

The factors influencing organisational responsiveness for sustainable projects

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Richard Hughes and Aaron Bradley Baker

School of Business and Law, Edith Cowan University, Perth, Australia

253

Abstract

Purpose – This study investigates how organisations respond to sustainability when it becomes a central strategic priority, particularly through project environments. The research seeks to understand the factors influencing organisational responsiveness to sustainability imperatives in projects, addressing a key gap in sustainable project management literature.

Design/methodology/approach – The study employed a thematic meta-synthesis of qualitative case studies from multiple countries and different economic sectors. Using grounded theory, data were coded to identify first-order concepts, second-order themes and aggregate dimensions, culminating in the development of a conceptual model of dynamic adaptation.

Findings – The analysis revealed three interrelated dimensions that shape organisational responsiveness: strategic governance for sustainability, adaptability to internal and external change and operational proficiencies in data and technology. Together, these dimensions enable dynamic adaptation, illustrating how governance continuity, structural flexibility and evidence-based decision-making contribute to embedding sustainability in projects over time.

Research limitations/implications – The study relies on secondary data, with limited insight into the context-specific dynamics of individual projects. Future research should test the conceptual model through longitudinal and empirical studies using primary data.

Practical implications – Organisations, particularly in public and not-for-profit sectors, can use the model to assess and enhance their strategic responsiveness to sustainability. Investment in governance mechanisms, adaptive capacity and analytical proficiencies is critical for project success.

Social implications – Improved responsiveness in organisational projects has the potential to accelerate sustainable development goal achievement, particularly in sectors or regions facing sustainability inertia.

Originality/value – The paper offers a novel conceptual model that integrates strategic management and project studies to explain how organisations dynamically adapt to sustainability imperatives through projects.

Keywords Sustainable development goals, Organisational responsiveness, Strategic governance for sustainability, Dynamic adaptation, Project studies

Paper type Research article

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1. Introduction

Organisations across the world are under growing pressure to respond to complex environmental, social and economic (ESG) challenges. These pressures are not abstract. They reflect the accelerating consequences of climate change, rising stakeholder expectations, post-pandemic recovery and the global commitment to meet the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030. Projects have become a primary mechanism through which organisations attempt to navigate these challenges. As temporary endeavours, projects deliver unique outcomes that organisations use to translate strategic sustainability commitments into practice. Lately, sustainable project management (SPM) has emerged as an important area within project studies (Sabini *et al.*, 2019). SPM brings attention to how project outcomes can be aligned with the SDGs so that impacts extend beyond immediate deliverables and create lasting organisational and societal value (Sankaran



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et al., 2020; Zwikael and Huemann, 2023). The shift toward sustainable projects is increasingly mediated by intelligent governance, a paradigm that moves beyond static oversight to embrace data-driven decision-making and digital transformation as primary enablers of effectiveness (Alshibani *et al.*, 2026). Recent research suggests that digital transformation acts as a catalyst for achieving the SDGs by synchronising technological innovation with ESG accountability (Kumar and Shah, 2025). In this landscape, projects are no longer merely *temporary endeavours* but act as dynamic, technology-enabled mechanisms for the real-time coordination and monitoring of environmental and social impacts (Dai *et al.*, 2025). This intelligent approach allows organisations to develop real-time responsiveness, utilise online integration to enhance decision-making capacity and maintain strategic fit between reporting capabilities and stakeholder expectations (Cao *et al.*, 2025).

Despite increasing interest in SPM and intelligent governance, organisational responsiveness to sustainability remains underexplored (Chofreh *et al.*, 2019). Many organisations continue to struggle with integrating sustainability into the way projects are planned, governed, resourced and delivered. This struggle has practical consequences, including missed opportunities to embed environmental and social priorities in decision-making and inconsistent follow-through on strategic sustainability ambitions (Barrutia *et al.*, 2022; Sousa and Meireles, 2023).

The challenges we outline also point to a deeper issue. While organisations often articulate sustainability as a strategic priority, few possess a cohesive system that allows them to respond effectively when sustainability demands change and become more central to business operations. Responding to sustainability is not only a matter of technical competence. It requires the ability to adapt, to sense emerging shifts, to mobilise capabilities across functions and to learn through iterative cycles of project activity. In a period of rapid technological change and shifting economic conditions, this responsiveness is becoming essential.

Our research question asked: *“In projects undertaken by organisations, what factors influence responsiveness when sustainability is a key imperative?”* To help answer this, we integrated insights from strategic management and project studies to propose a conceptual model of organisational responsiveness to sustainability. Drawing on a global thematic meta-synthesis (TMS), we identify three interrelated dimensions that support responsiveness in SPM environments: strategic governance, adaptability and proficiencies. In addition to advancing theory, our study provides a diagnostic framework that practitioners and policymakers can use to assess and strengthen organisational responsiveness. Further, the global and cross-sectoral scope of our data (covering public, private and not-for-profit settings) also supports the broad applicability of our model. Our proposed framework advances beyond prior governance models by treating governance as a dynamic, technology-enabled mechanism for coordination rather than a static hierarchy (Tomor *et al.*, 2019). Unlike traditional models that focus on structural compliance, our model integrates intelligent governance principles from Dai *et al.* (2025), illustrating how real-time data flows and feedback-based optimisation directly influence project-based sustainability performance. This approach uniquely addresses the asymmetries in scientific communication and institutional inertia that frequently hinder sustainability transitions in both developed and emerging economies.

Through these contributions, we address a critical gap in the SPM literature by offering a structured explanation of how organisations can more effectively embed sustainability in their projects and respond to evolving sustainability imperatives. This research provides practical value for organisational leaders, project managers, sustainability officers and policymakers who are responsible for translating sustainability commitments into project-based action. The model offers these stakeholders a diagnostic lens to assess organisational responsiveness and identify where governance, adaptability and analytical capabilities require strengthening.

Our paper is structured as follows: [Section 2](#) reviews the theoretical background on organisational responsiveness and sustainable projects; [Section 3](#) details the research design

and meta-synthesis procedure; [Section 4](#) presents and discusses the findings and [Sections 5](#) and [6](#) conclude with implications and future research directions.

2. Background

2.1 Organisations and projects

Projects enable organisations to realise strategic objectives by creating new products, services or processes. Defined as temporary initiatives in a unique context undertaken to create value ([Project Management Institute, 2025](#)), projects provide structured mechanisms for purposeful change and innovation ([Zwikael and Smyrk, 2019](#)). Unlike routine operations, projects operate within clear constraints of time, scope and resources to bring cross-functional teams together to implement transformation efficiently and responsively ([Project Management Institute, 2025](#)). When projects align with organisational strategy and external expectations, they become mechanisms for adapting to technological, environmental and social demands to advance genuinely sustainable outcomes ([Keshavarzian and Silvius, 2022](#)). In short, projects serve as practical instruments through which organisations can operationalise many sustainability commitments.

2.2 Organisational responsiveness

Organisational responsiveness refers to an organisation's capability to adapt structures, processes and decision systems to dynamic environments ([Küpers, 2011](#)). This capability includes both reactive adjustment to external pressures and proactive anticipation of sustainability opportunities ([Baum and Dahlin, 2007](#)). Within project settings, responsiveness manifests through governance, learning and performance-alignment mechanisms that embed sustainability imperatives across lifecycles ([Project Management Institute, 2025](#)). Projects therefore become vehicles for translating strategic intent into adaptive action ([Wang et al., 2024](#)). Two theoretical perspectives can help explain responsiveness.

First, stakeholder theory highlights why organisations must respond. Following [Freeman \(1984\)](#), the theory holds that long-term success depends on creating value for a range of stakeholders rather than just shareholders ([Laplume et al., 2008](#)). Later work extended this logic beyond corporations to public and not-for-profit sectors ([Phillips et al., 2007](#)), showing how governments and civil-society organisations must also respond to stakeholder demands for more sustainable and equitable practices ([Beske et al., 2020](#); [Yunus et al., 2020](#)).

Second, dynamic-capabilities theory explains how organisations develop responsiveness. This theory emphasises the ability to integrate, build and reconfigure internal and external competencies to address rapidly changing environments ([Teece et al., 1997](#)). Traditionally applied to competitive advantage, the theory is now being reframed around sustainability imperatives, where adaptation involves balancing environmental and social objectives rather than market share ([Heubeck, 2023](#)). Recent studies show that large organisations institutionalise dynamic learning systems, while smaller enterprises rely more on absorptive capacity and agile decision processes ([Ngereja et al., 2024](#)).

Organisational responsiveness is increasingly defined by the ability to transition from manual, reactive monitoring to intelligent, data-driven governance ([Dai et al., 2025](#)). This transformation involves a co-evolutionary feedback loop between technical design and institutional context, where technical interoperability and institutional legitimacy mutually reinforce one another ([Alshibani et al., 2026](#)). Intelligent governance is characterised by a multi-layer system architecture, encompassing data sensing, transmission and analysis, that supports autonomous adaptation and system-wide optimisation rather than remaining a static structural attribute ([Dai et al., 2025](#)).

Integrating stakeholder and dynamic-capabilities perspectives, therefore, clarifies both the external pressures and the internal processes that underpin responsiveness. Yet, the

2.3 Sustainable projects

The shift toward SPM introduces temporal and systemic tensions since SDG horizons often extend far beyond project timeframes (Silvius and Schipper, 2014). SPM must balance stakeholder needs with responsible resource use that safeguards future generations (Eskerod and Huemann, 2024; Friedrich, 2021). Previous reviews into SPM have examined why organisations integrate sustainability into project practice and what enables successful implementation (Sabini *et al.*, 2019). However, confusion persists between making project processes sustainable, for example, through ethical procurement or waste reduction, and delivering sustainable outcomes, such as long-term social or environmental benefits (Sabini and Silvius, 2023). Such ambiguities tend to disconnect academic findings from practitioner realities, particularly where cost or schedule pressures dominate decision-making in applied settings (Kiani Mavi *et al.*, 2021). Consequently, practitioners often seek greater clarity on how sustainability imperatives translate into actionable project practices (Sabini and Silvius, 2023). Understanding how organisations use projects as mechanisms of responsiveness to sustainability is essential. Therefore, while sustainability has become a central concern in organisational and project research, the mechanisms by which organisations translate sustainability priorities into responsive project practices remain poorly understood. Stakeholder and dynamic-capabilities theories provide useful but partial insights into this process. The emerging field of SPM thus requires empirical synthesis to explain how projects function as vehicles for organisational responsiveness.

2.4 Sustainability governance in institutionally constrained contexts

While digital governance models often emerge from mature economies, their application in institutionally constrained or developing contexts reveals unique dynamics of responsiveness. In regions such as the Global South (Dados and Connell, 2012), disruptive innovation is required to leapfrog obsolete sociotechnical systems, such as linear economies, toward zero-waste and circular models (Rittl *et al.*, 2025). For example, in emerging markets like Morocco, digitalisation and real-time monitoring have been identified as pivotal determinants of supply chain agility and operational efficiency, helping to overcome infrastructure gaps (Ghoubach and El Amine, 2025). Similarly, the deployment of sustainable information and communication technology infrastructure in new urban developments, such as Nusantara in Indonesia, demonstrates how data-driven governance can enable environmental resilience in previously undeveloped regions. These contexts highlight that the effectiveness of digital transformation is contingent upon governmental environmental commitment and institutional integrity, rather than technological availability alone.

3. Methods

Our study employed a TMS to integrate qualitative evidence from multiple case-based investigations of organisational responsiveness to sustainability. TMS is grounded in an interpretivist-constructivist epistemology and assumes a relativist ontology, recognising that multiple context-dependent realities can coexist (Finfgeld, 2003; Nye *et al.*, 2016). TMS goes beyond quantitative meta-analysis by emphasising the interpretive synthesis of meanings and patterns embedded in qualitative findings (Leary and Walker, 2018). Consistent with best practice for qualitative evidence synthesis, we followed the Enhancing transparency in reporting the synthesis of qualitative research (ENTREQ) framework (Tong *et al.*, 2012), which provides procedural guidance for search transparency, study selection, coding and synthesis. Figure 1 summarises the staged process used to find, identify, screen and analyse the case studies.

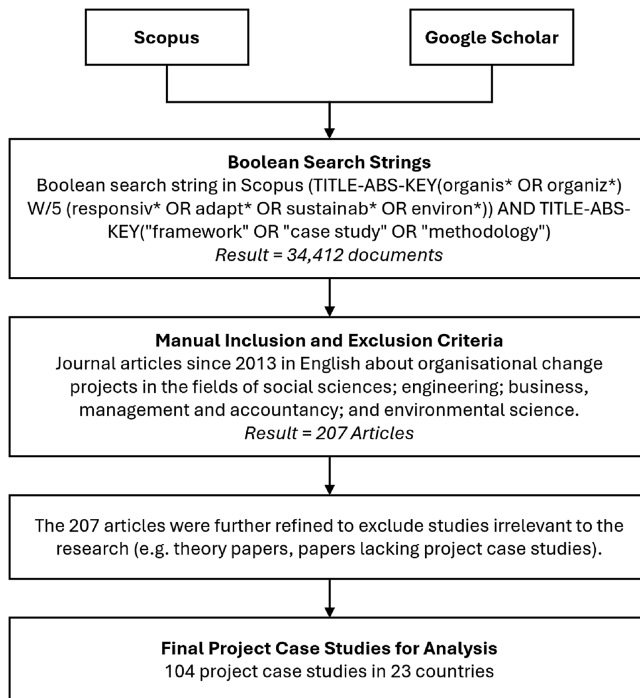


Figure 1. TMS research method

Consistent with the ENTREQ framework, the selection criteria for this synthesis prioritised empirical studies with applied relevance to organisational change. To ensure methodological transparency, certain studies were excluded if they lacked a clear empirical basis or focused solely on technical AI specifications without organisational governance implications. We acknowledge that the qualitative meta-synthesis of 104 cases may be subject to publication bias, and the heterogeneity of the included studies, spanning 16 economic sectors, requires a cautious interpretation of cross-contextual findings.

To identify relevant peer-reviewed literature, we conducted a structured search using the Scopus database of multidisciplinary academic journals. The advanced search function was used to construct a Boolean search string incorporating key terms and proximity operators to enhance conceptual precision and accommodate linguistic variation. The search string identified records in which variations of “organisation” or “organization” appeared within five words of terms such as “responsive,” “adaptive,” “sustainability” or “environmental.” The wildcard character (*) captured different morphological forms of keywords.

As Figure 1 shows, this search returned 34,412 results. These results were then refined using manual filters to include only journal articles published between 2013 and 2024 in English. Further filtering was applied to the initial search results including subject-area filters (social sciences, business, management and accounting, engineering and environmental science) together with the inclusion of recent, peer-reviewed research with applied or empirical relevance to organisational change and sustainability.

To complement Scopus, a parallel search was conducted using Google Scholar. Although Google Scholar lacks the advanced Boolean operators of Scopus, a simplified query was built using quotation marks for phrase matching and OR operators to capture spelling variations. Date-range filters (2013–2024) were applied, and results were manually screened for

relevance. This additional search broadened the evidence base and ensured inclusion of studies that might not have been indexed in Scopus (Martín-Martín *et al.*, 2018; Zhu and Liu, 2020).

Across both databases, we applied a broad conceptualisation of sustainability based on the World Commission on Environment and Development (1987) and the United Nations (2020) SDGs to select our case studies. All retrieved results were combined in an Excel workbook where we manually removed duplicate or irrelevant studies.

Qualitative findings were systematically extracted from each selected paper, including author analyses, contextual descriptions and methodological details. Each record in the data workbook documented the project and organisational context, research methods and participant characteristics, the analytical approach and observations related to organisational responsiveness and sustainability. These extracted materials served as the data corpus for synthesis. All source information was cross-checked against reference lists to ensure traceability. Following Finfgeld (2003), data analysis proceeded through iterative stages consistent with grounded theory (Corbin and Strauss, 2015). Using NVivo 12 software, we conducted open coding to identify first-order concepts from the extracted text, axial coding to group related codes into broader second-order themes and then selective coding to integrate those themes into higher-order dimensions explaining the phenomenon of interest.

We used NVivo to manage coding hierarchies, maintain an audit trail and support reflexive memoing. Analytical memos documented coding decisions, emergent interpretations and reflexive reflections on researcher positionality. Regular cross-checking among the research team promoted consistency and mitigated interpretive bias. Reflexivity was integral throughout the synthesis. The research team kept records about methodological choices, analytical decisions and assumptions about context and meaning.

4. Findings

The final sample for analysis consisted of 104 organisational project case studies covering 23 countries and 16 economic sectors, drawn from 37 peer-reviewed journals (Supplementary material). Case studies were categorised by economic sector including chemicals and advanced materials; collaborative/regional initiatives; community projects; education and training; financial services; government/public sector; healthcare; media and communications; mining and mineral extraction; manufacturing; not-for-profit/NGO; energy; services; technology; transport and logistics and cross-sector.

Our grounded theory coding is illustrated by the extract in Figure 2 where first-order concepts included leadership continuity, adaptive learning and stakeholder pressure; then axial coding captured broader mechanisms such as strategic governance, organisational adaptability and technological proficiency and, finally, selective coding revealed the aggregate dimensions to explain the phenomenon of interest.

By way of example, the following vignette illustrates how our extracted findings were transformed through the coding process. In the Port of Rotterdam case (De Gooyert, 2020), the organisation described two major trends shaping its long-term project decisions: the energy transition and increasing digitisation, both of which required investment in new technologies, cross-sector collaboration and advanced data-sharing capabilities. In open coding, these statements were broken down into first-order concepts such as *data to validate activities*, *technology innovation* and *strategic response to decarbonisation*. Through axial coding, these concepts were grouped into broader themes including *technological competence for sustainability* and *analytical decision support*. During selective coding, these themes contributed to the aggregate dimension we label *proficiencies*, which captures the technological, analytical and learning capabilities that enable organisations to operationalise sustainability within their project environments. This example demonstrates how raw findings were systematically abstracted into higher-level dimensions while maintaining clear traceability to the original material.

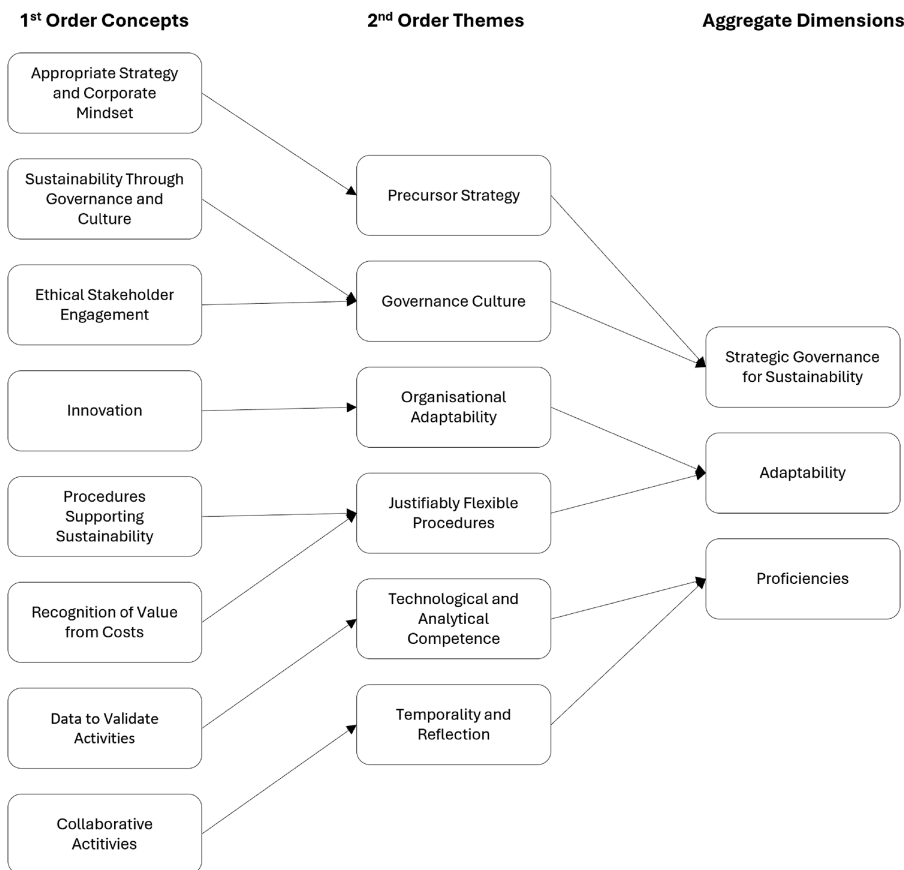


Figure 2. Example of second stage analysis

Through the TMS, three overarching dimensions (strategic governance for sustainability, adaptability and proficiencies) were distilled, with each representing a complementary aspect of how organisations respond to sustainability imperatives through projects.

4.1 Strategic governance for sustainability

Strategic governance for sustainability constituted the institutional backbone of organisational responsiveness. This dimension refers to the leadership behaviours, planning processes and accountability systems that integrate sustainability into enduring organisational routines. Across both public and corporate settings, sustainability initiatives were most effective when governance structures embedded environmental and social objectives in formal strategy rather than treating them as project-specific add-ons.

Values-based leadership, cross-functional coordination and clear alignment between funding and sustainability priorities consistently underpinned successful cases. In several government and infrastructure organisations, for example, long-range planning committees and stakeholder engagement frameworks ensured that sustainability remained visible across electoral and leadership cycles. Comparable effects were evident in financial and manufacturing organisations where project investment criteria explicitly referenced sustainability metrics. These observations align with [Roome and Louche \(2016\)](#) and

[De Gooyert \(2020\)](#), who highlight the power of participatory governance in embedding long-term commitments.

We found that strategic intent alone was insufficient, as some organisations saw their sustainability programs weaken when profitability pressures or leadership changes diverted focus. These cases illustrate the warning in [Wright and Nyberg \(2017\)](#) that organisational attention drifts without institutional reinforcement. Effective strategic governance, therefore, depends on leadership continuity and cultural embedding. As [Metcalf and Benn \(2013\)](#) observe, leaders who model ethical and transformational behaviour sustain momentum even amid competing priorities. Our synthesis shows that when governance mechanisms articulate a shared vision, codify sustainability objectives in decision protocols and maintain transparency through reporting structures, organisations are more capable of sustaining environmental and social outcomes over time. Thus, strategic governance for sustainability operates as the overarching framework through which organisations translate sustainability ambitions into consistent project-level action.

4.2 Adaptability

The second dimension, adaptability, reflects an organisation's capacity to realign strategies and structures in response to external and internal pressures. Adaptability was evident in projects that balanced long-term sustainability goals with short-term operational constraints through iterative learning and flexible resource allocation. Responsive organisations maintained readiness to adjust project designs, stakeholder approaches and technology choices as contexts evolved. It was evident that the multinational organisations demonstrated adaptability through flexible project cycles that allowed environmental targets to be recalibrated as regulations or markets changed. Similarly, not-for-profit and community organisations developed context-specific responses to climate impacts despite resource limitations. These patterns support the [Cyert and March \(1963\)](#) conception of adaptation as a behavioural process shaped by feedback and bounded rationality, and they resonate with [Baum and Dahlin \(2007\)](#), who emphasise learning from performance variance.

Nevertheless, we saw that adaptability was uneven. Some government organisations retained rigid operating approaches that constrained timely responses to emerging environmental risks, revealing how bureaucratic inertia undermines sustainability performance. Conversely, projects adopting iterative reflection and cross-functional reviews demonstrated higher adaptive capacity, enabling continuous improvement of sustainability practices. Our analysis suggests that adaptability is reinforced by two conditions: (1) a learning orientation supported by open communication and feedback and (2) institutional tolerance for experimentation that legitimises incremental change. Thus, organisational adaptability represents a deliberate and ongoing effort to align governance, culture and process flexibility with evolving sustainability demands.

4.3 Proficiencies

The third dimension, technological and analytical proficiencies, arose from the competencies that operationalise sustainability intent. These proficiencies encompass the ability to collect, interpret and act on data concerning environmental impacts, resource use and performance trends. Organisations with mature analytical systems were better equipped to translate sustainability objectives into measurable targets and evidence-based decisions. Energy and service-sector organisations that integrated carbon-pricing models, climate-risk analytics or digital dashboards into project evaluation showed marked improvements in responsiveness. Their data infrastructures supported forecasting, scenario analysis and transparent performance tracking. Such practices are consistent with [Jansen et al. \(2006\)](#) and [Zwikaël and Smyrk \(2019\)](#), who link dynamic adaptation to knowledge integration and alignment with measurable benefits. Conversely, projects reliant on ad hoc tools lacked the capacity to anticipate environmental shocks or demonstrate accountability to stakeholders.

Proficiency also extended beyond technology to organisational learning. Organisations that institutionalised post-project reviews and training programs and developed communities of practice demonstrated stronger collective competence. These mechanisms supported continuous recalibration of sustainability metrics and knowledge diffusion across projects. Where such learning systems were absent, responsiveness was eroded whenever external drivers including regulatory or donor pressure subsided. Thus, proficiencies act as the enabling infrastructure of responsiveness and provide the analytical, technological and learning capabilities that convert strategic commitment into sustained performance.

4.4 Integrative perspective

Taken together, the three dimensions represent a system of dynamic adaptation. Strategic governance supplies the institutional scaffolding and leadership continuity necessary to maintain direction; adaptability provides behavioural agility and feedback-driven change; and proficiencies furnish the technical and cognitive resources to make sustainability actionable. Their interaction forms a reinforcing cycle: governance sets priorities, adaptability tests and refines them and proficiencies capture learning that informs subsequent governance decisions.

This synthesis demonstrates that organisational responsiveness to sustainability is not a single capability but an integrated configuration of governance, behaviour and knowledge systems. Projects serve as both the testing ground and the transmission mechanism for these capabilities, revealing how enduring sustainability outcomes depend on the continuous alignment of purpose, flexibility and expertise.

5. Discussion

Although we categorised projects across 16 economic sectors, it was the organisations themselves and how they governed and managed their projects that proved most influential. Project studies often emphasise the temporary organisation, yet our evidence shows that permanent funding organisations shape the conditions under which project responsiveness occurs. Our work extends strategic management concepts of dynamic adaptation into the realm of organisational projects. In our cases, feedback loops and continuous learning supported long-term adjustment to changing environmental conditions. These patterns align with [Stieglitz et al. \(2016\)](#), drawing on [Eisenhardt and Tabrizi \(1995\)](#) and [Nadkarni and Narayanan \(2007\)](#), who argue that responses to environmental dynamism depend on the specific nature of external change. They also resonate with [Musah \(2024\)](#), who shows that institutional inefficiencies hinder SDG progress at the national level, a constraint we also observed in organisations with outdated governance arrangements. Project environments, therefore, represent an additional site in which organisational dynamism unfolds.

Recent literature reinforces our connections between governance adaptability and sustainable performance. [Musah \(2024\)](#) demonstrates how weak institutional arrangements constrain sustainability outcomes, a pattern mirrored in our cases. Likewise, [Heubeck \(2023\)](#) and [Ngereja et al. \(2024\)](#) highlight dynamic and absorptive capabilities as central to organisational responsiveness. Our data show these mechanisms embedded within strategic governance, adaptability and proficiencies.

The *proficiencies* dimension functions as the enabling infrastructure for responsiveness, converting strategic intent into sustained performance through analytical and technological capabilities. This aligns with the concept of digital ESG mapped by [Kumar and Shah \(2025\)](#), where emerging technologies like blockchain and AI-driven analytics reduce greenwashing by providing immutable, real-time evidence of sustainability outcomes. Conceptually, the causal mechanism driving this responsiveness appears to be knowledge integration – a mechanism reported in [Dai et al. \(2025\)](#), where an organisation with high-fidelity sensor networks and predictive analytics could anticipate failures and identify significant audit risk factors before they impacted project success. In this type of system, data transforms from an operational

output to a strategic asset, facilitating coordination across the defence lines of enterprise risk management (ERM).

Incorporating our three perspectives strengthens the contemporary relevance of our framework and shows how project environments reflect broader adaptive processes now recognised as essential for sustainability transitions. Further, our findings extend existing work that links dynamic adaptation mechanisms to sustainability. Previous research highlights the importance of leadership commitment (Quinn and Dalton, 2009), policy frameworks (Gunningham and Sinclair, 1999), interorganisational collaboration (Prentice *et al.*, 2019), capacity building (Bhagavathula *et al.*, 2021) and technological innovation (Leach *et al.*, 2012). Our contribution is to demonstrate these enablers within sustainable organisational projects rather than just at the policy or organisational system levels.

From an applied standpoint, we also identified several barriers that constrain organisational responsiveness. These included budget pressures, limited resources, bureaucratic inertia and the difficulty of reconciling competing organisational priorities. Together, these findings extend earlier work by Bansal *et al.* (2015), Kirsop-Taylor (2022) and Halseth and Ryser (2016). We also reinforce the role of leadership and strategic governance in enabling organisational change (Van Dam *et al.*, 2008; Burnes *et al.*, 2018), particularly in sustainability contexts (Metcalf and Benn, 2013). Servant and transformational leadership approaches (Van Dierendonck, 2011; Peterlin *et al.*, 2015; Chen and Yan, 2022) help embed ethical and future-focused goals into strategy (Díaz Nieto *et al.*, 2023). In sustainable organisational projects, leaders who emphasise empowerment, team development and vision create conditions that support sustained engagement. Our findings suggest that both servant and transformational approaches can help balance environmental and social objectives with traditional business aims, consistent with Marshall *et al.* (2017).

We also observed that power dynamics shaped the implementation of strategic governance for sustainability, in line with Díaz Nieto *et al.* (2023). Leaders often had to navigate institutional structures and competing stakeholder demands (Marshall *et al.*, 2017). Leadership continuity emerged as especially important. As shown in Sutherland and Smith (2013), sudden changes in leadership can unsettle long-term sustainability efforts unless sustainability is deeply embedded in organisational culture. We show that this applies equally to organisational projects. Strategic governance helps maintain long-term priorities, supports collaboration across sectors and encourages adaptive responses to external pressures. Leaders who engage diverse stakeholders and support flexible strategies are more successful in achieving durable sustainability outcomes (Bae and Grant, 2018; Díaz Nieto *et al.*, 2023). Succession planning with an ethical orientation further strengthens these efforts (Rothwell, 2016).

Time also proved significant. Long-term commitments supported the embedding of governance reforms, while ongoing monitoring helped organisations refine their processes in response to changing conditions. Even in shorter timeframes, adaptability was essential, particularly in cases involving education and global scaling. In other cases, time acted more as a strategic context than a longitudinal factor. Overall, time shaped leadership, sustainability and organisational adaptation in multiple ways across the cases.

5.1 Conceptual model

To help answer our research question, we incorporated our findings about the aggregate dimensions into a conceptual model (Figure 3) to illustrate five propositions. We acknowledge that, as a conceptual model, such propositions are exploratory and will require empirical validation. Figure 3 summarises the relationship between the propositions.

Strategic governance for sustainability forms the institutional foundation of the model (Proposition 1). Our findings suggest that this governance is most effective when it provides the institutional scaffolding to ensure continuity across leadership transitions (Proposition 2). Furthermore, responsiveness is significantly enhanced when organisations move beyond ad

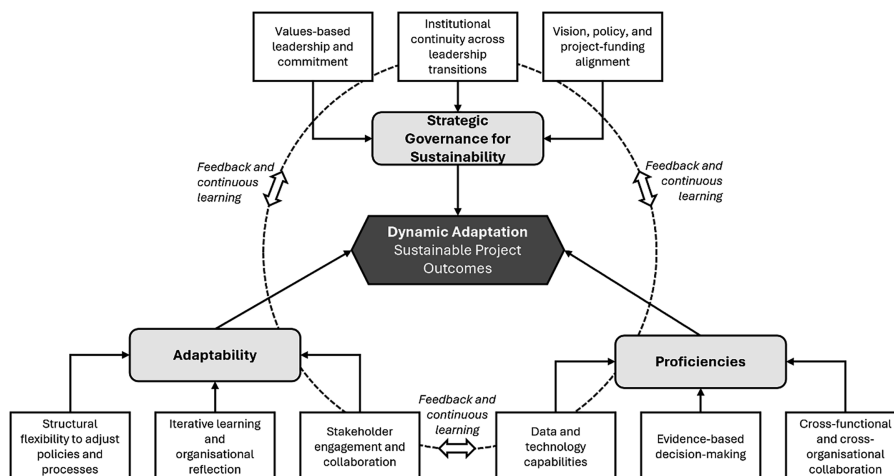


Figure 3. Conceptual model for organisational responsiveness to sustainability using projects

hoc efforts to integrate sustainability into core strategies, aligning it with formal planning processes and performance indicators (Proposition 3). Adaptability represents the capacity for strategic and operational flexibility (Proposition 4). This dimension allows organisations to modify their structures and practices in real-time to meet shifting regulatory, environmental and societal demands. Finally, proficiencies encompass the technological and analytical capabilities that operationalise sustainability intent. A critical component of this execution is the institutionalisation of cross-functional and cross-organisational collaboration, which ensures that diverse stakeholder feedback is integrated into project innovation and accountability (Proposition 5). The interaction of these three dimensions supports a reinforcing cycle of dynamic adaptation.

5.2 Mechanism enhancement

Dynamic adaptation, as described by [Jansen et al. \(2006\)](#), explains how organisations adjust to changing conditions by integrating existing knowledge and acquiring new knowledge. These processes rely on coordination mechanisms and are shaped by regulation, uncertainty and competitive pressure. Our findings show that sustainability projects benefit when organisations embed flexibility, learning and responsiveness into their governance systems. Formalising sustainability in decision-making, strengthening leadership continuity and institutionalising feedback mechanisms all support adaptive capacity. Technological and analytical capabilities further enhance responsiveness by enabling data-driven insight, performance monitoring, and scenario analysis.

Together, these elements allow organisations to engage in continuous learning and real-time decision-making aligned with long-term sustainability goals. Our three dimensions extend existing dynamic adaptation frameworks by shifting attention from static organisational structures to flexible, project-based responses. Alignment with recent work by [Musah \(2024\)](#), [Heubeck \(2023\)](#) and [Ngereja et al. \(2024\)](#) suggests that project-based adaptation reflects broader institutional responsiveness now recognised in sustainability research.

Several challenges remain. Bureaucratic inertia, short-term pressures and outdated internal processes can limit agility. Measuring adaptive mechanisms and linking project-level outcomes to broader societal impacts remains difficult without longitudinal data. Despite these challenges, organisations that tailor adaptation frameworks to their governance arrangements and capabilities are more likely to maintain responsiveness to environmental and social demands.

5.3 Answering the research question

To answer how organisations respond to sustainability imperatives, our model shows that responsiveness is not a single capability but a reinforcing cycle. Strategic governance provides the necessary institutional scaffolding, while adaptability ensures behavioural agility and proficiencies supply the technical resources required to make sustainability actionable. In projects, these factors influence responsiveness by converting strategic intent into real-time, evidence-based performance.

5.4 Research implications

This study advances existing theories of project governance toward an integrated model where digital transformation acts as a primary enabler of governance effectiveness. Our findings imply a conceptual shift in how researchers define governance within project-based environments. Rather than treating it as a static structural attribute or hierarchy, we establish governance as a dynamic, technology-enabled mechanism for real-time coordination. In doing so, our research contributes to the emerging digital ESG literature by demonstrating how the dimension of *proficiencies* functions as the enabling infrastructure for responsiveness. The model suggests that the causal mechanism driving organisational responsiveness is knowledge integration, wherein high-fidelity sensor networks and predictive analytics convert operational data into a strategic asset. This mechanism facilitates coordination across the lines of defence in ERM, allowing organisations to maintain a strategic fit between reporting capabilities and evolving stakeholder expectations. By integrating insights from strategic management and project studies, our study fills a critical gap, showing how projects function as the primary site for dynamic adaptation to global sustainability imperatives.

5.5 Practical implications

For practitioners, our findings suggest a phased approach to implementing intelligent governance. Managers should prioritise investment in foundational drivers of trust, such as data interoperability, privacy safeguards and digital literacy, before scaling to more complex solutions. Operationalising this framework requires governance-by-design, where sustainability is treated as an intrinsic principle evaluated through real-time dashboards rather than an afterthought. Additionally, internal audit functions should transition from simple compliance to strategic partnerships, utilising technology-enabled assurance to monitor emerging ESG pressures.

6. Conclusion

As the 2030 deadline for the SDGs approaches, the gap between strategic sustainability intent and project-level execution has become a critical bottleneck for global progress. Our study addresses this divide by synthesising evidence from global case studies across different economic sectors and offering a novel conceptual framework for dynamic adaptation. Our findings indicate that organisational responsiveness is not a static trait but a reinforcing cycle driven by three dimensions: strategic governance, adaptability and proficiencies. We conclude that the future of sustainable projects lies in a transition away from traditional, compliance-heavy oversight toward a paradigm of intelligent governance. By integrating digital ESG and high-fidelity sensor networks, organisations can transform sustainability data from a mere operational output into a strategic asset, enabling real-time coordination and evidence-based decision-making.

Ultimately, this research suggests that bridging the strategic gap requires more than technical competence; it demands institutional scaffolding that ensures continuity across leadership transitions and a culture of behavioural agility that legitimises experimentation. By providing a diagnostic lens to assess these capabilities, we offer a roadmap for practitioners

and policymakers to move beyond business as usual. In an era of rapid technological change and shifting environmental demands, the ability to dynamically adapt through projects is no longer an optional proficiency; it is the essential mechanism for ensuring that organisational actions contribute to lasting societal and environmental value.

7. Limitations and future research directions

While our study provides a robust diagnostic framework, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the TMS relies on secondary data, meaning the nuanced relationships between organisations and their projects were inferred from existing case studies. Second, the synthesis may be subject to publication bias, and the heterogeneity of the cases across various economic sectors requires a cautious interpretation of cross-contextual findings. Finally, because the study is cross-sectional, it cannot fully capture how factors might change as technologies like AI evolve and achieve mass adoption.

To address the identified limitations, several future research directions are proposed to advance the current understanding of organisational responsiveness within project environments. Future investigations should prioritise longitudinal evaluations to track the substantive impact of digital ESG on actual outcomes, such as carbon emission reduction and social inequality, rather than relying on descriptive governance summaries. There is also a critical need to test the proposed framework in institutionally constrained or developing contexts, particularly within Africa and South Asia, to discern how digital governance might bridge structural divides in the Global South. Furthermore, researchers should investigate the black box problem inherent in algorithmic governance to ensure that automated and AI-driven decision-making remains accountable and transparent within organisational systems. Methodological expansion is also necessary, as future research could employ primary data collection such as surveys or field experiments to empirically validate the five propositions of the conceptual model across diverse geopolitical settings. Finally, an opportunity exists to develop integrated assessment models capable of capturing the complex, technology-enabled interactions between water, energy and food systems in the digital era.

Supplementary material

The supplementary material for this article can be found online: <https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.31796965>

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Corresponding author

Richard Hughes can be contacted at: r.hughes@ecu.edu.au