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Introduction*

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THE CONCEPT OF SUSTAINABILITY entrepreneurship has emerged from the minds of theoreticians and practitioners alike as a merging of the entrepreneurship and sustainable development agendas. The potential contribution sustainability entrepreneurship could make to sustainable development makes the topic both important and timely. The concept is interdisciplinary by nature, drawing on knowledge from a range of research areas, including conventional entrepreneurship studies, business and environment studies, and newer research into environmental and social entrepreneurship. A creative synthesis is beginning to take shape with contributions from many corners of the world. Although still in its infancy as an area of knowledge, as the number of researchers interested in the relationship between entrepreneurship and sustainable development continues to grow, a window of opportunity exists to create a vibrant research community to advance a deeper understanding of the nature, promise and limitations of sustainability

entrepreneurship. *The First World Symposium on Sustainable Entrepreneurship* was held at the University of Leeds in July 2007 as an important step in this endeavour, bringing together leaders and innovators on the topic for an intensive and exploratory 'meeting of the minds'. This special issue of *Greener Management International* is intended to communicate these developments to a wider research community and to reflect the discussions during the symposium.

The goal of the symposium and of this special issue is to help lay the groundwork for future sustainability entrepreneurship research. This emerging research area would benefit at this stage from the development of common understandings of core concepts, definitions, unifying frameworks and research themes. Such common points of reference help to support the development of a more substantive body of knowledge by providing researchers with the opportunity to build on and respond to the work of others. It also enables researchers to distinguish between

* We would like to thank the Symposium participants for contributing to the discussions on which this introductory article builds. However, we stress that this introduction represents our subsequent interpretation and reflections on the symposium discussions and we do not suggest that all participants necessarily adhere to these views.

different schools of thought and to more accurately position their work within this emerging body of knowledge. One means of achieving this is to establish a dialogue between interested researchers, which facilitates the development of a dynamic research community. For these reasons, *dialogue* was the central focus of the symposium. These dialogues were divided into two core streams. The first stream focused on conceptualising and mapping the emerging field, while the second focused on framing research issues and questions.

Conceptualising and mapping the field

Sustainability entrepreneurship research is informed by a wide-ranging literature (see Parrish 2008 for an extensive review). However, the most direct antecedents and closely allied areas of research are studies on environmental and social entrepreneurship that emerged in the late 1990s and early part of this century. Social entrepreneurship has a wide and rapidly growing literature, with some notable collections found in a special issue of the *Journal of World Business*, edited by Christie and Honig (2006), and edited books by Mair, Robinson and Hockerts (2006) and Nicholls (2006). The literature on environmental entrepreneurship is more confined, though also rapidly growing. The research area began to take a firmer hold with the publication of special issues of the *Journal of Organizational Change Management*, edited by Krueger (1998a, 1998b) and *Greener Management International*, edited by Schaper (2002). Schaper also edited a book of collected works in 2005, with an updated and expanded second edition due in 2009. The literature directly on sustainability entrepreneurship is found predominantly in specialist journals such as *Business Strategy and the Environment* (Larson 2000; Young and Tilley 2006; Cohen 2006; Cohen *et al.* 2008), *Futures* (Parrish 2007a), *Local Environ-*

ment (Beveridge and Guy 2005), and now this special issue of *Greener Management International*. The more conventional entrepreneurship journal, *Journal of Business Venturing*, has started paying attention to this topic with the publication of articles by Cohen and Winn (2007) and Dean and McMullen (2007), and recent PhD theses by Johanisova (2007) and Parrish (2007b) have investigated the topic. Wüstenhagen and colleagues have recently edited a book on *Sustainable Innovation and Entrepreneurship* (2008).

For the purposes of conceptualising and mapping the area of sustainability entrepreneurship research, what is interesting about these various literatures is where they draw the lines of demarcation for their domains of enquiry. Conventional entrepreneurship researchers tend to consider any entrepreneurial activities that involve a profit motive as lying within their research domain and activities not involving a profit motive as lying outside of their domain. Thus, environmental, social and sustainability entrepreneurship is given due regard as long as the motives of the entrepreneurs include at least some element of self-interested profit seeking. Social entrepreneurship researchers tend to consider their research domain as involving any type of entrepreneurial activity that is motivated by the interests of others, including both non-profit organisations and social-purpose business ventures. In this respect, social entrepreneurship has become something of a catch-all, encompassing environmental and sustainability entrepreneurship, and anything else not considered within the realm of conventional entrepreneurship. Environmental entrepreneurship researchers tend to construe their research domain more narrowly as any entrepreneurial activity intended to better the environment. This includes both self-interested profit-seeking entrepreneurs operating within the environmental services sector and those entrepreneurs acting with purely environmental motives. Environmental entrepreneurship is often elided with sustainability entrepreneurship, but

the former lacks an explicit interest in social justice, equity, or well-being beyond the environmental domain.

Thus, researchers from the conventional, social and environmental entrepreneurship fields who take an interest in sustainability entrepreneurship tend to bring their associated lines of demarcation with them. Although not usually explicitly stated, these implicit and conflicting assumptions about the delineation of field boundaries is leading to disagreement and confusion over the proper scope of enquiry for sustainability entrepreneurship research. At the symposium participants brought their own specific definitions and no single consensus on wording was reached, although there was general agreement about the delineation between sustainability entrepreneurship and other forms of entrepreneurship. This delineation centred on the values and motives that drive entrepreneurship. Those entrepreneurial acts that are driven by the purpose of contributing to sustainable development—that is, to better both environmental quality and social well-being—are considered to be within the domain of sustainability entrepreneurship research, regardless of the presence or absence of profit as a motivating factor. Within this general domain boundary, symposium participants utilised a range of specific definitions to suit the requirements of their particular research questions and approaches. This plurality is indicative of the phase of creative potential that currently characterises this research area and this period of discovery and openness is important as researchers venture into new conceptual and empirical territory.

It is also important to discuss the reasons for the deliberate decision at the symposium to adopt the term ‘sustainability entrepreneurship’ rather than the more common ‘sustainable entrepreneurship’ to characterise this area of study. The process of entrepreneurship employed by entrepreneurs motivated by sustainable development is most accurately described as sustainability-driven entrepreneurship because it reflects the importance of sus-

tainable development as a guiding purpose rather than the notion of singularly sustaining economic growth, or sustaining ecological functions, or social justice alone. It also serves to usefully distinguish this school of research from more mainstream uses of the term ‘sustainable entrepreneurship’ associated with ideals of resource efficiency and with efforts to sustain entrepreneurship proper. Schlange (this volume) provides an excellent discussion of the use of the term ‘sustainability-driven entrepreneurship’, but, in short, the symposium participants chose this term as the best reflection of the area of research concerning the contribution of entrepreneurship to sustainable development in its full sense.

Framing research issues and questions

Considering what research agendas would usefully advance our understanding of sustainability entrepreneurship yielded a diverse list of issues and questions. However, these issues and questions tended to cluster around three themes that seem central to determining whether sustainability entrepreneurship as a phenomenon merits prolonged attention by a research community. The first theme concerns *the factors that determine the nature and prevalence of sustainability entrepreneurship as an outcome*. The current body of knowledge and scope of extant research has focused primarily on the attributes and activities of individual sustainability entrepreneurs, as is appropriate for a new phenomenon requiring description and characterisation. However, this line of enquiry can usefully be extended by paying more attention to the context in which sustainability entrepreneurship is situated, as contextual variables are likely to play an important role in shaping the way sustainability entrepreneurship is manifest across time and place. Instances of sustainability entrepreneurship in practice can be viewed as a function of the *values*

of the entrepreneur, the *competencies* of the entrepreneur and the *context* in which entrepreneurship takes place. Exploring research questions around these three areas is likely to be informative for understanding the nature and prevalence of sustainability entrepreneurship. From this perspective, the following types of questions could be usefully explored:

- ▶ What common value sets inform sustainability entrepreneurship?
- ▶ Through what processes are these values developed?
- ▶ How do the practices of entrepreneurship change when driven by different values?
- ▶ When in possession of the requisite values and motivation what entrepreneurial competences are required to succeed?
- ▶ How do cognitive processes link the values, competencies and context of sustainability entrepreneurship in practice?
- ▶ What role does the cultural milieu play in shaping the expression of sustainability entrepreneurship in a given place?
- ▶ What impact do stakeholders play in negotiating the launch and development of a new sustainability venture?

The second theme concerns *the role of sustainability entrepreneurship in larger processes of environmental and social change*. This involves paying more attention to processes occurring at multiple scales of analysis and positioning sustainability as an independent rather than a dependent variable. Sustainability entrepreneurship is of interest precisely because it is posited as means of redressing larger-scale processes of environmental degradation and persistent social dysfunctions. Understanding the role sustainability entrepreneurship does play, and the role it could potentially play, in altering these larger-scale processes requires a much better

understanding of the links between upward and downward causation in multi-scale processes. For example, units of analysis at multiple scales might include the micro scale of individuals, the meso scale of organisations and the macro scale of organisational fields or paradigms. Important insights are likely to be had by research that addresses such scales as an interwoven unit rather than as discrete phenomenon. From this perspective, the following types of questions might be posed:

- ▶ What organisational paradigms inform sustainability entrepreneurship and in what ways does sustainability entrepreneurship challenge current dominant paradigms?
- ▶ What role does sustainability entrepreneurship play in socioeconomic transitions?
- ▶ What are the direct and unintended consequences of sustainability entrepreneurship for socially and ecologically sustaining functions?
- ▶ What different impact might sustainability entrepreneurship have in niche markets versus large markets?
- ▶ Does sustainability entrepreneurship conflict with existing socioeconomic institutions and, if so, what are the implications of this structural conflict?
- ▶ Does the presence of sustainability entrepreneurs in a competitive market alter the dynamics and developmental trajectory of an industry?

The third theme involves *a critical perspective on the possibilities and limits of sustainability entrepreneurship*. This theme provides an important counterbalance to the tendency in entrepreneurship research of all varieties to position entrepreneurship as a cure-all tonic for all manner of social and ecological ills. This tendency began with conventional entrepreneurship in the realm of perceived economic dysfunctions, such as unemployment,

recession and the need for structural adjustments, and seems to have travelled with the entrepreneurship construct into the areas of social, environmental and sustainability entrepreneurship and their respective domains of perceived social and ecological pathologies. A critical perspective takes a broader view of the phenomenon in theory and practice by questioning some of the normative and taken-for-granted assumptions that underlie much of the research. By questioning the appropriateness of sustainability entrepreneurship as an approach to sustainable development, a critical perspective contributes to a more nuanced appreciation for the limits, and by extension the possibilities, presented by sustainability entrepreneurship. Research enquiries conducted from this perspective might usefully include the following types of questions:

- ▶ What are the limits to sustainability entrepreneurship as a path to sustainable development?
- ▶ Does sustainability entrepreneurship, in fact, serve to support the continuation of the dominant paradigm that has proven ecologically and socially destructive?
- ▶ Does legitimising sustainability entrepreneurship de-legitimise alternative non-market-based approaches to sustainable development?
- ▶ Is the market-based approach of sustainability entrepreneurship always appropriate, or should some domains remain 'outside' the market?
- ▶ What are the trade-offs between the decentralised approach of sustainability entrepreneurship versus more coordinated approaches to sustainable development?
- ▶ Does sustainability entrepreneurship favour those individuals and communities who already possess greater access to financial, social and human capital?

These three themes indicate where future research could usefully extend the limits of our current understanding. The questions suggested are intended to be indicative rather than definitive or exhaustive and grouping them into three cross-cutting themes is not intended to imply that there exist rigid boundaries separating certain types of research enquiries. In fact, the opposite may be true, in that what might well prove to be most useful is research that investigates the links between these lines of enquiry. What the dimensions of context, scale and limits as a whole suggests is that sustainability entrepreneurship may only be understood as a phenomenon existing in the particulars of time and place. In addition, future research needs to be tackled both empirically and conceptually. While it is important to develop strong theoretical concepts to inform our understandings, it is crucial that these concepts are continually paired against empirical realities. For example, typologies and ideal types are useful conceptual tools for making sense of diversity, but these ideal types are much more powerful analytical tools to the extent that they are informed by empirical cases of real-world experience. The articles in this issue represent some forays into addressing the research themes discussed and include a mix of both conceptual and empirical work.

Contributions in this issue

This issue includes five articles by nine authors. These articles have been developed as extensions of the discussions that took place during the symposium. The purpose of the articles selected for this issue is threefold: to indicate the range of work being carried out in the emerging research area of sustainability entrepreneurship; to develop some of the promising, but largely undeveloped, lines of enquiry discussed above; and to serve as catalysts for constructive debate and dialogue within a growing research community.

The article by Schlange addresses the first research theme concerning factors that determine the nature and prevalence of sustainability entrepreneurship, by exploring the relationship between the values and unique competencies of sustainability entrepreneurs. He does this by building on recent work on entrepreneurial cognition and stakeholder management. Schlange begins by synthesising the entrepreneurship literature into a typology based on the values and motives that drive particular entrepreneurs. He uses this typology of economic, social, environmental and sustainability-driven entrepreneurship to reinterpret a model of stakeholder identification and salience, positing key differences in the approach of successful sustainability entrepreneurs. This model is then tested with a Swiss-based empirical case study of sustainability entrepreneurship. Schlange concludes that his initial results suggest sustainability entrepreneurs may be more 'comprehensive' in their approach to stakeholders, and that their personal 'philosophy' is of particularly high importance. Thus, Schlange's paper makes some important advances in understanding the link between entrepreneurial values, competencies in the form of distinct entrepreneurial cognition and the stakeholder context of new ventures.

The article by O'Neill, Hershauer and Golden also contributes to the first research theme, but their article focuses on the sustainability entrepreneur's approach to value creation and the cultural context in which this value is created. They begin by reviewing some of the literature on environmental, social and sustainability entrepreneurship, and synthesise some of the key constructs to develop a model to identify the 'option space of responsibility, opportunity, and value creation available to the sustainability entrepreneur'. This option space combines attributes of sustainable development with specific stakeholder networks, resulting in what they term a 'holistic value proposition'. O'Neill and his colleagues then explore the context-specific nature of this holistic value

proposition with an empirical case of their work with an entrepreneurial venture located within the Navajo (Diné) tribal nation. Their conclusion suggests that the holistic value proposition is a useful conceptual tool for grasping both the universal requirements of a sustainability venture, such as the need to generate positive cash flows, and the culturally specific requirements, in this case the need to be reflective of the fundamental beliefs and values of the Navajo nation.

The article by Parrish and Foxon contributes to the second cross-cutting research theme concerning the role of sustainability entrepreneurship in larger processes of environmental and social change, by investigating the catalytic role of sustainability entrepreneurship in an equitable transition to a low-carbon economy. They draw on three bodies of literature, sustainability entrepreneurship, socio-technical systems and transitions management, to develop a co-evolutionary framework linking the interactive dynamics of change in technologies, institutions and business strategies. This framework makes an important contribution because it posits specific mechanisms linking the micro scale of individual sustainability entrepreneurs with the macro scale of socio-economic transitions. Parrish and Foxon then use this framework to analyse an empirical case of sustainability entrepreneurship within the evolving US energy industry and involving the Rosebud Sioux tribal nation. Based on this conceptual and empirical work, they conclude that the unique values and motives that define sustainability entrepreneurship are critically important to their ability to challenge the 'lock-in' of dominant institutions and technologies, and thereby catalyse larger-scale socioeconomic transitions to sustainability.

The article by Gibbs is a conceptual piece that also addresses the second theme to some extent, but makes a particular contribution to the third theme of a critical perspective on the possibilities and limits of sustainability entrepreneurship. To this end, Gibbs uses the conceptual

lens of several different streams of literature to critically reflect on the concept of sustainability entrepreneurship and its capacity to influence contemporary capitalism. These include the literatures on ecological modernisation, transitions management, science and technology studies, and environmental entrepreneurship. Through this approach he is able to raise a number of important questions that reveal some of the taken-for-granted and normative assumptions of sustainability entrepreneurship research. For example, Gibbs notes the lack of any sense of power relations between different actors that can influence sustainability transitions and asks whether sustainability entrepreneurship is by its very nature a niche activity, lacking the capacity to resist cooptation by mainstream regimes. He concludes by setting a research agenda for sustainability entrepreneurship researchers based on these critical questions and suggests a number of useful avenues with which to pursue such an agenda.

Another conceptual piece by Tilley and Young addresses similar themes to Gibbs, but takes a different approach. Where Gibbs is content to let his critical questions stand for themselves, Tilley and Young use their own model of sustainability entrepreneurship to develop an argument critical of approaches that could be characterised as consistent with notions of ecological modernisation. They situate the concept of entrepreneurship within the context of modernity and suggest the role of entrepreneurship for sustainable development is often positioned as a continuation of modernity in the form of ecological modernisation. They argue that by reinterpreting not just the appropriate domains of entrepreneurship, but also the concept of wealth and wealth creation to include environmental and social well-being, sustainability entrepreneurship so understood is able to transcend the continuation of the modernist agenda. Their article suggests researchers need to be more critical in making distinctions between concepts of sustainability entrepreneurship that support adaptation by the

current system to avoid fundamental change and those concepts that are inherently transformative.

Although the articles in this issue each present slightly differing interpretation of the phenomenon, taken together they make an important statement about sustainability entrepreneurship as an emerging area of research. These articles demonstrate that there is real value in recognising that sustainability entrepreneurship is distinct from other forms of entrepreneurship and that these distinctions should not be dismissed as trivial. While the researchers represented in this issue have taken pains not to overstate the capacity of sustainability entrepreneurship to bring about sustainable development, they have also provided ample conceptual and theoretical evidence that the potential contribution of sustainability entrepreneurship is significant enough to warrant a sustained programme of research to improve our understanding of this emerging phenomenon. We are confident that the articles in this issue help to lay the groundwork for such a programme by usefully extending the domains of enquiry, and we look forward to the dialogues that they may engender within a growing research community.

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