'The right thing to do': ethical motives in the interpretation of social sustainability in the UK's conventional food supply

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Abstract

This paper explores the role of ethics and responsibility as drivers of a transition to a more sustainable agri-food system, by drawing on an investigation of the governance of social sustainability in the UK's conventional food supply. The paper investigates how and why various non-state actors in the conventional food supply construe certain social obligations as being part of the remit of the food supply; whether ethics plays a motivating role; and the extent to which their activities are linked to sustainability. The paper uses data collected via two surveys of diverse entities in the conventional food supply, the first a survey of public-facing websites, the second a series of in-depth interviews. The entities ranged from primary producers, manufacturers and food service operators to consultancies, standard-setting organisations and advocacy groups. The study finds that actors view a variety of socially focused or socially beneficial activities as legitimate governance concerns for the conventional food supply, and that ethics plays a role in motivating or justifying these activities. However, the activities are inconsistently associated with sustainability, a finding that may undermine the use of sustainability programmes as tools for driving ethical agendas. Moreover, the dominant business framing of the conventional food supply means that ethical considerations are often expressed in terms of more instrumental priorities. Social sustainability or responsibility actions can be justified on moral grounds as 'the right thing to do' but usually have to be backed up in more pragmatic terms as a way of 'doing well by doing good'.

Abbreviations

CSR	Corporate Social Responsibility
Defra	Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs
IFRS	International Financial Reporting Standards
IUCN	International Union for Conservation of Nature
LCA	Life Cycle Assessment
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
sLCA	Social Life Cycle Assessment
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
WCED	World Commission on the Environment and Development
WSSD	World Summit on Sustainable Development

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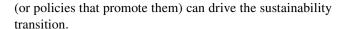
Introduction

This paper explores the role of ethics and responsibility as drivers of a transition to a more sustainable agri-food system, by drawing on a study of the governance of social sustainability in the UK's conventional food supply. The study investigated how and why various non-state actors in the conventional food supply construed certain social obligations as being part of the remit of the food supply; whether ethics played a motivating role; and the extent to which the actors associated these activities with sustainability. Ethics is taken here to describe the frameworks within which people try to determine how they 'should' behave, and how they choose between doing right and wrong (Honderich 1995). Governance refers to the processes of governing, i.e. making rules and coordinating behaviour (Bevir 2009), and involves

making choices about which concerns it is appropriate and feasible to act on (Miller and Rose 2008); definitions, or constructions of meaning, shape these decisions (Fairclough 2001).

The study focused on the social dimension of sustainability and the conventional food supply in the UK.[1] The study comprised a review of state policy documents; an analysis of 135 websites of organisational actors; and 27 semi-structured interviews with senior sustainability practitioners. As academic and policy concern with the sustainability of the agri-food sector has increased, a significant body of work has examined 'alternative' food production and consumption networks, but the conventional food supply, which in the UK accounts for the overwhelming bulk of food produced and purchased,[2] has attracted less attention. The 'social' aspects of sustainability have similarly been neglected, e.g., in comparison with the environmental aspects. Work on the use of standards to drive sustainability has discussed the development of social criteria by which to assess food businesses (e.g., Loconto and Busch 2010; Ponte et al. 2011; Loconto and Fouilleux 2013). Also, the methodology of environmental life cycle assessment (LCA) is being developed to include social criteria for food and drink products, through social life cycle assessment (sLCA) (e.g., Benoît and Mazijn 2009; Jørgensen 2012; Smith and Barling 2014). The study underpinning this paper took a broader look, examining how a wide range of actors conceptualised and operationalised the social obligations of the conventional food supply.

The paper is structured as follows. The next section briefly explains how the data was collected and is labelled in this paper. The following section summarises how the social 'pillar' of sustainability emerged and has been interpreted in relation to food; it also describes how sustainability has been adapted to the world of business, relevant here because the conventional food supply is overwhelmingly conducted by businesses of various sorts. Subsequent sections draw on the research data to show how social sustainability is being defined, how meanings are assembled, and how the business context affects social sustainability-related activity. The final section considers a 'clash of rationalities' between business and (social) sustainability, which may have implications for how effectively frameworks of ethics and responsibility

(or policies that promote them) can drive the sustainability transition.

The data

The new research data presented here derive from two related surveys. The first looked at how entities in the UK's conventional food supply addressed social sustainability in their public-facing websites. These entities ranged from primary producers/processors, through logistics providers, manufacturers, retailers and food service operators to trade associations, consultancies, standard-setting and other audit organisations, and pressure groups. They are referred to here by name plus category descriptor (e.g., retailer Tesco, Standards Organisation Accountability). Website data was gathered via 'gateway' sites on specified dates. To avoid repetitive footnotes, the sites referred to and dates are listed in Table 1 at the end of the article. The second survey was a series of semi-structured interviews with sustainability practitioners in the UK's conventional food supply. Interviewees were drawn from the same range of entities as the website survey. To protect anonymity the entities they worked for have not been named and it should not be assumed that they were the same as those from which website data was collected. Interviewees are referred to by number and category descriptor (e.g., I-2 retail), and anonymised job titles are provided in Table 2 at the end of this article. The term 'actor' is used to refer both to entities and to interviewees.

The context: social sustainability, food and business

The idea that sustainability, as an all-encompassing governance challenge (Adger and Jordan 2009; Grober 2012), must have multiple, interdependent facets or 'pillars' appeared early (Meadows et al. 1974; IUCN 1980), was formalised in influential UN summits and reports (WCED 1987; WSSD 2002) and is now ubiquitous. Among many suggested formulations (Kates et al. 2005; Littig and Griessler 2005; Mann 2009), a three-aspect model dominates, with the components usually depicted as environmental, economic and social. This fragmented way of thinking about sustainability has been widely criticised, both for undermining the holistic approach that sustainability governance demands (Adger and Jordan 2009; Psarikidou and Szerszynski 2012; Leach et al. 2010), and for generating counterproductive arguments about inter-pillar trade-offs (Spangenberg and Bonniot 1998; Waas et al. 2011). Nevertheless, pillarisation persists, and a social dimension is routinely included in sustainability planning and discourse.

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[1] The data in this article formed part of a wider study of social sustainability in the UK conventional food sector completed as a PhD thesis, Sharpe (2016).

[2] As an indication, the total combined share of organic, fair trade, Rainforest Alliance, higher-welfare meat and eggs, vegetarian 'meat' products and sustainable fish, categorised by the UK Department for the Environment, Food and Rural affairs (Defra) as 'ethical' foods, accounted for 8.5% of all household food purchases in the UK in 2012 (Defra 2015a).

Table 1 Entities for which websites were investigated, with dates Source: The Author

Name of entity	Websites accessed	Dates accessed
ABF	http://www.abf.co.uk/	3.5.13
Accenture	https://www.accenture.com/gb-en	21.2.14
Accountability	http://www.accountability.org/	12.12.13
Asda	http://your.asda.com/about-asda	23.10.13
Bakkavor	http://www.bakkavor.com	14.10.13
Benchmark Holdings	http://www.benchmarkplc.com/	21.11.13
Business in the community (BITC)	http://www.bitc.org.uk	7.10.13
Cargill	http://www.cargill.co.uk/en/index.jsp	11.10.13
Coca-Cola	http://www.coca-cola.co.uk/	15.10.13
Compass	http://www.compass-group.co.uk/	4.11.13
Covalence Ethicalquote	http://www.ethicalquote.com/index.php/about-us/	9.12.13
Dairy Crest	http://www.dairycrest.co.uk/who-we-are/our-business.aspx	16.10.13
Ethical Trading Initiative (ETI)	http://www.ethicaltrade.org/	9.10.13
Fairtrade Foundation	http://www.fairtrade.org.uk/default.aspx	3.7.13
First Milk	http://www.firstmilk.co.uk/default.html	23.4.13
Food Ethics Council (FEC)	http://www.foodethicscouncil.org/whoweare	2.12.13
Foreign Trade Association (FTA)	http://www.fta-intl.org/	20.11.13
Forum for the Future	http://www.forumforthefuture.org/	2.12.13
Marks &Spencer (M&S)	http://corporate.marksandspencer.com/aboutus	27.10.13
McDonalds	http://www.mcdonalds.co.uk/ukhome.html	6.11.13
Monsanto	http://www.monsanto.com/global/uk/Pages/default.aspx	14.10.13
Premier Foods	http://www.premierfoods.co.uk/	17.10.13
Produce World	http://produceworld.co.uk/	21.10.13
Roundtable on Responsible Soy (RTRS)	http://www.responsiblesoy.org/index.php?lang=en	14.12.13
Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO)	http://www.rspo.org/	17.12.13
Sainsbury	http://www.j-sainsbury.co.uk/	25.04.13
SGS	http://www.sgs.co.uk/en-GB.aspx	11.12.13
Soil Association	http://www.soilassociation.org/	6.12.13
Stobart Group	http://www.stobartgroup.co.uk/	12.11.13
Tesco	http://www.tescoplc.com/	23.10.13
The Co-operative (Co-op)	http://www.co-operative.coop/corporate/	12.04.13
The Natural Step	http://www.naturalstep.org/	22.11.13
TwentyFifty	http://www.twentyfifty.co.uk/	25.11.13
Two Tomorrows	http://www.twotomorrows.com/	25.11.13
Unilever	http://www.unilever.co.uk/	18.10.13
Waitrose	http://www.waitrose.com/	25.10.13
Warburtons	http://www.warburtons.co.uk/	17.10.13
Whitbread	http://www.whitbread.co.uk/homepage.html	5.11.13
Youngs Seafood	http://www.youngsseafood.co.uk	21.10.13
Yum! Brands	http://www.yum.com/	6.11.13

The meaning of 'social sustainability', however, is not clear or fixed, partly reflecting the flexible connotations of the term 'social' itself, which can be summed up as 'the ways in which people interact and organise' (Lockie et al. 2014, p. 3). Broadly, social sustainability is said to involve both (substantive) societal attributes that are seen as worthy or needful of being sustained; and (procedural) social processes by which all sustainability transformations should be brought about (Agyeman and Evans 2004; Dillard et al. 2009; Bostrom 2012). Substantively, long lists of attributes have been linked to the social pillar, such as education, health, wellbeing, equity or workers' rights (Harris and Goodwin 2001; Dillard et al. 2009; Bostrom and Klintman 2014). The processes by which these are to be attained are most often specified as inclusive, participatory and democratic, to achieve greater equity in both procedures

Table 2 Interviewees by number with anonymised job description (data collected between October 2012 and February 2015) Source: The Author

No.	Anonymised job description
1	Policy director, trade association (standard-setting / audit)
2	Technical director, retail
3	Sustainability policy officer, trade association (manufacturing)
4	Head of sustainability, retail
5	Sustainability policy officer, trade association (retail)
6	Head of sustainability, manufacturing
7	Food sustainability consultant
8	Sustainability director, food service
9	CSR officer, food service
10	Policy officer, advocacy organisation (business sustainability)
11	Producer (fruit)
12	Financial analyst, company rater
13	Producer and trade association (livestock)
14	Sustainable and ethical sourcing manager, retail
15	Ethical sourcing manager, manufacturing
16	Senior executive, manufacturing
17	Sustainability manager, food service
18	Senior executive, retail
19	Compliance officer, audit organisation
20	Ethical trading manager, retail
21	Sustainability consultant
22	Policy officer, audit organisation
23	Producer/processer (vegetables)
24	Sustainability consultant
25	Policy officer, trade union
26	Sustainability officer, audit organisation
27	Policy director, advocacy organisation (food sustainability)

and outcomes (Dobson 1995, 1999; Magis and Shinn 2009; Leach et al. 2010). Scholars argue that these menus are normative, and tend to reflect the definers' objectives (Beckley and Burkovsky 1999; Littig and Griessler 2005; Bostrom 2012). They also contend that they lack theoretical underpinning for what distinguishes social sustainability from other forms of social policy (Littig and Griessler 2005; Larsen 2009; Murphy 2012). Bostrom refers to the challenge of devising 'green social policies' (Bostrom 2012, pp. 3–4), which deliver high and equitable levels of wellbeing while respecting critical environmental thresholds, but this is in effect a restatement of the idea of sustainable development. The study of what social sustainability covers is ongoing recent definers agree that the term is still 'fuzzy' (Bostrom and Klintman 2014, p. 85) and dynamic.

In the absence of a fixed definition, various social attributes have been included in depictions of sustainable food systems. They go beyond the satisfaction of basic needs (i.e., calorific and nutritional adequacy) to include justice, knowledge, participation, health, diversity and values (Kloppenburg et al. 2000), equity (Blay-Palmer 2010) and concern for proximate and distant others (Psarikidou and Szerszynski 2012). These descriptions are typically applied to food provisioning arrangements that are 'alternative' to and putatively more sustainable than prevailing, 'conventional' arrangements. For example, Allen explicitly conflates 'alternative' with 'sustainable' (Allen 1993, p. x) and finds that 'alternative' agrifood arrangements, compared with 'conventional' ones, are 'more equitable, environmentally sound, and better for human health' (Allen 2004, p. 80). It is hard to find depictions of social sustainability applied to industrial food systems. Lang (2010) provides a rare example—in his framework the overarching goal would be to feed everyone equitably and healthily, while care would be taken to protect ecological resources and build the skills necessary for future generations. This framework would apply the 'green filter' that distinguishes sustainable social policy; and would also apply a 'social filter' (c.f. Raworth 2012), to embed social justice in, for example, plans to adapt farming to mitigate climate change. A more recent example is the Sustainability Assessment of Food and Agriculture (SAFA), produced for the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation, which has social indicators covering, e.g., workers' rights including child and forced labour, public health, fair pricing and transparency of contracts (SAFA 2013).

A parallel strand of sustainability discourse has applied sustainability ideas to the world of business. Business—a collective term for commercial entities including companies, firms or corporations (Wilks 2013)—was quickly implicated as a principal driver of unsustainability and thus a necessary ally in mitigation activity. Businesses have also been identified as powerful governance actors in general (Wilks 2013) and in the food system (Fuchs 2007). From Brundtland (WCED 1987) onwards, the UN championed the need for business to be enrolled in sustainability programmes, launching the Business Council for Sustainable Development at the 1992 Earth Summit and maintaining involvement through the Global Compact (established in 2000), described as 'the world's largest corporate sustainability initiative' (UN Global Compact n.d., a). The UN World Summit on Sustainable Development emphasised the crucial role of the private sector in realising the goal of more sustainable consumption and production (WSSD 2002), The UN's current overarching policy framework for sustainable development, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), also highlights the essential role of business (UN Global Compact n.d., b).

Business sustainability has been defined as:

> The ability of a company to continue indefinitely by making a zero impact on environmental resources.

That way, future generations will also benefit from the goods and services provided from the employment offered (Blowfield and Murray 2011, p. 59).

In this interpretation, the social dimension is limited to the benefits accruing to current and future generations from business activity. Others have provided broader definitions. Hawken, for example, argues that companies must 'squarely address social injustice' along with environmental issues (Hawken 2010 [1993], p. xi).

Commentators' views range from a conviction that business can be both an object of and a catalyst for transformative change (e.g., Hawken 2010; Elkington 1997; Zadek 2007) to extreme scepticism (e.g., Banerjee 2007; Fleming and Jones 2013). The hope is that businesses can become 'cannibals with forks' (Elkington 1997), with their destructive proclivities tamed, their inequities restrained and their scale and creativity harnessed for socially beneficial purposes (Elkington 1997; Zadek 2007). But for some, the project of 'sustainable development' is no more than a green smokescreen allowing business to carry on as before (Benton 1999). For McMichael (2000, p. 285) the Global Compact is a cynical alliance between the UN and corporations to give 'a human face to the global market'.

Nevertheless, by 1997, businesses were coming to terms with the need for an environmental 'bottom line' to sit alongside the traditional financial one. The social pillar, however, remained 'controversial' (Elkington 1997, p. 5). In response, Elkington came up with the 'Triple Bottom Line' (TBL), which applied all three pillars of sustainable development, translated as economic prosperity, environmental quality and social justice, to the formal process of business reporting. According to Brown et al. (2009, p. 226), the idea that sustainability included social issues 'became real for most companies… only after the triple bottom line terminology became prominent in reporting discourses'.

A clearly related concept is Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), which refers to the responsibility a business has for its impacts on the environment and society, and the actions (beyond legal obligations) it takes to enhance or mitigate these (Blowfield and Murray 2011). CSR is also explicitly seen as the means by which businesses can contribute to sustainable development (Benoit and Mazijn 2009; Ward 2012). CSR has an ethical component, in that it argues that companies should be concerned about how they make their profits and what they do with them, an idea elaborated in the 'stakeholder theory of the firm', which proposes that a business has responsibilities beyond its owners to others who may be affected by its activities. It has further been suggested that companies need to be socially responsible in order to maintain their 'social licence' to operate (Blowfield and Murray 2011). Meanwhile, doubts have been raised about the capacity of CSR to contribute meaningfully to sustainability transitions, given how selective and inconsistent it is in practice (Banerjee 2007; Fleming and Jones 2013).

As public authorities have delegated more governance responsibilities for achieving sustainability to the private sector, there has been an increase in 'reliance on industry-mediated food sustainability' (Barling and Duncan 2015, p. 415). While this has been explored in relation to the environmental aspects of sustainability (Friedmann 2005; Barling 2011), less research attention has been paid to the social aspects. The rationale(s) for and construction of food-industry-mediated social sustainability is an area in need of further exploration.

Selective defining

The complex web of the UK's conventional food supply involves entities which vary widely in scale, structure and function. Strikingly, however, the research found that most of them have the legal form of companies of one sort or another. Very broadly, the companies engaged in the production, processing and distribution of foods tended to be for-profit companies (e.g., family-owned, publically listed or mutual), while the companies that seek to interact with and influence them (e.g., by supplying consultancy, practising advocacy or developing or assessing against standards) tended to be either for-profit or non-profit companies. In other words, the entities either were, or were bound up with, businesses.

Not surprisingly, therefore, it was common for entities to seek to align the objectives of sustainability with the objectives of business. The certification company SGS said:

> Sustainability is about managing a long-term profitable business while taking into account all the positive and negative environmental, social and economic effects we have on society.

And retailer Asda said,

> Treating our colleagues and suppliers more fairly, cutting down on energy use in stores, and helping [customers] find healthy, affordable products. These actions are good for people and for the planet. While some call it sustainability—we just call it better business.

Under these agendas, actors were found to identify a wide range of social activities as being relevant to their professional endeavours and amenable to action. In other words, they saw a selectively delineated social terrain as being a legitimate and potentially fruitful site for food supply governance activity.

Although the term 'social sustainability' was rarely used in the websites, sustainability was frequently presented as having social aspects. On the other hand, social themes were often listed as part of 'social responsibility'—social sustainability and social responsibility were often defined in terms of each other, or as subdivisions of each other. For example, the processor Young's Seafood said sustainability meant operating 'in a responsible way which meets the needs of people and business—without compromising the needs of future generations'. Interviewee I-9 (food service) said she felt the term 'corporate responsibility' (CR) was 'less confusing' than sustainability. However, she went on to define CR as covering health and wellbeing, employee welfare, community and environment, which she thought in sum was synonymous with sustainability: 'You could actually say that I'm in charge of sustainability'. Overall, the link between social agendas and sustainability was inconsistent, suggesting that when actors undertake activities directed at, for example, protecting worker's rights or enhancing diets, these activities may not be associated, by the actors concerned, with sustainability in its holistic sense.

The websites sometimes described their social responsibilities in general terms, such as providing 'socially beneficial' management (the standards organisation Roundtable for Sustainable Palm Oil), or 'delivering social value within natural limits' (the consultancy Forum for the Future). Sometimes they were more specific. For retailer Tesco, a sustainable supply chain was 'underpinned by fair working conditions for all those involved in the manufacture and supply of our products', and manufacturer Unilever's Sustainable Living Plan said the 'social dimension' meant that 'our products make a difference to health and wellbeing'. Other websites mentioned responsible sourcing, community impact and workplace culture (producer Produce World); hunger relief, diversity and nutrition (food service operator Yum! Brands); or 'the responsible formulation, marketing and labelling of food products' (consultancy Two Tomorrows). These concerns were often couched in ethical terms invoking care and obligation, such as 'Doing things the right way' (manufacturer Bakkavor), 'Taking care of our people' (manufacturer ABF), or having 'moral responsibility to consider the social impacts of our activities' (foodservice operator Compass).

The interviewees interpreted social sustainability quite broadly, mentioning equity within and between generations, or concern for livelihoods and communities. Most pervasively, a concern for the people affected by the conduct of the food supply characterised the responses. I-11 (producer) said:

> I think social sustainability is where you can argue that what you are doing doesn't detract from people's experience of either eating the products of the industry or working within the industry or indeed living in the community in which the industry is based.

The concern for 'people' was expressed as the responsibility for supplying consumers with safe, nutritious and in some cases affordable food, and (strongly) in terms of employment. I-13 (producer) saw social sustainability as being about 'the responsibility companies have… to their employees [and] broader in terms of the communities where they operate', while I-4 (retail) spoke about being a 'fair partner' in supply chains. Some spoke of the responsibilities attached to employment in emotional terms. I-11 (producer) employed up to 450 East European seasonal workers on her fruit farm annually, and worried about not knowing them all by name. I-8 (food service), said he felt he was 'doing good' by:

> Keeping people in employment, keeping people in a certain level of lifestyle quality… supporting and making sure that kids aren't involved, so that they can go to school instead of holding a rifle, keeping businesses going, so people who've been fishermen for years out of fishing ports in Cornwall, who've been fishermen all their lives, can stay as fishermen, and they're not forced out of business by huge multinationals.

The findings (both from websites and interviews) confirmed that there is no settled definition of what social sustainability means for the conventional food supply. Such consensus as there was suggested that relevant themes included food safety, quality, adequacy and affordability; the quality of work involved in the food supply; the quality of relationships among participants in the food supply; the welfare of farm animals; notions of fairness (in the distribution both of food and the impacts of the food supply); notions of accountability; and the importance of engagement as a prerequisite and enabler of sustainable innovation.

Building meanings

Asked how they arrived at their understanding of the term social sustainability, interviewees' comments indicated that in the absence of a fixed definition, and also, importantly, because social sustainability (unlike environmental sustainability) had only relatively recently become part of their work remit, meanings were being built by drawing on familiar, related concepts (such as CSR), borrowing from other actors' definitions, and adapting meanings in ways favourable to their own situations, agendas or outlook. Sources mentioned included colleagues, professional peers, sectoral bodies, the Government, the UN, other organisations, competitors, civil society groups, customers, the internet and

internal sources. It was a cumulative, cross-referential, selective and opportunistic process.

However, patterns were discernible—which were also reflected in the websites. These patterns illuminated how the actors (the organisations behind the websites, and the practitioners in the form of the interviewees) construed social sustainability in ways that rendered it, in Miller and Rose's term, amenable to governance (Miller and Rose 2008).

The main way was by defining the term pragmatically, in ways that enabled or legitimated existing activities. For example, the websites showed that retailer Asda (which promoted its low prices) stressed food affordability as a key social component of sustainability, and manufacturer ABF devoted a whole section of its webpage on 'responsibility' to sugar (one of its most important products), rebutting the notion that sugar was a culprit in obesity. For some of the actors, social sustainability as an issue offered a new area of profitable business. The certification organisation SGS, for example, presented its services as helping to mitigate risks from 'social impacts' (e.g., relating to labour), 'while supporting business growth'. For other actors, the social dimension of sustainability presented a new vantage point from which to pursue a pre-existing agenda. For example the standards organisation the Fairtrade Foundation had incorporated sustainability into its definition of fair trade, presenting the latter as a 'strategy for sustainable development'.

The interviewees showed the same tendency. For example, I-3 (trade association) spoke about the 'necessity to feed a larger population' affordably (i.e. emphasising the need for more cheap food)—thus framing social sustainability in terms that did not conflict with the remit of his organisation. I-17 and I-9 (both food service) reported that their work involved manipulating their clients' perceptions of sustainability. For example, it was common for clients to request that 'local' food should be supplied, on sustainability grounds, but this conflicted with the practices of the large-scale food service operators for which the interviewees worked, which supplied standardised goods sourced through centralised buying desks, coming from possibly distant suppliers. I-9 said:

> Sometimes we have to educate [clients], for example in how a whole network of little suppliers isn't necessarily the right solution for them, so trying to help them to understand, because obviously you've got to balance out the commercial side. One of my team does quite a clever thing of saying well, you know, if you're in Kent it might be better to bring stuff in from France than from Scotland. All that good stuff.

A second pattern was that responsibility for 'people' (shown above to be a common summation of the social dimension of sustainability) was often conceptualised in a way that allocated people to groups for which different levels of concern were appropriate: customers, employees, suppliers and wider society. Responsibility rippled out from the entities to these various categories of people. One version of this model was disseminated by the advocacy organisation Business in the Community, which suggested that the appropriate spheres of social concern for businesses were 'workplace, marketplace, supply chain and community', where the workplace comprised employees, the marketplace customers, the supply chain suppliers and the community people who lived near shop or factory sites.

In various adaptations, this way of making governable a potentially infinite universe of objects of social concern was widely used. Trader Cargill's approach involved: 'operating responsible supply chains, enriching our communities and working to feed the world'. Manufacturer Warburtons, which emphasised its family ethos, saw itself as having responsibilities towards 'the family of owners, the family of employees, the families we feed'. Manufacturer Coca-Cola summed the idea up as 'Me, we, world'.

A third important guide in establishing which social concerns could legitimately be acted on was the idea of 'materiality'. The term derives from financial reporting, where it refers to concerns which potentially influence the financial fortunes of the company and should therefore be disclosed in company accounts (IFRS 2015).[3] Even in financial reporting, where the idea has quasi-legal force, materiality is a flexible concept, often seen to be specific to the context of the reporting entity (IFRS 2015). The scope of non-financial reporting (which covers sustainability) is even more fluid, making this an important forum where meanings and practices on business social sustainability are being hammered out.

As used by the entities investigated, materiality seemed to mean 'relevant, legal and operationalisable'. Crucially, it tied social aspirations to the practical competences and legal responsibilities of companies. Inputs supplier Monsanto explained it as the process of 'defining what's important socially, environmentally and businesswise to both our internal and external stakeholders'. Thus retailer Tesco decided that as a global food retailer and major provider of entry-level employment, the social areas where it could 'make a difference' were 'global youth unemployment, diet-related health and food waste'.

A fourth way of framing of social sustainability was explicitly in terms of ethical or moral conduct. In the websites, 'values' were frequently cited as a guiding decisions about which social concerns to act on. For example:

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[3] The International Financial Reporting Standards Foundation guidance states that 'information is material if omitting it or misstating it could influence decisions that the primary users of general purpose financial reports make on the basis of financial information about a specific reporting entity' (IFRS 2015, p. 28).

- Producer Produce World's conduct was guided by a 'wheel of values' listing 'trust, learning, being customer-led, innovative, responsible and collaborative';
- Retailer Sainsbury's founded its 20 × 20 Sustainability Plan on the company's five 'values': 'Best in food and health; Sourcing with integrity; Respect for the environment; Make a positive difference to the community; Great place to work';
- Consultancy 25 described itself as 'values-led', specifying 'integrity, leadership, performance, respect for human rights and sustainability'
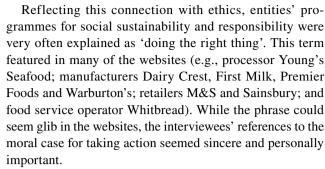
Although values were often cited as an important guide, these examples show that the term 'values' was itself susceptible to instrumental and cynical use. In another example, foodservice operator McDonald's cited as values 'believing in the McDonald's system' and 'staying profitable, to benefit shareholders'. Retailer Tesco, launching a plan called 'Using scale for good', said 'Scale is our new value', and one of logistics company Stobart's values was 'sustainable profits growth'. So although ethical values were frequently mentioned, they were open to distortion to fit organisational agendas.

Values were also cited by the interviewees as guides for decision-making. I-2 (retail) said his company's responsible social behaviour was 'enshrined in our operating principles'. I-15 (manufacturing) said:

> What I like about my work is that there's that history, they are doing it for its own sake … we have a few values within the company, one-sentence kind of things, like "consumers are our heartbeat", and "doing good" is precisely one of them.

Values were often said to pre-date the advent of sustainability or CSR. For example, retailer Waitrose said, 'Corporate social responsibility is a modern term, but one which encapsulates the ideals and principles of our founder'. Ihlen and Roper (2014) have argued that by identifying sustainability concerns with how they already do business, companies create an impression that they do not need to make any further changes.

Ethical motives could be explicitly invoked in (social) sustainability activity. Retailer the Co-op described the social pillar as sustainability's 'ethical component'. The consultancy Benchmark Holding's sustainability model had Ethics alongside Economic and Environmental pillars, where Ethics substitutes for the social pillar (this model was used by processor First Milk and foodservice operator McDonald's). Websites and interviewees referred to ethical sourcing policies: I-20 (retail) said these were synonymous with social sustainability. 'Ethical Excellence' was a strand of retailer M&S's sustainability Plan A.

Reflecting this connection with ethics, entities' programmes for social sustainability and responsibility were very often explained as 'doing the right thing'. This term featured in many of the websites (e.g., processor Young's Seafood; manufacturers Dairy Crest, First Milk, Premier Foods and Warburton's; retailers M&S and Sainsbury; and food service operator Whitbread). While the phrase could seem glib in the websites, the interviewees' references to the moral case for taking action seemed sincere and personally important.

Discussing sustainability, I-2 (retail) simply said it was 'the way we should do business'. I-15 (manufacturing) said, 'I personally believe in it and that's why I do it.' I-8 (food service) said:

> A big satisfaction is that I'd like to think I'm making a difference. That's my ultimate goal is to make a difference, is to make things better.

I-22 (standards organisation) said:

> Being able to do something that is actually going to result in somebody somewhere having an opportunity to improve their life in a way they might not have otherwise done … the opportunity to expose real injustice and try and get some action, that's what keeps me going.

I-20 (retail), said staff wanted 'to believe they are part of something good, want to do the right thing'. I-9 (food service) said:

> From an employee perspective, they feel better knowing it's not just about the bottom line, it's all the other elements that come into it.

A final strand in the construction of meaning and the case for action, also appealing to personal ethical frameworks and illustrating a procedural social aspect of sustainability, concerned the process of 'engagement'. This refers to the process of awareness-raising widely presented as a necessary precursor to action on sustainability. It was often discussed in terms of 'getting it' or 'mindsets'.

Manufacturer Coca-Cola talked of the need for 'embedding' ideas in operatives, and the advocacy organisation The Natural Step said that 'sustainability mindsets' were a cornerstone of its approach. Advocacy Group Business in the Community, outlining environmental challenges facing business, said 'the social challenges lie in persuading people to go along with this'—in other words, the (procedural) social dimension of sustainability referred to the process of persuading people of the need for environmental sustainability.

The phrase 'getting it' cropped up often in the interviews to describe how people came to a point where they grasped the implications of sustainability without needing further persuasion. I-14 (retail) expressed this when he said:

I would say an awful lot of the people in our division don't see their job, what they do, as work. None of us would put in the amount of effort we put in if it was a job. If I look at our key people, none of us switch off. Because it isn't a job, this is what we do and who we are.

I-21 (consultant) said 'It has to be attitudes that change', I-6 (manufacturing) talked about 'people getting it a bit more now' and I-15 (manufacturing) said suppliers were 'getting the mindset'. For I-4 (retail), the social process of engagement was a prerequisite for all action on sustainability:

To drive the kind of environmental performance that you want, you have to engage people. To drive a more productive, efficient factory, you have to engage people. If you don't treat people well, they won't be motivated, they won't have the capability and the skills to drive sustainability into the heart of what you're doing. To drive real change you need the people element.

The 'business case' imperative

It has been noted that in the conventional food supply, sustainability-related activity was predominantly conducted in a business environment. Interviewees made it clear that activity to promote sustainability, including social sustainability, had to be justifiable in business terms: they had to 'make the business case' by demonstrating that the activity would not jeopardise profitability or competitiveness.

For some interviewees this was axiomatic. It meant that any social benefits provided by food supply companies (such as provision of food, wages, welfare, jobs, community activities or benefits extended to suppliers) depended on the continuing financial viability of the companies (sometimes summarised as 'economic sustainability)': 'Ultimately, if we're not economically sustainable, we're not sustainable, it's that simple' (I-14, retail). I-9 (food service) said: 'It is in my genes. If it doesn't make business sense I know I won't get anywhere'. She talked about the constant need to 'balance out the commercial side', and said everything she did had to be 'within the business case'. I-14 (retail) described the tyranny of 'hitting the numbers' on a daily basis. I-16 (manufacturing) reduced the idea to comic duality:

The dilemma on sustainability for businesspeople is ensuring that sustainability means making your business better. If it's merely a social cost, in other words, I'm doing this because I feel good about things, but actually it's making my business less competitive, it's a problem … I'm not against saving the planet but I think the problem is, why should I save the planet, if [my competitor] is not, right?

Because I'll end up saving the planet and going bust, and he'll end up not saving the planet and he'll be making a fortune.

For other interviewees, there was a sense that business justifications had to be constructed for sustainability-related goals. I-6 (manufacturing) said the necessity to 'identify the business case' was 'one of her biggest challenges'. I-18 (retail), who felt that the business imperative to pursue growth was inimical to sustainability, nevertheless felt trapped by it, saying, 'if my competitors stop growing I don't have to grow, simple as that'. I-4 (retail), who was strongly motivated by the idea that firms should have goals that were not purely financial (such as providing meaningful and fairly paid work), accepted that this attitude was not shared by all of her colleagues:

Well, we're a retailer aren't we? We measure success in terms of how much we sold and what margin we made, and how small our waste is. If you can't talk about sustainability in that way, there's a whole group of people at [this company] who are never going to be engaged in it.

In this context, activities that brought business gains had more kudos, more credibility, than activities that 'just' brought social sustainability gains. I-22 (standards organisation) said the food businesses she worked with were not content to be seen to be acting simply from philanthropy:

[Change] has to be presented as good for business. Stuart Rose [former Chief Executive of M&S] boasted that Plan A had saved M&S £50 m. This is about being proud to say this isn't about philanthropy, or just the moral high ground, this is actually good business. That's the mantra now, that there has to be a business case.

Some interviewees made the point that sustainability could present businesses with new profit-making opportunities. But interviewees often commented that the necessity to work within the 'business mindset' limited their capacity to act in the ways or to the extent they otherwise might have done.

However, it is relevant to note that several interviewees said that company structure and ethos had a strong determining effect. For example I-2 (retail), who had worked for a plc, a co-op and was currently at a mutual, said that operationalising social concerns was easier at the mutual (where employees had a say in decisions) compared with a plc, 'where the shareholders can be very remote from the day-to-day activity'. I-18 (retail) was adamant that his company's private, family structure allowed it to act more effectively on social sustainability (for example by having a fairer salary structure) than it could have done as a plc.

At times the sense of limitation to the interviewees desire to 'make a difference' sounded like real frustration and at times like complacency. I-14 (retail) said, 'You can't change everything, you have to cut your coat accordingly'. I-17 (food service) said 'You want to do more than you can actually achieve'. I-9 (food service) described how the need to make compromises 'diluted' what she could do, but said:

I think it's OK to not be able to do everything. I've got my head in quite a good place of, let's make a decision on what we do and as long as we can back it up, we can't do all things but that's OK.

More negatively, I-8 (food service), despite feeling he was 'making a difference', said his efforts amounted to making things the 'least bad' they could be.

Overall, interviewees argued that activity for sustainability was prompted by both instrumental and moral motives. I-2 (retail) said, 'Some [of these activities] have business motivations, and some are motivated by how we should do business'. The interviewees were aware that what they did was vulnerable to the criticism of 'greenwash'. I.2 (retail), defending the need to make incremental rather than revolutionary change, said:

But there's a difference between incremental change and smokescreen CSR bullshit. And unfortunately there's an awful lot of the latter.

A clash of rationalities

Reflecting on the practices and processes they had been describing, many of the interviewees reported that they found social sustainability extremely difficult to 'do'. Various reasons were given: they found it 'fluffy' (I-4, retail), imprecisely defined, difficult to measure, subjective and culturally variably. And, as explained in the previous section, they felt constrained by the business context in which they worked.

The interviewees voiced frustrations that although they wanted to 'do the right' thing', they also felt their efforts were inadequate. One way of interpreting this sense of frustration is that it highlights a collision between two 'rationalities' of governance. The research encountered many tensions between the objectives of business and the objectives of sustainability, leading to compromises arrived at with regret or resignation. There seemed to be two different mentalities in play, one steeped in the priorities and consciousness of sustainability, the other in the priorities and consciousness of business. Miller and Rose define 'rationalities of government' as 'ways of rendering reality thinkable in such a way that it [is] amenable to calculation and programming' (2008, p. 16). The efforts of many of the actors (based on website

and interview evidence) were dedicated to problematising social sustainability in such a way that it was amenable to calculation and programming that did not transgress the expectations, norms and laws of business. In other words, most of the actors—including food supply actors such as manufacturing companies or retailers, as well as many of the pressure groups, consultancies or standards organisations seeking to influence the conduct of the food supply, worked within the business rationality. The sustainability rationality threatened to disrupt this—as Hawken (2010) noted, for some businesses doing the right thing might put them out of business.

The tension was apparent between and within organisations, and even perhaps within interviewees—several of the sustainability practitioners who worked for food companies were keen to ally themselves with longer-term and more altruistic goals (the sustainability rationality) than could be reconciled with the business case (the business rationality). It was notable that both sustainability and business were referred to by interviewees as part of themselves (business was 'in their genes', sustainability had to be 'got'). The conflicted interviewees stood on the fault line between two large and powerful sets of ideas.

The collision of rationalities also helps explain the paradox between the interviewees' sense of agency and simultaneous experience of powerlessness. They were senior operatives who presented themselves as resourceful decision-makers, and who felt their work could 'make a difference'. It was therefore surprising to find that they also had such a strong sense of the constraint the business framework put on their activities.

Underlying these considerations is the question of the extent to which food businesses can legitimately engage in activity for social good. Websites and interviewees said that large companies had the power to achieve large-scale social change. But commentators (e.g., Fuchs et al. 2011; Wilks 2013) have pointed out that companies have no democratic means of choosing or prioritising which social activities to pursue. It can be added that the many non-state governance actors now enmeshed in the food supply—the consultancies, advocacy groups, standard-setters and so on—do not have a democratic basis for their prescriptions and interventions either.

This paper has shown that activities undertaken in the conventional food supply under social sustainability or social responsibility agendas may be either explicitly ethical, or claim ethical motivations. However, the activities are often chosen on an ad hoc basis, where practitioners' knowledge and experience, and pre-existing organisational aims and priorities, are influential factors. Moreover, the social/ethical activities are very inconsistently associated with sustainability. These findings carry the implication that programmes for sustainability transition, which may be

comprehensive in scope (such as the Sustainable Development Goals) are likely to be selectively and opportunistically taken up by the organisations and individuals that seek to implement them. In addition, 'ethical activity' (such as ethical sourcing) may not be linked with sustainability by potential implementers, and vice versa. In other words, campaigners for workers' rights may not see their case strengthened by being presented as a facet of sustainability; and campaigners for greater sustainability may find they are being ignored by campaigners for workers' rights.

Finally, in the context of the conventional food supply, the predominant business framing meant that ethical concerns often gave way to, or were expressed in terms of, more material priorities. Social sustainability or responsibility actions could be justified on moral grounds as 'the right thing to do' but they usually had to be backed up in more pragmatic terms as a way of 'doing well by doing good'. This has policy implications for sustainability programmes at every level. The acid test—for policymakers and businesses—arises when 'doing the right thing' (in sustainability terms) means doing less well (in business terms) for owners and other stakeholders.

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