The Role of Sustainable HRM in Sustainable Development

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Abstract: Achieving sustainability is becoming a primary agenda for many societies throughout the world. However, we are currently witnessing a surprising stagnation in progress toward this goal. Neoliberal values of individualism, privatization and competitive advantage are proving to be hard to breach. Hence, there is a pressing need for change. Through an extensive literature overview, the present paper identifies existing misconceptions and differences in the comprehension of concepts such as sustainable development, corporate social responsibility and the relationship between strategic human resource management (HRM) and sustainable HRM. It describes and acknowledges the hindrances that sustainable HRM faces in practice, with a particular focus on the predominant schema of strategic HRM and the misconception of corporate social responsibility. The aspiration of the paper is to pose a new model of sustainability by implementing sustainable HRM at the center of sustainable development and corporate accountability. The proposed model is intended as a measurement of the levels of sustainable development in which organizations find themselves and report on, and as a more comprehensive model of sustainable HRM, which has the potential to be applied in practice.

Keywords: sustainable development; corporate social responsibility; strategic HRM; sustainable HRM; sustainability reporting; accountability

1. Introduction

The predominant global discussion in recent years has become sustainable development. The unmitigated capitalistic approach to development has revealed its devastating effects on our planet and societies. Hence, sustainable development is becoming the standard toward which all societies must strive. It stands on three pillars: the financial, the social and the environmental. At the outset of academic research on the subject, the environmental dimension received the most attention [1,2], however in past years, the social dimension has emerged as a widely researched area. Within the latter, the key approach in managing people has taken the form of sustainable human resource management (hereafter sustainable HRM) [3–9].

Using a modern approach [7] in which organizations are regarded as complex, multi-level systems, and human resources are not perceived only as a means to the financial bottom line, the purposes of this paper are: firstly, to provide the reader with an extensive literature review of influential authors in the field of sustainable HRM from a critical perspective; secondly to portray the interrelation of strategic HRM (hereafter SHRM) and sustainable HRM; thirdly, to further develop existing concepts and models in an attempt to contribute to the understanding and implementing of sustainable HRM into theory and practice.

The first part of the paper comprises influential definitions and concepts within sustainable development using comparative analysis. The second part focuses thoroughly on proposed definitions, internal concepts and frameworks for the sustainable HRM approach by prominent authors, and examines the relationship between SHRM and sustainable HRM. This is followed by a conclusion that determines the crucial aspects of defining and
implementing sustainable HRM into practice, and proposes a new model for sustainable development in order to conquer the existing mental schema of SHRM that is currently most fitting in the capitalistic mindset of global societies.

2. What Is Meant by Sustainable Development?

Elkington [1] wrote more than two decades ago that “the new agenda will increasingly revolve around values and ethics. Successful companies will be better at identifying, understanding, and responding to the values of those they work with and serve” (p. 150). He understood that organizations must acknowledge the shift occurring from the global consumer to the world citizen, which implies holism instead of materialism, responsibilities before rights, need not greed and “us” instead of “me”.

The first official definition of sustainable development was given by the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) in Brundtland in 1987, known as “Our Common Future”. WCED understood the importance of sustainable development as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” ([2] p. 43). As Ehnert et al. [7] note, this enabled the concept of sustainability to become a part of a global discussion in not only the academic sphere but also “on a broad political and corporate scale” (p. 9). As Jones [10] notes, “put the word ‘sustainable’ into Google today and you will retrieve over 118 million web pages” (p. vii). The crucial point in sustainability is the consideration of the long-term outcomes in three dimensions—environmental, social and economic. Ehnert [11] portrayed a comprehensive analysis of how the concept of sustainability evolved during time. It is clear how the term was at first intertwined fully with economy, and how it gradually progressed to the ecological, societal and finally, the corporate realm. Nevertheless, a clear and united definition still eludes researchers in this field. As Fechete and Nedelcu [12] argue, “for sustainable development, a good measurement process should consider the total performance of the organization” (p. 3). We should acknowledge that, as Connor and Dovers [13] note, sustainability is “a series and hierarchy of challenges to integrate” (p. 216). But the words that seem to capture the essence of sustainable development are written by Tol [14]: “it is everything to everyone” (p. 5). Hence, it must be noted that in the present article, sustainable development is perceived from a moral perspective; it is, as many authors have pointed out, a matter of ethics. As humans, we hold the power to either destroy or create; today, we are walking on the path of destruction and it is our moral duty to everyone and everything to find a new, better path that will start to repair all the damage that we have done and create new ways of life that are sustainable for all.

Such changes in the understanding of our ways of life are not surprising as the scale of technological development enables a growing interconnectedness of global societies. Awareness of the importance of our environment is growing; today, both younger and older generations are becoming more and more vocal about the predicament of global warming and all acts that contribute to it (e.g., CO₂ emissions, shrinking of forests, the rising of sea level, etc.). In Parkin Hughes’s [15] words, “there is a need for intergenerational equity, where the current decision-making time horizon does not undervalue the interests of future generations” (in [4] p. 68). Another crucial element of sustainable development is its social aspect. Although this dimension took a back seat as the environmental aspect received more attention, the social impact is becoming more and more acknowledged in recent years. Littig and Grießler [16] pose a compelling argument that relates to Welford’s [17] understanding of interconnectedness of sustainability and equity. In analyzing the three-pillar model, they state that “in fact, the much-hailed ‘win–win’ constellations of sustainable development often just provide for ecological and economic, but hardly ever for social gains” (p. 4). In their opinion, there is first a deeper issue, namely that of understanding what the core concepts, such as equality and equal importance, mean in reality; a question to which we do not have an answer, and a question that represents a barrier to the implementation of such theories in practice.
Sustainable development has in the last years become a part of the world of business. Several authors argue that organizations worldwide are claiming their commitment to sustainable development, but for the most part it is unclear if their claims reflect their true practices within and outside their organizations, or if they are in fact only a “convenient slogan” as Fleurbaey [18] meticulously notes. As previously stated, the environmental impact has received the most attention, particularly in the business realm; for that reason, today we are witnessing many misunderstandings about what sustainability is. Many organizations and people understand sustainability only through the environmental dimension, meaning that “being sustainable” pertains to acknowledging and taking measures that help protect and save the environment; however, sustainability is broader than just the “green aspect” of development.

Although the social dimension is gaining in importance, there are still many inconsistencies and much disharmony in defining it and implementing it in practice. Jones [19], for instance, sees the social dimension as “a sustainable society” in which he includes “labor practices, including migrant and child labor, risk management, human rights, including the rights of women, minorities and indigenous peoples and decentralized decision-making and regional development” (p. 6). He underlines the ethical base of sustainability, which he inherently relates to equity as crucial for achieving true sustainability. The same argument can be found by Ehnert et al. [7], as they understand it to represent “socially fair, ethical behavior” (p. 9). On this point we come to the crucial part, namely, sustainable HRM. Recently it has been receiving more attention; however, many authors argue that there are still gaps, not only within literature, but also in the relation between theory and practice.

In order to be able to come to any kind of conclusion, it is crucial to acknowledge the challenges that sustainable development per se, and particularly sustainable HRM, are facing. The most pressing challenges are the existing mental schema of SHRM and the current problem of defining corporate social responsibility (hereafter CSR). In this regard, the present paper not only acknowledges the gaps within the literature, but also addresses the misconceptions of existing terms, in order to form a framework for sustainable HRM that would be applicable in reality.

2.1. Sustainability versus CSR

The idea of sustainability is not new. Ehnert et al. [7] note, “sustainability refers to the ideas of ‘reproduction’ and ‘self-sustainment’ in order to ensure a system’s long-term viability or survival” (p. 8), an idea that has been discussed since long before the first official Brundtland definition. In the context of this paper, “sustainability” describes the process of sustainable development of organizations in which the goal is to achieve financial, environmental and social sustainability. The aim for an organization to be able to survive long-term presupposes more or less explicit environmental management; however, more and more organizations are now starting to acknowledge also the social dimension of sustainable development. The crucial part of changing the business strategy relates to HRM [6]. Nevertheless, sustainable HRM has only recently started to receive the amount of both academic and practical attention it needs in order to reach its full (sustainable) potential.

However, before we turn our minds fully to the concept of sustainable HRM, there is an important concept that must be addressed: CSR. As Ehnert et al. [7] and Kramar [6] argue, sustainable development carries an ethical or moral value, but such practices are seemingly difficult to achieve in the real world. Given that there are inconsistencies within the theory itself, it is not difficult to imagine the issues that the implementation of sustainable practices faces in reality. In regard to the business realm of ethics and practice, the term CSR is synonymous with sustainability (see, for example, Rasche et al. [20]). As Crane et al. [21] note, interest in CSR has varied throughout history with a particular peak in the 1960s and 70s. However, in recent years, international institutions (e.g., Business for Social Responsibility, International Business Leaders Forum, Business in the Community, Business for Social Responsibility [22]), governments and nongovernment organizations
have pushed for the recognition of the importance of CSR in the business world. Interestingly, even the World Business Council for Sustainable Development (WBCSD) [23] stated that CSR “is firmly on the global policy agenda”. Crane et al. [21] provide the reader with a detailed table of different definitions of CSR throughout the existing literature (pp. 6–8). Pang et al. [24], for example pointing out that the meaning, role and importance of CSR differs in different contexts. For that reason, they attempt to define CSR in various settings: “multinational corporations (MNCs), small to medium sized enterprises (SMEs), nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and the public sector” (p. 297). The most cited definition however, argued by many authors, is that of Carroll [25] who explains CSR as “the social responsibility of business which encompasses the economic, legal, ethical, and discretionary expectations that society has of organizations at a given point in time” (p. 500). This widely used definition goes hand in hand with Freeman’s [26] stakeholder theory. It is similar to the definition that the European Commission published in 2011 [27] in which they state that CSR is “the responsibility of enterprises for their impacts on society” (p. 6). It is interesting that in some definitions, CSR is regarded from a moral perspective, as portrayed in Kramar’s [6] explanation that “the essence of CSR is that organizations have not only economic and legal responsibilities but also ethical and philanthropic responsibilities” (p. 1070). This is interesting due to the fact that in reviewing the existing literature, many authors claim that most of the research on CSR links the term with the organizations’ performance, competitive advantage, or in broader terms, with the economic aspect of development. As such, it can be argued that the concept of CSR is without a doubt comprehended in various ways, and definitions do not necessarily complement each other. From such a perspective, it is not difficult to understand Ehnert et al.’s [7] argument that conceiving of sustainable development from a responsibility-oriented point of view may pose a problem: it implies universal values, needs and equity, while in reality, what we might think will be important in the future will not necessarily be the case. There are no specificities underlying the importance of the organization’s context when authors are attempting to clarify CSR, or when organizations are attempting to implement it in practice. Cultural and generational differences cannot be neglected. Although the aim of CSR, equated with sustainability, is for it to be achieved universally, the ways and practices of its achievement cannot be generalized and conceived of as universal; this in itself contradicts with the moral imperative of sustainability [28,29].

Continuing the critique by Ehnert et al., Van Marrewijk [9] argues that “too often, CSR is regarded as the panacea which will solve the global poverty gap, social exclusion and environmental degradation” (p. 2). As Halme and colleagues [29] also note, “CSR is treated as a monolithic concept” meaning that there is no distinction made between environmental and social issues, which in practical terms means that there are no distinctions between “CSR policies, practices and programs with performance” (p. 1185). Van Marrewijk [9] in turn addresses three views on CSR: the shareholder approach, the stakeholder approach and finally, the societal approach, which he regards as the broadest view that coincides most with the values of sustainable development. The societal approach sees organizations as part of the society in which they operate and in which they cannot function without public consent, which in itself encompasses all three dimensions of sustainable development. If the organization understands its existence as an integral part of the society, it by default acknowledges the influences of the organization on the environment and society and vice versa. As Van Marrewijk [9] argues, “it requires organizations to fundamentally rethink their position and act in terms of the complex societal context of which they are a part” (p. 3). This coincides with the definition provided recently by Rasche et al. [20] in which they regard CSR as “the integration of an enterprise’s social, environmental, ethical and philanthropic responsibilities towards society into its operations, processes and core business strategy in cooperation with relevant stakeholders” (p. 6). The societal approach might enable the concept of CSR to overcome the issue of generalization and universalism; however, that is much harder to achieve in practice. As Janowski [30] notes, “the idea that the logic of today’s corporation might be reconstructed to consider social
issues beyond economic rationality stands in contradiction to capitalistic foundations” (p. 13). Nevertheless, the conceptualization of CSR by Rasche and colleagues does not fully address one crucial aspect of sustainability, namely sustainable HRM, but instead focuses more on the top-down approach and the organizations’ external environment.

Mariappanadar [4] perceives CSR as “the obligation a corporation assumes to maximize its positive effect while minimizing its negative effect on society” (p. 49). In addition, Utting [31] notes that although many organizations may claim full engagement with CSR, the data in many cases show highly contradictory practices among leading CSR-engaged organizations, and an extremely limited number of organizations committed to CSR practices. In that, he addresses the ambiguity of the concept of responsibility in CSR and instead underlines the importance of the concept of accountability.

Interestingly, however, van Marrewijk [9] argues that “the term ‘societal responsibility’ covers all dimensions of a company’s impact on, relationships with and responsibilities to society as a whole” (p. 7). Nevertheless, Göbbels [32] concludes that “responsibility” should instead be “accountability” in addressing the corporate accountability movement. In continuing his argument, Utting [31] portrays a number of distinctions between CSR and corporate accountability, in which the ultimate difference lies in the voluntary aspect of CSR [20], whilst corporate accountability “redirects attention to the question of corporate obligations, the role of public policy and law, the imposition of penalties in cases of non-compliance, the right of victims to seek redress, and imbalances in power relations” ([31] p. 965). The movement of corporate accountability has been gaining in strength in recent years through various (critical) forces and operations (e.g., (transnational) protests, public campaigns, watchdog activities, international agreements, reforms, etc.); however, it appears that in regard to practice, CSR remains more applicable in the realm of what Utting calls corporate capitalism. This question of terminology leads us to another important aspect that may enable the term “accountability” to become further established in both theory and practice, namely sustainability reporting.

2.2. Is Sustainability Reporting Significant?

Since the acknowledgment of the importance of sustainable development, several influential international reporting guidelines have emerged. Two of the most prominent and widely accepted are the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) and the UN Global Compact. They represent guidelines for organizations but do not dictate or impose any measures on how to achieve sustainability. That being said, although such reports provide a great incentive for organizations to present themselves as credible to their stakeholders, the main shortcoming is without a doubt the fact that there are no follow-ups. They do not carry any guarantee that the organizations are truly sustainable, rather than using the term only as a “fashionable buzzword” as Laasch and Conaway [33] sharply note (p. 61). As Cohen and colleagues [34] argue, these reports “offer a globally relevant framework to support a standardized approach to reporting on an organization’s positive or negative impacts on the natural environment, society and the economy” (p. 245). The reports enable stakeholders a more internal view on the organization’s performance; however, they are voluntary, and not many organizations worldwide disclose them. By reporting on the organization’s sustainable development, they commit themselves to the “pursuit of a ‘triple bottom line’ in which they aim to improve their economic/financial, environmental and human/social impacts” (ibid., p. 246). Nonetheless, the reality is, as Ehnert et al. [35] argue, that “enhanced reporting does not necessarily mean enhanced transparency” (pp. 90, 91), nor does it imply that reporting portrays the reality within organizations.

This holistic perspective brings us to the social dimension within sustainable development, which entails both the external and internal social dimension of the organization [7,10]. The latter focuses on HRM which relates to “the notions of corporate sustainability to HRM practices as well as exploring the role of HRM in integrating the more general corporate sustainability practices and strategies in organizations” ([35] p. 88). Sustainable HRM practices are crucial in corporate sustainability, and this dimension is
gaining in recognition of its importance, both within the academic field and in actual HRM practices. Although the predominant schema within organizations is SHRM, its main shortcoming is the fact that its focus is on the positive financial outcome \cite{6,36}. For some the next step, for others an entirely new approach, sustainable HRM acknowledges the complexities such as the ambiguities, paradoxes, dualities and dilemmas associated with HRM practices” that SHRM does not \cite{6}. In that, organizations must strive towards sustainable HRM, rather than towards sustaining existing SHRM practices.

2.3. SHRM versus Sustainable HRM

The literature on sustainable HRM is expanding; however, it is still relatively scarce. We analyzed published articles on the topic of sustainable HRM in Web of Science from the year of 1987 to 2021 using the VOS viewer. As a comprehensive analysis of the acquired results would entail a full, detailed article, our intention was only to identify how frequently are our main concepts—as named in our keywords—are presented in research. Ultimately, the results were surprising. Not one of our keywords, apart from “sustainable development” (corporate social responsibility, strategic HRM, sustainable HRM, sustainability reporting and accountability), had connections/relations to other topics and concepts within the published literature in that period. The environmental dimension of sustainable development was the prevailing aspect addressed in the literature, while other strong topics included social (namely, relationship), organizational, employee and human activities. As argued, a minute analysis would require a comprehensive article in itself; for that reason, we enclose only a visual presentation of the acquired results in Figure 1.

In that regard, a few influential scholars have refined the definitions and conceptual models of what sustainable HRM is and how it should be implemented into practice. As Mariappanadar \cite{4} argues, “sustainable HRM acknowledges the importance of the employee and the impact of management practices in achieving corporate sustainability business strategy outcomes” (p. 2). Organizations, whether big or small, have an impact on the society on a local and global scale. They use resources that have an impact not only environmentally on our planet but on societies as well.

Boudreau and Ramstad \cite{37} contend that “HR has an important role to play in sustainability” (p. 134). Understanding the term “human resources”, as Brewster and Larsen \cite{38} assert, as valuable assets within the organization that “have needs and wants and can
respond and react” (p. 11), we acknowledge their importance in further (sustainable) development. One such example is featured in an article that addresses the importance of HR’s role in mitigation and planning after the disaster of Hurricane Katrina in the US. Analyzing the role that HR played (or should have played) in the aftermath of the catastrophe, the author concludes that HR practices are crucial for creating a positive environment in which employees feel safe to express their feelings and thoughts, which in turn ensures their commitment to the organization. “In addition, it increases institutional memory, which, in times of crisis, becomes important in sharing lessons learned” ([39] p. 45). In doing so, HR practices can help create an effective workforce and a connection with the community, while acknowledging and addressing their vulnerabilities, whether they are of physical, psychological, social, political, economic or other nature [39]. For as Mariappanadar [4] argues, “sustainable HRM as a recent development within the HRM field has evolved to explore and understand the institutional level work practices (work arrangements) that shape the characteristics and the role of work which have sustainable and unsustainable impacts on citizens’ quality of life while balancing the economic/financial, human/social and cultural elements of social sustainability” (p. 36).

Traditionally, human resources are conceived as a means to a financial end [40–42]. This corresponds for the most part with traditional practices termed as SHRM. Organizations have acknowledged HR practices’ contributions to their performance in the past decades by expanding or evolving SHRM with high performance work systems [6] and acknowledging the organizations’ social legitimacy [40,43]. However, the organizations’ main objective with SHRM remains the profit-oriented bottom line. Haberberg and Rieple [44], for instance, define strategy as “the set of actions through which an organization, by accident or design, develops resources and uses them to deliver services or products in a way which its users find valuable, while meeting the financial and other objectives and constraints imposed by key stakeholders” (p. 6). However, Thompson [45] sees strategy (and SHRM) in a somewhat different, more inclusive way; in arguing that SHRM must be considered from three perspectives, namely strategy, excellence and innovation, he underlines the following crucial aspects: “organization culture and strategic leadership; environmental fit; competitive advantage; key success factors; and the management of change” (p. 4). This appears to be a ‘wider’ perspective on management, as the author amplifies the importance of awareness and change. Freeman [26] sees SHRM as an “action oriented” (p. 44) move, and concurs with Thompson in arguing that “by calling those affected groups ‘stakeholders’, the ensuing strategic management model will be sensitive to future change, and able to turn new ‘external changes’ into internal changes” (p. 46). Wheelen and Hunger’s [46] definition is arguably similarly broad at first sight. They identify SHRM as “a set of managerial decisions and actions that determines the long-run performance of a corporation” (p. 3). Nonetheless, it must be noted that the performance of an organization is understood from a capitalist, competitive advantage-position in which the “long-run” is achieving the financial goal. In Thompson’s understanding of strategic management, the strategy, awareness and thinking relates firstly and mostly to achieving competitive advantage. Although in these terms competitive advantage is considered from a long-term perspective, its core is not based on the concept of sustainable HRM. In practice, HRM is measured primarily in a short-term orientation, which Wheelen and Hunger’s [46] define as an orientation “in which managers consider only current tactical or operational issues and ignore long-term strategic ones” (p. 280). They note that short-term orientation is more encouraged, as it is more efficient in terms of time and the current performance of an organization (pp. 279–280). Here we see a significant distinction in short- and long-term orientation, which the authors define as an orientation that “emphasizes the importance of hard work, education, and persistence as well as the importance of thrift” (p. 257). Arguing from a more ‘global’ point of view, Haberberg and Rieple [44] note the difference between short- and long-term orientations in a sociocultural context, namely that “values associated with a short-term orientation are respect for tradition, fulfilling social obligations, and protecting one’s ‘face’. A long-term orientation is characterized by thrift
and perseverance” (p. 603). In addition, it is interesting in Freeman’s [26] conceptualization of the short- and long-term view that he relates it only in terms of takeovers, investments or, broadly stated, in terms of owners and customers. There is no mention of the long-term perspective pertaining to the employee, although he addresses the importance of a shift toward “a more ‘human approach’” (p. 10) and expands the notion of employees to a wider concept of stakeholders.

Because we live in a capital-oriented world, the implementation of sustainable HRM faces several issues, as in order for the change to happen, organizations must change their organizational values. These potential issues relate to how we perceive the world, what we think is beneficial to the organization as a whole and what our final goals are. The tensions are portrayed in Mariappanadar’s [4] model of possible paradoxes (p. 99), in which the main tension in organizational values between SHRM and sustainable HRM practices revolves around short-term versus long-term perspective, and focus on the internal environment only (SHRM) versus focus on the symbiosis of the internal and external environments of an organization (sustainable HRM). Given that the primary objective of most organizations is efficiency, such tensions are not surprising. Ehnert [11] proposes a paradox framework for sustainable HRM in which she establishes three key paradoxes, namely efficiency–substance, efficiency–responsibility and present–future paradox (in [7] pp. 263–265). Tensions and paradoxes are undoubtedly unavoidable; however, they must be identified, not ignored, and dealt with proactively to establish fertile ground toward a sustainable organization [4,10].

Based on an analysis of websites of 82 European member organizations of the WBCSD [35], Ehnert [7] identifies the general objectives that motivate organizations are incorporating sustainability into their strategies, and displays categories comprised of such objectives related to HR. She notes the following as incentives: “attracting talent and being recognized as an ‘employer of choice’, maintaining a healthy and productive workforce, investing into the skills of the current workforce and creating employee trust, employer trustworthiness and sustained employment relationships” (p. 255). Furthermore, Ehnert [7] underlines sustainable HRM as a long-term oriented, impact-control oriented, substance- and self-sustaining oriented, partnership-oriented, multiple-bottom-lines-oriented and paradox-oriented approach (pp. 259–262). As she asserts, this framework offers an extended version of HRM in all its aspects.

The crucial aspect of Ehnert’s [7] framework is the impact-control oriented part, which includes the model of negative externality for sustainable HRM, which acknowledges both the internal and external environment of the organization, namely “nature, families, communities, education systems” (p. 259). The most conspicuous negative externality is employee downsizing; however, several studies have shown that such benefits are not better in the long-term, which is in turn a crucial point for sustainable HRM. As Mariappanadar [3] maintains, it has the opposite effect, meaning that it “may impose psychological, social and work-related health harm on third parties, for example upon employees, their family members and communities (p. 182) which would be more in line with strategic than sustainable HR practices, as it fulfils short-term financial goals. Negative externalities encompass numerous practices, not exclusively employee downsizing, and by acknowledging the importance of understanding and evaluating them, the organization can reach true sustainability. Mariappanadar [3] further proposes a conceptual framework for negative externalities which should be integral to sustainable HRM.

The author defines the harm of negative externalities as “the profound, incomprehensible and negative impact on employees’ and their family members’ reduced personal outcomes, social and work-related health wellbeing that are caused by work practices used by organizations to extract maximum skills, abilities and motivation of employees to achieve highly effective and efficient performance” ([3] p. 187). Acknowledgment of the psychological, social and work-related health aspect of harm, which, crucially, includes not only the employees but also their wider social environment, is what differentiates SHRM from sustainable HRM. This coincides with Ehnert et al.’s [35] definition of sustainable HRM, which they understand as “the adoption of HRM strategies and practices that enable
the achievement of financial, social and ecological goals, with an impact inside and outside of the organization and over a long-term time horizon while controlling for unintended side effects and negative feedback (externalities/harm)” (p. 3). Moreover, it can be argued that if we are endorsing this internal aspect of the social dimension, we are de facto encompassing also the environmental dimension, which is conceived as the third pillar of sustainable development. If we recognize and evaluate therefore the indicators of negative externalities, we subsequently fulfil all three dimensions of sustainable development—the social, the environmental and the financial.

3. Discussion

The underlying question in regard to change, particularly in sustainable development, is how to achieve it. When we talk about sustainability, we must acknowledge the fact that our societies are comprised of organizations of all kinds; regardless of whether they are a part of the private or public sector; organizations are the de facto driving forces of the development of our societies. The crucial point is—who or what are these organizations? The answer—people. Thus, how to accomplish change? Through people. Therefore, it is surprising that there is an overall lack of agility in implementing change. Although the social dimension has received ample attention in recent times, it is understood primarily as the external environment of an organization (e.g., human rights, supply chains even, etc.). This common understanding clashes in practice with the reality of capitalism and the leverage that the economic dimension has in the business context of further development.

In most instances, the social dimension within the subject of sustainable development is linked with the external environment of organizations in other, competing organizations, etc. However, there is little, or at least not enough, attention given to the development and enhancement of the social dimension within organizations themselves, that of employees. There is hence a lack of attention to the internal dimension, that is, existing HR practices. Given the predominant mental schema of focusing on the financial bottom line, the most widely used practices within organizations are what we call SHRM. Such HR practices are carried out from a top-down perspective, which in turn limits our prospects of broadening our comprehension of sustainable development and further action. The key to understanding how to transform HR strategy and practice from a strategic approach into a sustainable system is to acknowledge that the value of human resources lies beyond the financial line. However, this perspective is difficult to maintain, particularly due to the fact that we (for the most part) live in capital-oriented societies. Hence, everything and everyone is regarded as a means to financial gain. Sustainable HRM faces many difficulties due to the organizational strategic mindset that formulates practices for the sole aim of generating profit. Although they might embrace certain HR practices that are considered part of sustainable HRM, organizations cannot be sustainable if their final objective is financial benefit. As Kramar [5] argues, SHRM is dominant in both literature and practice because “central to the notion of SHRM is the assertion that an explicit organizational strategy provides the framework for the development of HR management practices” (p. 161). However, SHRM limits our understanding of organizational performance, as it is set from a rational, economical point of view. Instead, Kramar proposes an alternate view, namely complex adaptive systems, or CAS. Understanding the world instead as nonlinear, ever changing, evolving and adaptive, we enable ourselves to set different presumptions about the economy and institutions that comprise our societies. “A view of the organization as a CAS enables a dynamic focus, which acknowledges that change involving internal and external parties is a constant aspect of organizational life” (ibid., p. 165). Such an alternative view gives rise to an expanded understanding of HRM, as it under-stands the extent of human resources not only as employees within an organization but also as customers, the community, the legal systems, the institutions and the industry within which the organization operates. It also contributes to Ehner’s proposed paradox framework for sustainable HRM as it encourages “HRM practices and systems to explicitly seek to achieve outcomes broader than just measures of financial performance” ([5] p. 166).
The narrow definition of sustainable HRM from Cohen, Taylor and Müller-Camen ([34] p. 1) as “using the tools of HR to create a workforce that has the trust, values, skills and motivation to achieve a profitable triple bottom line” portrays the very struggle between SHRM and sustainable HRM practices in most organizations. Although the sustainable HRM practices on which the authors further elaborate include internal (employees) and external (communities) aspects, the definition entails a profitable goal even though it pertains to the triple bottom line. It would be foolish to ignore the existing values in our cultures when it comes to capital; however, that is the point of sustainability. The term ‘profitable’ is redundant in this definition, as sustainability in terms of the triple bottom line underlines the importance of the synthesis of the economic, environmental and social dimension without explicitly addressing the profitable aspect. However, the above-mentioned definition was extended by the same authors in the same year in another report, in which they defined sustainable HRM as “the utilization of HR tools to help embed a sustainability strategy in the organization and the creation of an HRM system that contributes to the sustainable performance of the firm. Sustainable HRM creates the skills, motivation, values and trust to achieve a triple bottom line and at the same time ensures the long-term health and sustainability of both the organization’s internal and external stakeholders, with policies that reflect equity, development and wellbeing and help support environmentally friendly practices” ([34] p. 3). It is evident from the provided definitions that distinct issues remain even within the theory itself, as the organization’s performance inevitably upholds the financial aspect. Despite the fact that the latter definition does not explicitly mention the financial bottom line, it nevertheless lacks a broader perspective on the role of sustainable HRM within sustainable development.

In order to change, we must change our understanding of human resources. Expanding the notion of human resources as employees only to encompass those who have an impact on, and who are impacted by, an organization enables us to conceive of human resources also outside the organization. This view differentiates from the traditional view in the sense that it broadens our perspective and enables a space for change. Perceiving the world in a Weberian sense, as a formal rationality where efficiency, calculability, predictability, technology and control [31] are the driving forces in achieving the capitalist values of bureaucracy, automatism, individualism and profit, is a limitation that must be overcome in order for us to comprehend the necessity and viability of sustainable development and its driving force, sustainable HRM. Such a world view in fact disables our ability to think in the long term, as our focus remains the short-term financial gain. To achieve a shift in our mindset, we must regard our realities from Bourdieu’s perspective of habitus, an acquired way of seeing the social world that depends on one’s position and upbringing [47,48]. The habitus provides the grounds for the possibility of changing our perception of a static, linear and rational world into a nonlinear, ever changing and evolving world [5]. The world is changing. Organizations should keep pace with the ongoing changes, given that they are inextricably intertwined with the alterations in our perceptions of what is moral, ethical and responsible. Hence, following the principle of maximizing efficiency and market returns, while ignoring the surrounding shifts, endangers an organization’s existence. As Kramar [5] asserts, “management theories such as SHRM have been developed to support the operation and long-term survival of organizations in a neoliberal capitalist economic system” (p. 161). The sole purpose of SHRM is to achieve the strategic goals of the organizations by employing HR policies and practices, which produce outcomes such as “engagement, commitment, productivity, capability development, learning and knowledge sharing” (ibid.). Although such outcomes might seem desirable and in favor of employees, it is crucial to note that such practices are for the most part used due to the strategy of the organization and do not stem from the needs and wants of the employees themselves [4,7]. Their purpose is to achieve the set goals, even if they do not correspond with the wellbeing of the employees.

Throughout the paper, several definitions within the field of the broad concept of sustainable development, CSR and sustainable HRM were portrayed in detail. As indi-
cated, there remain inconsistencies within both theory and practice, however, they seem to be narrowing in the past years. The reason for the discrepancies lies in the fact that definitions correspond to the “dimension” and/or points of view in/from which sustainable development is to be implemented. For example, arguments for an organization to become sustainable due to environmental concerns (e.g., automobile industry) refer mostly to environmental management and do not focus on, for example, the social aspect within an organization. In that sense, only one aspect of sustainable development is addressed, and such an organization cannot be regarded as being ‘fully sustainable’, given that sustainability is a process that stands on three pillars, not one. However, this is only one example of the obstacles that defining sustainability faces today. The main controversy remains the financial aspect of development. The main goal of organizations, except perhaps of NGOs or similar, has been achieving competitive advantage in economic prospects, particularly for those aiming to survive in a capitalist, neoliberal world. The means to this end represent, for the most part, human resources. Organizations have thus developed strategies (SHRM) with which they would enhance their human resources’ potential in order to achieve their end, frequently by any means necessary. In past years, however, such inadequate practices have become undesirable, and in some cases even publicly condemned. The external social pressure that certain organizations have received due to their harsh practices has had serious negative consequences in terms of performance. The impact of organizations can be seen in the environmental dimension, as consumers and local communities vocalize their discontent with the practices of certain companies that are endangering the planet. The same can be said of the social dimension—one such example is the crisis faced by Amazon when the world turned against them after the conditions under which their employees were forced to work were made public. As Boudreau and Ramstad [37] note, “the working conditions of employers and their suppliers have become a de facto standard for many firms as sweatshop scandals have hurt a number of famous brands” (p. 130). In this respect, it is not fruitful to discard the social dimension of sustainable development, particularly that of sustainable HRM. Thus, it would be reasonable to argue that sustainable HRM is the crucial aspect of sustainable development. Jackson [49] likewise argues that “if sustainable social and economic growth, both now and in the future, is to be achieved, people throughout the world need to be in position to work and be managed sustainably within the work-place” (Jackson in [4] p. 61). For if we understand that we as humans are the driving forces of our societies, all changes start with us. Hence, by acknowledging the importance of HRM within and outside the organization, we are in fact addressing all three bottom lines—the economic, the environmental and the social. In Kramar’s [5] words, “HR can be considered as both a means to achieve sustainability and a dimension of an outcome of sustainability” (p. 159).

In discussing sustainability, such progressive development entails an ethical and moral imperative. The problem for modern societies is their capitalistic, consumer character and culture. Values and norms have shifted from a collective to an individualistic mindset, with people’s main objective now being their own enhancement and success. Our realities are portrayed as, well as perceived as, linear, static and detached from one another, regardless of constant connectedness via internet and other forms of globalization. However, in order to thrive, or rather, survive, we must change our ways of living. What we lack, in theoretical terms and particularly in the practice of sustainable development, is a comprehension of our collective selves, or if we use Durkheim’s [50] and Mauss’s [51] concepts, organic or corporate solidarity. In the beginning, when the term sustainability started to become acknowledged as an ultimate alternative to crude neoliberal norms and values, there was a pressing need to create a model which entails specific dimensions that are to be addressed in further development, meaning the social, environmental and economic bottom lines. However, as time passes, we are witnessing a worrying lack of progress. Free markets, individualism and never-ending advancement in industry do not appear to be losing their power and influence. Something must change. Mauss wrote long ago that “one can even imagine what a society would look like where such principles would prevail. In the liberal
professions of our great nations, morality and economics of this kind are already partly at work. Honor, selflessness, and corporate solidarity are not empty words, nor are they contrary to the necessities of work” ([51] p. 141). Both Mauss and Durkheim understood society as a collective, organic entity, and in their minds, it was our moral duty to prevail over the existing ‘economic animal’ we have been reduced to, and become again beings of reason, duty and morals. From such a perspective, it is pertinent to argue that the model of sustainable development can and should change, or rather, develop further. We are not addressing these issues for the first time; the idea has been alive and present for several decades and is even thriving in some cases and some parts of the world; however, that is not sufficient. Hence, it is essential for further development to recognize that there are other aspects that the future model of sustainable development should address.

This paper proposes a model of sustainable development that has been adopted and altered in a way that supports the interconnectedness of the self and the collective. Holden, Linnerud and Banister [28] propose a model that acknowledges the dimensions of equity, needs and limits in which the three dimensions of the social, economic and environmental are entailed. Although they thoroughly address the three imperative moral dimensions that contribute to further implementation of sustainable development, the model is not sufficient in terms of how to achieve it. Their standing point, “sustainable development is a normative values system, on a par with human rights, democracy and freedom” (ibid., p. 215), is crucial; it addresses all three aspects of sustainable development while enhancing awareness of its moral imperative. Furthermore, it acknowledges differences in cultural as well as institutional contexts. Nevertheless, it does not fully suffice; it remains rather idealistic. The model is based on human behavior, which is in itself essential to achieving sustainability; however, the realities of neoliberal values and norms cannot be dismissed. What it lacks is the beginning and the end, so to say. How, then, to achieve this goal and how to preserve it?

The proposed model, presented in Figure 2, is a completion of the model proposed by Holden, Linnerud and Banister [28] and it differentiates in terms of proposing the means of achieving equity, needs and limits and in the end, how to sustain it.

![Diagram of Proposed Model for Sustainable Development](image)

**Figure 2.** Proposed model for sustainable development. Source: Adapted and extended from Holden, Linnerud and Banister ([28] p. 215).

The core of the proposed model is sustainable HRM, while the aim of achieving sustainability is paralleled with corporate accountability (CA). Let us first address CA. As mentioned in the previous section, the CA movement is already extant; however, the
concept of “corporate” has a different meaning to the proposed model. It is arguable that, as Utting [31] remarks, the movement “is significant because it brings issues of conflict, redistributive politics, counter-hegemonic struggle and structural change back into the equation” (p. 971). Nevertheless, in the CA movement, the term relates to corporations as organizations within societies. The term within the proposed model, however, relates to Durkheim’s and Mauss’s theory of organic/corporate solidarity. They conceive of the human as a part of a whole, of the society, that is, inherently interconnected and dynamic. In order for us to leave behind the homo oeconomicus model, we must acknowledge the fact that, in Mauss’s words, there remains “among our masses and our elites, pure and irrational extravagance [as] an everyday practice” ([51] p. 149). For sustainability itself carries a moral, ethical and collective resonance, which cannot be achieved by comprehending the term “corporate” in terms of neoliberal values. Perceiving the term “corporate” from this perspective contradicts the very essence of sustainability, given that the imperative is capitalistic, although it pertains to real, existing organizations, corporations. Conversely, the concept of CA in the sense of organic solidarity carries development one step further toward sustainability. In that sense, it can be equated with the movement of corporate accountability, since the aim is to hold organizations accountable for their actions. The general public’s expectation of organizations to be transparent in their activities, and to be held accountable if they are not, is growing and cannot be disregarded. It is important, however, to acknowledge that the term “accountability” itself carries a linguistic barrier. For instance, in the Slovenian language, there is no difference between the word “responsibility” and “accountability”, although they may imply different consequences. A related issue is that of defining and measuring accountability—first, who is able to define the lines, and second, how can we measure the sustainability performance of organizations? As Keeble and colleagues [52] argue, “the difficulty in measuring performance is further complicated by the fact that many corporations have a complex organizational structure, with different business streams, functions and projects” (p. 150).

In addition, the cultural and institutional context of the organizational environment cannot be disregarded; there are many external factors that influence an organization’s performance and strategy [53]. It would be unjust to discount the fact that organizations face many difficulties in implementing sustainable practices, because they operate within external environments that do not function in a sustainable fashion [4,7,20]. The number of organizations attempting to find new ways of operating in order to achieve full sustainability is expanding; however, for the most part this pertains to the environmental dimension. Nevertheless, many are starting to pay attention also to the social dimension [53] and to fathom the importance of sustainable HRM. They are acknowledging that, as Boudreau and Ramstad [37] indicate, “sustainability is not just good ethics; it is potentially good long-term economics” (p. 134). By understanding, therefore, sustainability as CA from this perspective, we have taken the next step in achieving our goal of expanding the meaning of sustainability beyond more than a simple buzzword.

The second modification of the proposed model is the placement of sustainable HRM into the heart of sustainable development. Many prominent authors in this field have argued that sustainable HRM is crucial for sustainability [4,6,7,11,34], and yet they have not positioned sustainable HRM at the very center. Although one might read between the lines and conclude that sustainable HR practices are essential to achieving sustainability, it must be argued that their omission renders their argument deficient. To achieve sustainability, society must be perceived as a whole, a perception that considers the variety of subgroups and individuals as human beings through a moral, ethical perspective. In doing so, all three imperatives of sustainability—the social, economic and environmental or rather, equity, needs and limits—are addressed. For that reason, sustainable HRM is, and must be, at the heart of sustainability, given that its very essence is the people.

There are three known approaches within the theoretical field of sustainable HRM, namely paradox theory [11], theory of negative externalities and stakeholder harm [3] and stakeholder theory [15]. As Kramar [5] argues, stakeholder theory may also be understood
in an alternative, neoliberal sense, although Ehnert and colleagues [35] argue that it is the best approach in researching the aspect of sustainability reporting. Approaches presented by Ehnert and Mariappanadar, on the other hand, represent a wider perspective, because they explicitly acknowledge the possible tensions between the internal and external environment, as well as tensions between the existing schema of SHRM and sustainable HRM, positioned from a modern organizational context perspective [7]. It is also essential to acknowledge negative externalities using Mariappanadar’s model, particularly due to the neglect of this perspective in SHRM and the overall narrow understanding of negative externalities solely as employee downsizing. However, in regard to the question of approach, all approaches can be combined within the capability approach, as argued by Holden and colleagues [28]. By establishing the individual’s wellbeing at the core of any further development, we address all aspects that the aforementioned approaches accentuate. Furthermore, we also address the three key dimensions of sustainable development, namely environmental quality, social justice and economic prosperity, through the lens of the three crucial moral imperatives—ensuring social equity, respecting environmental limits and satisfying human needs [28]. For that reason, although the authors posited the capability approach from a wider, sustainability-point of view, it can be argued that it can and should be placed also in the specific field of sustainable HRM.

Sustainable HRM should be established as the starting point in achieving sustainability. Humans are the most powerful and influential beings on our planet; our actions and reactions are what define our present and future realities. Hence, any further development is meaningless if we don’t come to an understanding that we are, as Elkington meticulously noted in 1997, cannibals, and that our fork is sustainability. Many in the business realm argue that CSR is what the reality of sustainable development in their perspective is. Rasche and colleagues [20] portray an explicit understanding of sustainability from the organizations’ perspective; however, there appears to be no mention of HR practices within the organizations themselves, let alone the need for a symbiotic relationship between the internal and the external environment of an organization. Furthermore, they address extensively the social dimension of sustainability, however they disregard or, as Utting [31] argues, do not “fully acknowledge the conflicting interests of stakeholders” (p. 971), which is again a crucial differentiation between sustainable HRM and SHRM. Socially responsible behavior can be interpreted in various ways; it depends not only on top-level management within the corporation, but also on the surrounding culture in which the organization operates. In that regard, the meaning and functioning of CSR cannot be generalized, and more importantly, cannot be perceived as synonymous with sustainable development or sustainability. Utting [31] notes that although many organizations may claim full engagement with CSR, the data in many cases show highly contradictory practices among leading CSR-engaged organizations, and an extremely limited number of organizations committed to such practices. He thus addresses the ambiguity of the concept of responsibility in CSR and underlines the importance of the concept of accountability. It becomes clear at this point why the term “responsibility” in CSR should be replaced with “accountability”. Instead of corporate (social) responsibility or CSR, truly sustainable organizations should strive to incorporate accountability (CA). The latter implies that organizations that reported sustainable practices would be held accountable if the reporting did not equate with the real practices of the organization. This is particularly important since “the GRI guidelines are now regarded as ‘the de facto global standard’ for sustainability reporting by the leading global companies” ([54] p. 91).

Corporate sustainability (CS), or CSR as it is widely understood today, is therefore a complex matter that is yet to be fully resolved, particularly in the realm of terminology. Nevertheless, what would enable us to differentiate the different levels of sustainable development in organizations could be the proposed ambition level of corporate sustainability by Van Marrewijk [9]. He proposes five ambition levels, namely compliance-driven CS, profit-driven CS, caring CS, synergistic CS and holistic CS. The highest level, holistic CS, represents organizations that understand corporate sustainability as “the only alternative
since all beings and phenomena are mutually interdependent” (ibid., p. 9). Regarding CS as CA through the proposed five levels by Van Marrewijk would enable an agile attainment of sustainable development. As Dyllick and Hockerts [8] rightly note, “progress towards global sustainability is suspiciously absent” (p. 131). Although this apprehension was written 19 years ago, it remains pertinent.

The main point here is that many organizations are claiming to have fully implemented the element of sustainability into their organizations’ strategy, but we are not witnessing such results in any great measure. One explanation is that these organizations are using the term “sustainability” as a front to of promoting their organizational brand; the second explanation stems from the possibility that they are unable to implement such strategies and practices due to external limitations (e.g., nature of their industry); whilst the third is that they are simply not accomplishing any results because they lack proper tools and knowledge. HR practices have the ability and the reach to fuse the goals of all three pillars of sustainable development.

In our view, the most fitting model for sustainable HRM within the proposed model of sustainable development is Kramar’s model [6] in which he combines Ehnert’s, Mariappanadar’s and sustainable work systems theory. As Kramar argues, the proposed model acknowledges more than simply the financial outcome of HR practices within an organization, but rather extends their reach deep into the social and environmental dimension as well. It specifically recognizes the multiple contextual frameworks that influence sustainable HRM, as well as tensions and specific effects that tensions might entail and/or produce. However, although the model included the literature on negative externalities, it would be crucial to complement Kramar’s model with Mariappanadar’s model of negative externalities, given its complexity and thoroughness in identifying harm indicators, individual differences and HR practices. Implementing sustainable HR practices based on these two models through the lens of the moral imperatives of needs, limits and equity creates a fruitful ground for true sustainable development. The organizations existence is inextricably linked with its society and with individuals who comprise it; therefore, by influencing the individuals, we influence on the society, and vice versa. For that reason, human resources cannot be perceived only existing within the organization, but also as being outside the organization; hence, the definition and the comprehension of the meaning of HRM in terms of sustainable HRM must be expanded to include all individuals, that is, all human beings in society.

Nevertheless, the challenge is not complete. As already argued, it cannot be disregarded that “the practice of HRM cannot be explained by rational choice because people involved in developing and implementing HR policies operate in a context of conflicting pressures” ([6] p. 1083). Deviating from existing neoliberal norms and values poses a complex challenge in the pursuit of achieving sustainability. As has been argued, some shifts have been noted in certain industries. However, the rate of change appears to be stalling. For that reason, sustainability should be, as argued in the proposed model of this paper (Figure 2), comprehended as CA. Measures such as GRI or UN Global Compact are extremely valuable, but are again voluntary and not assessed or investigated further. Thus, we cannot give an accurate presentation as to how far we have come in achieving sustainability. CA is therefore, with its tendency toward the activist stance, crucial for further enhancement. In addition, by acknowledging the importance of implementing sustainable HRM, combined with the notion of CA, into the model of sustainable development, the change can begin at the organizational/institutional level; or stated differently, not from outside-in, but rather from inside-out. However, this cannot work unless we change our perspective in perceiving organizations as CAS when implementing new practices. Additionally, in regard to sustainability reporting, it would be essential to include the five ambition levels, proposed by van Marrewijk [9]. In doing so, it would be possible to recognize more specifically the organizations’ true impetus and be able to act accordingly. Only in doing so can we take the next step in reaching legitimate sustainability.
Given that there are, as indicated, several models that would complement each other well in achieving sustainability, we propose a new model, comprised of Mariappanadar’s model of negative externalities, Kramar’s model of sustainable HRM and our proposed model (Figure 2), which represents a bigger picture entailing all crucial aspects in shifting focus from an individualistic, capitalist perspective to a collective, sustainability-oriented way of living.

The model presented in Figure 3 is designed in a circular fashion because sustainability itself presupposes symbiotic relations between all stages and dimensions of development. For that reason, all arrows all pointing in both directions symbolize the interconnectedness of HR strategies, policies and practices with equity, needs and limits, which are inherently linked and based on the internal and external context of organizations and should be comprehended as corporate accountability. As previously mentioned, the present model is comprised of two existing models along with one model modified in the present paper; however, two additional aspects are included, namely that of van Marrewijk. The first addition represents CAS, which enables us to comprehend various dimensions of organization’s contexts to be viewed from a critical, non-linear point of view. More specifically, it enables us to regard institutions, technologies, society and the economy as ever-changing entities that influence organizations’ performances in various, complex ways. In doing so, we enable a further detachment from the neoliberal norms and values that regard our realities and development as linear and disregard the influence of the external context on organizations.

**Figure 3. Proposed model for sustainable HRM.**

The second addition refers to the five ambition levels proposed by van Marrewijk, already previously mentioned. In order to reach the ultimate goal of CA, we see recognition of the different levels on which organizations operate during their reporting and development as crucial in understanding the level of sustainable development in which we find our societies. This is what will enable any real progression from our current standpoint toward fully sustainable societies.

4. Conclusions

Literature on sustainable development and sustainable HRM is broadening. The aim of the present paper was to acknowledge definitions of sustainable development and CSR, which were portrayed in detail to establish a sense of the current understanding of what sustainable development entails. It was also pertinent to acknowledge existing HR practices; more specifically, the relationship between SHRM in relation to the somewhat
new schema of sustainable HRM. It is crucial to acknowledge the current domination of SHRM in organizations throughout society, and the challenge it represents when seeking to successfully implement sustainable HRM in practice. The intent of this paper was to portray various ways in which sustainability and concepts such as CSR are understood and acknowledged. One reason for this was the aspiration to comprehend the significance of the term “accountability”, and by what means and to what end corporate accountability could be achieved.

The present paper thus analyzes definitions and concepts of influential authors in these fields from a critical perspective and provides two new models. In Figure 1, we present a visual presentation of the concept of sustainable HRM in Web of Science in the time period 1987–2021. From the results we conclude that the environmental dimension remains to this day the most pressing topic within the field of sustainable development, although the social dimension is visibly expanding. The following is an alternative model of sustainable development, presented in Figure 2, adopted and modified using existing propositions of models, definitions and perspectives. Further development of existing models is essential to enable us to overcome the current discontinuity of sustainable development. Development of existing models has provided a new starting point, namely sustainable HRM, a new perspective, additional practices and finally, a new stepping stone, namely corporate accountability. The second proposed model presented in Figure 3 is more specific. It illustrates a new configuration of sustainable HRM comprised of three models, namely Mariappanadar’s model of negative externalities, Kramar’s model of sustainable HRM and our proposed model of sustainable development. The modification of existing models is here again crucial for further development, as it attempts to underline more specificities that are of vital importance in successfully implementing sustainable HR practices within an organization, or put differently, in successfully achieving true sustainability.

The aspiration of this paper is to acknowledge sustainable HRM as the essence of sustainable development, while further defining sustainable development as corporate accountability. The arguments for such a premise are given throughout the paper in an attempt to fully address all pertinent issues that sustainable development faces in modern times. The proposed model of sustainable HRM aims to enable easier detachment from the domination of SHRM, and comprehension of the interconnectedness of all aspects of development: the symbiosis of the internal and external environment of organizations, the importance of acknowledging different contexts that influence organizations’ performances and the crucial aspect of accountability, without which sustainability would remain an ideal never to be achieved.

The concept of sustainable HRM requires further research, particularly in terms of acknowledging the pressing matter of contextual differences and thoroughly researching specific contexts from both a theoretical and practical perspective.

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