

Special issue of *Organization & Environment*

“The Role of Place in Sustainability”

Submission deadline: 30 November 2022

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Introduction

While the theorizing related to organizations and the natural environment has in recent years emphasized the global level (e.g., grand challenges, planetary boundaries and climate change), this special issue revisits the local by focusing on the role of place in sustainability. In this special issue, we want to “think local” and “act local”. Place has always had a central role in the study of organizations and the natural environment, from Rachel Carson’s (1962) *Silent Spring* to Elinor Ostrom’s (1990) grounded work on the commons to calls for appreciation of Indigenous theorizing (see Banerjee & Arjaliès, 2021). Place has a significant impact on how we perceive the world (see Mazutis, Slawinski & Palazzo, 2021). Shrivastava and Kennelly (2013: 84) argue that place is a “multidimensional concept”, defining it as “a built or natural landscape, possessing a unique geographical location, invested with meaning.” Place can thus be understood to include location (i.e., the geographical location), the locale (i.e., the setting of day to day activities), the sense of place (i.e., human experiences of the physical place), as well as the broader context (local institutions and ecosystems) (see Agnew, 1987; Cresswell, 2004; Gieryn, 2000; Relph, 1976; Mazutis, et al., 2021). In short, sustainability is not ‘placeless’.

Within business scholarship, often combined with high quality social, environmental or life science research, the role of place in sustainability has had many manifestations ranging from local adaptation of practices by firms and comparative institutional analyses to contextual themes such as smart or sustainable cities. In this case, we welcome submissions that address local sustainability thinking and/or practices. While place should be central in the theorizing of special issue papers, we are open to examinations of local sustainability where business plays a role. This can include a range of actors beyond large multinational firms, such as local businesses, social or sustainable enterprises, as well as engagement with or within nonprofits, social movement and grassroots organizations, public sector organizations, multi-stakeholder initiatives, and new moral markets. We are also open to explorations of unsustainability and critical perspectives to local sustainability initiatives.

Examples of research questions

In this special issue, we focus on four (partly interrelated) broad questions:

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1. Organizations within local environments: How do organizations ground their sustainability into local contexts?

The complex nature and global scale of sustainability issues such as climate change, poverty, and inequality has urged many scholars to move away from studies of the local environment. Yet, while the scale of these problems is global, their manifestations often vary markedly from one place to another—rendering ‘global’ solutions maladaptive to specific locations, if not outright destructive. Moreover, the locale is especially important in the context of sustainable organizing because it shapes opportunities for organizations to engage with sustainable or moral markets. Recent work has highlighted, for example, that regional logics and values supportive of sustainability enable the founding of organizations that align with these values and logics (Tilleman, Russo & Nelson, 2020; Vedula, York & Corbett, 2019), that local social movements motivate moral market entry by companies with resonant identities (Sine and Lee, 2009; Georgallis & Lee, 2020), and that local institutional mechanisms shape the perceived trade-offs and strategic orientations of dual-purpose organizations (Battilana, Obloj, Pache & Sengul, 2020).

Thus, place determines both sustainability problems and potential solutions. But how do organizations that address sustainability issues navigate these local environments? How do they acquire resources to support their goals? How do they link their business to local norms and values? How do they tie local issues to global problems? How do they ground their sustainability into the local context?

2. Organizations as local environments: How do organizations and sustainability co-evolve in a local context?

Information regarding the social and environmental issues facing society can be overwhelming and paralyze firm behavior (Barnett, Henriques & Husted, 2020). Wicked problems are complex, long-term challenges that require collaboration between business, government, NGOs, community and faith leaders, indigenous peoples and other stakeholders (Barnett, Henriques & Husted, 2018). A focus on place can potentially help organizations co-create (Torfing, Sørensen & Røiseland, 2019) more impactful sustainability practices. Similarly Russo et al., (2022) explore how hybrid companies are concentrated in places depending on local community’s collectivism, political orientation and third sector munificence. Arguably the time of seeing business as separate from society and the environment is coming to a close. If we take a systems perspective, the internal vs. external divide of organizational practices becomes blurred and novel place-based perspectives are needed. Recent calls for embedding organizations in their biophysical environment and adopting a systems perspective (see Grewatsch, Kennedy & Bansal, 2021; Howard-Grenville & Lahneman, 2021; Jarzabkowski, Dowell & Berchicci, 2021; Mair & Seelos, 2021) have important implications for place-based theorizing on sustainability. Ultimately management research and its knowledge sources badly need to be contextualized (Filatotchev, Ireland & Stahl, 2021).

These developments raise a number of questions: How have local narratives of place, including traditional knowledge, change an organization’s sustainability practices? How do organizations, places and sustainability co-evolve? How does contextualized knowledge bring new perspectives to sustainability?

3. Organizations beyond local environments: How do organizations scale their sustainability practices beyond their local context?

A central theme in entrepreneurship and strategy research has been to understand what makes some organizations more successful than others at scaling their operations. Successful growth is particularly critical in the realm of sustainable entrepreneurship, given the promise of social impact that awaits the successful transfer or adaptation of such business ventures (Chliova & Ringov, 2017). But insofar as organizations use resources from the local context, rely on employees or consumers who espouse resonant values, and benefit from institutions that support sustainable enterprising, scaling beyond the

local context can be challenging. This is particularly the case if one aims to study the transformative impact of organizations on the economic and societal systems they are embedded in (Grewatsch, Kennedy & Bansal, 2021; Mair & Seelos, 2021). Moreover, heterogeneous contexts render the benefits to scaling more uncertain, raising the question of whether, and when, expanding geographically is preferable to ‘deep’ local scaling (Kim & Kim, 2021).

Given these challenges and trade-offs, what are some successful ‘recipes’ for growing sustainability practices beyond the local context? What are the actors, institutions, and mechanisms that facilitate or impede such endeavors? How do organizations go about scaling their sustainability practices beyond their local context?

4. Organizations across local environments: How do organizations learn and develop their sustainability practices from different contexts?

Studies on the diffusion of organizational practices, the literature on learning, and research on international business have all been concerned with how organizations learn from others as well as from their own experience. Following others is particularly prevalent in the face of uncertainty, whereas stable conditions make organizations more likely to rely on their own experience. This poses a challenge for understanding sustainable ventures across contexts: much of the (international business) learning literature has assumed relatively similar experiences across contexts, and experience similarity is indeed conducive to learning; but sustainability problems and solutions tend to be complex and place-dependent, making experience less directly applicable to new contexts.

This raises several questions: Do sustainable ventures rely more on their own experience or on knowledge from local affiliates when scaling to new contexts? How similar, and in what ways, must the context be for prior learning not to be obsolete? And what role does the specificity of the local environment play in perceptions of what should or should not be transferred to other contexts? Moreover, many organizations fail when they attempt to scale, or they experience failure vicariously. Does such adverse experience demotivate further expansion attempts, or are prior failures helpful in the process of expanding sustainable enterprises and markets? Overall, how do organizations learn and develop their sustainability practices from different contexts?

Submissions, Paper Development Workshop and Deadline

This special issue is in line with, and strongly supportive of, the mission and focus of *Organization & Environment*. Potential contributors should familiarize themselves with the journal’s expectations and guidelines. In line with the journal policies, we are committed to pluralism in terms of theories and perspectives. We welcome both conceptual or empirical papers. In line with the theme of the special issue, we are particularly interested in receiving submissions from, about, and grounded in knowledge from less or underexplored contexts.

We will organize a paper development workshop at the University of Amsterdam Business School in conjunction with the [Group for Research on Organizations and the Natural Environment \(GRONEN\) 2022](#) conference. The workshop is planned to take place in hybrid format, making both in person and online participation possible and to allow interested contributors to receive feedback on an early version of their manuscript. When submitting a paper to the GRONEN conference, authors are asked to indicate whether they at the same time want to submit the paper for consideration to the special issue workshop. Participation in the workshop is neither a guarantee of acceptance of the paper for the special issue, nor is it a requirement for consideration of a paper for the special issue.

To be considered for this special issue, submissions must fit with the aim and scope of *Organization & Environment*. Papers should be prepared in accordance with the journal’s [submission guidelines](#). Full-length papers should be submitted through the journal’s online submission system: <https://mc.manuscriptcentral.com/oe> by 30 of November 2022.

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