how we bring nature into SD thinking but why and how ecological imaginaries continue to be suppressed. Future research could ask: *Who benefits from keeping sustainability within an anthropocentric, managerial frame rather than a relational, ecological one? What narratives and institutional structures actively suppress ecological imaginaries?* This shift challenges the deep-seated managerial mindset that dominates sustainability imaginaries. Rather than treating SD as a problem to be solved by human intervention, it invites us to explore how we can participate in ecological processes rather than control them.

6.3 Asking Whom We Hear: Shifting to Inclusive World Perspectives

As Jasanoff argued (2010), to live “creatively with climate change (here SD) will require re-linking larger scales of scientific representation with smaller scales of social meaning”. While global sustainability initiatives, such as the SDGs, have provided a common language for action, they also risk promoting epistemic homogenization (Escobar, 2017). At a deeper level, this also demands rethinking how knowledge is produced and legitimized within SD research

and practice. Research needs to ask: *Whose imaginaries shape SD? How do these SD imaginaries differ across cultural and regional contexts, particularly in the non-WEIRD societies? What competing or coexisting imaginaries emerge?* The perspectives of elders, youth, and marginalized communities remain underrepresented in mainstream SD narratives, leaving out important intergenerational perspectives (Clarkson et al., 1992; Sloan Morgan et al., 2024). *How do intergenerational perspectives (particularly those of elders and youth) offer new SD imaginaries?* By expanding beyond a universalized imaginary of SD, future research can help foster a more plural perspective on SD. One that asks *how SD could look if we truly listened to diverse voices?* and treats SD not solely as discourse but as an embodied practice, an act of being, creating, and unlearning.

7. Conclusion

New imaginaries can be a source of motivation for change (Milkoreit, 2017). Change we so desperately need. In this study, we explored how sustainability agents imagine SD and the extent to which their imaginaries reflect dominant global sustainability narratives. Despite their diverse backgrounds, the emergent imaginaries omitted more radical, localized, or deeply personal perspectives on SD. By shedding light on the underlying dynamics, this study contributes to ongoing debates on how we mainstream and accelerate SD. We call for greater attention to how SD imaginaries are constructed, whose voices are amplified or silenced in the process, and how we might cultivate more pluralistic and ultimately more transformative SD imaginaries beyond Agenda 2030. Reimagining sustainability agents' imaginaries will require hospicing and organizing beyond standardized templates towards genuinely situated and actionable approaches to mainstreaming SD.

Appendix A

Table 1: Overview of Participant Demographics and Backgrounds

#	Sex	Country of Work	Type of Organization	Work Sector	Job Title	Tenure in SD profession
1	M	Ukraine	Government	Infrastructure	Advisor	4 years
2	F	South Africa	Start-up	Agriculture	Founder	6 years
3	F	Tanzania	Non-profit	Development work	Consultant	7 years
4	F	Tanzania	Non-profit	Development work	Country Director	20 years
5	F	India	Government	Innovation	Director	13 years
6	F	South Africa	Start-up & Non-profit	Agriculture	Founder	6 years
7	F	Seychelles	Government	Tax & Finance	Commissioner General	22 years
8	M	Sweden	Business	Innovation	Group Coordinator & Strategist	17 years
9	M	Tanzania	University	Development work	Researcher & Project Lead	17 years
10	M	India	Government	Innovation	Manager Strategic	16 years
11	F	Sri Lanka	Intergovernmental Organization	Development work	National Specialist	10 years
12	M	Nepal	Non-profit	Development work	Partner Monitoring Officer	15 years
13	F	UK	Non-profit	Development work	Policy Lead	10 years
14	F	Ghana	Intergovernmental Organization	Tax & Finance	Program Manager & Advisor	6 years
15	F	Somaliland	Government	Health	Program Officer	6 years
16	F	Egypt	Non-profit	Development work	Program Officer	13 years
17	F	Tanzania	University	Development work	Researcher & Project Lead	13 years
18	M	Sweden	Business	Innovation	Innovation Manager	10 years
19	F	Somaliland	Government	Health	Technical advisor	5 years
20	M	Nepal	Non-profit	Development work	Technical Coordinator	9 years

Appendix B

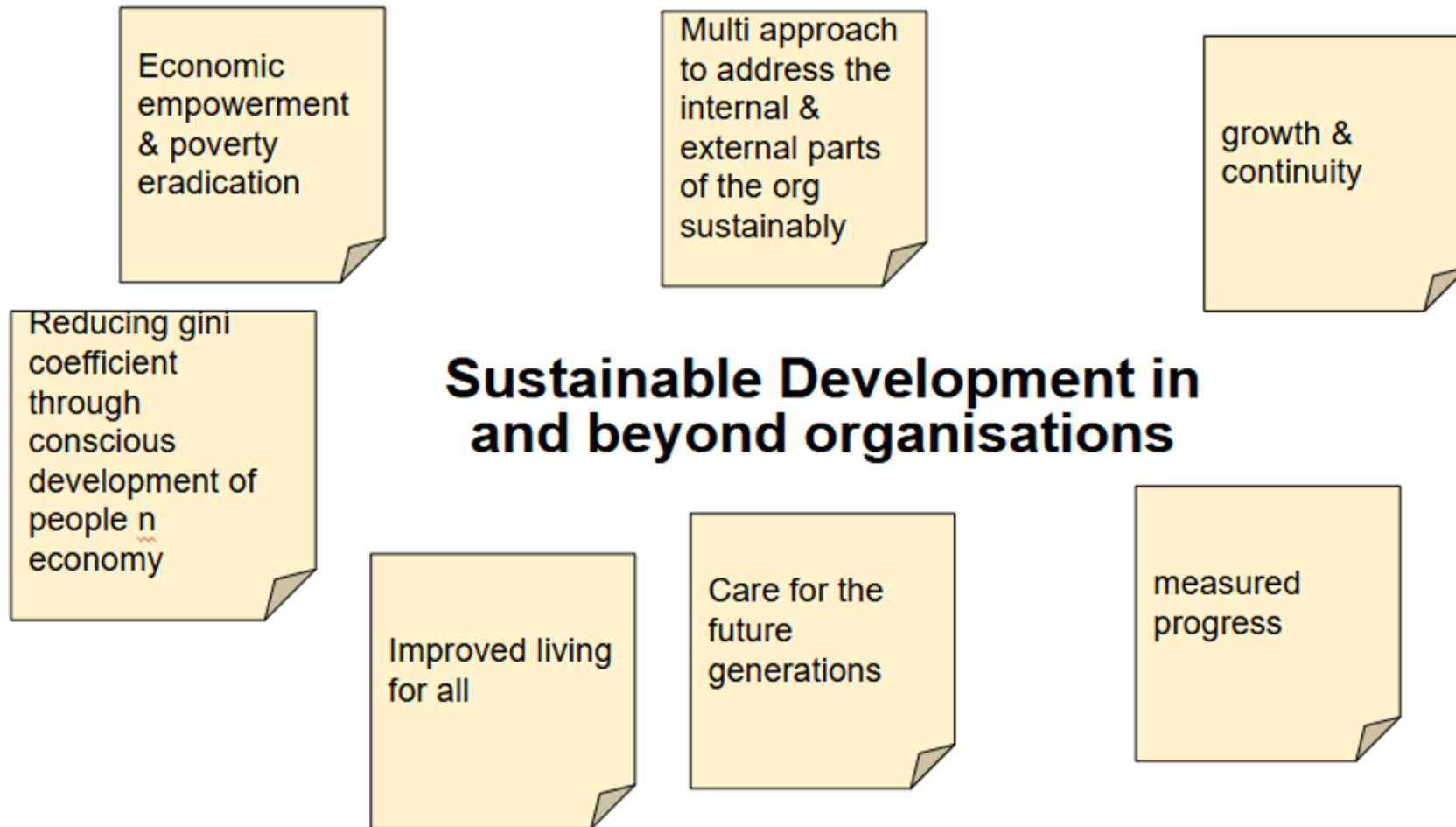


Figure 4: Example mind map by Sustainability Agent

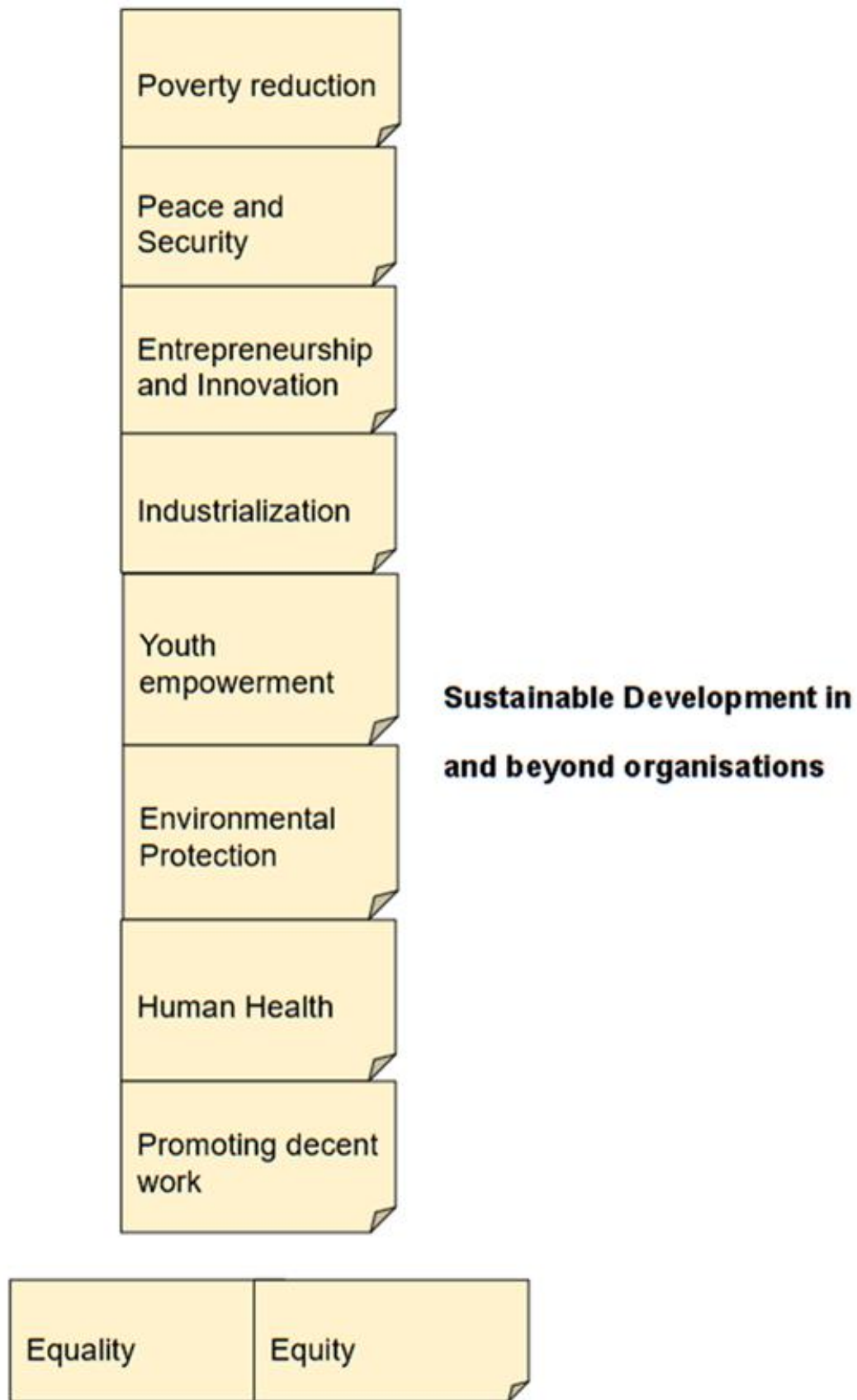


Figure 5: Example mind map by Sustainability Agent

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