Sustainability: Inclusive storytelling to aid sustainable development goals

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AUTHOR
Dr Natalya Sergeeva, associate professor, the Bartlett School of Sustainable Construction, University College London.

Natalya is an academic and consultant in the areas of project and innovation management, leadership, narratives of projects, sustainability, digital technologies, health, and wellbeing. Her work is focused on how managers make sense of and communicate narratives and stories about emerging global issues. Natalya's work is published in a wide range of academic journals, including the *International Journal of Project Management*, *Project Management Journal*, the *International Journal of Managing Projects in Business*, *Construction Economics and Management*, *Industrial Marketing Management*, the *International Journal of Innovation Management* and the *European Journal of Innovation Management and Creativity and Innovation Management*.

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Executive summary

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were established by the United Nations in 2015 as a call to action for individuals, teams, projects, organisations and industries. The UK is at the forefront of delivering the 2030 agenda for sustainable development (HM Government, 2019). The practice of sustainability involves understanding the ways individuals and teams in projects and organisations respond to the sustainability targets set nationally and internationally. There remains little empirical research exploring the ways in which sustainability is interpreted and practised by sustainability practitioners, including those whose job title infers direct responsibility (e.g. sustainability consultants, sustainability managers, environmental managers, BREEAM managers, etc.).

In this study, Dr Sergeeva utilises an inclusive storytelling research method to help better understand the perspectives of sustainability practitioners about the ways they respond to the sustainability agenda. The study shows that a range of stories, work identities and roles (e.g. champions, activists, facilitators, supporters, motivators, influencers, enforcers, coaches, communicators, promoters, educators and dreamers) emerge in addressing the sustainability agenda. It also highlights the way in which inclusive storytelling is a central part of sustainability work. Finally, this report makes some practical recommendations for practitioners.

1. Introduction

There is a widespread acceptance that climate change constitutes the major social, economic and political challenge of the 21st century. The need for action is increasingly prioritised within the accepted sustainability agenda, which also embraces the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (UN, 2019) and industrial sustainability strategies (HM Government, 2019). The need to respond to the 2030 agenda for sustainable development is an influential 'grand' narrative which shapes the voluntary targets set by different industries and new forms of regulation. But it also challenges our understanding of ourselves as individuals, our practices, and the context of the projects and organisations within which we are situated.

This report explores the ways sustainability practitioners make sense of sustainability and address the sustainability agenda through their practices and activities. In this research, the focus is on the specific group of specialist sustainability consultants, sustainability managers, environmental managers, and other project professional roles. These roles are particularly relevant when exploring the ways individual and collective identities are discursively crafted and communicated, and how policies and practices are influenced and shaped.

The guiding research question was: how do sustainability practitioners make sense of sustainability and address the sustainability agenda set nationally and internationally?

By addressing this question, the research seeks to enhance our current understanding of sustainability and how practitioners make sense of that concept through their stories, work identities and roles. The aim of this report is to present sustainability practitioners' own views and perceptions of their roles, work identities and vision for achieving sustainability targets set both nationally and internationally. To date, there has been little empirical research that explores sustainability practitioners' perceptions of their work identities and their perceptions of the sustainability goals. This research aims to fill this gap in the existing knowledge by addressing the research question.

In order to answer the research question, 60 life-story interviews were conducted with sustainability practitioners from a broad range of business sectors. The research draws upon relevant studies on sustainability and the lens of inclusive storytelling in order to understand how sustainability practitioners make sense of sustainability from their experiences and the ways in which this concept is interpreted and enacted in their practices.

2. Relevant studies on sustainability

There is growing literature on sustainability and its constituent agendas in the built environment context (Murtagh and Sergeeva, 2021; Opoku et al., 2015; Zabihi et al., 2012). Green and Sergeeva (2020) outlined the need for built environment professionals to continue responding to the changing policy landscape related to the sustainability and zero-carbon agendas. They suggested a narrative perspective as a useful framework for analyses of built environment practitioners' perspectives, stories and narratives about sustainability and the evolving policy landscape. Such a perspective enables understanding of built environment practitioners' workplace identities and roles. Sergeeva and Lindkvist (2019) argued that construction sector firms respond to the sustainability agendas set both nationally and internationally through their practices and promotional narratives on their websites. They found that key industry players are willing to go beyond the expectations of policy and the various targets set. These firms respond to the sustainability agenda at the industrial policy level by formalising their sustainability strategies, using innovative and sustainable technologies, and creating new job roles with sustainability in their titles.

"Practitioners' work identities and perceptions play an important role in influencing and responding to the sustainability agenda"

Building upon this work, in this report it is argued that practitioners' work identities and perceptions play an important role in influencing and responding to the sustainability agenda. An individual's work identity refers to a work-based identity consisting of a combination of organisational, occupational and personal identities that shapes the informal roles that an individual adopts and the corresponding ways he or she behaves when performing their work. Work identity is constructed at the intersection of the organisational, the social and the individual (Johnson et al., 2006).

Other relevant studies include Wright et al. (2012), which identified and labelled sustainability managers' multiple identity narratives. These individuals presented themselves as follows in response to the broader engagement with climate change discourse: "green change agents", "relational managers" and "committed activists". Wright et al. argued that identities are both dialogical – as they are constructed through interaction with others – and situated, as they are dependent on available discourses pertaining to specific cultural and social contexts in order to form an understanding of the self. For example, Heizmann and Liu (2018) conducted a multimodal discursive analysis of a sustainability leadership centre in Australia, demonstrating how its identity narratives reproduce individualist ideals of leadership. They found that "sustainability leaders" are fashioned via a quasi-Buddhist narrative through which they traverse three stages: calling, awakening and transforming. Heizmann and Liu (2018) highlighted that little attention has been given to the interplay between the discursive activities of sustainability actors and the broader power/knowledge relations to which these contribute.

This study builds upon these previous studies to focus on how sustainability practitioners make sense of sustainability with a particular emphasis on their associated work-related identities.

3. Inclusive storytelling

Storytelling has a long history within the study of organisations (Boje, 1991, 2001; Gabriel, 1995, 2000, 2004). The contribution of "storytelling organisation" (Boje, 2008) research is in understanding the sensemaking that takes place in pragmatic ways between storytellers and their audiences. Some stories are concerned with specific events or people, while others take a form of biographies.

In this research, storytelling is defined as the act of telling and sharing stories about personal experiences, life events and situations. It is important to distinguish between storytelling and narrating; the former is more personalised, entertaining and emotional in nature, while the latter leans towards coherence, stability and performative intent (Sergeeva and Green, 2019; Sergeeva and Winch, 2021). Narratives are often characterised by performative intent – that is to say, they are mobilised to serve a particular purpose (for example, to convince clients and investors). Performative narratives are often repeated in organisations because repetition serves to stabilise particular meanings (Dailey & Browning, 2014). Stories and storytelling, and a sense of humour, are important for individuals and teams. They are therefore "fragments" of organisational discourse that craft identities and interests in time and space. In organising themselves, individuals and teams use both storytelling and narratives. Inclusivity is what characterises this process.

"Storytelling is best understood as a dynamic process that is continuously (re)created through the elaboration, contestation and exchange of different stories"

It is suggested that storytelling is best understood as a dynamic process that is continuously (re)created through the elaboration, contestation and exchange of different stories. Storytelling plays an essential role in the social construction of work identities and roles (Alvesson et al., 2008; Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003; Sergeeva and Green, 2019). By telling stories, individuals seek to bolster their identities, both in the eyes of themselves and others (Alvesson et al., 2008; Baumeister and Newman, 1994; Brown, 2015). Stories are inherently social and emotional, as people may seek empathy and understanding from others when constructing their work identities and roles. This research explores the work identities of sustainability practitioners and their stories about how they relate to and enact sustainability in their professional and personal lives.

It is further argued that collective identities may be formed in response to the broader goals of sustainability. A collective sense of becoming "sustainable" creates a collective identity that drives and motivates individuals to make changes in their work practices and everyday life. Collectively, movement towards a more sustainable future becomes increasingly feasible as collective agency builds on individual agency. In summary, the process of becoming more sustainable as industries and organisations is a continuous process of interaction between organisational strategies, narratives, stories and experiences.

4. Research process

The rationale for the life-story interview method is that it enables the interviewee to reflect on personal and work experiences, including life events, and to share stories with the interviewers (Easterby-Smith et al., 2001). This study focuses on sustainability consultants and managers sharing their perceptions and stories about sustainability, their work-related identities and their visions of the achievement of sustainability goals. By using life-story interview, the researchers reached areas of socially constructed reality that would otherwise remain inaccessible if utilising other methods. Identity work is often revealed in the career stories through which leaders seek to make sense of their career progression and share lessons learned (Ibarra and Barbulescu, 2010). Such stories can yield important insights into how practitioners relate to their individual and work identities and the actions they take. The inherently retrospective nature of these stories helps to provide an insight into how changing contextual conditions might consolidate leaders' sense of work identity over the course of their careers. Stories could also be about their visions for the future, such as the achievement of certain sustainability goals.

The interviewers listened to stories recited by sustainability practitioners in interview situations. The interviewees shared interesting examples and stories about the ways they define, practice and respond to the sustainability agenda. There is little reason to assume that the stories articulated were in any way replicable; a different researcher would inevitably elicit a different set of discourses. The life-story interview questions were deliberately open-ended to encourage practitioners to talk about their own interpretations and personal experiences: Tell me about your views on sustainability. What motivated you to become a sustainability practitioner? How do you practice sustainability? Tell me about yourself and your response to the sustainability agenda. What is your vision for the future?

In total, 60 life-story interviews have been conducted online with UK-based sustainability practitioners across a range of different business sectors. The majority of the interviewees are from the built environment industries, including construction, infrastructure and real estate. Some are from the UK government. The interviews were transcribed in full, thereby aiding subsequent thematic analysis. The analysis method consisted of repeated detailed reading of the transcripts, with a focus on identifying points of commonality and points of difference. The themes identified in the analysis are presented hereafter.

"Identity work is often revealed in the career stories through which leaders seek to make sense of their career progression and share lessons learned"

5. Empirical findings

5.1 Defining sustainability

The majority of the participants agreed that sustainability is a very broad term with various different aspects. When defining sustainability, most of them referred to the three sustainability pillars: environmental, social and economic (see Figure 1 below).
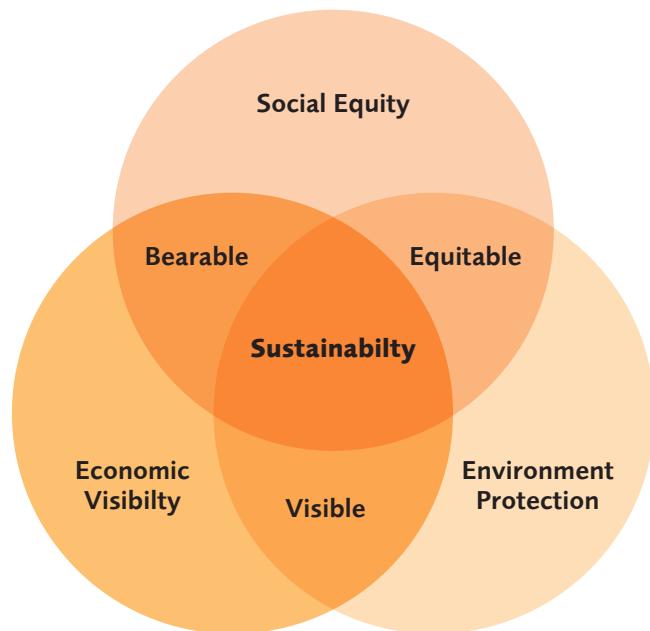

Figure 1: The three pillars of sustainability

Sustainability has commonly been defined in relation to these three pillars – social, economic and environmental – and with an awareness that decisions made today will impact future generations and the creation of a more sustainable world.

"At the early stages of the project life cycle, there is greater possibility to achieve a significant carbon reduction"

The participants highlighted the power of sustainability and the need for everyone to become aware of the impact they have and what changes they need to make. This referred to making improvements, creating value for society through sustainable practices, and providing a positive impact rather than just minimising the negative impact (e.g. on the environment or on society). Some further emphasised that this needs to be more visible in terms of what people know and understand with regard to their personal impact. This relates to the actions and choices we make, the paths we take in life, and the outcomes we want.

At the level of a project, the most impactful phase was recognised by practitioners to be the front end – the early stages of the project life cycle – where there is greater possibility to achieve a significant carbon reduction through, for example, renewable energy use or energy-efficient resources. The sustainability assessment is then maintained throughout the project life cycle and at the post-project evaluation phase. At the level of the individual, the impact referred to the personal choices and actions people make, whether choosing to drive or to take the train in order to minimise pollution, to recycle, and so on.

Furthermore, some participants put more emphasis on the environmental aspects of sustainability, while others focused on social impact. For example:

> "It's what construction does to support the environmental issues and part of it is waste management. So it's design, how do we improve the design, how do we improve the constructability, so there were a number of things that we looked at as saving costs but now they are more on a sustainable environment that supports future generations rather than what we do now. So it's more holistic and includes other things like design, like managing the risk of waste."

> (Sustainability manager, construction firm)

In the above quotation, there is an emphasis on continuous improvement leading to a future vision of a more sustainable environment.

> "I suppose right now I'm particularly interested in the social aspects of sustainability because I see there is in many ways, the environmental stuff which is what I've been involved for a long time now for about – well, nearly 30 years since I started at university – I feel that we know what we need to do and it's a case of implementing that, but I think we're just starting to understand the social elements, which seems to be the next phase really. And because I worked in commercial property, I strongly believe there is real opportunity for a lot of our clients who are trying to do the right thing and trying to rebuild or to build some trust with the wider public, with the wider stakeholders, and I think that's where the social elements of sustainability very much come into play. And you might have heard terms like social value and the value that development and property investment can actually bring to places."

> (Sustainability consultant, construction management firm)

In the above quotation, the social aspects of sustainability refer to social value. It is also about a belief and vision for a future of sustainability.

The interviewees generally agreed that sustainability has become an important and often repeated narrative. It has become a popular narrative, and practitioners in the industry are engaging with this narrative. Sustainability is seen as important and influential, but it's subject to multiple interpretations, and is often associated with behavioural changes:

> "I think sustainability is about changing our behaviour, in all senses. How do we have a concrete that's less carbon-intensive? Sustainability has gone from being important to influential stakeholders, certain politicians, certain scientists – it's becoming a popular topic. So your Sky cycling team has 'Save the oceans'. It's become a mainstream narrative, not just a technical narrative or a political narrative, so it's risen."

> (Sustainability consultant, infrastructure firm).

Other definitions of sustainability included:

> "For me, sustainability is wider than what we do outside. So for me sustainability is making sure that we do not take more out, we put more back in. In terms of the earth and the world, it is more about using our resources more efficiently."

> (Sustainability consultancy, management consulting).

> "A new way of looking at almost anything and saying this is not as good as we thought, it could be changed, or this needs to stop completely because this is negative, or this needs to be encouraged."

> (International business development professional, environmental consultancy)

In summary, the participants appear to favour a more holistic view of sustainability.

5.2 Sustainability practitioners, their work identities, roles and personal experiences

The participants in this study emphasised their motivation, passion and enthusiasm for sustainability and for responding to the sustainability agenda. Sustainability roles were seen as diverse and multi-disciplinary, involving education in the form of obtaining new knowledge, training and networking. These roles include (but are not limited to) the following activities:

- Supporting organisations in their journeys towards net-zero carbon emissions;
- Breaking down specific sustainability practices in response to the sustainability goals set nationally and internationally;
- Forming sustainability strategy(s) for organisations and providing ongoing monitoring;
- Conducting sustainability audits for organisations;
- Conducting BREEAM assessments for new and existing stock;
- Conducting cost-benefit analyses and simulations; and
- Any other activities specifically requested by customers.

More and more organisations recognise the need for and the importance of a sustainability strategy that not only sets out their vision and objectives, but that also responds to the wider sustainability agenda. A continuous process of monitoring organisational progress was particularly emphasised in relation to sustainability strategies.

The participants have further pointed out that there are some partnerships and institutions that provide guidance on sustainability and net-zero carbon agenda. IEMA, an international membership body committed to global sustainability, was most commonly recognised among participants. The participants also recognised other professional institutions championing sustainability, including APM, ICE and RICS. Some participants expressed their wish for another, more specialised professional institution focusing on sustainability.
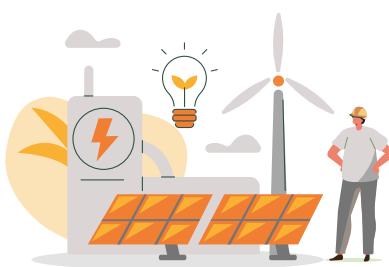
In talking about sustainability practices and work activities in response to the sustainability goals, the participants presented themselves with work identities. The interviews demonstrate that various work identities and roles emerge in response to the sustainable development goals, including: champions, activists, facilitators, supporters, motivators, influencers, enforcers, coaches, communicators, promoters, educators and dreamers. These work identities pertained to informal roles that have adopted for particular audiences. Some selected work identities are demonstrated below.

Activists

Many interviewees saw themselves as sustainability 'activists', as individuals who are proactively driving the sustainability agenda among colleagues by responding to the sustainability goals. The story below was shared by a sustainability consultant from a construction management firm who was proud of his achievement and communicated his vision for the future:

> "One of the reasons that I've enjoyed my career in construction has been because I can show people, my family, friends, whatever, as we go around the place I can point out things and say, "Well I did that", or "I was involved in that", or "I know the people that did that", or "My business did that bridge or that building". Because I think those things are impressive. So that's where I came from. We've played our part in getting on top of the climate change challenge. So we've continued to provide all of the infrastructure, whether that's housing or roads or transport, whatever it is that society needs we continue to provide that, but we're doing it in a way that is sustainable. So we've got our heads around what the problem is, recognising we've got a big part to play in helping to solve it and we've done that. So that's what we are doing, and we won't do it in my working lifetime, but we'll know whether we're making progress or not in my working lifetime. So that's my vision for the future, to see how we are playing our part in solving that problem."

> (Consultant, construction management firm)

"More and more organisations recognise the need for a sustainability strategy that also responds to the wider sustainability agenda"

Many interviewees were keen to talk about their future vision for sustainability. Sustainability activists typically hoped to practice sustainability both within their organisations and outside of work by engaging in sustainability events and networks.

Facilitators and champions

One of the work identities presented by the participants was that of the 'facilitator' of sustainability, an individual who guides and ensures the team works effectively towards meeting the sustainability goals in an organisation and through their professional networks. Participants emphasised their commitment to meeting the low-carbon agenda in the construction industry and in their life at home. For example, the environmental manager at a large infrastructure firm saw himself as a facilitator of sustainability who is aiming to embed a carbon-efficient approach into project work. He described his role as working together with the project team towards common objectives and achieving sustainable development goals:

> "So this is where my role as a facilitator comes in. I need to work with that project team and I deliberately say the project team because I'm including the project manager, the cost manager, the engineers and designers, the construction manager, the procurement people – they all have a role to play. So I'm working with all of those to try and say, right, resource efficiency, low-carbon etc."

"The interviewees emphasised the need to speak the language of the various professionals with whom they work to achieve shared understanding"

Underpinning the work identity and informal role of the 'facilitator' of sustainability, the interviewees provided examples of the activities they undertook as sustainability and environmental managers and consultants. They emphasised the need to speak the language of the various professionals with whom they work to achieve shared understanding and progress towards achieving common sustainability goals.

One senior sustainability consultant at an engineering and architecture consultancy saw herself as sitting somewhere between the roles of a champion and a facilitator:

> "I would be between a sustainability champion and facilitator. Probably more of a champion at work but a facilitator outside. What drove me to sustainability was the challenge, because it was not really widespread where I am from. I believe so much in what I do that I think I need to get out of the office and make something for my community and that is why I think I am facilitator because I am helping the community."

Of further note is the fact that the role of champions of sustainability was also seen to include encouraging people to change their behaviours and mindsets in order to achieve the sustainability goals set nationally and internationally.

Supporters

Many interviewees saw themselves as 'supporters' of sustainability, individuals who support the sustainability agenda and provide guidance to other stakeholders and employees on implementing sustainability practices. Some stories are presented below:

> "I guess I am a proponent, and I will do whatever is in my power. But I also understand the limitations on what you cannot do overnight."

(Sustainability consultant, sustainability construction consultancy).

> "I connect, support and challenge people. Ask them a question: what do their children think and hope they are doing at work tomorrow?"

(Director, sustainability association)

Coaches and educators

Several interviewees saw themselves as 'coaches' or 'educators' of sustainability who support and provide guidance on how to become more sustainable.

> "I am a life coach. I am trying to coach people on how to be more sustainable in their jobs and their workplaces. I am trying to take everybody on that journey."
>
> (Head of sustainability and the environment, architectural practice)

This role comes naturally given the nature of sustainability consultants' professional role. There was also agreement among many of the interviewees about the importance of understanding people's psychology.

There was further evidence that sustainability practitioners are not only responding to the sustainability agenda and goals through their work roles, but also in their day-to-day lives. Here are some examples:

> "We bought a new-build house two or three years ago, and I wanted my house to be as sustainable as possible. My house has one solar panel."
>
> (Sustainability consultanct, management consulting firm).

> "I have an electric car and I do try to cycle... I obviously try to live a sustainable life by eating organic food. And trying not to use too much plastic. I've also been volunteering with a community energy organisation."
>
> (Sustainability consultant, sustainable construction consultancy)

> "On a personal level, I have just put together a reading list which I feel sort of keeps up to date with all the new developments that are relevant. Friends and colleagues who are interested help."
>
> (Sustainability and physics engineer, construction engineering consultancy)

> "I keep in touch with previous colleagues who are also working as sustainability consultants in the real estate world. It's useful to see what they're doing and what their companies are offering."
>
> (Sustainability consultant, real estate company)

> "I do attend the live webinars. Actually, it's quite easy at the moment. You can just sign up and then it plays in the background, while I'm working on something else."
>
> (Head of sustainability and environment, architectural practice)

"Sustainability practitioners are not only responding to the sustainability agenda and goals through their work roles, but also in their day-to-day lives"

5.3 Collective identity and sustainability

The empirical data from the individual life-story interviews have demonstrated a strong sense of collective identity ('we') around a shared understanding of sustainability and its goals. The interviewees very often talked about shared mindsets and common values. Here are some examples that show a strong sense of a collective identity:

> "The Paris Agreement is a great example of how all countries can work towards the same goals."
>
> (Sustainability consultant, real estate company)

> "I think if you went to some industry event about sustainability on a particular topic, I think in general sustainability practitioners, as in the people who are trying to improve the sustainability of their projects and their organisations, I think you could almost put together like a collective output or collective outlook rather. So I think everyone is... so to massively generalise, I'd say on the whole people are always trying to learn more, always happy to share what they've done and are on the whole, where they can, happy to engage with industry initiatives to try and make things better. If you put all that together it then becomes a, we, as the industry."
>
> (Environmental manager, infrastructure firm)

"The empirical data from the individual life-story interviews have demonstrated a strong sense of collective identity ('we') around a shared understanding of sustainability and its goals"

The above quotation places emphasis on a culture of continuous improvement and learning in the construction sector and people's willingness to share and engage with sustainability goals. Other examples of a need to act collectively in response to the sustainability agenda are:

"We are all towards the same goals in the future. Sustainability consultants are sort of pulling it all together."

(Sustainability consultancy, management consulting)

"The whole thing about sustainability is that everyone knows we can't do it alone, so the collectiveness is important."

(Sustainability consultant, construction firm)

"I use 17 sustainability goals when talking about careers for students. I just ask students to pick one and say why they picked this one. These students are resonating with a goal and it's helping them to understand who they are and what they are passionate about. But what it's also showing is that all of the goals are important."

(Director, sustainability association)

"Globally, by governments, businesses, individuals, universities etc., we have to work together to resolve this."

(Director, sustainability association)

It is further emphasised that it is only through employee engagement with the sustainability agenda and goals that people's mindsets and behaviour will change. An organisation's sustainability strategy acts as a vision and a reminder for employees to comply with the sustainability goals and agenda.

5.4 Future vision

In this study, there was an interest in finding out the sustainability practitioners' vision for the future in terms of achieving sustainability goals, and their general vision about the extent to which sustainability will be practised in the future. There was an agreement among the participants about the importance of sustainability in the future. There was generally a positive vision for the future:

"The role of the sustainability consultant may not exist in the future, as all practitioners will eventually respond to the sustainability agenda"

"Sustainability is becoming more and more important to companies, and I think it will become more and more important in the future. We've already started seeing companies that include sustainability in their high-level senior meetings, in the board meetings.

"The great work has started and we are not there yet, but at least we have made the first step towards a more sustainable world. This is something positive to see."

(Sustainability consultant, real estate company)

Some interviewees argued that the role of the sustainability consultant may not exist in the future, as all practitioners will eventually respond to the sustainability agenda. They further suggested that in future there will likely be a need for a wider sustainability co-ordinator role to oversee and co-ordinate sustainability consultants and have a more strategic view:

"I do not think the role of sustainability consultant should exist in the future. All disciplines should be sustainable... But I do not think there is a wider co-ordinator role and I think that is probably what sustainability consultants are working towards, as there is a lot of information and there is not one co-ordinator that really understand the whole essence and is able to piece it together."

(Senior sustainability consultant, engineering and architecture consultancy).

A number of interviewees highlighted the need for investment in sustainability, especially at a government level:

"Maybe we need more investments from different sources, government, and I think it is just more about proving to people that on a long-term basis it saves a lot of money to build a building sustainably with energy savings and things like that."

(Sustainability consultant, sustainability construction consultancy).

Of further interest is the importance of inspiring stories, case-study examples and the creation of spaces for individuals for practising sustainability:

"We need evidence to justify and to manifest what the vision is, but you don't use data to create the vision. You use inspiring stories and create spaces to do that. And the vision is extraordinarily positive, despite all I know.

"I do believe we will get to the point where we have much greater equality and equity around the world. I do think we will learn very quickly to live in balance and harmony with nature."

(Director, sustainability association)

6. Practical recommendations

Based on the empirical findings, there are several practical recommendations which have been made by the interviewees in terms of education, policy and practice:

A holistic approach to sustainability

Most practitioners agreed that a more holistic approach to sustainability should be adopted. For example, this might involve systemic air purification, greening the planet, systemic water purification, changing people's behaviours and mindsets, etc. Some holistic examples from interviewees included:

"It needs to be a very holistic system in achieving sustainable development goals."

(Sustainability consultant, built environment consulting firm)

"For example, if we give a recommendation to a project, it wouldn't be just because if you don't do that you won't get your points into a sustainability matrix. It's more holistic and about considering what would add value to the project."

(Senior sustainability consultant, engineering and architecture consultancy)

"We have got this problem that we keep designing buildings in ways that are not sustainable, healthy or equitable, so we need a whole change of approach. My job in the business with my colleagues is to unlock that process and change the way people are behaving."

(Head of sustainability, architecture and design practice)

Some practitioners highlighted that a multi-level approach to sustainability should be encouraged, at the global, industrial, organisational, project, team and individual levels. Here is one example:

"Investors in most cases are very keen for sustainability, so it comes from top to bottom, rather than bottom-up or a holistic approach. I've been on projects where there has been scrutiny from the top on why certain a level of sustainability has not been achieved, but I think it is probably a better way to deal with things to engage design teams from the outset rather than just leaving sustainability to the back end."

(Sustainability consultant, engineering and architecture consultancy)

This aligns with the growing body of studies that acknowledge multiple perspectives on sustainability and the comprehensive nature of the concept (Green and Sergeeva, 2020; Murtagh and Sergeeva, 2021; Sergeeva and Lindkvist, 2019). A holistic perspective is also aligned with the commonly accepted view of sustainability in relation to the three pillars: social, economic and environmental.

Greater focus on the impact of sustainability-related practices on the planet and society

As was discussed in Section 5.1, practitioners highlighted the need for a greater focus on the impact of sustainability-related practices on the environment and society based on the choices, decisions and actions we make throughout our lives. The emphasis was on creating positive impact (e.g., using more sustainable materials for future construction, greener and more sustainable places for people to work and live, demonstrating the achievement of sustainable goals, etc.) rather than just minimising our negative impact (e.g., by reducing waste or reducing carbon emissions). Individual and collective behaviours and actions are required if we are to achieve the sustainable development goals.

There is broad agreement among practitioners that sustainability-related values (environmental, social and economic) should be included in the educational programmes of schools, universities and companies throughout people's lives. This finding is also emphasised in the special issue of *Buildings & Cities* journal, "Education and training: Mainstreaming zero carbon" (Green and Sergeeva, 2020).

There has also been a suggestion that organisations should provide time and space for self-learning on sustainability-related issues for employees, potentially including attending webinars, participating and organising events, or free days for self-learning and inspiration.

Practitioners agreed that individuals and organisations should learn from global experiences of best practices and then implement them locally. Best practice on sustainability should be demonstrated through case studies and then shared on social media.

Sustainability strategies

There was an emphasis among the participants on the need for and the importance of sustainability strategies as a vision and reminder to act upon and achieve sustainable goals. One part of the sustainability consultant's role is to help organisations in forming a sustainability strategy, helping them in realising the strategy, and supporting them through continuous monitoring towards achieving the strategy. The strategy should also be reviewed and revised over time.

The participants also emphasised the importance of how sustainability strategies are communicated externally:

> "We moved our sustainability report online, so we created a sustainability microsite. I was assisting our marketing and communications teams in that transfer and the content for that in terms of case studies, but also in terms of how our strategy is communicated externally."

> (Sustainability adviser, construction firm)

Case studies and stories are seen as an important part of promoting sustainability in organisations and motivating employees to come up with innovative sustainable solutions:

> "If we do not capture the story, we never move forward. It will take forever to pick up an idea and try it again. Instead, we could all read about it and then use that experience. And it is important, even if we have a negative case study, that is also very positive thing – we can then understand how not to do things. Stories are also good for inspiring people to make a change. These people need to be rewarded and recognised."

> (International business development professional, environmental consultancy)

Sustainability assessments

Practitioners pointed towards some difficulties associated with green building standards, including:

- **They can be a box-ticking exercise – it can be easy to meet some criteria without doing much out of the ordinary or thinking of the bigger picture.**
- **They are slow-moving in terms of updating the content – the knowledge and capabilities of some fast-paced sectors move much faster than the standards.**
- **None of the existing systems really cover embodied carbon.**

Based on these challenges, a number of recommendations were made to address the wider perspective on sustainability (e.g., sustainable development goals), to ensure continuous renewal of the content of sustainability assessments (BREEAM), to focus more on embodied carbon, and to create new and improved standards.

All participants agreed that there is a need for a continuous process of auditing and monitoring organisations' sustainability-related effectiveness.

Sustainability co-ordinator or/and chief sustainability officer roles

While some interviewees argued that the role of sustainability consultant may not exist in the future because all practitioners will eventually respond to the sustainability agenda, this role has been growing over the years and accruing various work responsibilities. Because of the rapid growth of this role and the diversity of its work responsibilities, some interviewees felt that there is a need for someone who could oversee them at a more macro level.

> "All participants agreed that there is a need for a continuous process of auditing and monitoring organisations' sustainability-related effectiveness"

As was outlined in the previous section, practitioners have highlighted the need for a new professional role – a sustainability co-ordinator or/and chief sustainability officer – who would oversee the sustainability consultants and focus on global sustainability goals, challenges and opportunities. As the number and remit of sustainability consultants expands, there is a need for someone who will co-ordinate them and have a wider perspective on achieving sustainable development goals. Here is one example from the practitioners:

> "Raising awareness is going to become less needed, I would say. It's probably just going to be more about setting targets and co-ordinating those targets and monitoring performance."

> (Senior sustainability consultant, engineering and architecture consultancy)

Funding and initiatives for sustainability

Organisations should attract funding from a variety of sources (e.g. green funding initiatives) for practising sustainability and responding to sustainable development goals. Government should continue to provide opportunities for funding to allow organisations to keep improving their practices.

7. Conclusion

The UN SDGs provide a foundation for industries and firms aiming to achieve these recommendations. In time, sustainability will become a normal and important part of every practitioner's role regardless of their job title. There is already a strong sense of individual and collective responsibility for achieving the SDGs. The motivation, enthusiasm and belief that sustainability practitioners have in a sustainable future should motivate other practitioners to engage with and respond to the SDGs. The personal stories shared by participants in this study are valuable when it comes to learning from each other.

The built environment plays an important role in achieving our global sustainability goals. Sustainability practitioners more generally are seen as agents of change, and agency can lead to the modification of structural rules. Personal commitment and values – as well as self-identity more generally – can contribute to and shape the self-identities and collective identities which inform social sensemaking and sensegiving. The past can be reconstructed and can influence present agency, and so stories and narratives may operate as processes for transformation. Based on life-story interviews with sustainability practitioners, these different stories (performative stories, stories about everyday experiences, future-oriented stories and stories about self-identities) and work-related identities (facilitators, activists, coaches, etc.) emerge in relation to the need to achieve the sustainability goals.

This report demonstrates that understanding sustainability as a form of inclusive storytelling to which individuals and firms respond through their work-related identities, practices and actions opens up an opportunity for a better understanding of the meaning of sustainability for practitioners. It also has important implications for constructing individual and collective identities.

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Association for Project Management

Ibis House, Regent Park,
Summerleys Road,
Princes Risborough,
Buckinghamshire HP27 9LE

Tel (UK) 0845 458 1944
Tel (Int) +44 1844 271 640
Email info@apm.org.uk
Web apm.org.uk

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