

CHANGE MANAGEMENT FOR THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT OF ORGANIZATIONS

Mădălina TOCAN¹⁶,

Institute for World Economy, Romanian Academy; Faculty of Financial Management,
Ecological University of Bucharest

ABSTRACT: *Sustainable development has become a strategic imperative for organizations, governments, and societies, requiring structural transformation and long-term commitment. The integration of sustainability into business models entails profound organizational changes, affecting processes, culture, and stakeholder relationships. Consequently, effective change management emerges as a critical enabler for embedding sustainability into organizational practice and plays a central role in ensuring that sustainability strategies are effectively implemented, accepted, and embedded into organizational culture.*

This paper explores the interdependence between sustainable development and change management, arguing that their synergy is essential for achieving systemic transformation. It examines the theoretical foundations of both domains, highlights practical approaches for aligning change management strategies with sustainability objectives, The analysis concludes that only through integrated and adaptive change management approaches can organizations successfully balance economic, social, and environmental objectives, ensuring sustainable growth and long-term viability.

Keywords: *Sustainable development, sustainability, change management.*

JEL Classification: *M10; M14; Q01.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The concept of sustainable development has become one of the central paradigms of the 21st century, shaping not only global economic and environmental policies but also the strategic orientation of organizations across sectors. Triggered by accelerating climate change, rising inequality, and resource scarcity, sustainability has transcended the boundaries of environmental activism and has entered the mainstream of corporate governance, public administration, and civil society initiatives.

The United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, through its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), emphasizes the interconnectedness of economic growth, social inclusion, and environmental protection. This global framework has been adopted by governments and organizations worldwide as a roadmap for inclusive and sustainable futures. However, translating the SDGs from political commitments into

¹⁶ PhD. Scientific Researcher III, Associate Prof, madalina.tocan@gmail.com
madalina.tocan@gmail.com

operational strategies at organizational and societal levels has proven challenging. This is because sustainability initiatives often disrupt existing practices, challenge entrenched interests, and require reallocation of resources. As a result, resistance to change, organizational inertia, and lack of clarity regarding implementation pathways frequently undermine sustainability efforts.

Against this backdrop, change management emerges as an indispensable tool for operationalizing sustainable development principles in organizations. Traditionally, change management has been defined as the structured approach to transitioning individuals, teams, and organizations from a current state to a desired future state. Models such as Lewin's unfreeze–change–refreeze cycle or Kotter's eight-step model emphasize leadership, communication, and stakeholder engagement as critical enablers of successful transformation. These theoretical underpinnings are directly applicable to the sustainability agenda, which requires organizations to adopt new processes, embrace innovation, and foster a culture of responsibility and resilience.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Sustainable development has evolved from a marginal discourse in environmental movements during the 1970s to a global paradigm of governance, business strategy, and social responsibility. Its most cited definition, introduced in the Brundtland Report (1987), describes it as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” [11]. Sustainable development is often framed as a universal solution to balancing economic growth, social inclusion, and environmental protection [2].

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals provide a concrete framework for operationalizing this vision. They reflect the complexity of sustainability by linking poverty reduction with climate action, economic growth with social inclusion, and technological progress with environmental stewardship [12]. These objectives emphasize the need for sustainable business practices, urging companies to integrate economic, environmental and social (known as triple bottom line) considerations into their strategies [9]. From a managerial perspective, sustainable development demands more than compliance with environmental standards. It involves rethinking organizational purpose, redesigning production and supply chains, and adopting circular economy principles. In this sense, sustainability becomes a strategic orientation that redefines competitiveness, legitimacy, and long-term survival of organizations.

The sustainable development of companies has, in recent years, become a subject of increasing attention from both management theorists and business practitioners. When properly integrated into corporate strategies, organizational sustainability becomes a development model that offers multiple advantages. At the same time, a sustainable approach to business development proves to be an intelligent method for simultaneously addressing social, environmental, and economic challenges, which are particularly pressing today [3].

Organizational sustainability has been defined through a triple concept that addresses environmental issues, economic aspects, and social concerns. In this regard, it becomes imperative for organizations to evaluate the role of human, operational, and technological dimensions in the application of sustainable business practices. Sustainable operational practices are expected to deliver products to the market with zero defects and zero environmental impact [10].

Change management refers to the systematic process of guiding individuals, teams, and organizations through transformation [13]. Its theoretical foundations can be traced back to Kurt Lewin's change theory (1951), which conceptualized change as a three-step process:

unfreezing the status quo, implementing change, and refreezing new behaviors [8]. Although simplistic, this model highlighted the psychological and organizational mechanisms involved in overcoming inertia and embedding new practices.

Subsequent approaches have refined and expanded these insights. Kotter's 8-Step Model (1996) emphasizes leadership, vision, and stakeholder alignment as critical drivers of successful change. His model highlights the necessity of creating a sense of urgency, building guiding coalitions, and anchoring new behaviors in organizational culture. Similarly, Prosci's ADKAR model focuses on individual transitions, recognizing that organizational change is the cumulative result of personal adoption [13].

3. MANAGING SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT THROUGH CHANGE MANAGEMENT

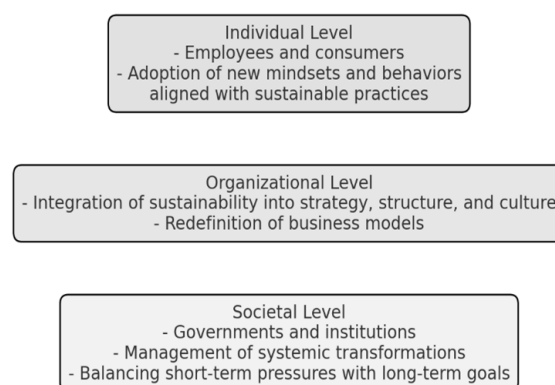
In today's dynamic world, organizational change and development management are fundamental elements of business success and, at the same time, sustainable development has emerged as an essential paradigm for businesses seeking to balance economic growth with social justice and environmental protection [4].

Adapting sustainability to existing business models may require a fundamental rethinking of operations and strategy, as the path toward sustainability entails very real challenges of change. For this reason, integrating sustainability demands profound transformations within operational processes and organizational structures [10] and, to varying degrees, all aspects of change management will have a substantial impact on sustainable development of organizations [1].

However, while some organizations are beginning to recognize the necessity of adopting ecological processes and behaviors as an essential component of sustainability practices, they are confronted with the dilemma of determining the most effective ways to implement them. The management of sustainable organizations, in fact, requires a comprehensive review of the entire system, as all aspects of the organization are subject to change. Consequently, the role of change management becomes inevitable [7].

The intersection of sustainable development and change management lies in the recognition that sustainability initiatives are inherently transformative. Unlike traditional efficiency-driven projects, sustainability often challenges fundamental assumptions about value creation, growth models, and stakeholder relations.

Figure no.1. Sustainable development as a multi-level change process



Source: Author's own processing

For instance, transitioning to renewable energy, reducing carbon emissions, or adopting circular economy practices requires not only technological innovation but also behavioral and

cultural shifts across the organization and its stakeholders. From this perspective, sustainable development can be understood as a change process on multiple levels.

Lozano argues that in order to effectively address sustainability, organizations must anticipate, prepare for, and manage change [6].

Other authors argue that, in order to build organizational sustainability, companies should: develop and maintain an organizational culture oriented toward sustainability, integrate sustainability objectives into the overall organizational strategy, and actively involve employees in the decision-making process and in the implementation of sustainable initiatives [5].

Recent researches emphasize the need for integrative frameworks that combine sustainability and change management. For example, Lozano's holistic approach to corporate sustainability argues that sustainability drivers must be embedded into organizational systems through iterative cycles of change. Similarly, concepts such as the triple bottom line and environmental, social, and governance (ESG) frameworks highlight the necessity of aligning financial performance with social and environmental accountability.

Adapting John Kotter's framework (1996) to the specific requirements of sustainability within organizations we propose a change management model for adopting sustainable development in organizations, structured in eight sequential steps.

1. Create urgency – The process begins by emphasizing the environmental, social, and economic challenges that necessitate immediate action. Establishing urgency highlights the risks of inaction and the opportunities of sustainable transformation.
2. Build a guiding coalition – Effective change requires a coalition of leaders, and key stakeholders who can champion sustainability initiatives and drive collective momentum.
3. Develop a vision and a strategy – Organizations must articulate a clear sustainability vision aligned with their mission and long-term strategy. This includes defining measurable goals and actionable pathways to integrate sustainability into operations.
4. Communicate the vision – Transparent and consistent communication is essential for reducing resistance and fostering buy-in across all organizational levels. The sustainability vision must be embedded into internal and external communications.
5. Empower action – Employees and managers need training, resources, and incentives to adopt sustainable practices. Barriers must be removed, and opportunities for innovation should be encouraged.
6. Generate short-term wins – Early achievements, such as reductions in energy use or successful recycling programs, demonstrate progress and strengthen organizational commitment to sustainability.
7. Consolidate gains – Building on initial successes, organizations should scale sustainable practices and expand their integration into business processes, supply chains, and governance structures.
8. Anchor sustainability in culture – Finally, sustainability must become part of the organizational culture. Embedding sustainability values into culture ensures long-term resilience, legitimacy, and continued commitment.

Figure no.2. Change management model for sustainable development in organizations

Source: Author's own processing

This model emphasizes that sustainability is not a one-time project but a continuous change process that requires leadership, stakeholder engagement, and cultural transformation. By following these steps, organizations can successfully transition towards sustainable development while ensuring employee alignment, stakeholder trust, and organizational resilience.

4. CONCLUSIONS

In today's context, marked by unprecedented economic, social, and environmental challenges, organizational change management stands out as a critical enabler of the transition toward sustainable development practices. Integrating sustainability into corporate strategy is no longer optional but has become a structural necessity for the long-term survival, competitiveness, and legitimacy of organizations.

Managing sustainable development through change management represents a dual challenge: achieving ambitious sustainability goals while orchestrating organizational and cultural transformations.

The organizational change required to embed sustainability principles is profound and systemic. Transformation cannot be achieved through isolated or short-term initiatives; rather, it requires a continuous process of renewal, adaptation, and cultural alignment. Effective change management must be orchestrated from both directions: top-down, by providing vision, leadership, and institutional structures, and bottom-up, by actively engaging employees and fostering ownership of sustainability initiatives.

Equally important, change should not be perceived solely as a disruption, but as an opportunity for innovation, value creation, and resilience building. Organizations that embrace change and develop adaptive capacities are better positioned to thrive in volatile environments and to contribute meaningfully to the construction of a sustainable society.

In conclusion, achieving sustainable development requires that companies implement integrated change management approaches grounded in leadership, stakeholder engagement, and cultural transformation. Only through such comprehensive strategies can organizations

simultaneously pursue economic, social, and environmental objectives, while ensuring resilience and long-term success.

REFERENCES

1. Al-Hadrami, A., Al-Aabri, L. S. S., Al Maawali, I., Al Habsi, K. S., & Alyaarubi, A. S. S., 2023, *Dimensions of Change Management and its Effect on Achieving Sustainable Development Goals in Oman*, Migration Letters, Volume. 2, no.5, available at: <https://migrationletters.com/index.php/ml/article/view/3549> .
2. Bora, I., 2025, *Leveraging leadership and digital transformation for sustainable development: Insights from Cambodia's public sector*, Sustainable Futures, Volume 9, available at: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2666188825001157#bib0050>
3. Covaș, L. 2019, *Cultura organizațională și dezvoltarea durabilă a întreprinderii-Monografie*, ASEM, ISBN 978-9975-75-954-0. available at: <https://irek.ase.md/xmlui/bitstream/handle/123456789/2094/Covas%20Lilia%20Monografie%202019.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>.
4. Faraj, T., Alwetwat, S., 2023. *The Effect of Organizational Change and Development Management on Sustainable Development*, Quantrade Journal of Complex Systems in Social Sciences 5(1), available at: <https://dergipark.org.tr/tr/download/article-file/3174999>
5. Kondratieva, H., 2025, *Formation of organizational sustainability in organizations in the context of sustainable development goals*, Economic Scope, 196, available at: <https://doi.org/10.30838/ep.196.244-248>.
6. Lozano, R., 2022, *Organizational Change Management for Sustainability*, Springer eBooks, available at: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-99676-5_5
7. Muo, I., Azeez, A. A., 2020, *Organizational green behavioral change: the role of change management*, International Journal of entrepreneurial knowledge, Issue X, Volume X, ISSN 2336-2960, available at: <https://www.ijek.org/index.php/IJEK/article/view/98/93>
8. Ogochi K., D. 2018, *Lewin's Theory of Change: Applicability of its Principles in a Contemporary Organization*, Journal Strategic Management, Vol 2(5) pp. 1-11. available at: <https://stratfordjournalpublishers.org/journals/index.php/journal-of-strategic-management/article/download/229/274>.
9. Sedovs, E., Volkova T., Ludviga I., 2025, *Sustainable development and strategic management - what is on the horizon in our non-ergodic world research?*, Sustainable Futures, Volume 9, 2025, available at: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2666188824002624>.
10. Thakur, V., Mangla, S., 2019, *Change management for sustainability: Evaluating the role of human, operational and technological factors in leading Indian firms in home appliances sector*, Journal of Cleaner Production, Volume 213, 2019, Pages 847-862, ISSN 0959-6526, available at: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0959652618339179>
11. United Nations, 1987, *Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development: Our Common Future*, available at: <http://www.un-documents.net/our-common-future.pdf>
12. United Nations, 2015, *Sustainable development goals*, available at: <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/development-goals/e>.
13. University of Arizona, 2025, *What is Change Management?* available at: <https://www.uagc.edu/blog/what-is-change-management>,