

Article

Unpacking B Corps' Impact on Sustainable Development: An Analysis from Structuration Theory

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Abstract: With *Our Common Future* and the United Nation's global call to implement the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2030, public policies increasingly emphasise the need for various actors to contribute to a global transformation and a more sustainable future. Despite growing research on hybrid organisations and their contributions to sustainable development, their impact on accelerating this transition might be faulty. Looking at a type of hybrid organisation, Certified B Corporations (B Corps), this article draws on a multiple case study of nine B Corps in a developing country in Latin America, Colombia. The study builds on the Structuration Theory to examine to what extent and how B Corps impact sustainable development. The article empirically shows that B Corps focus on four categories of sustainable development: considering future generations; enhancing human development; encouraging new mindsets, behaviours, and lifestyles; and promoting socio-political engagement. The findings suggest that B Corps develop communicative and narrative discourses and symbolic schemas as means of signification and follow norms and moral rules to exert legitimation and utilise authoritative resources to exercise power. The article contributes to research on hybrid organisations, sustainability transitions, and business models.

Keywords: Sustainable Development (SD); Triple Bottom Line (TBL); Structuration Theory (ST); hybrid organisations; B Corps; business models; sustainability transitions



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1. Introduction

With the publication of *Our Common Future* by the United Nations in 1987, Sustainable Development (SD) has been increasingly presented as a pathway for a better and more desirable society. SD, defined as the “means meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” [1], has become a pervasive topic and a ‘global agenda for change’ to promote long-term environmental strategies by the cooperation and collaboration of various actors. Particular concerns have been manifested on how contributions to SD, and notably to the SDGs, can be addressed from a transformative perspective through individual and collective action [2]. Although SD was initially considered an initiative of governance between nations to restructure the international economic system through multilateral solutions and cooperation, new entrants, including private businesses, have been explicitly called upon to play a part in this transition towards a more sustainable world.

Organisations are one of the social actors with the highest potential to contribute to SD. In particular, hybrid organisations are entities that perform in the spectrum of traditional and non-profits organisations [3]. They are characterised for delivering socio-ecological impacts through their products and practices while being self-sustaining and economically viable [4] in an endeavour to drive change and tackle the world's most

challenging problems [5]. Research has demonstrated the progressive role of hybrid organisations in SD, a topic that is gaining significance for supporting policies for more human development in a Post-COVID-19 society [6]. Specifically, studies have revealed that hybrid organisations oriented towards SD focus on activities at the interception of the Triple Bottom Line (TBL)—An approach that jointly integrates economic, environmental, and social dimensions [7]. Sustainability-oriented hybrid organisations have been shown to be more equipped to face the so-called grand challenges and reproduce sustainable transitions [8]. Despite growing research on these organisations' contributions to SD, notably to the SDGs [9], approaches to concretely understand how they impact SD for a more accelerated sustainability transition is missing.

To analyse this phenomenon, we focussed our attention on a particular type of hybrid organisation, Certified B Corporations (B Corps). The B Corp certification is a third-party audit coordinated by B Lab, a US-based non-profit organisation “that serves a global movement of people using business as a force for good” [10]. B Corps are considered ‘new hybrid organisations’ [11] as they simultaneously pursue social and environmental value while generating economic value. B Corps are well-aligned with global sustainability agendas [12] and their business models focus on TBL issues [13]. They incorporate sustainability practices and follow transformative motivations to balance profits and purpose by promoting “a global culture shift to redefine success in business and build a more inclusive and sustainable economy” [14].

Scholars have stated that B Corps can foster societal changes [12] by promoting inclusive growth through the so-called ‘stakeholder capitalism’ [15]. Thus, B Corps integrate hybrid economy concepts [16], utilising capitalists and collaborative practices in tandem [17]. Despite these revelations, empirical observations on this phenomenon are lacking. Studies have questioned B Corps' contribution to SD through their business models [11,18], and more concrete insights on how they configure a more inclusive and sustainable economy are claimed [19]. Considering B Corps' ambitions to redefine and transform the economic system to a more hybridised and sustainable one, interpretations from their agentic capacity to pursue these transformations is faulty.

This study builds on Structuration Theory (ST) [20] to analyse B Corps' impact in SD. ST views the structure and agents of a social system as a duality, suggesting that social system creation and reproduction is based on agents' interactions within social structures. Because ST allows a deeper understanding of the transformation of society [21], it provides theoretical insights to explain how B Corps can impact social structures in their operating context. Specifically, this paper focuses on the following questions:

RQ1: *How, and to what extent, does B Corps impact SD?*

RQ2: *How do B Corps influence social structures to impact SD?*

This study undertakes a cross-case analysis of nine B Corps in Latin America, Colombia. Data collection included semi-structured interviews with business founders and key informants, while abundant secondary sources were used for data triangulation. We interpret SD as a transformative concept to be achieved at the interception of the three dimensions of the TBL and provide empirical observations of four categories: considering future generations; enhancing human development; encouraging new mindsets, behaviours, and lifestyles; and promoting socio-political engagement [22]. The categories are explored to contextualise B Corps' approach to SD through their business models. The theoretical underpinnings on ST allowed interpreting elements of *signification*, *legitimation*, and *domination* to analyse B Corps' influence on social structures through SD. Our study contributes to research on hybrid organisations and B Corps, sustainability transitions, and business models.

This paper is structured as follows: after the Introduction, Section 2 presents the theoretical background and the research underpinnings. Section 3 describes the methodology, while the findings and discussion are presented in Sections 4 and 5, respectively. The paper closes with Section 6, which includes the conclusions, implications for managers and policy-makers, research limitations, and potential avenues for future studies.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1. Sustainable Development and Hybrid Organisations

SD is a contested topic that has been shaped by different worldviews, resulting in a wide range of definitions [23]. The Brundtland Report of the United Nations presents the classic and most widespread definition of SD in *Our Common Future*, defined as the “means meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” [1]. *Our Common Future* recognises humanity’s dependency on the environment to meet needs beyond the mere exploitation of resources, calling for a society interdependent with the environment [23]. The Brundtland Report demands a different form and speed of growth, combining economic and ecological decision-making processes with a stronger emphasis on human development [24]. SD results from a growing global awareness that links environmental problems and socio-economic issues that concerns today’s grand challenges [24].

Growth and development from the SD perspective have been an important debate in business literature. Businesses have materialised an understanding of SD in practice, often linked to the TBL approach [23], based on economic, environmental, and social issues [7]. The TBL integrates social and environmental dimensions to traditional economic activities to measure a firm’s sustainable performance. Although the TBL has not been free from criticism, various studies recognise Elkington’s approach [7] as a conceptual basis and reference to interpret SD [25]. One of the major weaknesses of the TBL approach is the lack of academic consensus on what each of its dimensions concretely means. To illustrate, the economic dimension is associated with economic growth, equal income, prosperity, economy, and profits; the environmental dimension is linked to ecological balance, environmental health, respecting environmental limits, environmental quality, and the planet; while the social dimension is related to democratic participation, social progress, social justice, people, or equity [26]. The TBL dimensions are frequently presented as three interconnected rings [23] (see Figure 1).

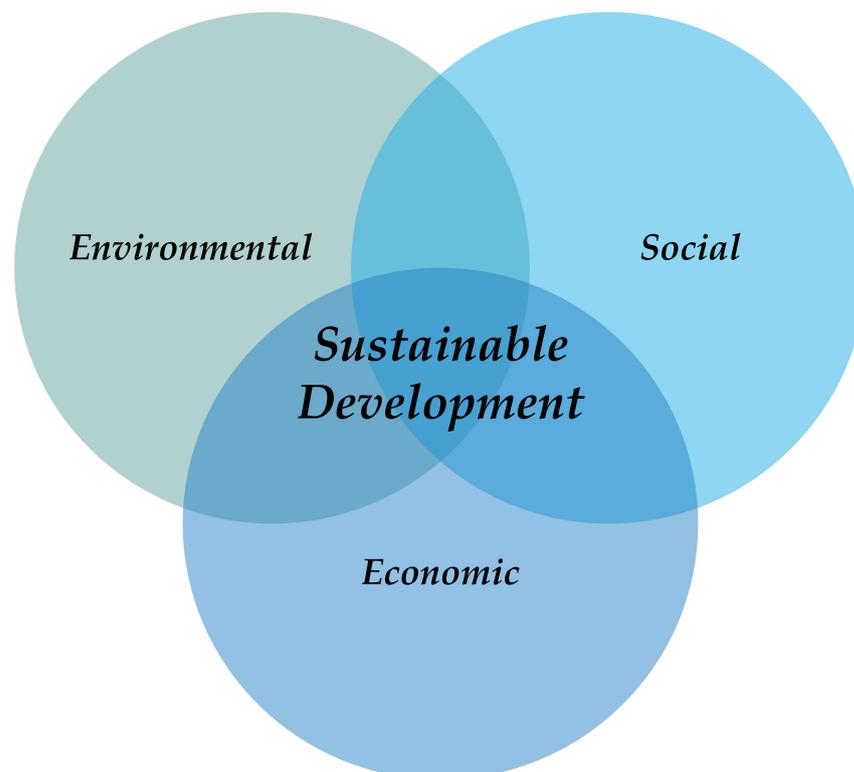


Figure 1. TBL dimensions of SD.

Firms are economically sustainable when they ensure sufficient liquidity to produce a persistent return, are ecologically sustainable when their resources are consumed at a rate lower than that of their natural reproduction or their substitutes, and are socially sustainable when they add value to the communities in which they operate, enhancing their development [27]. Hybrid organisations, particularly sustainability-oriented hybrid organisations, fit into these criteria, meeting TBL dimensions at the intersection of their core [4]. The joint economic, environmental, and social dimensions suggest that these hybrids promote net positive sustainability, address SD challenges, are concerned with present and future generations, or integrate socio-ecological worldviews [4].

The following subsection introduces a hybrid organisation with sustainability orientations which draw interest in this research, B Corps.

2.2. B Corp: A Sustainability-Oriented Hybrid Organisation

Hybrid organisations are entities that “pursue a social mission while engaging in commercial activities that sustain their operations” [28] and incorporate diverse institutional logics from public, private, and non-profit sector elements [29]. One of these firms’ main characteristics is the combination of commercial and charity activities [30], and the configuration of their business model focuses on the resolution of social problems [31]. Hybrid organisations oriented towards SD issues [4] are often linked to work integration, stewardship and environmental protection, employment, or local development [32].

B Corps are a type of hybrid organisation [9] that “align profit and societal impact and prioritises positive social and environmental outcomes” [12]. B Corps bind their business purpose in the enterprise status [14] and voluntarily implement stricter transparency and accountability standards than traditional corporations [33]. They must reach a minimum of 80 out of 200 points in the Benefit Impact Assessment (BIA) through validating performance in five areas: communities, workers, environment, customers, and governance. B Corps’ efforts to use business as a force for good and desire to build a new social contract between business and society [34] is incarnated in the idea of acting as “The Best Enterprises for the World” instead of the well-known Forbes approach of becoming “World’s Best Companies”. B Corps are oriented towards sustainability issues at their core [35], directly contributing to the well-known TBL dimensions [13,36].

Hybrid organisations’ capacity to achieve SD is intrinsically embedded in their business models [37,38]. Following Tabares [22], B Corp activities at the intersection of the TBL can be identified in the value proposition of hybrid organisations’ business models in four categories: (a) considering future generations; (b) enhancing human development; (c) encouraging new mindsets, behaviours and lifestyles; and (d) promoting socio-political engagement. These categories serve as a starting point for understanding how B Corps address SD. The following subsection explores how such an approach can be interpreted in light of existing theories.

2.3. Structuration Theory

Structuration Theory, developed by the British sociologist Anthony Giddens, aimed to complement a missing aspect of social theory by integrating the notion of agency and its reciprocal interaction in social structures. According to Giddens [20], structures are *dual* as they are both a ‘medium and an outcome’ of the social practice in the social system. Giddens highlighted the reciprocal relationship between agency (individuals’ motivations) and structure (external forces immersed in society) as micro and macro perspectives, respectively. The duality refers to the structure’s capacity to shape agency and, simultaneously, the agency’s capacity of reproducing and constituting structures.

Agents are continuously constrained and enabled by structures [20]; the attributes of a social system integrate the rules and resources that agents use in their interactions [39]. Agents are ‘knowledgeable’, meaning that they are aware of what they are doing, revealing their freedom and capacity to put into practice their knowledge [40]. The structure or rules and resources that allow reproduction of the social system influence agents. Thus, the

social system comprehends the schemas that build up the structure in which social life is enacted. Following Giddens, three dimensions characterise the structure: signification, legitimation, and domination [20].

Signification alludes to interpretative schemes by which agents draw their interactions to communicate understanding and meaning [40]. Giddens framed signification as ‘modalities of structuration’, related to cognitive schemes of communication expressed through the individual speech and language, institutionalised through symbolic orders and discourses [20]. The signification structure is based upon common concepts, notions, ideas, or even theories that give sense to organisational activities [40]. Legitimation refers to norms, moral codes, and values that constitute human interactions. Norms are expected to sanction human behaviour determining certain rights or obligations of social actors [41]. Domination relates to facilities or resources through which agents exercise power. Resources can be authoritative, derived from the capacity to coordinate activities with social actors, or allocative, which arises from controlling elements of the material world such as objects, goods, or material products [20]. Both authoritative and allocative resources provide a channel for domination and enable the agency’s transformative capacity [40].

Agents are a central element of ST, represented by individuals’ capacity to take action and exert some control or transform social relations to some degree [39]. Agents are expected to use their individual capacities to exploit resources and understand a structure’s rules [42]. Following Sewell, “to be an agent means to be capable of exerting some degree of control over the social relations in which one is enmeshed, which in turn implies the ability to transform those social relations to some degree” [39]. Although structures empower actors differently, actor capacity is inherent in all individuals [39]. According to Keller [43], actors use the rules and resources as discourses of their practice. Thus, communication patterns are bound into discursive practices through an incorporated knowledge which dictates actors’ means of acting. Actors use signification to communicate; legitimation provides a shared set of normative rules, moral obligations, values, and ideals [44]; and domination provides the influence to understand power relations and the use of resources [40]. Figure 2 depicts the main concepts of ST utilised in this research.

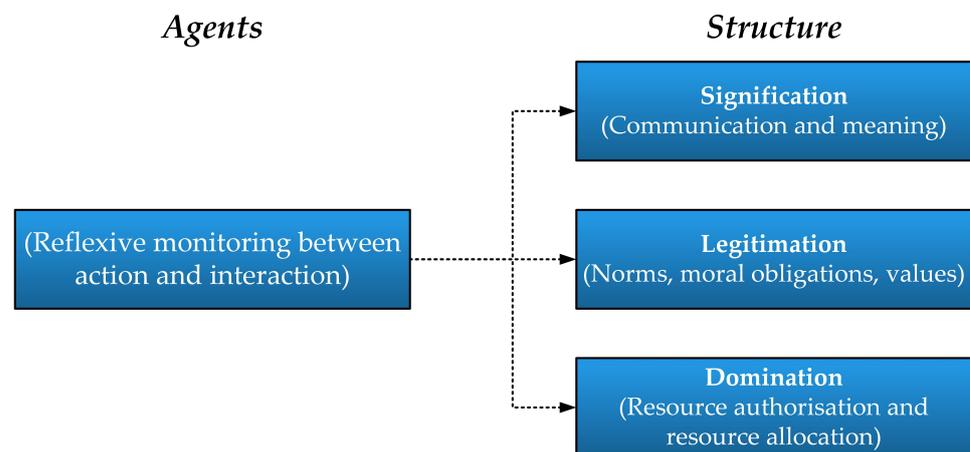


Figure 2. Giddens’ Structuration Theory Model. Source: Adapted from Giddens [20] and Macintosh and Scapens [40].

These categories allowed us to think systematically about B Corps’ involvement in SD, as this phenomenon occurs in a specific context in a social system. The system in which a structure is implicated comprises signification, domination, and the legitimation of agents, which are reproduced across time and space. ST is used to consider the role of agents and structure in interpreting B Corps’ reasoning to impact SD through business activities.

Although limited, former studies have analysed hybrid organising phenomena from the perspective of ST [45]. To show an example, the emergence of hybrid organisations has been attributed to an interplay between agency and structure in the UK after the

introduction of the policy in social enterprise, leading to the creation of sustainable rural communities [46] and ethnic minority-led social enterprises [47]. Gordon et al. [48] utilise the ST to interpret the impacts of hybrid organisations on individual and community health and well-being, while Sarason et al. [49] explore the impact of sustainable entrepreneurship in SD in developing countries in Latin America.

The following section describes the methodology.

3. Methodology

This study adopted an interpretive, exploratory, and qualitative methodology involving case study research. Case studies are suitable for studying real-life, contemporary, complex phenomena [50]. A multiple-case-study approach was adopted to provide more in-depth details of the phenomenon of interest [51]. This methodology was selected because “multiple cases are a powerful means to create theory because they permit replication and extension among individual cases” [52]. Because different cases underscore complementary facets of a phenomenon, researchers can build a more comprehensive theoretical picture by putting together individual observations, allowing replication to corroborate propositions.

3.1. Research Setting

The empirical study was conducted with B Corps in a developing country in Latin America, Colombia. Colombia is characterised by severe social problems such as poverty, violence, inequalities, or the failure of public institutions [53]. In 2020, Colombia became the 37th country to join the OECD; however, the country has the highest inequality across households among its members [54]. The country is classified as having an upper-middle-income [55]; it ranks 67 out of 166 countries in SDG performance with a score of 70.9% in the SDG Index, with important weaknesses in promoting good health and well-being and decent work; reducing inequalities; promoting peace and justice; or building strong institutions [56]. Since the mid-20th century, Colombia has been framed as a territory in conflict because of the growing emergence of rebel insurgencies such as the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and paramilitary groups. Due to the most recent peace agreement between the Colombian government and the FARC in 2016–2020, ex-combatants and displaced populations have been seeking their integration into society as an effort of reconciliation.

Concerning the role of hybrid organisations in Colombia, what calls the attention of this setting is the upsurge of B Corps. The B Corp certification in Latin America was founded in 2012 by Pedro Tarak (Argentina), Maria Emilia Correa (Colombia), Juan Pablo Larenas and Gonzalo Muñoz (Chile) through the B System movement (Sistema B) headquartered in Chile. The first certified B Corps in Latin America emerged in these three countries and served as pioneers for other companies in the continent. Currently, Colombia occupies fourth place in Latin America and 11th in the world with the highest number of certified B Corps [57], making the country an interesting setting to analyse these enterprises impact on SD.

3.2. Data Collection

The cases selected followed a purposeful sampling approach, seeking rich observations that allowed extending the emergent theory [51]. The cases analysed in this study are part of a research on B Corps in Colombia (see [9]); however, this paper focuses on nine enterprises to delve into the research questions in greater detail. Table 1 presents the overview of the analysed B Corps, including a short business description and the interviewees participating in the study. Each of these B Corps provides examples of how a hybrid organisation can drive SD at the intersection of the TBL.

Table 1. Overview of cases.

| B Corp | Business Description | Interviewees |
|------------------|--|--|
| Indeleble Social | Experiential training and corporate volunteering | Executive Director/Co-founder, General Manager/Co-founder, Project Coordinator, Administrative Coordinator |
| Mejor en Bici | Bicycle sharing service | General Manager/Co-founder |
| Terramarte | Reusable Ecological Bags | General Manager, Director of Marketing and Communications |
| Jaguar | Agri-food Services Consultancy | CEO/Founder |
| Sentido Verde | Environmental Consultancy and Education | General Manager/Co-founder, Commercial Director |
| Alcagüete | Healthy Snacks | Managing Director/Co-Founder, Marketing Coordinator |
| Siembra Viva | Organic Farm and E-commerce Market Place | CEO, Director of Operations, four Farmers |
| Cafexport | Coffee and Cacao | CEO, General Manager, Director of Sustainability (two interviews) |

Data collection included two interviews sets. The first set included semi-structured interviews with B Corps' founders and senior managers. Interviews were developed between October 2019 and August 2020 at their locations and via virtual meetings. Interviews lasted 45–90 min. To gain a deeper understanding of the topic, a second set of interviews was carried out with six B System informants, who provided in-depth information regarding the B Corp movement. Interviews with B System informants were conducted through virtual meetings between July 2020 and January 2021, lasting 45 to 60 min. Key B System informants included the B System Co-Founder and Leader of B Academy Colombia (Informant: I1), the Executive Director of B System Colombia (I2), the Executive Director of B System Brazil (I3), the General Member Board of B System Colombia (I4), the Executive Director of B System Latin America and the Caribbean (I5), and the Director of Business Development and B System Ecuador (I6). All the names of the participants were anonymised.

The variety of qualitative gathering methods allowed a more comprehensive triangulation of the findings during the data analysis. Apart from the interviews, the main source of information regarding businesses' involvement in SD was retrieved from websites and social networks (e.g., social media, podcasts, news). Interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and transcribed to support the data analysis. The questions referred to relevant aspects of B Corps' involvement in SD, asking interviewees to engage in narrative storytelling to prompt rich statements. The interview guide was built on SD literature [4,22] and ST [20] regarding signification, legitimation, and domination elements.

The first part of the interviews integrated questions regarding general conceptions of SD (e.g., "How do you define SD?"), motivations and business activities (e.g., "What dimensions of SD does the enterprise focus on? How does your business portfolio relate to SD?"), and measurement and disclosure (e.g., "How does the enterprise approach SD? Does the company disclose SD? Does the enterprise use indicators to measure SD?"). The second part of the interview consisted of retrieving data from the elements of the structure: signification (e.g., "What meaning does the enterprise give to SD as part of its business activities? How do B Corps communicate SD-related issues? What kind of interactions transmit B Corps' intention to focus on SD?"); legitimation (e.g., "What norms, moral standards, values, or ethical positions guide B Corps' approach to SD? What conducts, procedures, or processes encourage or discourage the organisation from pursuing SD? What positions, mindsets, or decisions are expected from B Corps concerning SD? What norms are B Corps expected to follow in Colombia to pursue SD?"), and domination (e.g., "What human and non-human resources do B Corps use to drive SD?"). Interviews with B System key informants focused on the second section of the interview.

3.3. Data Analysis

By following the data collection principles, multiple sources of evidence were collected and triangulated to correct bias and reach internal validity [58]. A case-study database was constructed to increase reliability, consisting of a single case report, case-study narratives, anecdotes, field notes, and a portfolio with the files. Single case reports were developed following the case study database, citing specific evidentiary sources and following a protocol, which guided the research procedure to link the research questions. This process allowed higher construct validity by maintaining a chain of evidence [59].

Data analysis started by converting all materials into ATLAS.ti v9. Datasets were read through, starting with the interview transcripts, secondary materials, and field notes. Combining this activity with extant literature from ST [20] and following case-study data analysis [51,60], the researchers analysed the data in three stages: within-case data, cross-case data, and triangulation (see Figure 3).

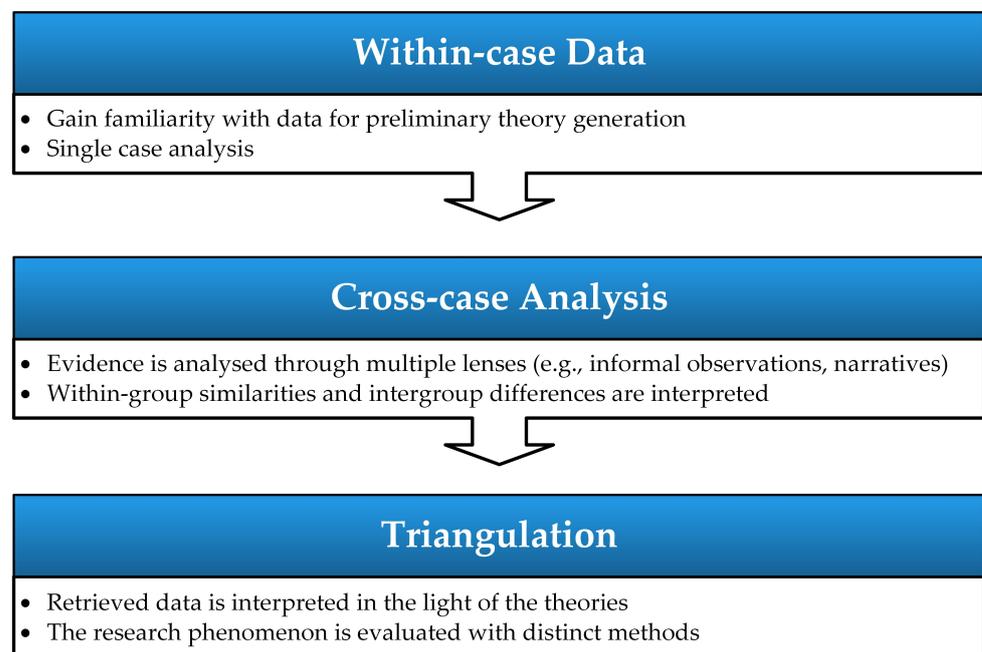


Figure 3. Data analysis of the multiple case study. Source: Compiled by the authors.

Within-case data was developed by separately examining and summarising single reports and case story narratives to study concepts, patterns, and themes through the collected responses. Each case study summarised interview data and different secondary data sources [59], providing concrete examples of SD. Various elements of ST were detected during the analysis (Figure 2). The cross-case analysis was developed throughout the multiple cases to determine how results were prolonged beyond individual cases—the cross-case analysis allowed comparing the findings retrieved from the nine B Corps. Triangulation followed by interpreting the retrieved information from different sources and materials. Interview data was triangulated with the secondary sources, i.e., business reports and other published sources, for example, by providing examples of how B Corps concretely contribute to SD dimensions at the intersection of the TBL. Data analysis was further discussed between the researchers to identify the key findings.

4. Results

This section summarises different categories in which B Corps impact SD (Section 4.1) posteriorly; using ST, elements of the structure are analysed (Section 4.2).

4.1. B Corps Impact on Sustainable Development

To identify where the three dimensions of the TBL meet in B Corps' activities, four categories were taken into consideration based on former studies in hybrid organisations [22]. Table 2 summarises exemplary observations of sustainability-oriented activities developed by B Corps at the intersection of the three dimensions of the TBL.

Table 2. B Corps business activities at the intersection of the TBL.

| B Corp | Examples * |
|-------------------|--|
| Indeleble Social | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Human training through collective construction and participatory methodologies • Corporate volunteering strategies and training • Strategies for the development of sustainability-oriented capacities in people and organisations • Strategic management of corporate social responsibility and educational communication |
| Mejor en Bici | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promotion of bicycles as a sustainable transportation mode • Design of spaces and infrastructure for bicycles |
| Terramarte | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Products manufactured by women heads of households • Products that replace the use of plastic materials |
| Ecosistema Jaguar | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Branding: Marks for agri-food products under triple impact standards • Regenerative Agriculture: Agri-food services for building transitions to regenerative/ecological production systems • Agricultural Training: programs for accelerating the adoption of social and environmental practices • Agtech: traceability systems building that encourages data access to agricultural chains |
| Sentido Verde | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Awareness and education for sustainable consumption and production • Consultancy for environmental capacity building in individuals and organisations |
| Alcagüete | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Healthy snacks with a 1 × 1 and 1 × 2 for donating food to reduce malnutrition in children • Partnering with local farmers and low-income indigenous communities • Improving social and ecological sustainability in the food industry |
| Siembra Viva | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promoting sustainable organic agricultural production • Training of local farmers and people affected by the Colombian armed conflict |
| Cafexport | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Agronomic services and training for coffee farmers • Seed traceability and linkage to seed origin services • Piloting new projects to improve environmental and social impact in agriculture • Emission reduction and protection of natural aquifers |
| Portafolio Verde | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Circular economy strategies for organisations • Economic security projects with vulnerable, unprotected, and at-risk populations • Programmes for the strengthening of communities promoting sustainable self-management • Promoting sustainable production by raising awareness and ecological stewardship awareness |

* Extracted from the enterprises' websites.

4.1.1. Considering Future Generations

The first category relates to promoting the conservation and survival of future generations, related to net-positive sustainability and regenerative development. This approach to SD considers that successful business activities are those that co-evolve between human activities and natural systems [61]. This activity includes agricultural practices that promote community engagement, the business alienation with the natural cycles of social-ecological systems [62], or building transformative capacities for social resilience [63]. Examples of this category were observed in Ecosistema Jaguar, Siembra Viva, and Cafexport. To illustrate, Ecosistema Jaguar is a company that designs profitable businesses prototypes and business intrapreneurship ideas to regenerate natural ecosystems and positively impact communities. The enterprise has developed projects to conserve native plants and

species, such as the 'Andean potato', avoiding the spread of genetically modified crops and preventing the extermination of native seeds while encouraging the participation of indigenous populations in the agricultural industry. Companies must make certain economic sacrifices to adjust their production processes to the natural cycles. Another example regarding the consideration of future generations can be observed in the case of Cafexport, which works with generations of single-crop coffee-growing families, who have been engaged in this activity for more than four or five generations in Colombia.

4.1.2. Human Development

The second category relates to activities that hybrid organisations develop that enhance human agency, promote social cohesion, and improve human capabilities [22]. Human development as a holistic concept includes impacts on community resilience, the strengthening of rural and urban communities, or the encouragement of social cohesion. This category allows building on human agency by improving and enhancing people's capacity to act, particularly in their relationship with nature and the environment that they inhabit. Following Ziervogel et al. [64], this category can be interpreted as having a transformative capacity by promoting human communion, enlarging social networks, and promoting communities to bond.

B Corps with a focus on SD in this category are essentially those that engage in activities involving various societal actors, notably, excluded and marginalised populations. Terramarte, Ecosistema Jaguar, Alcacüete, Cafexport, and Siembra Viva, for example, bring together actors in the labour market, such as single mothers, illiterate populations, people affected by the armed conflict in Colombia (such as ex-combatants and displaced populations), indigenous communities, and local farmers, thereby enabling collective agency.

Cafexport works with farmers and cooperatives in the coffee region in Caldas, developing technical assistance processes and social and environmental programs while investing in the modernisation of the agricultural industry. By applying Fair Trade principles in their relationships with farming communities, the firm aims to increase the economic profits of local farmers. Alcacüete manufactures healthy snacks that seek to reduce malnutrition in children. Their supply chain is developed by partnering with farmers and low-income indigenous communities in Cauca, Santander, and the Colombian Amazon, who grow local ingredients, such as coconut, cacao, and acai, through organic practices.

Siembra Viva works with farmers affected by the Colombian armed conflict, generating training and learning spaces in the agricultural sector and encouraging them to cooperate as partners, not as employees. Siembra Viva generates agricultural training spaces with local educational institutions such as the National Training Service (SENA) and has channelled resources from Acumen to promote their integration into society. The agriculture industry is a good example of this category, as firms trigger economic empowerment in farmers, generating spaces of financial autonomy and increasing the work skills of their collaborators, and become involved in modern organic sustainability practices.

4.1.3. Novel Mindsets, Behaviours, and Lifestyles

SD in this category aims to reverse or transform practices in consumption and production by promoting alternatives to well-known unsustainable practices (e.g., wasteful water consumption, utilising one-use plastics, or wasting food, to name a few). This approach to SD aims to encourage sustainable habits and lifestyles in society with the potential to contribute to changes in socio-technological systems such as transportation, housing, communication, or nutrition [65]. Instructive examples are Mejor en Bici, which promotes the bike as a sustainable means of transportation for individuals and communities; Terramarte, which promotes the use of ecological bags to substitute the use of plastic materials; Sentido Verde, which focuses on educating individuals and collectives to build sustainable habits; and Alcacüete and Siembra Viva, which promotes healthier food options from the existing offer in the market. An interesting case is Portafolio Verde, a consulting firm that leads an initiative called Ciclo Siete, a project integrated by 22 Ibero-American countries to promote

the visibility of the good social and corporate practices framed in the SDGs. The movement has a collaborative vision in seven topics: biodiversity, sustainable mobility, education, sustainable design, healthy lifestyles, and culture that promotes voluntary participation in SD issues in individuals and communities.

4.1.4. Socio-Political Engagement

This category integrates business activities that aim to raise awareness of SD issues by involving different actors and promoting their political agency. This category is closely linked to social equality and social justice [66]. It professes to give actors visibility in issues of social and environmental public interest, allowing greater interaction between individuals and their communities and policy-makers. This category is linked to the idea of political participation, described in *Our Common Future*: “participation requires a political system that secures effective citizen participation in decision making” [1]. Thus, participation, understood as an issue of public interest, aims to raise the involvement of ‘low voices’ [66], including animals and other beings that cannot speak for themselves.

Some B Corps emphasise direct engagement of communities in the ecological issues, such as Indeleble Social and Portafolio Verde, which both work with rural collectives, while others accentuate on putting pressure on policy-makers and local legislations that favour environmental legislations, such as Terramarte. Terramarte has contributed to environmental SD through lobbying activities, showing progress in reducing single-use plastic. They supply ecological bags to one of the largest retailers in the country, replacing the manufacture and use of around 200 million single-use plastic bags in Colombia since their foundation to date (2010 to 2021). Portafolio Verde is an illustrative example of socio-political engagement and sustainability awareness. The firm created a non-profit project called Animal Bank, which supports ecological tourism and promotes biodiversity and wildlife conservation through sponsorship donations to protect Andean species in danger of extinction. They also offer social licence services to promote the rural participation of communities, ensuring that activities of extractive multinationals do not clash with the ecosystems these communities inhabit.

B Corps can perform SD from different approaches. SD can be seen at the interception of the TBL, combining business activities in a mix of economic, environmental, and social dimensions: considering future generations; enhancing human development; encouraging new mindsets, behaviours, and lifestyles; and promoting socio-political capacities.

The following section uses ST to understand B Corps’ impact on SD.

4.2. B Corps Impact in Sustainable Development: An Interpretation from the Structuration Theory Lenses

Drawing on Giddens’ key notions of ST, the dimensions of *signification*, *legitimation*, and *domination* are revisited. The three dimensions are indistinguishably connected; they allow the interpretation of organisational practices and activities regarding how B Corps give signification to their intentions, legitimate their actions, or deploy resources to impact SD.

4.2.1. Signification

Signification relates to interactions created upon interpretive schemas that communicate an understanding and meaning of human activities [40]; thus, SD is expected to be reproduced under the common understanding and constructed ideas of sustainability. Signification can be observed in business practices embedded in communicative schemas to transmit meaning in SD. Two categories of signification were identified: communicative and narrative discourses and symbolic schemas.

On the one hand, B Corps’ communicative discourses are dominant through narratives that evoke various SD concerns. Some of these narratives and communicative discourses integrate concepts and storylines about the transformation of society through business practices. Aligned with the categories of SD, B Corps emphasise their discourse on providing solutions to social and environmental problems that can benefit the needs of future generations; enhance human capabilities; encourage new mindsets, behaviours,

and lifestyles; or promote socio-political engagement. Sustainability is presented through a narrative that highlights the positive effects of market actors' intervention:

We are convinced that the bicycle is an element of change in the structure of our society. Specifically, the bike helps us build a more collaborative economy and brings us closer to each other. (Mejor en Bici)

The private sector is capable of making the whole world work in one way or another, and this capacity to address the problems of inequality, the climate crisis and poverty is an impressive hope. (Informant 1)

SD is pursued by the recreation of cognitive schemes of mutual knowledge and transmitting ideas as a reproducing structure. B Corps communicate their perception of what is a common understanding of the main problems in society which can be resolved through business solutions. B Corps' rhetoric shows a rejection against the dynamics of the current capitalist system, presenting a concern for the planet's future and an urgency to attend to grand societal challenges. B Corps suggest alternative arrangements in business that challenge dominant practices, highlighting the current system's failure. B Corps enact their communicative approach to SD by highlighting their efforts to build "a new social contract" or "taking collective global action", focusing on topics such as gender equality or ending racial inequalities [34]:

Together, we can find the solution to many of the problems that consumerism, industrialisation, and technology have created. (Terramarte)

Our model is a profit through purposes model. We believe in the transformative capacity of private enterprise, which is greater than that of an NGO. We believe in capitalism to transform the world. It is not savage capitalism, nor compassionate capitalism, but a moderate, redistributive, inclusive capitalism. (Cafexport)

The B movement in Colombia seeks to transform the private sector and the traditional version of capitalism, understanding that the traditional version, although it has brought many benefits to humanity, is also responsible for some of the big problems in terms of inequality and in terms of transgressing planetary ecological limits. (Informant 4)

On the other hand, signification is pursued through *symbolic schemas*, referring to attitudes on day-to-day activities [40]. An illustrative example of signification practices at a symbolic level is related to corporate activities that incarnate the lifestyle and values promoted in their core business (e.g., recycling, commuting on bicycles, using environmentally friendly virtual browsers, among others):

We try to be very consistent with what we propose. We do not use flyers; all information is electronic. We ride a bicycle; we use public transport. We are consistent between what we are and what we promote. (Sentido Verde)

Symbolic schemas are also manifested as B Corps share concepts, rules, and ideas of SD with more powerful actors and global agendas. Thus, business activities are built upon the SDGs and address very specific targets of the 2030 Agenda:

As a company, we are aligned to the SDGs, and we know in advance which SDGs we are targeting when we work with an organisation or a community. We help organisations to align or understand how their product or core business is aligned with the SDGs. (Indeble Social)

4.2.2. Legitimation

Legitimation involves moral and ethical structures of interaction. As seen in this research, B Corps legitimise their activities through norms and moral rules built upon SD principles. On the one hand, norms can be observed through practices that enable or constrain relationships with certain actors or behaviours in the social milieu that allow the coupling with SD practices. Norms result from self-imposed societal commitments and are expressed through interactions, business protocols, and practices that recreate

rights and obligations with different stakeholders. For instance, B Corps in the agricultural industry base their activities on standards of organic culture, Fair Trade, local purchasing, or regenerative agriculture, understood as legitimised SD practices.

We believe in the power of traditions and ancestral wisdom, mixed with technical knowledge and technology to create businesses that are respectful of communities, and that generate social, environmental and economic well-being. (Ecosistema Jaguar)

The B Corp certification is another form of legitimisation, as the standards promoted by B Lab seek to promote practices of SD. B Lab awards B Corps performance in various categories. The 'Best for the World Honorees' is a B Lab grant recognition on environmental, community, customer, and worker impact performance. Similarly, B Lab's close relationship with high dialogue institutions allow B Corps to legitimise business engagement in SD. To name an example, Portafolio Verde assesses the implementation of SD practices in the corporate sector aligned with the GRI and Global Compact.

We are an organisation that supports the solution of all social and environmental challenges of public, private and non-profit organisations. We have organised six work cells; each one serves very different clients and has very different challenges, but always aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that the world has been working towards since September 2015, at the COP21 in Paris. (Portafolio Verde)

We focus on triple impact; this is really the focus as a B-system. As a global B movement, we encourage companies to differentiate their financial performance as regularly as their social and environmental measures. This is already a global trend, and that is why we believe that the focus should not only be on the business ecosystem but globally as we seek to change the rules of the game of how we are influencing public policy. (Informant 6)

On the other hand, B Corp *moral standards* are built to face social/environmental harm or avoid injustice in society. Such morality is drawn through 'sanction mechanisms' [44] directed towards SD offenders and infringers. B Corps develop sanction mechanisms in their relationship with stakeholders when rejecting corruption and the unethical practices of the industry. Sanctions are identified by refusing to work with specific sectors (e.g., the petroleum or arms industry are outstanding examples). Various practices are considered as 'dishonour' as they affect long term sustainability. For example, some consulting firms refuse to certify certain extractive activities as they are interpreted as greenwashing. The following statement summarises this idea:

Some things that cannot be judged so lightly. We need to uphold very clear ethical limits. We have anti-corruption policies and we are signatories to the Global Compact. We have a full anti-corruption and transparency paragraph in our statutes. In our Internal Working Rules, we have client exclusion criteria. (Portafolio Verde)

Sanction mechanisms also reflect a desire to avoid 'the guilt' of performing inadequately or unfairly. B Corps embody values such as 'acting transparently with customers', 'being empathic with communities', 'behaving environmentally consciously', or 'acting fair with actors involved in the supply chain'. Moral standards towards SD practices are built on shared universal values that aim to prescribe righteous behaviours. Of particular interest are B Corps' intentions to equilibrate social relations by promoting socio-political engagement and enhancing human development and social cohesion with nature. From this perspective, B Corps are legitimised on SD issues by following norms and standards:

There are companies that want to do the best practices and have the best standards. I call them 'standard enterprises'. But other companies that like to be full in all standards, they believe in certifications, but regardless of the certification, whatever the standard lovers are, they like to be at the forefront and achieve a B impact. (Informant 5)

Legitimacy also is exercised by extending responsibility to consumers and encouraging actor's stewardship. Thus, B Corps expect customers to choose their products/services in a form of recognition or acceptance that these firms pay fair wages, establish sustainable

agricultural practices, or allow the participation of marginalised actors (to name a few examples). By choosing B Corps, customers 'reward' their activities and 'punish' those that do not align with SD practices. Moreover, not only the customers legitimise B Corps. These companies seek to be legitimised through the use of sanction mechanisms, by embodying the activities desired by local governments and their attempts to engage business in society.

4.2.3. Domination

The use of resources, as domination structures, allows actors to exercise power [40]. In order to exercise domination and draw new structures of SD, authoritative and allocative resources were revised.

Authoritative resources were recognised through practices and activities supported in networks, collaborations, and alliances. These relationships are developed with more powerful and resourceful actors, such as the United Nations, to develop projects aligned with global goals to directly impact the social problems in Colombia related to economic growth in the agricultural industry, social inclusion of vulnerable populations, or environmental protection of endangered ecosystems, to name a few. Ecosistema Jaguar works with the United Nations Development Programme to reintegrate ex-combatants of the Colombian armed conflict in the agricultural sector under legal practices. Mejour en Bici has developed agreements with the Mayor's Office of Bogota to supply the demand for bicycle use, providing affordable services to populations of different economic levels. Mejour en Bici alliance allows the influencing of more people and generating more inclusive solutions aligned with SD objectives. Terramarte is another example:

More than 60% of our manufacturers are women, and many of them are vulnerable or disabled. We are working with these populations through a project with the United Nations Development Programme from October 2019 to promote their economic integration into society. (Terramarte)

Allocative resources, which resort to non-human resources, are less outstanding than authoritative in the analysed B Corps. Examples of allocative resources are mainly related to activities that are essential for doing business (e.g., land use, patents, assets, installations); however, from the observations of this research, authoritative resources are more dominant in these companies. This is to the extent that the relationship and articulation with the goals of more powerful actors allow B Corps to organise their activities and coordinate the activities of other social actors. Power is therefore exerted, as these B Corps aim to make a difference in how things have been done in the economic system. The use of authoritative resources permits these companies to intervene in society with the backing of a larger purpose that goes beyond their interests as a profit-oriented organisation.

5. Discussion

This paper set out to explore (1) how and to what extent B Corps impact SD and (2) how do they influence social structures to achieve these impacts. In the following, we discuss our findings in light of the theoretical framework in relation to the research questions and the current literature.

5.1. B Corps: At the Intersection of the TBL

Hybrid organisations oriented towards sustainability avoid trade-offs between economic, environmental, and social dimensions of the TBL [67], integrating the three dimensions in tandem [4]. The observations of this research aimed to explain how these sustainability-oriented hybrid organisations differentiate from traditional social and environmental enterprises. Therefore, this study provided some insights into how B Corps impact SD at the interception of the TBL, adding on former discussions of hybrids with similar motivations [4,22,62].

This paper explores four categories of SD that meet at the interception of the TBL. The first category, which focuses on considering future generations, is related to topics such as net positive and regenerative sustainability [61]. This category focuses on practices

that protect and reinforce ecological and living systems by restoring, reconciling, and regenerating ecosystems and the environment, centred on the people who inhabit and manipulate it [68]. Observations in this research extend former discussions on the role of hybrid organisations and how they create relationships with different stakeholders [69], aligning with the natural cycles of social-ecological systems [62].

A second category relates to aspects of human development, including activities such as promoting human agency, social cohesion, or capacity building [22]. This issue is well-aligned with the capability approach [70,71], as suggested by Holden [72], focusing on promoting human capabilities, extending to what people are capable of being and doing. This spectrum is associated with transformative capacities, highlighting that a connection between human action and nature is necessary to sustain life [64].

The category of socio-political engagement is very close to B Corps' approach to human development, linked to social justice and political agency issues of SD. In line with Holden [72], this study extends this category, highlighting B Corps' intention to promote biodiversity stewardship, raising 'low voices' from invisible actors in society, including animals and nature. This category also underlines B Corps' intentions to alter local legislations, which may impact people's consuming choices.

The fourth category highlights that B Corps concentrate on promoting new mindsets, behaviours, and lifestyles to impact consumption and production patterns. These two latter categories are the least discussed by Hestad et al. [4]; thus, this study extends the overarching understanding of sustainability-oriented hybrid organisations' impact on SD at the intersection of the TBL.

One of the fresh insights that this research proposes is identifying and linking B Corps' focus on SD and how these categories are well-suited to accelerate sustainability transitions [73] in socio-technical regimes such as consumption, food, transport, or housing [65]. By impacting the four categories of the TBL simultaneously, more sustainable modes of production and consumption can emerge. However, some deviations may occur, since not all activities contribute to SD at the same time.

This study suggests that an organisations' business model plays a role. To illustrate, Indeleble Social focuses on social issues by promoting educative experiences centred on enhancing human skills. Other dimensions of the TBL can be addressed by developing activities that involve rural communities on issues of environmental interest that lead to socio-environmental cohesion in the long term. A similar example can be mentioned with Terramarte, who promotes novel lifestyles and environmental habits with their market offer of ecological bags. Similarly, the enterprise can address other TBL dimensions as long as these behavioural purposes can be intertwined with social and environmental targets. To do so, the firm engages vulnerable populations in the manufacturing process of their products, utilising natural materials produced by local suppliers. Therefore, the business model may dictate the extent to which an enterprise addresses entirely the TBL.

Another deviation may occur in B Corps' approach to SD. Although the 2030 Agenda focuses on a transition to a low carbon economy, some B Corps still adopt a net-zero sustainability approach, based on the idea of 'less bad', understanding sustainability as a concept that cannot always be achieved holistically. Multiple examples of B Corps falling into this category can be observed on their website. However, some of these commitments have an implementation date of 2030, which is when the SDG agenda will pass under global scrutiny.

Finally, it must be highlighted that the categories of SD explored in this research are transformative in essence; thus, business activities that facilitate their implementation could be better described by means of social innovations. It is recommended to look at former studies that dig into this relationship [9,74,75].

The following subsection discusses how such an approach to SD by B Corps may influence social structures.

5.2. Impacting Sustainable Development: Lessons from the Structuration Theory

The empirical observations underscore the interdependent role of agency and structure to impact SD. The research supports Giddens' ST by providing new insights on the role of agency in the transition towards a more sustainable society. Looking through the lens of ST, B Corps relies on relevant aspects of signification, domination, and legitimation that explain their impact on SD. These elements allowed us to analyse B Corps' communicative action, means of sanction, and use of facilities to impact SD.

First, signification is a central element for B Corps to impact SD. This element of the structure, which is explicit and direct, allow organisations a proactive and personalised interaction with the actors of the social system. B Corps fabricate discourses to directly communicate with actors with a shared understanding of SD, giving significance to their actions. By using narratives and symbolic schemas of social action, B Corps aim to show the 'right way' to reach solutions (practices, products, ideas, solutions) and manifest a critical attitude on the functioning of the economic system without denying its relevance. B Corps do not embody a struggle against capitalism; on the contrary, they advocate for its reconstruction by promoting SD. These findings are aligned with sustainability transition studies that reflect the power of narratives to drive social change by persuading and influencing social actors [73]. These results also reflect that to reach further impacts, hybrids should build common worldviews on SD [76].

However, legitimation also has a role to play for B Corps to impact SD. In contrast to signification, legitimation is more subtle and implicit. It is based on attitudes and sanction mechanisms that may confront value systems and contradict basic human behaviours. Guided by moral norms and standards, B Corps seek to uphold inclusive economic relations, thus allowing only a limited number of actors to interact with these enterprises. Following norms and moral standards makes the legitimisation mechanism more hostile than cooperative, which could generate an adverse response. To illustrate, some farmers and ex-combatants stated that organic practices generate very slow and limited income, putting them at an economic disadvantage compared to farmers using traditional practices (case Siembra Viva). Somehow, the impact of SD becomes a limited choice for those who can afford it (e.g., customers capable of paying higher prizes). Likewise, B Corps legitimation is aligned with the concept of 'collaborative governance', as they are supported by multi-stakeholder standards, such as the GRI or the UN Global Compact [77].

Finally, domination was analysed to interpret B Corps' impact on SD. Authoritative resources are outstanding, because the companies favour practices emanating from collaborations and alliances with more powerful and resourceful actors. This study reinforces the findings of Sarason et al. [49], making explicit that each society has different dominant structures; thus, the elements of the structure can vary depending on the context. Resources may thus differ according to the organisations' size or financial capacities. To illustrate, some large Colombian B Corps that were not part of this study — such as Alquería, Juan Valdez, or Crepes & Waffles — have greater allocative resources to achieve impacts on SD compared to the small companies evaluated in this article. Moreover, regardless of their size, all B Corps manifest comparable signification and legitimation dynamics, following analogous discourses and narratives, as well as norms and moral standards.

One of the central considerations derived from using ST in this study was identifying how B Corps, using their agentic capabilities, impact SD through their interactions with social structures. Figure 4 shows that the elements of the structure range from direct layers of interaction with individuals (e.g., customers, employees) to an interplay with more influential and compelling actors (e.g., the UN, governments). Signification seeks to influence social structures through direct and personalised communicative interactions, building upon shared meanings and actions that generate coordinated and harmonised communicative responses in individuals (Individual level). On the contrary, domination result from the use of authoritative resources, in which interactions with more resourceful and influential actors allows agents to exert power (Collective level). Finally, legitimation (Intermediate level), occurs as a process of constructive interaction on norms and moral

standards adopted by B Corps and their alignment with external actors, which seek to resonate with cognitive and meaning-making structures (through collaborative governance) with individuals.

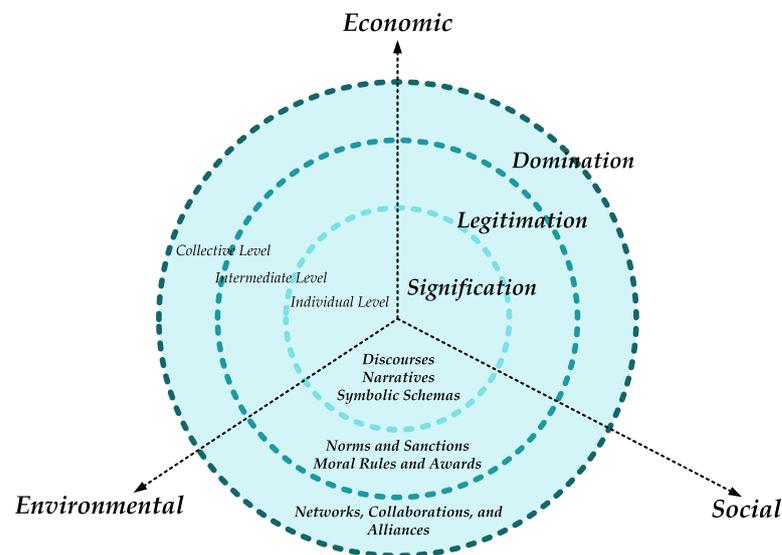


Figure 4. Impacting Sustainable Development: Three layers of Social Structures.

This study suggests that organisations can focus on different elements of the structure to persuade actors in society and impact SD. First, to impact signification structures of SD, discourses and narratives and symbolic schemas must be reproduced. Organisations may impact signification by promoting shared cognitive structures and worldviews, looking at SD as the provision of a solution to social challenges and as a method to reconfigure capitalist practices. Second, to legitimise SD, organisations should be built upon norms and moral standards of universal shared values of sustainability. Focusing on these aspects will allow the delimitation of sanction mechanisms and the recreation of rewards and punishment behaviours between actors in society, influencing and persuading them. And third, domination follows to the extent that organisations utilise authoritative resources that connect more resourceful and powerful actors in society. Impact on SD follows as these more powerful actors serve as backers of these organisations' choices.

6. Conclusions

Looking at the particular context of a developing country in Latin America, Colombia, this paper aimed to explore how and to what extent B Corps impact SD and how these organisations influence social structures to achieve these impacts. To respond to the first research question, this study explored four categories of SD that sustainability-oriented hybrid organisations develop through their business models: considering future generations; enhancing human development; encouraging new mindsets, behaviours, and lifestyles; and promoting socio-political engagement. To evaluate the second research question, the paper has explored the influence of B Corps' social structures in the structuration process to impact SD, revealing the role of the three structuration elements: signification, legitimation, and domination. The iterative process of duality between agency and structure is depicted through B Corps' continuous interactions, as they perform actions and develop their intentions through business models that focus on the economic, environmental, and social dimensions of SD.

Using ST was useful in this research because this approach permitted an understanding of B Corps' intentions and reflexivity, their perception of the world and its fractures, and the scope of their effort in which they consecrate their agentic capabilities. Particularly, the findings revealed how B Corps pursue sustainable modes of production and consumption. The paper provides examples of the integration of TBL issues, which makes hybrid

organisations more likely to contribute to sustainable transitions than traditional hybrids and other firms focused on shareholder supremacy.

This study suggests that adopting particular practices of SD can help practitioners to achieve long-term sustainable impacts. Following examples such as those provided in this research may be inspirational. However, this study does not ignore the fact that following these practices can lead to business leader tensions, paradoxes, and ambiguities. If future practitioners wish to approach SD from a transformative perspective, the four categories presented in this study can be a starting point. It is important to encourage organisations to critically revise their practices and reflect on how they contribute to SD. It is also crucial for policy makers to consider the importance of enhancing the development of hybrid organisations and other firms with transformative purposes to support and promote good practices for the benefit of society as a whole.

While the article provides foundations for future research, it does have limitations that cannot be ignored. First, the B Corps explored in this study belong to a limited number of sectors (education and environmental consulting, transport, food, and manufacturing); thus, sectors leading socio-technological transitions require additional observations (e.g., energy, health, or housing). Future studies could focus on this issue, exploring how actors such as B Corps and other hybrids contribute to SD and accelerate transitions. Second, limitations in understanding domination were also present during this research. This is because the firms covered in this study were mostly small and medium-sized, usually having more limited allocative resources. Future studies could fill this gap by focusing on large enterprises and how they impact SD through allocative resources. Third, despite the belief that focusing on SD has positive transformations in society, there are still issues that are not yet fully covered relating to the negative impacts of hybrid organisations following such endeavours. Scholars are encouraged to explore how B Corps generate unintended negative effects through a TBL approach to SD by not addressing the root causes of problems, only their mitigation or amelioration.

Researchers could use our exploratory findings to study how SD that meet at the intersection of the TBL hinder or facilitate sustainability transitions and how hybrid organisations accelerate such a process. Dimensions and sub-dimensions of the four categories of SD in hybrid organisations should be covered in order to clarify the depth of this phenomenon.

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