

Sustainable organizational development

At the 2015 UN General Assembly, all member states ratified Resolution 70/1: “Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.” The resolution outlines 17 goals for global sustainable development and 169 associated targets. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) replaced the Millennium Development Goals ratified in 2000. The SDGs constitute a comprehensive framework in the form of a number of concrete goals with the purpose of guiding the entire world toward a more sustainable future by 2030. These ambitious goals reflect the collective sense of urgency shared by an increasing proportion of the world’s population. The goals should be perceived as an attempt to illustrate the major transformations our society must undergo in the coming years and decades to overcome massive challenges. As the former President of the UN General Assembly, Mogens Lykketoft, writes:

The SDGs are not just a recipe for a ‘good’ future. They are a message to us all, that we cannot reach the goals by walking along the same paths that we have treaded the previous 15 – or for that matter, the previous 70 years [1] (Lykketoft, 2016, p. 9).

Since 2000, significant progress has been made on a number of the grand challenges defined by the Millennium Development Goals. For instance, the world has witnessed a massive reduction in poverty and in infant and neonatal mortality as well as an impressive increase in school enrolment (United Nations, 2015). However, as stated by Lykketoft above, the current efforts are by no means enough if we are to meet the SDGs by 2030. In fact, the Sustainable Development Solution Network reports that no country is on track to achieve all 17 goals, with major performance gaps even among the top countries on SDG 12 (responsible consumption and production), SDG 13 (climate action), SDG 14 (life below water) and SDG 15 (life on land) (Sachs *et al.*, 2019).

The SDGs are a result of the most comprehensive consultation process ever facilitated by the United Nations (the process involved a broad range of actors such as governments, academia, NGOs, ten million people through an online survey [2], private sector and philanthropies). In this respect, the private sector (global companies as well as small- and medium-sized enterprises) plays a crucial part in the fulfillment of these goals (Muff *et al.*, 2017). As the former Secretary-General of the United Nations Ban Ki-moon stated in his opening speech at the Global Economic Forum in Davos in 2016:

Our planet and its people are suffering too much. This year has to be the moment for turning global promises into reality. Governments must take the lead with decisive steps. At the same time, businesses can provide essential solutions and resources that put our world on a more sustainable path” [3].

However, since Ban Ki-moon called on the world’s business community to play its full role in helping to achieve the ambitious 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, in general, corporate practices have only changed slightly. Contrary to the popular belief, the implementation of corporate sustainability programs has, as Leleux and Kaaij (2019) mention, been slow at best, and sloppy and ineffective at worst. Thus, less than a third of companies worldwide have developed clear business cases or supported value propositions for their approaches to sustainability (B&SDC, 2017).

If we are to meet the targets of the 2030 Agenda, it is obvious that things must change. Governments must enforce rules and regulations that promotes organizations to implement



sustainable processes and products (Álvarez Jaramillo *et al.*, 2019), but rules and regulations will not be enough by itself. Companies and organizations face, as stated by Lykketoft (2016), large and fundamental changes in their way of operating if we are to meet the goals of 2030. However, research shows that many organizations lack expertise (Malá *et al.*, 2017; Mourtzis *et al.*, 2016), resources (Zhou *et al.*, 2015; Ghadge *et al.*, 2017), managerial competences (Auer and Jarmai, 2017; Neto *et al.*, 2017; Chassé and Boiral, 2017), awareness of sustainability issues (Tsalis *et al.*, 2013; Johnson and Schaltegger, 2016) and suffer from a weak organizational structure (Ghazilla *et al.*, 2015; Lewis *et al.*, 2015). Thus, for many organizations, sustainable development requires a reconfiguration of the internal setup, their modes of production and their mindset (values and beliefs), as the old and well-known ways of operating is no longer adequate.

Turning organizations upside down through the development of new values, beliefs and ways of operating is by no means an easy task. It puts pressure on the organization's and not least the employees' ability to override existing ways of operating. The field of organizational learning has a history of engaging in debates about how learning plays an important role in developing organizations and employees' competences in coping with new and unknown situations and problems (Huber, 1991; Easterby-Smith and Lyles, 2011). Argyris and Schön (1995), two of the most influential researchers within organizational learning, state that organizations are to question their pre-assumptions and develop new understandings through double-loop learning processes if new ways of operating based on new paradigm are to be implemented. Other researchers have focused on the importance of fostering reflection and reflexivity (Cunliffe, 2004) as the stepping-stone to organizational development in complex settings. However, the most profound characteristic of organizational learning is heterogeneity and the deep interest in developing answers on how organizational learning can be helpful in developing organizations ability to handle complex and wicked problems (Argote and Hora, 2017).

As described above, the world has seen a growing societal realization that fundamental changes are required, and the pressure on developing not just new ways of living but also new ways of solving organizational problems have increased the interest in organizational learning. Many scholars have begun to connect research on organizational sustainability to the insights found in the vast body of research literature within organizational learning (Siebenhüner and Arnold, 2007; Lozano, 2014; Oelze *et al.*, 2016). This special issue of *Journal of Workplace Learning (JWL)* is centered on current research that seeks to bridge theories on sustainability and organizational learning and thus seeks to move the field of sustainable organizational development forward.

Articles in this issue were originally submitted to the fourteenth international conference on "Organizational Learning, Knowledge and Capabilities" (OLKC) hosted in Copenhagen by the Department of Culture and Learning, Aalborg University from 22 to 24 April 2020. OLKC is an annual multidisciplinary conference, which dates back to 1996. It began as a one of the initial forums where researchers interested in innovation, collective knowledge and in how organizational capabilities can integrate the two, could meet and debate latest research and issues of interest. The aim of the conference is to explore, discuss, consolidate and contribute to the development of studies of organizational learning, knowledge and innovation. The theme for the conference in Copenhagen was "Bridging Organizational Learning – Collaboration and Co-production for a sustainable future." Unfortunately, due to the global pandemic crisis and the ban on international travel imposed by almost all European countries, the conference was canceled at the last minute. However, we decided to carry on with our original idea of giving the best papers the opportunity to be published in the *JWL*. All papers submitted to the conference track on "Sustainability and organizational

development” were invited to submit their manuscripts for consideration for the *JWL* special issue. The result of this process is the five papers included in this special issue, presenting different discussion around how organizational learning can facilitate sustainable organizational change. The editors first identified (following *JWL* criteria) manuscripts among the submitted papers that was worthy of inclusion in the aforementioned due to its scientific contribution and relevance in relation to the specific theme of the special issue. Once we had generated an initial selection of ten items, we invited these authors to rework their papers for the special issue – double-blind peer reviewing was followed without exception. Five papers met the required standards and the tight deadlines. Next we briefly introduce the papers.

The five articles in this special issue all deal with the question of how organizations can adjust to the changes in society and the conditions under which they operate. In this regard, they all deal with organizational learning. The first three articles are based on empirical studies, whereas the last two seek to develop conceptual frameworks for analyzing and understanding sustainable organizational development.

The first paper by Anna Zgrzywa-Ziemak and Katarzyna Walecka-Jankowska conducts an empirical study in 694 Polish and Danish companies. These companies were evaluated on two parameters: organizational learning processes and organizational learning capability. Furthermore, the study explores if and to what extent these parameters influences organizational sustainable performance. The study confirms a positive and statistically significant relationship between organizational learning and organizational performance. With reference to their findings, the authors argues that organizations should not just focus on sustainable adaptations but also on intensifying the internal OL processes to be able to maintain continuous positive results within sustainable development.

The subsequent paper by Etty Ragnhild Nilsen and Anja Hagen Olafsen is equally a quantitative study using Survey data from a sample of 259 employees in a Norwegian public organization undergoing major strategic changes. The aim of the study is to examine how organizational culture and individual readiness for change relate to types of commitment to change. The authors argue that change should be understood as a natural part of organizational culture. As sustainability requires continuous change, it is crucial that organizations be able to implement changes successfully. The authors identify different kinds of organizational culture and evaluate their implications on the willingness and commitment to change among employees. The study contributes with detailed insight that will prove useful for organizations trying to prepare employees for approaching organizational changes.

The third contribution made by Marina Figueiredo, Neyliane Maranhão de Castro and Minelle Silva is a qualitative study. The authors have been involved in a participative action research project aiming at changing the habits regarding electrical consumption among the employees in a Brazilian medium-sized company. Through a process of educating the employees and encouraging them to explore new ways of reducing energy consumption the company managed to not only reach a much more effective state of energy consumption but also to change the mindset of the employees and the internal discussions. The authors conclude that sustainable actions and understandings within organizations can be achieved through a knowledge sharing process that focuses on keeping the newly acquired knowledge alive within the practices of a community by embedding knowledge in material practices and creating opportunity for continuous innovative micro actions.

The fourth paper by Ulrik Brandi and Mette Thomassen is a conceptual paper discussing how organizational learning and corporate entrepreneurship can promote and facilitate sustainability practices in organizations. The authors argue that to improve the process of

sustainable organizational transition, we need to study this processes from a holistic and integrative perspective. In this endeavor, the authors combine knowledge from the research fields of organizational learning (OL) and corporate entrepreneurship (CE) to develop a multilevel and processual model of sustainability practices. Finally, the authors discuss the implications of linking OL and CE in such a model, addressing organizational and workplace learning theory, ethical aspects and practical implications.

The final paper of the issue by Anja Overgaard Thomassen and Kenneth Mølbjerg Jørgensen discusses the role of university-based management education in relation to developing public managers' competences in coping with complex sustainable issues. Problem-based learning is discussed as a pedagogical approach for enabling sustainable management learning, and Dewey's concepts of experience, inquiry and reflection are used to conceptualizing learning as an iterative "self-corrective" learning process toward sustainability. The experiences of two public managers participating in a personal development module in a management education program are used to discuss how Dewey's concepts capture the integration of practice and theory. The authors end the paper by arguing that problem-based learning and in particular Dewey's pragmatic philosophy offers a valuable framework for managers striving to develop sustainable organizations.

Organizing for sustainable change is no easy task. The challenge is complex, multifaceted and without easy answers. Lots of managers give up all together when asked to come up with solutions addressing the massive problems the world is acing today. As Per Esben Stoknes, leader of the Norwegian Business School's executive program on green growth, mentions, a lack of practical solutions causes helplessness to grow and messages of fear to backfire (Stoknes, 2015). Thus, it has been important for us that all the papers, in addition to present new research results and thus move this important field forward, discuss how the results can be translated into concrete organizational practice. In this respect, it is our hope that this special issue can inspire not only our fellow research colleagues but also employers and employees interested in moving their workplace toward a future of sustainable organizing.

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Notes

1. Our translation.
2. The world we want survey recorded voices from ten million people around the world and mapped what they considered as the most critical challenges of our time (www.worldwewant2030.org/trends/).
3. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2016/01/520492-world-business-must-play-part-achieving-new-sustainable-development-goals-un>

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Further reading

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