

GUEST EDITORIAL

Systems Thinking and Sustainability in Organisations

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This set of articles arises from a series of conferences (Business Systems Laboratory Symposia, 2013–2015) and in particular from the 2nd Business systems Laboratory International Symposium, Rome 2014 with the theme ‘Systems Thinking for a Sustainable Economy’, concerned with systems thinking and its relations with sustainable management, where the relevance of systems thinking was demonstrated. The current period of our global society is characterised by intense transformations in the competitive logics of organisations, markets, and, generally speaking, society. Social circumstances today are typified by dynamism, connectivity, nonlinearity, and emergent properties — in other words by ‘complexity’ (Dominici, 2012). The ongoing rapid changes of our times have undermined the concept of alleged stability of the social and business context, causing a boost in all three factors of complexity: economic, technical, and socio-psychological (Dominici & Palumbo, 2013). Economic complexity refers to the changing of relations among business players; technical complexity encompasses the drive towards more flexible technologies; and socio-psychological complexity refers to the social behaviour of the consumer (Dominici & Palumbo, 2013). These factors need to deal with the larger system of the whole ecosystem, in order to avoid compromising the ability of future generations to benefit from systemic improvements. In other words, any change, improvement, or development of a social system has to be valuable in the long term, hence it must be ‘sustainable’.

This special issue brings together research articles presented in their preliminary version at the Second BSLab International Symposium in Roma 2014, which address, through different methodological approaches, the timely topic of decision support for sustainable management. These articles present interdisciplinary work that does not aim for the ‘one size fits all’ solution. Given the broad scope of application for sustainability management, this special issue addresses the remarkable open perspective of finding new ways to improve decision support tools and methods for sustainability management. For this special edition we chose four articles (coming from research presented at the BSLab Symposium 2014) considering different approaches and some of their applications to sustainability in organisations.

In the first article, Karin Brunsson points out that sustainability relates to ethics, and individuals and organisations should follow different ethical standards. The author argues that, if individuals adopt an organisational kind of ethics then global

sustainability is at risk, suggesting that global sustainability depends on how individuals define their true interests.

The second article presented in this special issue by Bardy et al. deals with the systemic dimension of sustainability in the developing world. The authors argue how only a holistic approach can resolve the issues related to inter-societal and inter-temporal resource allocation, which are at the core of sustainable development. A systemic outlook can augment research and performance of sustainable development in developing countries, aiming to demonstrate how the systemic approach to sustainable development can be practically applied through multi-stakeholder dialogues. This article contributes to the discussion on sustainable development by comprising a systemic perspective and shedding light on the links between systems thinking and the systemic practice of dealing with the large number of stakeholders involved in sustainable development in developing countries.

The third research article by Dobson et al. aims to investigate teaching and learning about transition initiatives based upon social enterprise and reciprocity. In particular, the study aims to shed light on how game theory and strategy simulation environments may support these activities. The authors discuss the co-evolutionary nature of internal and external organisational contexts. The article presents a gaming prototype based upon an extension of the Prisoner's Dilemma (Exploring Community Resilience, ExCoRe) as a medium for active learning, able to introduce a broad concept of reciprocity and collaboration on a systemic level. The article argues that the static nature of the traditional strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT) approach makes it unsuitable in actual turbulent complex scenarios. Therefore students can benefit from establishing a more dynamic relationship between internal and external environments through a strategic decision-making game. The presented ExCoRe is a strategic decision-making game wherein survival relies on social cooperation and interaction with neighbours. Through simulation with the ExCoRe game the authors test their hypothesis using different scenarios.

Finally, in the fourth article, Sajeve et al. analyse the concepts of sustainability and governance from a holistic and systemic perspective and explore the evaluation of sustainability through a qualitative methodology, grounded in the five capitals model of Forum for the Future. They use the 'Governance Assessment Matrix Exercise' (GAME) as a tool for setting general criteria for sustainability for each of the dimensions of the five capitals model. The GAME methodology is applied to three case studies, in order to systematically understand the impacts within and between systems, causal factors, and possible countermeasures. In this way, the authors aim to find general and overarching sustainability criteria that may be holistically applicable for the evaluation of socio-technological systems related to diverse local communities and could facilitate the recognition of enablers and constraints, actions and policies, thereby supporting sustainable development.

It has already been indicated that all these articles within this special issue present different methods and means for determining and assessing the application of systems thinking for the sustainable management of organisations. The

advancements and methodologies proposed could be relevant for all kinds of organisations, irrespective of their size and property. Through the diffusion of these methodological approaches we hope to contribute to the scientific debate and promote participation in the dissemination of scientific advancements that may stimulate the progress of the sustainability debate in the field of organisational science.

References

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Notes on contributor

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