NEW GROWTH AND THE FOSSILIZED ECONOMY: SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT, DISCOURSE, AND THE CASE OF RECOMMODIFICATION

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DEDICATION

To the people who advocate for a cleaner, greener, and more sustainable future every day: your work inspires me to do the same.

ABSTRACT

Starting in the 1960s, there was increased public awareness of environmentalism and, later, anthropogenic climate change. Public and private interests began to focus on the 'issue' of the environment, and in 1987, the UN *Our Common Future* Report (later known as the Brundtland Report) introduced the concept of sustainable development (SD). Using this concept as my guide, my research question is: Is the model of SD, as presented in the 1987 Brundtland Report, *effective?* I argue that SD, with an inherent emphasis on *development* and (economic) growth, is not a useful tool to advance effective climate action. Through participant observation at a Canadian corporate/climate conference and interviews with young sustainability professionals with experience in the public and private sectors (n=8), I argue that the concepts of sustainability and SD have been co-opted (through discourse and action) by corporations looking to profit. As such, I observe a corporate culture which *embraces* and *adheres to* the model of SD, but which uses SD to justify business- and growth-first approaches to environmentalism. I then outline a model of 'recommodified SD,' informed by the need to 'sell' the idea of SD (in its corporate and commodified form) *to* and *from* staff and their organizations. Ultimately, I present an argument on the discursive functionality of SD in perpetuating the idea that There Is No Alternative (TINA) from status-quo approaches to climate action.

ETHICS STATEMENT

Work described in this honours thesis received research ethics approval from the University of Alberta Research Ethics Board, as “DEVELOPMENT OR DECOMMODIFICATION: UNIVERSALISM, SUSTAINABILITY, AND THE ALBERTAN WELFARE STATE”, Pro00148597, JANUARY 16, 2025.

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that many are routinely asked to give their time for the 'youth leadership/ climate action' space, and their insights were very valuable for this thesis.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BAU	Business-As-Usual
DEI	Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion
EM	Ecological Modernization
ESG	Environmental, Social, and Governance [Framework]
IDA	Interpretive Discourse Analytical [Methodological] Approach, as per Wash (2020)
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
P3s	Public-Private Partnerships
ROI	Return On Investment
SD	Sustainable Development
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
TINA	There Is No Alternative
UN	United Nations
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
WLOC	Women Leading on Climate [Movement]

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The impact and consequences of **'sustainable development' (SD)**[1] as a concept and policy tool are extensive. Given the proliferation of its use in public discourse, and its growth as a key heuristic within public and private policy circles [e.g., as the central concept behind the United Nations' *Sustainable Development Goals* (SDGs) for 2015-2030 (United Nations, n.d.)], SD is an important concept in contemporary environmental politics.

In this thesis, I am interested in the origins, growth, and use of the SD model by public and private actors (over other forms of environmentalism or policy action) as a supposed 'solution' to the climate crisis. Within the present neoliberal context in Canada, I will also interrogate conventional models of sustainability and business, the interactions between them, and the potential role of new ideas and alternate systems-level thinking as a disruptor to the status quo.

The title of this thesis, *New Growth and the Fossilized Economy*, reflects the tensions of this new era of "polycrisis" (Tooze, 2022) and highlights the overlapping challenges of SD implementation. [The concept of 'polycrisis' refers to the intersection of socio-political, economic, and environmental crises in the modern era, and it helps explain how many different types of crises (e.g., the housing crisis, debt crisis, climate crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic, etc.) may compound and intensify (Tooze, 2022). Here, I use the concept of 'polycrisis' to help explain the tensions between the *climate* and *energy* crises (which, in turn, reflects the tension between 'environmental' and 'economic' goals in the SD agenda).]

[1] Throughout this thesis, I will challenge the definition and our collective understanding of SD. However, for the purpose of my main argument, SD is defined in the Brundtland Report (1987) as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (United Nations, 1987; Olive, 2016).

The first part of the title, *New Growth,* refers to two simultaneous developments: (i) the introduction of new talent into the field of corporate sustainability as young 'sustainability professionals,' and (ii) the tight grasp that pro-growth narratives have on our economy and our understanding of SD. The latter half—the *Fossilized Economy*—refers to environmental breakdown in a society driven by fossil fuels, as well as the challenges of adapting old ('fossilized') economic systems to suit the goals of sustainability. This part was inspired by Malm's (2018) discussion of the 'fossil economy,' which is a concept he uses to describe the central role of the fossil fuel industry in the climate crisis.

Ultimately, my focus in this thesis is on non-sustainable, 'fossilizing' systems of economic *thinking* in the public and private sector in Canada. It is about the power of communication and discourse to achieve political, economic, and social objectives—both at the systems level (i.e., SD as a discourse used by organizations and their senior leaders) and at the individual level (i.e., among young sustainability professionals who plan and implement the day-to-day work of SD), and the barriers to meaningful and effective environmental policy implementation.

I studied two different populations—corporate representatives and young sustainability professionals—and I have compared how they frame SD differently. I found that framing and discourse are powerful tools to delay, or advance, the environmental agenda, and the commodification of SD by corporations is a serious trend worth further study. In the next section, I will discuss the politics of environmental discourses, before providing a more comprehensive overview of my main research question and arguments.

The politics of framing and discourse

Earlier this year, we saw the power of framing and political communication in justifying the retrenchment of environmental progress in policy. Shortly after his inauguration, the President of the United States, Donald Trump, signed executive orders for the country's withdrawal from the 2015 Paris Agreement, promised to "drill, baby, drill," attempted to override climate commitments in other jurisdictions, and repealed numerous important environmental protections and regulations at the federal level (Edsall, 2025; Noor, 2025; Walling, 2025; White House, 2025b). He also declared a "National Energy Emergency" through executive order on his first day in office (White House, 2025a; Walling, 2025), which contrasts with attempts in Canada and around the world to declare a National *Climate* Emergency (CBC News, 2019).

These actions from the US Administration will have profound impacts on human health, the economy, and the environment (Edsall, 2025). In a statement for the New York Times (Opinion), the president of Earthjustice, Abigail Dillen, wrote

> The most important thing to understand is that we are seeing a wholesale approach to eradicating environmental protections. This is the hatchet, not the scalpel. So it's everything from the water you drink and the air you breathe to the food you eat and the basic products you buy. If the Trump administration is successful in rolling back that progress, we will pay enormous costs, some of them measurable in terms of health care and many of them incalculable in terms of human suffering and loss. (Edsall, 2025)

Additionally, Aru Shiney-Ajay, the executive director of the youth-led Sunrise Movement, called the decision to strike down state-level climate laws "an illegal, disgusting attempt to force everyday people to pay for the rising toll of climate disasters, while shielding the richest people in the world from accountability" (Noor, 2025). These are just a few responses from activists to these policies, and it marks a time of intense social, environmental, and economic inequality.[2]

Evidently, the climate crisis—including its consequences and the opportunities for *action* and *change*—is imbued with power and privilege. However, how we *talk* about the crisis (or whether it is framed as a crisis at all) is also important to recognize and consider. Is it an Energy Emergency, or a Climate Emergency? Is it about human health, economic growth, or a balanced combination of the two? Throughout this thesis, I will explore the discursive functionality of SD and sustainability in *delaying* environmental progress, despite a decades-long embrace of the concept by political and corporate actors. In doing so, I will also interrogate why lasting environmental progress has been so challenging to achieve.

Research Question

The climate crisis has intensified in recent years, yet the SD framework has persisted as a foundational idea in international policy [see, for example, the United Nations SDGs (United Nations, n.d.)]. Given this impact and high level of awareness of SD, I am interested in the ways social discourse around SD has perhaps *limited* our ability to imagine sustainability in holistic, mutually beneficial, and restorative ways. In particular, I am concerned with how a pro-growth framing of SD, as an idea and policy tool, has greatly limited the effective integration of 'sustainability' across social, economic, and environmental domains. [Here, I define 'pro-growth'

[2] As I revisited this chapter in July 2025, the US House of Representatives had just approved another bill to reverse progress made through the previous administration's Inflation Reduction Act under President Biden through the phase-out of clean energy tax breaks (Drenon and Yousif, 2025). Not only will this bill pose a serious threat to climate progress, but financial cuts to Medicaid and other social services in the bill will increase social vulnerability for Americans. This is yet another example of the impacts of policy in an era of 'polycrisis' (Tooze, 2022).

SD as a model which encourages further economic development, expansion, and profit, rather than (or at least, at the expense of) environmental preservation and sustainability.]

Therefore, for this thesis, my research question is: Is the model of sustainable development, as presented in the 1987 Brundtland Report, *effective?*[3] There are numerous ways that I could define and measure the 'effectiveness' of SD. Sustainability, at its very core, is concerned with an equitable balance between economic, social, and environmental concerns (Mulligan, 2018). This leads to inevitable tension between these, at times, antithetical goals. For this thesis, I am interested in the ways that our framing, discussions, and perceptions of the climate crisis influence (in)action in the public and private sectors. I am also interested in the ways that these framings become entrenched in corporate cultures and are reproduced among young sustainability professionals. As such, my working understanding of 'effectiveness,' as it relates to the goals of SD, refers to the ability of SD to produce a *culture* of sustainability and sustainable business practices in the ways it was initially designed and presented in the Brundtland Report (United Nations, 1987).

Argument

In this thesis, I argue that SD *is* effective in advancing the sustainability agenda as it is defined and operationalized in the Brundtland Report (United Nations, 1987). However, I temper this assertion with the argument that SD has always, from its very inception as a policy concept in the 1980s, been predicated on business growth and the continual extraction, destruction, and exploitation of environmental resources. As such, I argue that SD:

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[3] In 1987, after being commissioned by the United Nations' World Commission on Environment and Development, former Norwegian Prime Minister Dr. Gro Harlem Brundtland released the groundbreaking *Our Common Future* report (Mulligan, 2018). As I will expand on later, this Report was the first to popularize the concept of 'sustainable development' in international policy arenas.

- is not a particularly useful tool to advance environmental policy beyond a 'Green-Lite' framework (as per Doern et al., 2015);
- has been co-opted by corporations looking to 'profit off of the resistance,'[4] leading to the (re)commodification of environmentalism; and
- is amplified by a culture (both internal and external to specific organizations) that embraces, reaffirms, and prioritizes business- and growth-first approaches to environmentalism.

Through fieldwork with top North American corporations, interviews with young sustainability professionals, and a review of academic literature, I present these arguments with the hope of understanding more about the origins, operationalization, and future of SD.

In the following section, I present a brief review of Canadian environmental history and various (competing) models of sustainability from the literature.

[4] Credit for this framing and the language around 'profiting off the resistance' is to my colleagues in *Geography 3850: Geographies of Crisis and Resistance* with Dr. Bronwyn Bragg from the Winter Semester (2025) at the University of Lethbridge. In this class, we discussed how the climate crisis, geopolitical tensions, and the crisis of capitalism are deeply intertwined, and the group discussions helped me reflect on my own work in this thesis.

CHAPTER 2: BACKGROUND

Business and Environmentalism in Canada: A History

In *Green-Lite* (2015), Doern, Auld, and Stoney offer a comprehensive analysis of Canadian environmental policy over time. In particular, they argue that understanding the interactions between businesses and public regulations is now *vital* to understanding the broader trends of environmental policy in Canada (Doern et al., 2015). They focus their analysis on six 'environmental regimes' (i.e., key bureaucratic and institutional relationships concerning the environment), interactions of public and private power, and the evolution of Canadian environmental policy over time. However, for this thesis, their review of "The NGO, Market, and Business – Environment Regime" (Doern et al., 2015, 297-332) is particularly relevant to understand how public and private interests have influenced environmental decision-making over time.

Using their text as my main guide, I will explore the evolution of this 'Regime' in the following section. This overview from the 1960s to the present day will help explain early trends of 'greenwashing,' the gradual corporatization of the environmental agenda, and the complex relationship between public and private sector interests.

Evolution of Environmental Policy

Since the 1970s, the role of businesses in the environmental agenda has changed. A shift towards neoliberalism, deregulation, and co-governance and co-regulation strategies (i.e., governance partnerships *with* the private sector) began in the late 20th century (Doern et al., 2015). Taken together, these shifts are part of the larger 'second wave of environmentalism' in Canada (Olive, 2016) and can be mapped from the 1960s:

- **1960s-1970s.** During this time, there was growing discontent with the state of environmental affairs in Canada, and an increasing number of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) dedicated to environmental activism and/or lobbying efforts (Doern at al., 2015; Olive, 2016). Rachel Carson's groundbreaking environmental book, *Silent Spring*, was released in 1962, and there was a shift in the public consciousness and awareness of these issues (Doern et al., 2015; Olive, 2016). Around the world, organizations like Greenpeace took multi-lateral action on issues like whaling and began collaborating with other agencies. In some ways, it was the work of NGOs that laid the groundwork for the influx of market-based environmentalism and campaigns yet to come (Doern et al., 2015).

- **1960s-1980s.** During this period, NGOs and other actors were also engaged in a constant struggle to hold political capital and engage in decision-making at the municipal, provincial, and federal levels. The early environmental movement was focused predominantly on nature and conservation, but this later evolved into broader concerns on climate change, human health, and the crisis of industrial capitalism (Doern et al., 2015; Olive, 2016). This slow shift overlapped with the energy crisis associated with the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) in the 1970s and, again, increased public awareness about energy (oil) volatility (Doern et al., 2015). It was also a period of increased litigation on the climate and the introduction of new environmental policy, such as the *National Environmental Protection Act* (NEPA) in the United States. Additionally, as related to the private market, there was

  > the ostensibly opening up of previously closed policy networks where businesses and governments dominated decision-making [during this time]….This change, aligning with the ideas of sustainable development in the 1987 Brundtland report,

> saw the rise of numerous roundtables and multi-stakeholder processes that sought to address tensions between economic growth and social and environmental outcomes (Doern et al., 2015, 302-306).

The shift of environmental debates *away* from the halls of government and into the public arena—through these engagement sessions with business, or, in the case of NGOS, into the media, at public events, and between advocacy groups—had a democratizing effect. In the case of forestry campaigns, it meant that "[p]ower in the international arena on this issue was tied less to political and material resources and more to *cultural* resources" (Pralle, 2003, 246, as cited in Doern et al., 2015, 308, emphasis added). [I will return to this idea of 'cultural' capital/resources in the context of public discourse later in this chapter.]

- **1990-2014.** As businesses began to have more influence in environmental decision-making and policy change [with what some have referred to as the "the markets pathway" (Berstein and Cashore, 2000, as cited in Doern et al., 2015, 309)], 'private governance' and co-regulation took hold as a strategy for increased sector-level influence in Canadian environmental policy. From mining to organic agriculture, public-private partnerships and private-sector influence on environmental regulations became a new norm (Doern et al., 2015).

Since 2014, the landscape of Canadian environmental policy has continued to evolve and respond to national and international pressures. In 2015, Justin Trudeau was elected as the Prime Minister of Canada with an ambitious environmental policy plan. Earlier that year, Rachel Notley was elected as the Premier of Alberta—ending 44 years of continuous Conservative leadership in the province—on a platform to implement the Climate Leadership Plan (CLP) (Bratt, 2025). These political shifts led to the introduction of innovative carbon pricing systems and other environmental commitments (Bratt, 2025), and they coincided with other international efforts (like the 2015 Paris Climate Agreement).

However, the election of Donald Trump as President of the United States stalled some international momentum. From 2016-2020, and upon his re-election in 2024, the United States has taken a more isolationist stance on economic affairs and environmental regulation. Indeed, the executive order to remove the United States from the 2015 Paris Agreement and the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change was very explicit in its emphasis on the economy:

> The United States *must grow its economy and maintain jobs* for its citizens while playing a leadership role in global efforts to protect the environment. Over decades, with the help of sensible policies that *do not encumber private-sector activity*, the United States has simultaneously grown its economy, raised worker wages, increased energy production, reduced air and water pollution, and reduced greenhouse gas emissions. The United States' successful track record of *advancing both economic and environmental objectives should be a model for other countries…* (The White House, 2025a, emphasis added).

This recent move to withdraw from international climate efforts contrasts with a rich history of environmental activism and planning by the United Nations [including the ongoing Conference of the Parties (COPs), the Montreal Protocol (1987), commitments by the UN Environmental Programme, and the Brundtland Report (1987), to name a few].

In the following section, I explore the Brundtland Report (United Nations, 1987) in greater detail. As the first report to introduce the concept of SD, and as the influencing force behind other important Canadian legislation [e.g., the *Green Plan* (1990)], the impact of this Report is widespread. In particular, how SD was defined, operationalized, and understood by readers after the release of the Brundtland Report is important to understand how SD became co-opted by the private sector.

The Brundtland Report

Our Common Future, later known as the Brundtland Report, was the first major publication to champion 'environmental sustainable development' in international policy fora (Mulligan, 2018; Olive, 2016). Commissioned by the United Nations' World Commission on Environment and Development, it was published by a team led by Dr. Gro Harlem Brundtland in 1987. It outlined ambitious and meaningful goals like poverty eradication, conscious investment and development, and increased environmental protection (United Nations, 1987), but the grounding concept of the report, SD, was viewed by some scholars as "strongly anthropocentric" (Olive, 2016, 87). Nevertheless, SD became part of the "worldwide discourse" on environmentalism, and the ideas were taken up by policymakers in Canada as part of Prime Minister Brian Mulroney's celebrated *Green Plan* (1990) (Olive, 2016, 87).

Created three years after the Brundtland Report, the *Green Plan* (1990) was a $3-billion plan to increase federal spending on environmental protections and entrench the principles of SD in the Canadian political landscape (Olive, 2016). However, the money was never spent, and Mulrooney's ambitious plan to expand environmental protections was sidelined by a wave of neoliberal policies and budget cuts (Olive, 2016).

In the decade following Mulrooney's strategy, the federal government passed a new Act (i.e., *Federal Sustainable Development Act*, S.C. 2008, c. 33) as part of revived efforts to institutionalize SD (Toner and Meadowcroft, 2009). This Act necessitated the creation of Sustainable Development Strategies every three years (Government of Canada, 2022; Toner and Meadowcroft, 2009), and was a marker of some federal progress in implementing SD. Now in its fifth iteration (2022-2026), the latest report is the *first time* that all three pillars of sustainable development — social, environmental, and economic — have been considered and included in the reporting (Government of Canada, 2022). The new Strategy offers a fairly comprehensive overview of the federal government's alignment with each of the SDGs, and it recognizes that SD is a "continually evolving concept" (Government of Canada, 2022, 19).

However, despite these modest bureaucratic steps, the implementation of an *effective* SD agenda continues to be an elusive goal. This is, in part, due to various structural barriers: multi-generational planning is challenging in democracies, federalism creates jurisdictional complexity, and the Canadian electoral system (i.e., first-past-the-post) means that more progressive, environmentally minded representation (like the Green Party of Canada) cannot secure any relative power (Olive, 2016; Toner and Meadowcroft, 2009). Considering these challenges, any *change* in environmental policy or government strategy has been difficult to achieve.

This is despite the fact that the original ideas of SD were rooted in an imperative for *change* from the status quo, based on new socio-political, economic and environmental goals in the Brundtland Report (Toner and Meadowcroft, 2009; United Nations, 1987). However, as demonstrated in the case of the *Green Plan* and Canadian SD policy, *change* is, of course, a momentous task in the face of structural barriers like those highlighted. There is also the fact that those who *plan the economy* and those who *plan the environment* are so often separated from one another in the bureaucracy.

In the past, the very ideas of 'the economy' and 'the environment' were not seen as inter-dependent. By highlighting this and calling for their integration, Toner and Meadowcroft (2009) argue that the Brundtland Report (1987) "got to the heart of why bureaucratic inertia is such a powerful barrier to sustainable development" (86). Indeed, SD

> policies were intended to address the root causes of the problems by altering the corporate and governmental decision-making processes that triggered the unsustainable practices of human systems (Toner and Meadowcroft, 2009, 77).

The original idea of SD was to “alter…the ‘quality’ of growth so that change leads to authentic social progress” (Toner and Meadowcroft, 2009, 78) [e.g., in the introduction of the Brundtland Report, the lead author writes, “What is needed now is a new era of economic growth - growth that is forceful and at the same time socially and environmentally sustainable” (United Nations, 1987, 7)]. However, as I will demonstrate throughout this thesis, there has been very little, if any, dramatic change in corporate and governmental decision-making concerning the environment. I argue that this is, in part, due to the foundations and operationalization of SD (as it was initially presented in the Brundtland Report [United Nations, 1987]).

Despite outlining a strong commitment to the principles of social and environmental sustainability, the Brundtland Report framed the goals in explicit economic and pro-growth terms:

> Our report…is not a prediction of ever increasing environmental decay, poverty, and hardship in an ever more polluted world among ever decreasing resources. We see instead the possibility for a new era of economic growth, one that must be based on policies that sustain and expand the environmental resource base… (United Nations, 1987, Introduction, Section IV.3).

Therefore, when presented with a commitment to both “sustain *and expand*” (Section IV.3, emphasis added), the language of ‘sustainability’ in this context seems somewhat contradictory. The original *Green Plan* (1990) in Canada mirrored this emphasis on the economy. In the introduction of Mulroney’s report, the authors write that

> The Brundtland report quickly captured the world's imagination with the concept of sustainable development. [... It] is described, in general, as activity [sic] in which the environment is fully incorporated into the economic decision-making process as a forethought, not an afterthought…. That approach offers genuine hope of economic development without environmental decline. We Canadians know from our own

> experience that *economic growth is essential if we are to enjoy the services to which we have become accustomed.* [...] Yet our diminishing pool of environmental assets will simply not support more of the resource-hungry kind of prosperity that dominates in developed nations.[5] The promise of sustainable development is that economic development can and must be sustained by the environment (Environment Canada, 1990, 4-5, emphasis added).

In that excerpt, the emphasis on economic development and growth is clear. While the authors acknowledge that the developed world is largely responsible for ongoing environmental decline [with inclinations toward "resource-hungry…prosperity (5)], this recognition is done without any meaningful action toward *limiting* the consumption of goods and services to "which we [as Canadians] have become accustomed" (4)). These intricate dynamics of 'blame' (as per Stone, 1989), denial, and hypocrisy are explored further in relation to environmental policy and (in)action in Chapter 3.

Ultimately, in this thesis, I am interested in what I believe is the central tension in the Brundtland Report (1987) and related policies like the Green Plan (1990): Can we sustain and maintain current levels of energy production and standards of living, while also expanding our capacity to produce, consume, and develop? I argue that this paradox has, in fact, not yet been successful, nor will the model of SD be able to address this structural failure.

To explore this further, I will examine the various models and conceptualizations of sustainability and extend this discussion from the practical (policy) implications of SD to its

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5 The original concept of 'sustainable *development*' can have different meanings, and as Olive (2016) writes [*continued on next page*]

> What sustainable "development" means domestically in Canada is not always clear, as Canada is already considered a developed country. However, even a country categorized as industrialized or developed continues to experience economic and industrial growth or development. (87)

As such, throughout this thesis, 'development' (in the context of SD) is understood to be a synonym for economic and industrial *growth* and *expansion,* not necessarily an evolution from developing to developed state status.

grounding theories. In the following section, I draw on Mulligan's (2018) analysis of sustainability models and use Hawke's (2001) 'four-pillar model' to explore how the 'cultural' dimension of sustainability can be integrated into existing models.

Models of Sustainability

The foundational academic models of sustainability, all of which invoke ideas of social, ecological, and economic balance and interconnectedness, have many similarities. In Mulligan's (2018) overview of sustainability models, he highlights the differences between Elkington's (1994) 'triple bottom line' model, Hawkes' (2001) 'four pillars model,' Giddings et al.'s (2002) 'nested diagram' model, and the 'Social Ecology' model (Mulligan, 2018). As we see in Table 1, each model was designed with different value sets and policy priorities in mind, but they relate to a common goal of sustainable practices in policy and society.

Table 1. Overview of Sustainability Models

Overview of the Sustainability Model	**Unique Feature or Focus Area**	**Potential Limitations**
The 'triple bottom line' model by Elkington (1994). This model features an interconnected display of the *social, economic,* and *environmental* realms (Mulligan, 2018).	This was the first model to demonstrate the inter-reliance of the environment and other social priorities (Elkington, 1994; Mulligan, 2018).	The partially overlapping circles in the Venn diagram implied, to some scholars, that the relationship between the variables was weak and not entirely interdependent. The use of economic-based language like 'triple bottom line' also implies the superiority of business and development (Mulligan, 2018).

Hawkes' (2001) 'four pillars model' expanded on Elkington's (1994) model by adding a *cultural* dimension. Hawkes also imagines each dimension as a 'pillar,' rather than as a circle within a Venn diagram.	This model was the first to propose that the context and culture that exist within and around sustainability priorities are integral to its design and important to consider (Hawkes, 2001; Mulligan, 2018).	This model, in reframing the various dimensions as stand-alone *pillars*, does not visually demonstrate the interconnected or interdependent nature of the variables.
Giddings et al.'s (2002) 'nested diagram' model attempted to reimagine Elkington's (1994) model by displaying each of the three dimensions—social, economic, and environmental—as "nested" within one another.	This model flipped our understanding from three distinct factors for sustainability to integral components. The model shows rings around one another, with *economics* at the centre, *social* surrounding it, and the *environment* encapsulating it all (Giddings et al., 2002; Mulligan, 2018).	The challenge that Mulligan (2018) highlights with this model is that economics is at the centre or core of the model, and everything else extends from it. This implies that our modes of production must still dictate our relationship with the environment.
The 'Social Ecology' model, as presented in Mulligan's (2018) overview, aims to combine the previous models. In keeping with the Venn diagram model, the design consists of a social, environmental, and personal dimension. The *social* is adapted to include both economic, cultural, and political aspects of sustainability.	This is the only model presented in Mulligan's (2018) overview that highlights the role of the personal. By combining various dimensions into the 'social,' the author acts "on the assumption that economic development needs to be geared toward social wellbeing" (Mulligan, 2018, 93).	By equating *personal* choice and action to the *environmental* and (increasingly complex) *social* categories, some nuance in the concept of sustainability—and its inherent political and social goals and implications—may be lost.

For this project, I will be drawing on Jon Hawkes' (2001) four pillars of sustainability model. As highlighted in Table 1, his work expanded the 'triple bottom line' (Elkington, 1994) model to include *culture* as an equally important 'pillar' of sustainability (Hawks, 2001). In doing so, he argues that

> community wellbeing is built on a shared sense of purpose; values inform action; a healthy society depends, first and foremost, on open, lively and influential cultural activity amongst the communities within it; [and] sustainability can only be achieved when it becomes an enthusiastically embraced part of our culture (Hawkes, 2001, 25).

Using Hawke's (2001) work as my grounding model, the motivation for this thesis is to explore how and why SD has not been realized, and through which *cultural* adaptations and policy tools genuine sustainability could be achieved.

The Cultural Problem

Evidently, the variables of 'culture' and political discourse are important to consider. It should also be telling that Dr. Michael Mann—a renowned climate scientist at the University of Pennsylvania—has recently published two books on science communication, *The New Climate War* (2021) and *Our Fragile Moment* (2023), which are more focused on combating mis- and disinformation about the climate crisis than on the science itself. Through social media and in popular culture, scientists like Dr. Mann are engaged in the cultural problem that is social and governmental inaction. From op-eds to cameos in mega-blockbusters like *Don't Look Up* (2021), the fight for any meaningful reorientation toward sustainability in policy agendas and civil society has often taken place (at least recently, or so it seems) in cultural arenas.

As anthropologist Elizabeth Marino describes, "the 'climate change debate' in America [has become] polarized as a proxy culture war and…a debate about development versus environmental protection" (Marino, 2015, 6). Therefore, to understand the debate, we must first understand the culture. Hawkes' (2001) assessment that political and social responses to climate change have become deeply intertwined with our *values* creates, for him, two social imperatives to achieve sustainability: the entrenchment of a sustainable culture and direct cultural action. With this in mind, a qualitative study on the barriers to the implementation of a sustainability agenda would be incomplete without a methodological approach that emphasizes and creates an awareness of the cultural context, identifies key actors capable of shifting this culture (or, in Hawkes' perspective, those capable of cultural *action*), and speaks to this desire for socio-political change more generally. As I will explore more in Chapter 4, this is how I arrived at the following methodological parameters:

1. Youth, as potential forces of social and political change, are included as interview participants (as per their roles as new sustainability professionals);
2. The approach to the interviews is explorative and open-ended; and
3. 'Culture' is explored at different scalar levels, such as in corporate and governmental settings.

Ultimately, this project follows a multi-methods design to explore questions of sustainability and governance. In utilizing methods that create an awareness of political and social context (such as participant-observation, as explored in Chapter 4), the design of this project reflects a conviction on behalf of the researcher to be reflexive, thorough, and inquisitive. This is further explored in the next section on reflexivity and positionality in research.

Reflexivity and Positionality in Research

"Everybody has a story about how they arrived and keep arriving at radical politics. [...] It's useful to share the ways we become politicised if only because it helps politicise others."

(Olufemi, 2020, p. 1)

This thesis is built upon years of formal and informal work that I have done in 'youth climate action' spaces. By engaging in the process of reflexivity in research, which is broadly defined as "a set of continuous, collaborative, and multifaceted practices through which researchers self-consciously critique, appraise, and evaluate how their subjectivity and context influence the research processes" (Olmos-Vega et al., 2022, 242), I seek to reflect upon my own biases, perspectives, and knowledge as part of this research project and use these perspectives to engage in a deeper, more thoughtful analysis. In doing so, I draw inspiration from Sarah Homan's guidelines and framing of positionality in research at The Equality Institute (Homan, 2023).

First, where I am from

I was born and raised in Lethbridge, Alberta, and I have family roots in the Badlands near Camrose, Alberta and north of Peace River, Alberta. I come from a line of White, European homesteaders who settled from the United Kingdom, Ireland, and Germany in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. All chose to settle and build their lives in Alberta, and on both sides of my family, we are deeply connected to Treaty 6, 7, and 8 land as uninvited guests.

Many members of my extended family are environmentalists, even if that is not the label they may always choose for themselves. They care that their farming practices are sustainable, and that the land on which they hunt, quad, and have cook-outs is still there for future generations. In my immediate family, appreciation for the natural world was also central to my upbringing.

Despite being raised 'in the city' (...by Alberta standards), we spent weekends in National and Provincial parks, roaming the coulees, and exploring the mountains. All these experiences inform my present interest in strengthening environmental policy in Canada and mitigating the impacts of the climate crisis through policy.

Positionality and empathy for the position of others

As much as this thesis is focused on the discursive and literal *barriers* to change, it is also a story about youth leadership and *facilitators* of change. I have been in numerous spaces as a 'youth representative' on environmental issues over the years (from international advocacy as the Canadian youth advisor on Climate and Environment to the G7 in Japan, to sitting as the 'Environment Representative' on my local constituency association board for Alberta politics). However, in each space, there is always the hesitation—is this actually doing anything? When people talk about burnout in activism, youth disillusionment and frustration, or youth tokenism in consultation and organizational spaces, it is something that I, too, have experienced. So, when I share the results from the interviews with young sustainability professionals in this thesis, I hope my empathy for their position as activists (internal or external to the 'system') is reflected.

Ultimately, when I show up in different spaces, I carry many different identities and perspectives with me. The contrast of being interested in climate policy as an Albertan often comes up, and even in unrelated conversations, I have been called 'pipeline girl'. I also, as a woman and past youth representative to the United Nations' 66th Commission on the Status of Women, understand the gendered dimensions of the climate crisis and the need for climate justice. Additionally, as a young person, I have the benefit of some naivety when talking about the climate crisis; like many other young people, I want to see radical change when I participate in negotiations, advocacy, and community organizing, and I am interested in why progress is often so slow to achieve. All of these perspectives inform my ongoing work and the design of this thesis.

My experiences and training

Through my undergraduate training in political science, I have been taught to focus on *power*. I have been taught to critically examine who holds power, why, and what the structural conditions are which support the political, social, and economic norms. My training has provided me with literature and tools to investigate the problem of SD in unique ways, whether through policy analysis, the lens of structuralism, or in consideration of geopolitics.

However, my education in the Western tradition has also limited me in some ways; while an effort has been made throughout this thesis to incorporate different ways of knowing, including some Indigenous perspectives, my own thinking, training, and (most of my) reading on the subject of environmental policy and public discourse has been informed by Western, white, and settler colonial scholars. Therefore, as I move forward with my academic studies, I hope to learn more about—and put into practice—decolonial citational practices.

Ultimately, these different aspects of my identity—as a young person, a woman, a descendant of White settlers, an 'activist,' and a student—have informed the design of this project, the analysis, and the modelling and results.

I now turn back to the literature to explore some key themes in environmental policy as it relates to the central questions of my thesis.

CHAPTER 3: LITERATURE REVIEW

In this section, I provide a broad overview of the literature related to the central research question: *Is the model of sustainable development, as presented in the 1987 Brundtland Report,* effective? In doing so, I focus primarily on literature which discusses different paradigmatic approaches and discursive framings of the climate crisis, including different 'solutions' or responses (e.g., through policy, institutional reform, economic growth, etc.).

In this Chapter, *how* the issues are talked about (and by whom) is of central importance. Like the goal of my thesis (where I focus on SD as a *discursive* tool), I am interested in how different scholars talk about, write about, and think through environmental challenges, and who may disagree with one another.

At the core of this literature review, I argue that an awareness of the political economy of SD is important to understand the corporatization and commodification of SD. To understand how SD could be co-opted as a concept by the public and private sector to advance economic growth, we must first understand how ideas about the environment are formed, who takes responsibility (and blame) for such a crisis, and how this relates back to the welfare economics of the state.

Based on my main argument in this thesis that SD has been recommodified, entrenched in corporate sustainability culture, and embraced by young sustainability professionals as a tool to promote (un)sustainable development, this Chapter also introduces the necessary concepts and theoretical tools to make those claims. I introduce readers to Arne Naess' concept of Deep Ecology and the idea of (de)commodification, distinguish between anthropocentric and eco-centric approaches to environmentalism and environmental policy, and discuss theoretical tools to understand dynamics of power, blame, and responsibility in policymaking (e.g., per Stone, 1989).

I have taken this broad approach to help demonstrate the complexity of environmental policy and decision-making, as well as the wide variety of different 'solutions' to the climate crisis and theoretical approaches that have been proposed in the literature. To organize my research, I have grouped topics based on three themes. These are:

I. *Anthropocentrism versus Ecocentrism*. In this section, I am focused on perceptions of risk, the continuous quest for 'modernization,' and the perceptions of responsibility (and blame) as it relates to environmental policy. I focus on whether we should prioritize the needs of people or the environment when making policy decisions, the ethics of SD, and the challenges of creating policy that addresses capitalism and the economic growth imperative. I also discuss the power of framing and terminology, which connects back to the discourse/analytical frame of the thesis.

II. *Equity versus Equality in Environmentalism.* Next, I discuss the competing ideologies of critical feminism, universalism, and Deep Ecology as they relate to human-environment relations and (economic) development. This theoretical background is necessary to understand the (re/de)commodification trends of SD that are discussed at length in the later chapters, including the potential ethical challenges of universalist approaches to SD.

III. *Environment and the State*. Finally, I relate the theories of environmentalism back to state politics and the political economy of environmentalism. Using the province of Alberta as a case study, I discuss how the welfare state, economic growth and development, and political resistance to sustainability are all connected to broader concepts in environmental policy. This section helps to introduce topics that are discussed further in the interview results (Chapter 5), especially on the topic of *compromise* between environmental, economic, and socio-political priorities.

Ultimately, each of these sections speaks of a different aspect of the climate debate and reveals a new cultural and discursive challenge to achieving meaningful climate action. They build on the context outlined in Chapter 2, including the overview of 'SD' as a concept and the brief history of environmentalism in Canada, to shed light on the variety of ways in which environmental policy has been imagined, created, implemented, and rejected.

This background also helps support my argument of TINA[6]—there is no alternative—in how state citizens or young sustainability professionals can imagine the future of climate policy. Given the recommodification of the SD agenda and the co-optation of this policy concept by the private sector, it is difficult to imagine any 'solutions' that challenge the status quo or work to implement the ideas and theories presented in this chapter (such as Deep Ecology or environmental feminism) in any meaningful way. Therefore, this literature review is about the barriers and possibilities for socio-political *change* (in ideas, policy, discourse, etc.) to address the climate crisis.

I: Anthropocentrism versus Ecocentrism

Whether framed in anthropological or ecological terms, and no matter how or for whom it is considered to impact, climate change poses a significant *risk*. In this section, I ask: Who is responsible for implementing effective environmental policy and addressing climate risks? How are these risks even understood? I briefly explore the concept of 'risk society,' the politics of denial and blame in the context of the climate crisis, and how causality and blame are understood (and

[6] The phrase 'There Is No Alternative' (TINA) was a slogan used by Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher in the United Kingdom to describe the dominance of neoliberal capitalism in 1980s (Flanders, 2013). It is an interesting acronym, and throughout this thesis, I occasionally reference TINA to refer to the inability of the state (and its people, policymakers, etc.) to imagine any alternative to the present world order and the contemporary environmental/political discourse. [This application of TINA (to describe political resistance broadly, rather than the legacy of PM Thatcher) was also used by my co-presenters and I in a 2025 presentation at the Alternate Routes conference (Whiting et al., 2025).] Therefore, while this draws on the legacy of PM Thatcher's catchphrase and the supposed 'permanence' of neoliberal capitalism, my use of 'TINA' is this thesis is intended to be broad.

manipulated) within public policy more generally. I then discuss some differences between anthropocentrism and ecocentrism in the context of this thesis.

Understanding Risk in the Modern World

First, a theoretical understanding of the risks posed by the climate crisis is important to consider. Ulrich Beck's work on *Risk Society* provides one such perspective. When placed into a contemporary context by Burgess and others, they argue that

> the major threats that society faces are no longer primarily external, coming from without – most obviously as natural hazards. Instead they are produced as unintended consequences of modernisation itself, most palpably in the form of climate change produced by human activity. (Burgess et al., 2017, 1)

This framing helps readers understand some of the threats posed by "self-produced risks" in society and 'our' ability to manage those increased risks [with 'our' understood broadly, including actors like the risk management/regulation industry, or society more generally] (Power 2007, 21, as cited in Burgess et al., 2017, 1). It provides the context for an anthropological framing of risk in society and the threats posed *by* humans *to* humans in the context of emerging challenges (such as the climate crisis).

Beck argues that the institutions and policies which seek to guard us from these human-made risks are, also, of human creation, and are therefore subject to the same flawed structural conditions which necessitated risk management strategies in the first place (Burgess et al., 2017). Therefore, given the scope and scale of new-age risks (like climate change), society is limited by our response/risk management tools.

We are also in a 'risk society' era where there is widespread distrust of public authorities, corporations, and science (Burgess et al., 2017). Using the example of a public health crisis, the ‘mad cow disease’ in the 1990s, the authors argue that “[t]he predominant response to new publicly articulated uncertainties was *denial*, as government tended to reject the possibility of the disease affecting humans” (Burgess et al., 2017, 2, emphasis added). It is this theme of denial and distrust—in the context of new ‘uncertainties’—that I will return to in the context of Mann’s (2021) work on corporate denialism and resistance to climate policy, as well as Stone’s (1989) work on blame in policymaking, in this literature review.

In the third component of this literature review (i.e., Environment and State), I will discuss some perspectives on growth, post-growth societies, and the implications for the welfare state. First, though, on the topic of the risks of modernization, Anders Hayden’s (2014) *When Green Growth is Not Enough* provides helpful context on the topic of *ecological* modernization and the discursive battles that give way to vastly different policy outcomes.

Hayden’s (2014 Model: Exploring BAU, EM, and Sufficiency Perspectives of Environmentalism

Based on corporate, governmental, and individual perspectives on how to ‘best’ respond to climate change, Hayden (2014) outlines three core paradigms that he observed in his research: (i) business-as-usual (BAU) approaches, (ii) ecological modernization (EM) [otherwise known as ‘green growth’] views, and (iii) sufficiency perspectives. The first paradigm, BAU, prioritizes economic growth and development regardless of environmental goals and objectives (Hayden, 2014). BAU sees climate action as antithetical to the goals of capitalism, capital accumulation, and state development, and those who have this view will want to maintain the status quo.

In contrast, the EM approach recognizes that the economy is interdependent with the environment, and as such, environmental goals must be considered *in the context of* economic growth. Similarly, ‘green growth,’ as a sort of synonym for EM, refers to ‘sustainable’ or otherwise environmentally-conscious social, economic, and environmental development.[7] In 2012, 'green growth' was the grounding concept behind the Rio 20+ Conference on Sustainable Development, and it has been praised by the likes of former UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon and former US Vice President Al Gore (Hayden, 2014). Hayden's (2014) core argument, however, is that 'green growth' may not be enough to address the climate crisis. Instead, he outlines a third paradigm—sufficiency—which is "not necessarily anti-capitalist, [but] …represents a more significant challenge to the current socio-economic order, including the consumerist culture that sustains it ideologically" (Hayden, 2014, 5).

One of the main differences between EM and sufficiency is that the latter proposes systemic upheaval, rather than systemic modification. Both propose a decoupling between the economy and eco-social welfare, but "[w]hile EM seeks to decouple economic growth and environmental impacts, sufficiency advocates reframe the challenge as one of decoupling well-being from commodity consumption" (Hayden, 2014, 24).

There are also practical examples of each paradigm, and there is considerable variability within them. For instance, proponents of the BAU model may focus on geo-engineering solutions to avoid emissions cuts [which is a fairly advanced, nearly EM-type strategy] or they may advance arguments that "downplay or deny [the] seriousness of environmental problems" (12) [which is

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[7] Hayden's (2014) note on the definition of SD is interesting, and it is worth including in full. He says that

> Considerable debate exists over the meaning of "sustainable development," but most formulations of the concept share EM's belief that there is no inherent conflict between economic growth and environmental sustainability. However, different emphases exist in the EM and sustainable development literatures. EM has tended (at least until recently) to focus on the global North and to lack the emphasis on social equity that is prominent in much of the sustainable development debate (see, e.g., Dryzek 2013) [Hayden, 2014, 463, Note 2, Chapter 1].

With this definition in mind, the second section of my literature review will focus more on debates of equity versus equality in the context of environmentalism, before I explore different policy responses (to SD as a concept more generally) in section three.

the most basic rejection of climate science], depending on where they are on the spectrum of BAU responses (Hayden, 2014).

Next, EM enthusiasts may vary between *weak* ecological modernization [e.g., techno-solutionism or a strong belief in the ability of the market system to 'solve' environmental problems] and *strong* ecological modernization [e.g., institutional reform, changes to urban planning and urban sprawl, etc.] (Hayden, 2014). However, it is important to note that institutional reform will *not* necessarily address the risks posed by the climate crisis, as the institutions, even in a reformed state, will still be constructed under the socio-economic conditions which originally gave rise to those same risks (Burgess et al., 2017). Proponents of the 'sufficiency' perspective would likely agree with this assertion, and depending on where they lie on the spectrum of sufficiency-grounded responses to the climate crisis, may call for critiques of the model of economic growth or the upending of civilization itself (Hayden, 2014).

However, the question remains: what is to be done about the climate crisis, and who should be held responsible? If we hold that climate change is a non-issue (as per the BAU paradigm), then responsibility lies with no one, and businesses and governments can delay any meaningful investment into solutions (see also Mann, 2021). This would have serious economic, social, and environmental impacts. In contrast, if the sufficiency perspective is used to inform public policy, radical and expensive social changes will need to be implemented—a process that may also be subject to delays and blame-avoidance.

Today, EM has become the "dominant political discourse" (Hayden, 2014, 16), but there are still questions of responsibility, especially when strong ecological modernization calls for economic, social, and political change. As such, pro-growth paradigms continue to be favoured. Hayden (2014) writes,

> Given the centrality of growth to the worldview of modern societies, not to mention the workings of capitalism (or at least any variation of capitalism known so far), it is no surprise that government, business, and other mainstream actors favour pro-growth, EM responses to climate change – at least once they move beyond a BAU perspective. (5)

Ultimately, this framework (i.e., BAU, EM, and sufficiency) is useful to understand the nature of the discourse that emerges in the results of this thesis. Hayden's book is also useful to understand the strength of pro-growth responses to climate change, and why a pro-growth framing of SD has been successful in the public and private sectors. The issue of political *responsibility*, though, is still in question. In the next section, I explore some perspectives on the politics of blame and avoidance as it relates to environmental policymaking.

Politics of Blame and Responsibility for the Crisis

In Chapter 2, I reflected on Dr. Michael E. Mann's recent publications and the imperative to speak to, and help evolve, *cultural* understandings of the climate crisis. In *The New Climate War* (2021), Mann outlines the strategies of large corporations (and their political allies) looking to delay any meaningful response to the climate crisis. He writes that those who wish to prevent or stall climate action undertake different types of messaging campaigns as climate change "*downplayers, deflectors, dividers, delayers*, and *doomers*" [like Hayden's (2014) BAU paradigm] (Mann 2021, 45). In doing so, Mann (2021) argues that these corporations often utilize strategies of blame and manipulation to protect their business interests. By mapping this new-age war of dis- and misinformation, Mann (2021) reminds us that there are well-funded, corporate campaigns to shift the responsibility for the climate crisis to the individual and *away* from corporations. This means that creative (and deceptive) messaging can have a significant influence over the adoption and implementation of meaningful climate policies, and it reflects the considerable power that *private* corporations have over the *public* agenda. The role of this corporate power is important, and I will revisit this idea in Chapter 5.

Next, to dig deeper into the theoretical underpinnings of blame and deception in public policy, and to extend Mann's (2021) ideas of public/private 'doomism' and 'delay,' I examine Deborah Stone's (1989) theoretical work on causality and blame.

Stone's (1989) Framework and Applications for Environmental Policy

In her outline of the typology of causal stories, Stone writes that there are two fundamental frameworks that we use to interpret and understand the world: natural and social. The first framework, which is rooted in environmental and 'scientific' framings of the world, examines phenomena that occur independently of human intervention. As such, she argues that people often perceive the natural world to be the "realm of fate and accident" (Stone 1989, 283). The second framework, the social, is believed to be the result of will and choice. The framework assumes human agency, and "[b]ecause we understand causation in the social sphere as related to purpose," (Stone 1989, 283) we view manipulation, intervention, persuasion, and influence as worthwhile in the pursuit of change.

As per Stone's argument, in the natural world, we can only respond, mitigate, and prepare; any sense of control or "influence has no place" (Stone 1989, 283). Yet, seeing these two frameworks as distinct may be counterproductive to meaningful climate action and policy; it does not allow for a 'blurring' of social and environmental problems, nor an acknowledgment of the interdependence of the two realms. It also limits the potential for meaningful interventions in the climate crisis, given that the so-called 'randomness' of the natural world (which, through this framework, could include extreme weather, wildfires, and melting ice caps—all of which are made worse by *anthropogenic* climate change [and is, therefore, not random]).

Nevertheless, the capacity for intervention (even in a minority of policy problems) implies the possibility of some policy choices. So, guided by the two frameworks (i.e., natural and social), Stone (1989) provides us with language to describe policy problems and causes. In her model, she cross-references *actions* (whether they be 'unguided' or 'purposeful') and *consequences* ('intended' and 'unintended') within these frameworks (Stone 1989, 285). For example, when actions or policies are purposeful and the consequences are as intended, the actions contribute to our sense of satisfaction and form the domain of "rational action" (Stone 1989, 285). These actions contribute to policymakers' belief in cause and effect; a decision was made, and the consequences were reasonable and predictable. Conversely, 'inadvertent causes,' through a neoliberal lens, refers to the willful ignorance of cause and effect and infers purposeful action but unintended consequences. Here, the victim is blamed for their (in)action. Other relationships in this quadrant model also exist (e.g., unguided actions and unintended actions), but for the purpose of this discussion, this model and its strict boundaries appear to be insufficient to explain or create policy that addresses the complexity of human-environment relations.

Instead, we can look at Stone's (1989) three models of complex, intersecting causes: (i) complex systems, (ii) institutional causes, and (iii) historical or structural causes. Each of these gives us a different policy analysis tool. The idea of 'complex systems' recognizes the 'messiness' of structures, influence, and choices in the social world and rejects the idea that blame can be easily attributed to one person or event for any one particular outcome. 'Institutional causes' highlight the overlapping and intersecting responsibilities of many organizations and institutions in any given social problem, problematizing the idea that problems can, or will ever, have simple answers.

Structural models, by extension, “hold that social patterns tend to reproduce themselves” (Stone 1989, 288) under the social conditions (e.g., capitalist or communist) in which they exist. This means that outcomes are impacted by structures; therefore, a change in outcome would constitute a change in structure. This represents an interesting perspective on policy change and limitations to policy innovation.

However, Stone (1989) cautions that causes (or policy outcomes) attributed to any of these complex models

> are in some sense analogous to accidental or natural cause[s]. They postulate a kind of innocence, in that no identifiable actor can exert control over the whole system or web of interactions. Without overarching control, there can be no purpose and no responsibility. (Stone 1989, 289)

From this perspective, the structure (which, in this case of this thesis, is capitalism) is framed to be as random or uncontrollable as nature itself. Therefore, this framing works to uphold ideas that climate change is beyond ‘our’ (i.e., corporations’ or governments’ or individuals’) control. Rather than recognizing that the climate crisis is admittedly complex and is a result of human activity (that could, holding all other variables constant, be ‘stopped’ if the collective will were there), Stone’s (1989) theories reflect many challenges in assigning causality, blame, and responsibility for the climate crisis through policy.

Ultimately, Stone’s (1989) framework provides us with one lens to examine and make sense of policy problems. Of course, there are other ways of seeing the world that are not nearly as binary (i.e., just ‘social’ or ‘natural’), but anthropocentric models are often the most conventional or widely accepted framing in Western society. With this view, humans dominate the natural world; we extract resources for profit, impose systems of environmental management, and buy and sell land as a commodity.

Anthropocentrism – A Continuation of Blame Politics?

A paradigm of anthropocentrism is further reflected in the concept of 'ecosystem services' (Balvanera et al. 2017), which, itself, is grounded in neoliberal assumptions about the environment. While progressive in its recognition that humans rely on natural processes and are "deeply embedded within ecosystems" (Balvanera et al. 2017, 40), the concept of 'environmental services' seeks to categorize all resources based on their role and potential for profit. Broadly defined as the "benefits people obtain from ecosystems" (Balvanera et al. 2017, 42), the categories of services are: (i) provisioning (i.e., goods with market value), (ii) regulating (i.e., natural tools for climate mitigation), (iii) cultural (e.g., tourism, natural beauty, etc.), and (iv) supporting (i.e., fundamental environmental processes, such as photosynthesis or nutrient cycling).

However, the idea that each of these services could (and should) be monetized, including cultural services, and derive value from their relationship to humans' economic and social welfare, is a Western and colonial perspective of the environment. Even the idea that the natural world is—or should be—*in service to* humans (given the term 'ecosystem *services*') reinforces ideas of anthropocentrism and domination of humans over the environment. Therefore, in the context of SD, it becomes easier to justify continual extraction and exploitation for human benefit (i.e., economic *development*) at the expense of the planet.

In the following section, I provide a brief overview of alternative and more eco-centric ways of conceptualizing our relationship to the natural world.

Indigenous perspective: a challenge to dominant worldviews

The book *Blackfoot Physics* (2005) by F. D. Peat, which was recommended by my colleague, Breanna Little Mustache, explores Indigenous and Western worldviews and science. In the opening chapter, Peat highlights the similarities between quantum theory—a Western scientific theory that assumes the holistic relation of all things—and Indigenous worldviews on human-environment relations, wherein “there is no seperation between individual and society, between matter and spirit, between one of us and the whole of nature” (Peat, 2005, 6). He continues,

> Indigenous science teaches that all that exists is an expression of relationships, alliances, and balances between what, for lack of better words, we could call energies, powers, or spirits… [In Western science,] Ecologists stress that we must attend to the basic interconnectedness of nature and to the sensitivity and complexity of natural systems. This has always been the approach of Indigenous peoples. (Peat, 2005, 7)

Considering these ideas, perhaps my title of ‘anthropocentrism versus ecocentrism’ for this section is itself a misnomer, for the concepts presented in *Blackfoot Philosophy* (2005) present an entirely eco-anthro-egalitarian (and non-hierarchical) view of all relations in Indigenous sciences, not an ‘eco-*centric*’ one. Knowing this, I have kept the title if only to demonstrate the deep-seated ideas of hierarchy that inform our Western understandings of risk, modernization, and the economy—and how far we have yet to go if Canadian environmental policy is to truly embrace (both discursively and tangibly) more egalitarian forms of human-environmental relations, as informed by Indigenous sciences and reconciliatory processes.

Another example of non-anthropocentrism comes from Dr. Leroy Little Bear (Little Bear, 2025). On May 13, 2025, Dr. Little Bear presented on the Buffalo Treaty to staff members at the Prentice Institute for Global Population and Economy. As a research assistant with the Institute, I was able to listen to this presentation and learn more about the Treaty’s efforts to unite community partners, Indigenous Nations, and organizations like ours for ongoing socio-political reconciliation and the return of buffalo to the land. Interestingly, Dr. Little Bear discussed the importance of the buffalo as a "keystone species" within Indigenous Plains cultures *and* the natural environment, including the long tradition of multi-species relationism in Indigenous cultures on the Plains (Little

Bear, 2025). This presentation helped me increase my understanding of what eco-centrism/harmony can look like *in practice*, whether through community building or policy change. It also helped me reflect on the differences between equity and equality-based approaches to environmentalism.

In the next section of the literature review, I build on this discussion of ‘equity versus equality’ and explore how it relates to some of the tensions in Western philosophy and feminism in relation to environmentalism. In doing so, I also reflect on the limitations of such approaches in the context of Indigenous perspectives.

II: Equity versus Equality in Environmentalism

From the earliest stages of my research, the theoretical tensions between universalism, radical ecology (and Deep Ecology), and feminism—each as a way to conceptualize our relationship to the natural world—were self-evident. In this section, I explore each of these theories and the complicated relationship between them.

First, I will provide a brief overview of universalism as it is presented in the social policy literature from Beland, Marchildon, and Prince (2019). When I started this thesis, I was attracted to the concept of social universalism and how it could relate, if at all, to environmental policy. This also led me to Arne Naess’ work on Deep Ecology (Naess, 2005; Zimmerman, 1994), which is grounded in an ‘equality’ approach to human-environment relations. As I will explore further, his argument on the necessity of self-dissolution into the natural world to become a whole and equal participant in the environment provides an interesting foil to other, more ‘equity-based’ models of human-environment relations.

I conclude this section with a brief overview of some theoretical critiques of universalism and Deep Ecology, drawing on the work of Zoe Todd and others to provide some perspectives on equity-based approaches to environmentalism and policymaking.

Brief Overview of Universalism

In their article, *Understanding Universalism*, Beland et al. (2019) provide a comprehensive overview of the concepts of universalism, universality, and universalization in Canadian social policy. Broadly speaking, the concepts refer to the ideology, governing tool, and process of institutional change, respectively, related to the idea that social welfare benefits should be available to individuals "based on citizenship and residency, [...not] income or means" (Beland et al., 2019, 1). The idea is that *everyone* should have access to opportunities and programs that support their health, education, retirement, and more—but this comes with a few caveats. Presently, the concept is somewhat limited in its understanding of universality beyond traditional views of state-to-citizen exchange. Theoretically, then, one could imagine an adapted form of universalism—where equal 'benefits' (i.e., public funding or services) target not just residents, but also the natural environment. This is explored in more detail later.

Prince (2019) extends this definition and outlines the three core features of universality (i.e., universalism as a policy tool): (i) that programs have universal design features (i.e., do apply to everyone indiscriminately); (ii) formal legislation exists; and (iii) there are impacts of the universal policies on individuals, the market, and the broader social sphere. In particular, the 'impacts' range from a de-stigmatization of accessing services to the process of *decommodification*.

First proposed by Esping-Anderson, the concept of decommodification refers to the process of individuals having to rely *less* on the private sector for welfare (e.g., education, childcare, healthcare, assisted living, employment insurance, etc.) (Prince, 2019). My reading of Beland et al.'s work (2019), in the context of environmentalism, made me reflect on whether a prioritization of the 'decommodification' principle of universalism—even as an isolated concept, separate from that of universalism—has potential for climate action, despite the structural barriers of a "stratified market economy" (Prince, 2019, 20). I return to this idea in Chapter 6.

Brief Overview of Deep Ecology

Next, Arne Naess' (2005) discussion[8] of the Deep Ecology movement is an interesting theoretical model for 'effective' climate action, and it builds on ideas of decommodification. His seven-point model for Deep Ecology stands in opposition to the remarkably simple model of Shallow Ecology, which he argues is solely concerned with the "health and affluence of people in the developed countries" (Naess, 2005, 343). Deep Ecology, in contrast, is concerned with more relational perspectives of human and environmental well-being.

Nevertheless, both 'ecologies' are concerned, at least in part, with social welfare (albeit, in the case of Shallow Ecology, it is a far more exclusionary form). This marks a potential shift toward the integration of natural and social frameworks (as per Stone, 1989) in determining and legitimizing human agency in environmental or 'natural' issues.

In particular, Deep Ecology's second, fourth, and sixth principles (i.e., biospheric egalitarianism—at least in principle; anti-class posture; and complexity, not complication; respectively) are especially important in the context of this thesis (Naess, 2005, 343-345). For the

[8] His 2005 book chapter was intended to be a summary of previously published work from the 1970s and 80s.

second principle, Naess writes that the “attempt to ignore our dependence [on the environment] and to establish a master-slave role has contributed to the alienation of man from himself” (Naess, 2005, 344). By this measure, the climate crisis is a war of self-creation, and unrestricted resource extraction will continue to tear at the seams of our social and environmental realities. [This is similar to Ulrich Beck’s idea of risk society and the challenges of modernization (Burgess et al., 2017).] Moreover, principle four (i.e., to hold an anti-class posture), necessitates an alternate form of human-environment relations. It holds that, as a society, should we wish to look beyond classist, exclusionary understandings of our social and natural world, we need to shift toward a more symbiotic relationship with the environment and with each other. Lastly, the sixth principle favours the shift toward complex economies and social integration (Naess, 2005, 345), not reliance on single-industry prosperity.

Applying Naess’ framework through decommodification

An operationalization of the principles of decommodification, as envisioned by Naess and other proponents of Deep Ecology, involves a shift toward the self-realization of all beings and an integration of humans with the natural world (Zimmerman, 1994). Through self-realization, Naess argues that there is an inevitable dissolution of the boundaries between what is “I” and what is “it” to be used, bought, or sold (Zimmerman, 1994). This process of self-realization (i.e., developing a full awareness of one’s place in the world and one’s very being) would necessitate the elimination of the ‘self’ as a distinct entity. In doing so, all other beings and objects would no longer be objectified in contrast to the self, because the self no longer exists; thus, self-realization lends itself to the decommodification of all things. As seemingly the opposite of some imagined or ‘absolute’ form of commodification within a capitalist economy, this state of decommodification (as per my interpretation of Naess and others) also draws on universalist language and the ethics of indiscrimination. Essentially, under this system, we all become the same within a nonhierarchical, non-individualistic world of total decommodification.

There are, however, numerous critiques of universalist approaches and this paradigm of non-difference between all things—living and non-living. Some of these critiques are explored in the following section.

Brief Overview of Ecofeminism and Other Critical Theories

As I have begun to explore, universalism is, in theory, conducive to decommodification and Deep Ecology, because (just as the word suggests) it favours indiscriminate social policy. In theory, then, an application of universalism to environmental policy would not prioritize human goals over ecological balance, for everything would have equal (non-monetary) value and worth. However, even the original grounding claim of this thesis—that capitalism leads to a *commodification of everything*, and is therefore universalist and can act as a theoretical 'limit' or boundary on a spectrum of (de)commodification—has been disputed (Hall, 2024). Moreover, some critical theorists, including ecofeminists (as cited in Zimmerman, 1994) and Indigenous scholars (Todd, 2015), raise concerns with the core tenets of Deep Ecology (namely, indiscriminate self-realization, the dissolution of self-worth, and the absorption of the human into the imagined 'other' of the natural world).

Some ecofeminists, for example, argue that the universal ideas of Deep Ecology are problematic because to be indifferent to one another assumes that we are all the same, and to be the same assumes a personification and power-laden image of the 'common' (Zimmerman, 1994). The 'common,' they argue, is imbued with patriarchal, racist, and classist expectations, as the theorists of Deep Ecology (who are mostly older, White men)—however pure their intentions—

cannot separate the dissolution of the self from the structures of the patriarchy and power imbalances in society (Zimmerman, 1994).

Similarly, the supposedly 'universal' climate crisis is not a crisis for everyone, nor is it the first crisis of land, identity, or kinship experienced by Indigenous people (Whyte, 2018). So, if the intention is to expose the raw or baseline 'human-ness' of each other, it must be questioned who—and whose narratives—constitute the 'human' form itself. If it is only White scholars, then a rich diversity of perspectives would be lost (and self-realization would be an assimilationist and neocolonial act, rather than an emancipatory act of dissolution and unification with the natural world). It would, in this reading, act as an oppressive extension of patriarchy, reimpose a narrow understanding of what it means to be human, and draw us further from our goals of social-ecological balance.

The theoretical frameworks that initially informed the design of this project and influenced my early thinking—namely, universalism (Beland et al., 2019), decommodification (Gerber and Gerber, 2017), and Deep Ecology (Naess, 2005; Zimmerman, 1994)—appear to be, like many theories that aim to be all-encompassing, insufficient to describe the complexity of the climate crisis on their own. These theories, many of which can be touted as 'solutions,' arose and are replicated through a particular set of academic norms and structures. As Zoe Todd (2015) highlights in her work, *Indigenizing the Anthropocene*, these narratives have been constructed, studied, and advanced through colonial, white academic institutions, and as a product of these structures, they cannot capture the intellectual pluralism and competing ontologies put forth by Indigenous and feminist thinkers. As Todd writes,

> The complex and paradoxical experiences of diverse people as humans-in-the-world, including the ongoing damage of colonial and imperialist agendas, can be lost when the

> narrative is collapsed to a *universalizing species paradigm*. (Todd, 2015, 244, emphasis added)

Considering my earlier discussion of Peat's (2005) theoretical inquiry into the differences and similarities between Indigenous and Western science, and his perception that relations in Indigenous sciences are grounded in values of holism and interconnectedness, this rejection of a 'universalizing species paradigm' aligns with my broader literature review—though not, perhaps, for the reasons I might have initially assumed. Todd (2015) puts forward an argument that concerns power; when Western philosophy holds more relative power over discourse and policy than Indigenous philosophy, and when it seeks to collapse the human experience into one, whole experience, the richness in the diversity of thought is lost. Conversely, Peat (2005) highlights the deep interconnectedness of all things that he observed in Indigenous cultures, not the universal 'sameness' of all things. Taken together, we can see how diversity, complexity, equity *and* equality must be considered within the context of environmental policy.

In the final section of my literature review, I consider how some of these ideas and considerations are operationalized in imperfect and bureaucratic ways through interactions between the 'environment' and the 'state.'

III: Environment and the State

"The economic crisis makes future growth uncertain; climate change makes it undesirable."

(Gough, 2010, 61)

The relationship between the environment and the state is a complex web of politics, political culture, policy, and historical context— all of which cannot be fully described in the space (or scope) of this thesis. As such, I have chosen to focus on a few isolated dimensions of the relationship: connections between environmental policy and welfare economics; the politics of state growth and decommodification; and the challenges of political change, using the province of Alberta as my case study. In doing so, I focus on how environmental policy impacts the core socio-economic needs of the state. This is important context for the broader discussion on the *barriers and limitations* of SD as a model for state development that is referenced later in this thesis.

Environmental policy and welfare economics

First, in discussing the paradox of sustainability, Bailey (2015) highlights the tension between two separate literatures: scholarship regarding the "fiscal sustainability of welfare states" (793), which he argues is often predicated on future or perpetual growth; and the post-growth literature, which calls for an upheaval of the current system and threatens the economic stability of welfare states. Although supporters of both ideas are often progressive, leftist thinkers, some differences between these literatures (such as welfare state *expansion* and the *scaling-down* of state growth and consumerism) seem irreconcilable (Bailey, 2015). By highlighting these differences, Bailey (2015) challenges the idea perpetuated by the model of SD that there is, inherently, a positive or symbiotic relationship between environmental and social policy (where ongoing investment and development fuels a stronger, more ecologically resilient, and wealthier state). Instead, Bailey (2015) highlights the many challenges of having *both* economic growth (including ongoing resource extraction and state development in the name of improved social welfare) *and* meaningful and effective climate action at the state level.

However, Bailey (2015) writes that the *goals* of welfare expansion and sustainability are similar, at least in that

> the values which underpin an effective response to climate change – altruism rather than egoism, collectivism rather than individualism, cooperation rather than competition, inter-dependence rather than inequalities, de-commodification rather than the free market – seem to also promote the core values underpinning public welfarism. (806).

Therefore, Bailey (2015) argues that we need to consider how to ensure welfare state retrenchment (i.e., de-growth) can better align with the goals of environmental sustainability, while also considering how de-growth (in the name of sustainability) may necessitate the *expansion* of state welfare to support those negatively impacted by suppressed levels of economic activity. This is the core challenge of implementing a sustainability agenda in the 21st century.

When we apply this idea to different forms of social policy, we see that other welfare models—such as social universalism (Beland et al., 2019)—can run into the same challenge. As it looks to de-privatize more social services, a universalist model for welfare policy implies an *expansion* of the welfare state to meet everyone's needs (and would involve some element of state fundraising) (Beland et al., 2019). While this may a good policy to address more people's needs, it does not align with the goals of a post-growth economy, where the state "deliberately suppress[es] levels of taxable economic activity" (Bailey 2015, 795) and we see welfare state *retrenchment.* As such, post-growth policies may negatively impact the social and economic welfare of citizens. [This is yet another argument used to justify growth-oriented SD by public and private actors (as discussed in Chapter 5); if post- or de-growth policies will hurt or disadvantage people, then growth is necessary—even at the expense of environmental stability—due to our current economic system.]

However, by maintaining status quo policies, the health, wellbeing, and livelihoods of people are *also* negatively impacted. As a result of climate change, there are direct risks (e.g., displacement due to extreme weather events, rising insurance costs, etc.), indirect risks (such as global migration and displacement patterns), and broader economic and social consequences of climate adaptation and mitigation policies (e.g., rising costs, changes to consumption behaviour, etc.) (Gough, 2010). These changes will require public governance and central coordination, and as such, may bolster the role of welfare policies in addressing these systemic challenges (Gough, 2010).

Still, though, the tension between economic growth, social justice, and environmental sustainability is difficult to reconcile. To demonstrate this, Gough (2010) draws on Jackson (2009)'s assessment of the growth paradox, writing: "There is no credible, socially-just, ecologically sustainable scenario of continually growing incomes for a world of nine billion people" (p. 57, as cited in Gough, 2010, p. 60). This means that SD—with its present emphasis on economic *growth* and *development*—is not a suitable model to promote justice or environmental sustainability.

Gough (2010) also discusses the role of decommodification in supporting a sustainable transition to zero-growth economies. He writes that, beyond the initial ideas of Polanyi and the decommodification of *outputs of labour*, there may also need to be

> second stage [of decommodification, which] would entail a move towards de-commodified production—reducing working hours and commodity purchases, growing the core economy and fostering preventive social behaviour, among many other things. (Gough, 2010, 62)

This aligns with the argument raised by others (e.g., Zimmerman, 1994) that decommodification may be a viable policy tool for radical environmentalism. Yet, as Gerber and Gerber (2017) argue, decommodification has received limited attention by scholars, especially economists. They contend that ecological economists have done a poor job of incorporating the principle of decommodification into their work, and if it were to be studied and applied in research, Gerber and Gerber (2017) argue that it could enable the transition to a more sustainable, post-growth economy that is not necessarily anti-capitalist. Much like Kovel (2004), who argues that political will is a significant barrier to an alternate, climate-friendly future, Gerber and Gerber (2017) write that

> Decommodification-oriented public policies and local alternatives have somehow disappeared from the picture, although they form a crucial component of industrialized… economies. (Gerber and Gerber, 2017, 555)

This relates to the idea of TINA and the ability of the SD paradigm to limit our ability to imagine any alternatives to the status quo. We do not *think* we can do things differently, so our policies stay the same.

The case of Alberta

The province of Alberta is a unique case study in environmental politics and blame avoidance, and it is worth mentioning as a case study of 'TINA' politics. A strong sense of regionalism [and a growing sense of sub-nationalism, given the recent protests for Alberta separatism following the re-election of the federal Liberals in April 2025 (Drinkwater 2025)], coupled with the lack of (or, resistance to) policy innovation in the province (Hallstrom, 2025) and its history as an oil and gas province, has resulted in a unique brand of Albertan petro-populism that is pro-energy, anti-federalism, anti-intellectual, and anti-Ottawa (Rolfe et al., 2025, forthcoming).

Based on these trends, scholars have also observed a form of 'dispositional immobility' in the province (Lightbody and Kline, 2016), whereby non-decisions and deliberate policy inaction are rooted in structural conditions and general resistance to change. Given the impacts of path dependency, which "stresses self-reinforcing or positive feedbacks, through which institutional rules of the game, interests and dominant ideas can powerfully reinforce themselves, resulting in stickiness and inertia," (Gough, 2010, 53), policy innovation and *change* —particularly in places like Alberta—continue to be a challenge (Hallstrom, 2025).

Using Stone's (1989) model of complex problems in public policy, we can see that actors which rely on the status quo—such as the province of Alberta, with these trends of dispositional immobility and policy inertia—benefit from the default to complex causal explanations and the subsequent lack of self-blame in policymaking and public debate (Stone, 1989). Alberta also benefits from a deeply anthropocentric framing of environmental problems and solutions, wherein the environment stands to benefit human needs (ranging from energy to economic capital), and where a loss of eco-capital or ecosystem services (Balvanera et al., 2017) is a *human* problem (that can be solved through technological innovation, more resource extraction, etc.), not a problem of *climate* breakdown and collapse. This reflects a reliance on paradigms (like BAU, per Hayden, 2014) that favour the framing of human-environmental relations along deeply anthropocentric lines. These themes are explored in more detail in Chapter 5, as I discuss the different discourses present throughout my primary and secondary research.

Ultimately, through TINA politics and political resistance to change, the province of Alberta—much like the concept of SD—benefits from a maintenance of the status quo, further economic development, and state expansion. This overview of Alberta politics also highlights some barriers that may prevent the implementation of a more sustainable policy agenda that challenges the growth-oriented model of SD.

Conclusion

In this literature review, I have presented an overview of some of the different ways to conceptualize environmental problems, policy solutions, and the state of environmental affairs more generally. I have highlighted some of the differences between anthropocentric and eco-centric views of the climate crisis, while also arguing that the term ‘eco-centric’ does not accurately reflect the complex web of relationships and interactions between humans and the environment (as it is presented within the traditions of some Indigenous science). I have also explored the dynamics of risk, modernization, and policy responses, while keeping in mind the different environmental paradigms at play. After exploring a selection of different philosophical positions on the climate crisis and the varied benefits of equity and equality-based approaches, I concluded with a brief overview of welfare economics and its relation to environmental policy. The case study of Alberta was briefly mentioned to highlight the challenges of implementing the SD agenda in different political jurisdictions, especially one which is resistant to political and policy change.

In the next chapter, I will discuss my methodological approach to studying these themes, including the corporatization and commodification of SD, in more detail.

CHAPTER 4: METHODS

Overview

This project used a multi-methods design to examine the discursive functionality of SD in Canada. There are two parts: (i) participant observation, discourse analysis, and field notes from the GLOBExCHANGE conference in Toronto, Ontario from February 11-13, 2025, and (ii) eight semi-structured intensive interviews with youth (ages 18-30) who have worked (paid or unpaid) as sustainability professionals within the last 5 years, and who have attended a GLOBE Series corporate sustainability conference.

These methods were chosen because they helped me understand both the public-facing discourse on sustainability and SD (from organizations present at the conference) and the personal perspectives of those who (i) attended the conference in the past, (ii) worked in the sustainability field, and (iii) may have been influenced (or not) by those same discourses. This meant that my results show an interesting mix of similarities and differences between how organizations *communicated* their goals and awareness of SD, as compared with how their employees *interpreted* these same objectives. In Chapter 5, I return to this idea of 'two-way' discourse to reinforce my argument on the pattern of recommodification within corporate environmentalism.

A Note on Goals and Project Design

Initially, I had wanted to engage with the interpretive discourse analytical approach (IDA) for policy analysis as an additional methodology in my thesis, put forth by Wash (2020), to examine the social, political, and historical context of policy documents related to SD. Using this approach, Wash (2020) argues that IDA "prioritise[s] empathy over emancipation" (pg. 4). I understood this to mean that the goal was to build a greater awareness of the subject, rather than become involved in the struggle of the subject.

During the project design phase, I reflected on this idea and the goals of my thesis. When knowledge is extracted, whether through interviews, policy analysis, or participant observation, should the goal be to encourage empathy…or, given the complexity and urgency of the climate crisis, should research in this field work to promote emancipatory action through its reporting? Given that Wash's (2020) method did not involve human subjects, I can understand why we would look to promote greater understanding through historical discourse analysis, rather than action. Nevertheless, I was intrigued by this debate and how it may inform my project.

Wash's (2020) approach contrasts with Bobrow and Dryzek's (1987) discussion of critical theorists Harold Laswell and Jürgen Habermas and the idea that the "raison d'etre of the social sciences is to improve human existence" (172) and foster emancipation (Lasswell and McDougal, 1943, as cited in Bobrow and Dryzek, 1987). A proponent of the Lasswellian, critical approach to policy studies may also contend that "policy scientists can do little to help society attain utopia, but they can do much to avoid dystopia" (Bobrow and Dryzek, 1987, 173). My opinion on this statement has evolved over the course of this thesis. Through critical investigation and a reimagining of SD as a policy concept and strategy, the aspirational goal of this thesis is to contribute to a greater understanding of SD discourse in the public and private sectors (and at the organizational and individual level), so that it may reveal potential levers for systemic change or opportunities for more meaningful climate action. It also, I hope, builds on the well-established idea that human welfare is deeply embedded within environmental sustainability (Giddings et al., 2002; Mulligan, 2018), and as such, improvement of the human condition necessitates drastic improvement to the state of environmental affairs.

While Wash's (2020) ideas led me to reflect on the high-level goals of this thesis, I was not able to use this method due to time constraints. By excluding the section on policy analysis and IDA, it allowed for deeper reflection on the conference and the interviews; nevertheless, Wash's (2020) reflections on 'empathy' versus 'emancipation' continued to inform my thinking on this project.

Participant Observation

At the GLOBExCHANGE (https://www.globeseries.com/globexchange/) conference for sustainability professionals in Canada, I identified research participants, engaged in discussions on corporate social responsibility and SD, and observed the dynamics of public-private partnerships (P3s).

The GLOBE Series conference[9] was held in Toronto, Ontario, from February 11-13, 2025. The conference is held biannually and is the largest gathering of climate professionals in the private sector in Canada. On its web page, the firm invites prospective participants to

> Join hundreds of North America's foremost climate and sustainability leaders to learn and connect all while moving the dial on the global clean economy. You'll find the solutions, skillsets, and dollars needed to turn your sustainability challenges into opportunities. (Globe Series, 2025)

The conference was framed as an opportunity to gather, explore new opportunities, and invest in 'solutions' in the sustainability space. For me, it was also a rich opportunity to explore the differences (or tensions) between public and private sector commitments to climate action, and to connect with young sustainability professionals for this research project.

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[9] The name 'GLOBE Series,' which is mentioned throughout this thesis, is the organizing firm behind the GLOBExCHANGE Conference. Seeing as both terms were used interchangeably throughout the conference, I have followed suit in the methods and results of this thesis to discuss the organizing efforts and the conference dynamics at large.

As a volunteer notetaker[10] for GLOBE Series, I attended seven one-hour concurrent sessions. These were assigned to me based on the preferences and interests that I expressed to the organizers in the application process. As a general participant, I attended an additional seven plenary sessions. For each presentation, I took multiple pages of in-depth notes, and then I revisited the notes a few weeks later to analyze key themes and notable takeaways.

Awareness of the conference

The first time I was made aware of the GLOBE Series conference was in Winter 2023, when I was on the Canadian delegation for youth representation at the G7 (i.e., the Youth7 Summit). I had been working to strengthen my awareness of Canadian youth climate advocacy, and so I applied and was selected by GLOBE Series to participate in their 'Leading Change' youth conference (which took place two days before the GLOBExCHANGE conference for corporate attendees) in 2023. As a Leading Change delegate and as a member of the Youth7 delegation, I was excited to see all the ways that young people (i.e., those aged 18-30 working in the sustainability sector and who were also selected to join 'Leading Change') and the private sector were advancing climate action at the GLOBE conference.

However, when I attended the Leading Change and GLOBExCHANGE conferences, I was struck by the relative *lack* of action and the frustrating dialogue around promoting economic growth through business development and expansion, despite their commitment to hosting net-zero events. I did not intend to return to the conference in future years, mostly because I had just

[10] Later in the methods section, I explain why I was a volunteer at the conference with a pre-set schedule. In short, the conference organizers covered some of my participation fees as a volunteer, which made it financially possible to attend as a researcher.

spent a lot of money to attend and was unsure of the value gained as a young climate activist (also, I was not yet in a position to be 'networking' for future jobs in the corporate sustainability space).

Two years later, though, when I began designing this research project, I was reminded of my experiences at GLOBE. I decided it would be an interesting way to explore the tensions of SD in corporate culture—as told by those who work in the sustainability field, and by the companies themselves.

Justification of Methods

Participant observation is a useful methodological tool for the analysis of group dynamics and social issues. The approach enables researchers to "learn about the activities of the people under study in the natural setting through observing and participating in those activities" (Kawulich, 2005, 2). While traditional anthropological uses of participant observation involve community-based integration as part of ethnographic studies (Kawulich, 2005), my use of the method involved self-integration into corporate and sustainability culture.

When using this method, the researcher must be reflexive and cognizant of their positionality while engaging in data collection (Kawulich, 2005). In the context of GLOBExCHANGE, this meant that I was conscious about the power dynamics at the conference and the potential limitations of access, knowledge, or awareness due to my position as a young woman.

Design

There are a variety of different 'stances' that the researcher can take, but for this project, I chose to adopt an adapted "complete observer" (Kawulich, 2005, 21) stance.[11] As such, my observation of the group dynamics was (relatively) unknown to the individuals, but within the context of a public conference, it was safely assumed that the attendees, especially the conference presenters, were aware that I, along with other attendees, took thoughtful notes and reflected on the content, themes, and approaches.

As an observer, I took notes on the content that was covered in the sessions, the speakers and their professional backgrounds, the style of presentation (e.g., workshop, panel, interactive activity, etc.), the interest and/or engagement from the audience, the framing of different topics and issues, the style of language used (e.g., language of 'crisis' vs. 'solutions'), and the size of the audience. These notes helped me to analyze and understand what was being said, how it was being communicated, what was *not* being said, and how different topics (ranging from SD to economic growth to equity-based partnerships) were discussed in different forums at the conference.

Unique Considerations

Given the context of GLOBExCHANGE—as a rather elite and exclusive forum for sustainability professionals in Canada—there were a few barriers that I had to overcome to conduct this research (notably, the costs of participation). Registration fees ranged from $1695-2475 per

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[11] Kawulich (2005) describes four different stances that the researcher can take when using the participant observation method. These range from 'complete participant' (where the researcher fully participates in the situation, yet whose role as a researcher is unknown to the other participants) to 'complete observer,' where "the researcher is in plain sight in a public setting, yet the public being studied is unaware of being observed" (Kawulich, 2005, 21).

person for working professionals and $695 for students (GLOBExCHANGE, 2025). However, all volunteers selected for the conference were granted complimentary access.

I applied for the volunteer role in December 2024 and was selected as a session notetaker by the organizers. As such, I was expected to complete a minimum of three, 3–4-hour shifts and release my notes to the conference organizers. This role gave me a unique perspective on the type of data that was being recorded by the organizers (i.e., a bit more of an 'insider' perspective), but it also meant that about half of my schedule was pre-set. [I *was* able to express interest in different topics with the organizers, so I asked to go to sessions that related to my thesis.]

I have included an overview of the sessions I attended in Table 2. All the concurrent sessions were part of my volunteer shift schedule, and I went each of the plenary sessions on my own (without formal notetaking responsibilities). Each session was approximately 1 hour long.

Table 2. List of Sessions Attended at the GLOBExCHANGE Conference in February 2025

Session Title	**Style of Presentation and Date**
Welcome and Opening	Plenary (February 11, 2025)
Net Positive: How Courageous Companies Thrive by Giving More Than They Take	Plenary (February 11, 2025)
At the Forefront: Women Leading the Charge	Plenary (February 11, 2025)
Frontier Opportunities for Climate Action	Plenary (February 11, 2025)
From Policy to Progress: Federal-Provincial Action to Shape Canada's Nuclear Future.	Concurrent (February 11, 2025)
Building Cross-Sector Climate Action: Leveraging Collaboration in Healthcare and Beyond.	Concurrent (February 12, 2025)
Solutions Showcase: Black Entrepreneurs Pioneering Sustainable Businesses.	Concurrent (February 12, 2025)

Navigating ESG in Polarizing Times: Language that Unites, Not Divides	Concurrent (February 12, 2025)
Boardroom Brains: Gamifying Climate and Nature Risk Management	Concurrent (February 12, 2025)
The Assembly – Energy in Canada at GLOBExCHANGE 2025	Plenary (February 12, 2025)
Practical Paths: Pragmatic Strategies for Long-Term Sustainability	Concurrent (February 13, 2025)
Navigating Bill C-59: Balancing Risk Mitigation and Maintained Progress	Concurrent (February 13, 2025)
Private Sector, Public Good: How Businesses are Driving Bipartisan Action	Plenary (February 13, 2025)
Closing Plenary: Moving Forward (Toward Real Change)	Plenary (February 13, 2025)

When I was a volunteer, I drafted an initial copy of notes for the organizers, and then added some additional reflections and observations through the lens of my research questions. In the Results (Part I), I have included a short summary of each of the 14 sessions I attended, in addition to my analysis.

The conference was also an opportunity to meet and network with other young sustainability professionals from across Canada. This helped with recruitment for the interviews, which is explored in the next section.

Intensive Interviews

In addition to participant-observation at the GLOBExCHANGE conference, I conducted intensive interviews with youth sustainability professionals to discuss (i) their company's current or past actions to address and integrate sustainability and (ii) their own perceptions of the climate crisis and the ethics of SD.

Justification of Method

When selecting a methodological approach, I found that primary data collection through intensive interviews aligned with my project goals. This approach is well-suited to the creation of a conceptual map, and problems that require creative solutions (such as the climate crisis) can be explored and imagined, rather than measured and assessed. The intensive interview approach helped me understand a particular *view* of the issue within and between a group of people, and it allowed for relatively unstructured yet investigative dialogue (Brenner, 1985). Additionally, given that an "intimate familiarity" (Brenner, 1985, 149) with the topic cannot be achieved by participant observation alone (Brenner, 1985), I chose to expand my research project in this way.

Design

As a methodology, the "central purpose [of intensive interviews] is conceptual mapping" (124), whereby the researcher facilitates a discussion with the participant and encourages them to draw connections, propose new insights, or expose gaps in the theories and ideas (Hochschild, 2005). The interview itself is relatively informal, but it relies on the prior subject-matter expertise or awareness of the researcher and flexibility with the structure and content (Hallstrom, 2001). Intensive interviewing is also known to be a "discovery procedure" (Brenner, 1985, 150) and it encourages the participant to self-select their framing, interpretation, and contributions to the discussion (Brenner, 1985).

Ideally, intensive interviews follow the following guidelines: the sample is chosen at random; the researcher approaches the subject with a neutral and unbiased stance; informed consent is collected; the data analysis process is systematized and replicable; and the information is made public following the research project (Brenner, 1985; Hochschild, 2005). Further, intensive interviews should be designed to be flexible and adaptable (Hallstrom 2001).

In addition to finding out *what* connections the participant is making, the researcher should look to discover "how people frame their views" (Hochschild, 2005, 125) and *why.* Hochschild (2005) also cautions against explicitly asking the participants the central research question, as it may discourage creativity or ingenuity within the discussion. Ultimately, this methodology was well-suited to the research questions, as it allowed for a more explorative and open-ended approach (both for me, as the researcher, and for the participants).

The interviews had a thematic structure based on the following categories: personal identity, perspectives on sustainability, organizations and governance, and different dimensions to SD. In each category, broad, "'open' specific probe" (Brenner, 1985, 151) -style questions were developed to guide the conversation and ensure the topics were adequately covered.

I. Personal identity: First, participants were asked to reflect on their positionality within their work, including how they got involved in the sustainability sector. This theme focused on an exploration of the initial topic (Brenner, 1985).

II. Perspectives on Sustainability: Next, the participants were asked to reflect on the purpose and practicality of sustainability. They were also encouraged to define 'sustainable development' in the context of their work or personal experiences. This primed the discussion on the different dimensions of sustainability (as discussed in part four).

III. Organizations and Governance: The participants were asked to consider the role of the public and private sectors in addressing climate change, as well as the role of public-private partnerships (P3s). This theme emphasized social and political structures and their potential limitations.

IV. Sustainable Development: Lastly, participants were encouraged to reflect on the discussion and consider the idea of SD across *all* dimensions (environmental, economic, and social). Participants were also asked whether their organization or workplace considered each of the dimensions of SD as part of their business framework.

Rationality for Target Population

Young professionals were chosen as the target population since they have unique perspectives and will inherit the contemporary systems and structures related to SD. Additionally, as demonstrated through the Fridays for Futures youth-led climate strikes in recent years, young people's

> despair and anger over the inertia of political systems, and their search for social identity, political efficacy, and structural embeddedness were a driving force for young people's politicisation [of those issues] (Spannring and Waechter, 2024).

Based on this assessment of youth politicization, I was most interested in how young professionals understood SD and its applications to their work. I was also interested in whether they understood the broader framework to be a useful tool in promoting climate action, or whether they wished to pursue more radical action within their organizations.

Ultimately, the unique, though often highly diverse, socio-political context of youth in Canada helped ensure the interviews were thoughtful and forward-looking.

Analysis

The interviews took place online after the GLOBExCHANGE conference via Microsoft Teams. They were automatically transcribed on Microsoft Teams, reviewed by the researcher for accuracy, and then analyzed using the NVivo online qualitative analysis software. The process of qualitative analysis relied on inductive and deductive coding, as per Bingham's (2023) overview. It involved five steps: (i) organizing, (ii) sorting, (iii) understanding, (iv) interpreting, and (v) explaining the data (Bingham, 2023). I did this by cleaning the transcripts, developing and applying a series of deductive codes based on my understanding of the topic and initial impressions from the interviews, and then reviewing each transcript in detail and adding new inductive codes to my codebook as necessary. When an interesting inductive code was added part-way through the analysis process, I returned to the earlier transcripts when possible. I then interpreted the data and compiled the results into three key themes. Finally, to explain the data, I brought in new literature when needed and discussed the findings at the thematic level. These results are explored in the following chapter.

CHAPTER 5: RESULTS

In this chapter, I will share the key findings from this research project, including the specific results from participant observation at GLOBExCHANGE (Part I) and the outcomes from a thematic analysis of the interviews with young sustainability professionals (Part II).

My main finding, which I will return to in Chapter 6, was that the discursive functionality of 'sustainability' and SD was two-fold: the businesses and conference organizers attempt to 'sell' the idea of SD to its staff, stakeholders, and public audience (including consumers) as a meaningful environmental intervention and career path; while the young sustainability professionals try to 'sell' the idea of SD *back* to their corporations as a 'good business decision.' The result is a corporate and commodified form of SD that does not challenge the status quo, achieves minimal environmental progress, and is profit oriented.

Parts I and II of Chapter 5 each demonstrate one half of this 'two-way' discourse. In Part I, I outline how SD is communicated *to* sustainability professionals *from* the private sector organizations and the conference organizers. I demonstrate that sayings like "Keep fighting the good fight" (direct quote, Session 11), or session titles like 'Private Sector, Public Good' (Session 13) reflect the optimistic narratives of 'progress' and 'innovation' that the corporations are trying to impart to their staff, despite the dominance of corporate/profit-oriented SD and the subsequent *lack* of progress toward genuine sustainability. In Part II, I discuss the other half of this two-way discourse (i.e., how sustainability professionals communicate and 'sell the idea' of SD *back to* their organizations). I outline how young sustainability professionals understand their role, how they try and convince upper-level management of the benefits of sustainability, and what their role is as activists *and* workers in these organizations.

Ultimately, I argue that SD is used as part of a 'solutions' narrative by *both* the corporations and the sustainability professionals, despite offering no meaningful change to the environmental agenda. These results are explored further in Chapter 6.

Part I: Participant Observation

Introduction

In this section, I present an overview of my session-level analyses and field notes from the GLOBExCHANGE conference in February 2025. All sessions are listed and described in chronological order, apart from the keynote address by Paul Polman, which is presented first. Each of the sessions' dates and titles reflect the original conference itinerary, and double quotation marks are used sparingly to indicate a direct quote that I was able to capture at the conference session.

While the overview of the individual conference sessions may seem a bit repetitive to readers, I have included the full list of descriptions and summaries to demonstrate the *consistency* of the conference messaging, despite the variety of the session themes and the diversity of the speakers. I attended sessions on healthcare, nuclear energy development, small-business and entrepreneurship, and public-private partnerships, to name a few, and in each room, the same themes and core messages resurfaced. These themes are presented in the following section.

Summary

Based on my analysis and review of each of the 14 sessions that I attended at GLOBExCHANGE, I have identified several cross-cutting, meta-themes from the conference. First, there was interesting discourse and framing that was *present* in the conference sessions, based on my thematic and discursive analysis. These include:

I. **Resistance to degrowth paradigms.** There was clear resistance to any sustainable strategies that would result in *less* profit or economic growth. Instead, the speakers tried to focus on how sustainability could be integrated into their business practices without compromising future growth.

II. **Contested language.** There was a focus on strategizing and adapting the use of different terminology to communicate sustainable business practices (to the public, to corporate executives, to governments, etc.). For example, if commitments to 'net-zero' prompted an unwanted political or social response, companies were looking to adapt their communication strategy to avoid backlash.

III. **The rise of green-hushing and the emphasis on 'risk.'** Similarly, some companies were worried about the legal ramifications of making public commitments to sustainability, especially in light of recent federal legislation, Bill C-59 (i.e., the anti-greenwashing legislation). Many of the conversations were focused on risk management to mitigate the political and environmental risks of 'business-as-usual' approaches.

IV. **The wake of 'unprecedented times.'** There was a heightened awareness of the volatile political and economic climate, and many speakers referenced the ongoing geopolitical tensions between Canada and the United States.

V. **Good for business.** As highlighted in Paul Polman's talk, there was a clear emphasis on the benefits of sustainable business practices to the bottom line. The idea that we need a 'cleaner and more competitive economy' was also consistent throughout the sessions.

VI. **The private sector knows best.** Among many private sector sustainability professionals, there was an understanding that businesses should have the autonomy and authority to self-regulate and create in-house policies to address environmental concerns. Government regulation was, comparatively, less desirable.

VII. **Favouring the 'E' of ESG frameworks.** While there was some mention of the ESG (environmental, social, and governance) model overall, there was almost an exclusive focus on the 'Environmental' aspect, and the social and governmental impacts of businesses were marginalized within many of the discussions.

VIII. **Partnerships, partnerships, partnerships.** There was an interest from many businesses in partnering with others, including governments, to ensure that the financial capital, investments, and regulatory environment were conducive to climate action. Any partnerships, though, still needed to align with their business goals.

IX. **Strong messaging, but weak link.** There were admirable actions highlighted and commitments made throughout the conference, but there was also some clear cognitive dissonance between the role of businesses and the need for environmental protection. Despite concerns about the climate crisis, the paradigm of growth-oriented sustainable development continued to be the unquestioned strategy to address those concerns.

X. **'Recommodification' of the environment.** Lastly, the keynote address, which was well received by attendees, reflected a broader tendency to 'recommodify' the environmental goods and processes that, among sustainability professionals, have been agreed upon as valuable and necessary for environmental stability and our planetary boundaries. However, I argue that by framing sustainability as the 'biggest economic opportunity,' the potential for money to corrupt well-intentioned acts is intensified. [These trends of 'recommodification,' as opposed to (de)commodification, are explored more in Chapter 6.]

In addition to several key themes that highlight the discourse that was 'present' at the conference, there were other perspectives that were left out of the discussion. Notably, these included:

I. **Dialogue on 'sustainable development.'** I was expecting to see and hear more references to SD and the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) than I did. In fact, beyond a few members wearing SDG-pins on their suit jackets (presumably to show solidarity with the Agenda), there was very little reference to the framework at the conference or in the individual sessions.

II. **Holistic and intersectional approaches.** Although the need for partnerships was often highlighted, few sessions considered the *social* impacts of business. Additionally, while there were a few instances where Indigenous partners were invited to speak or co-host sessions, I noticed that there were very few sessions in which critical theory, feminism, other ways of knowing and seeing, Indigenous frameworks, or other paradigms informed the discussions.

Ultimately, these findings indicate that corporate sustainability is, in many ways, a paradoxical endeavor. It is challenging for businesses to self-regulate when they are motivated by profit, just as it is difficult to balance holistic perspectives of ESG and intersectionality when the primary role of businesses is so often framed along pro-growth, pro-development terms. Despite many well-intentioned words, acts, and commitments, the theme of 'using sustainability' to advance business and economic objectives was consistent, and I find it troubling when urgent (and well-funded) action to mitigate the impacts of climate change is needed now more than ever.

In the next section, I will examine these themes in more detail. I start with an overview of the keynote address by Paul Polman.

Overview of the Opening Plenary Session

The keynote session of the opening plenary is often the main event of any conference. It is the time slot when attendees are energized and eager to hear what is being said, and it is an opportunity to set the tone of the conference, frame the key themes and priorities, and highlight the work of a visionary leader in the field. At GLOBExCHANGE, the keynote speaker was Paul Polman, a renowned businessman and climate equity campaigner. His speech was thought-provoking and reflected many of the core themes from the conference. From the relationship between business and climate, to the role of government regulation, Polman's presentation was a helpful primer for the many discussions and sessions yet to come.

Framing the issue: climate action as good for business?

Polman focused his 50-minute presentation on his latest book, *Net Positive: How Courageous Companies Thrive by Giving More Than They Take* (2021). In his talk, he argued that business development and sustainability are not mutually exclusive ideas; rather, the imperative for climate action represents the greatest economic opportunity of our time. [This theme was reflected throughout the entire conference. In nearly every session I attended, the resistance to degrowth (or even slow growth) business paradigms was clear.]

Polman's work was informed by a long history of environmental advocacy, and he opened his talk with some sobering statistics on the irreparable harm that a 'business-as-usual' approach is having on the planetary boundaries. He argued that "we have treated this planet like an all-you-can-eat buffet," and to ensure conscious growth, we need to guarantee that "all beings are receiving the care they need." However, there was limited discussion in his talk—and, frankly, throughout the entire conference—on how to approach and integrate this 'all-species' approach into business.

Still, Polman argued that every day after World Overshoot Day[12]—a day which marks when the Earth's resources have been 'used up' at a sustainable level to support the human population for the year—can be considered *theft* from future generations. However, even though this level of resource-use is causing widespread and deeply inequitable threats to environmental stability, Polman did not frame this 'theft' as criminally reprehensible. Instead, he framed World Overshoot Day as a *reason to act* on climate, but he did not go so far as to introduce any robust accountability measures for companies that do not.

This was another key theme of the conference. Many argued that companies should *not* be mandated (through regulation, policy, etc.) to make sustainable choices; instead, through persuasive sustainability professionals, public demand, and by knowing it is 'the right thing to do,' companies will act on their own volition. Government interference—aside from public-private partnerships or co-governance strategies (both of which allow for some autonomy from each party)—were deemed unnecessary by many of the private companies at the conference.

The framing of World Overshoot Day, the 'business case' of climate, and the de-regulatory approach each represent a form of cognitive dissonance between the core message (i.e., that businesses are doing irreparable and life-threatening harm) and the proposed solution (i.e., environmental and social sustainability). How can economic growth, even an adaptable and more eco-conscious form of growth, be amenable to the goals of *less* resource extraction, *less*

[12] In 2024, the World Overshoot Day was August 1, 2024. In 2025, at the country-specific level, Canada used it's share of resources by March 26, 2025, following the United States on March 13, 2025 (Global Footprint Network, 2025).

production, and *fewer* species lost? This framing of sustainability, I argue, continues to be one of the greatest challenges to meaningful climate action.

Polman's concept of 'net-positive' growth epitomizes this idea; he believed, like many other business leaders in that room, that immense profit can still be made from the sustainable transition. His vision was to "accelerate the transition to sustainable wealth," and he argued that we need to start "investing in solving problems, not creating them." In this skillful framing of the problem, Polman acknowledges that there are environmental and social reasons to act on net positive goals, *in addition* to attractive economic reasons. While this reflects some element of intersectional thinking and is not, inherently, a negative idea, it does not allow for a re-imagining of climate action or SD beyond the role of business growth.

Lastly, Polman argued that the 'real issue' at hand is not climate change, a lack of technologies, or a lack of possibilities. Rather, it is the lack of cooperative and empathetic leadership; it's an issue of "greed" and "apathy." The challenge remains, then, of how to best square the competing social and environmental demands with the desire for economic growth, business development, and corporate greed.

Overview of Other Conference Sessions

In the following section, I present an overview of the individual sessions I attended as a notetaker for the conference and as a participant in the plenary sessions. For each session (No. 1-14), I have included a brief description of the speakers or topic, before listing my reflections and analysis of some of the content, context, or broader themes.

No. 1: Welcome and Opening. *Plenary (February 11, 2025).*

Description: In a brief opening presentation with the President of GLOBE Series, Elizabeth (Shirt) Gamble, and Councillor Larry Sault (Councillor Pillar 7 Lead: Inclusive Leadership and Governance, Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation; President and CEO, Anwaatin Inc.), the organizers welcomed attendees and recognized the land on which we gathered.

Discussion: Right from the beginning of the conference, the presenters stressed how this era represented "unprecedented times" (regarding the recent re-election of Donald Trump, among other geopolitical changes), and they introduced the conference theme as 'The Future is Regenerative.' This theme is interesting in itself; it seems to stress that society can regenerate all that it has lost, or, at least, can sustain circular economies in the future. Neither of these options or strategies were particularly salient in the presentations throughout the week.

Councillor Sault extended Gamble's optimistic introduction to the conference. He focused on the positive benefits of Indigenous enterprise, leadership, and engagement in reconciliation with governments and businesses. He also encouraged the audience to think about 'Seven Generations' thinking in their sustainability planning—but again, I did not see this concept reflected throughout the conference in any significant way.

Overall, the first session was a polite and bureaucratic opening to the conference. It did not call on participants to engage in paradigm shifts or radical action, but rather, it celebrated the opportunity to gather as fellow sustainability professionals.

No. 2: Net Positive: How Courageous Companies Thrive by Giving More Than They Take. *Plenary (February 11, 2025).*

Description: This was the keynote session with Paul Polman. In this talk, Polman discussed the concept of 'net-positive' and how sustainable business leaders can capitalize on the economic opportunities of climate action.

Discussion: Readers can refer to my discussion of Polman's talk earlier in the Chapter, where I outline how Polman's talk 'set the tone' for the rest of the conference.

No. 3: At the Forefront: Women Leading the Charge. *Plenary (February 11, 2025).*

Description: This session featured a conversation between Catherine McKenna (Founder and Chief Executive Officer, Climate & Nature Solutions), Barbara Zvan (President and CEO, University Pension Plan), and Merran Smith (President, New Economy Canada) to discuss the role of gender equity in climate action and launch the Women Leading on Climate (WLOC) initiative.

Discussion: McKenna, the former Canadian Minister of the Environment (during the 2015 introduction of the carbon tax and improved environmental partnerships with Alberta during the leadership of Premier Notley and the Alberta NDP), provided some interesting, though mostly apolitical, insights. She noted that women are 2.5x more likely to lobby for climate action than men and that "bold, courageous energy" is needed to advance these causes. She also noted that the 'business case' of climate action should not be discounted, and that it is important to 'push back' when people argue *against* the business case of climate action.

A different speaker on the panel argued that "nature" is one of our biggest strengths in Canada—but the issue of '...for what?' remained; should nature be further commodified to make us more competitive in the global economy, or is the ‘strength’ of nature the idea that it just *exists…* for, with, and among Canadians? The speakers went on to say that a ‘green taxonomy’ is needed in Canada—an indication that more ‘financing for the green economy’ with predictable rules and procedures is necessary to meet the needs of the business community.

Overall, I thought that this was a positive discussion that did not shy away from some hard ‘truths’ (namely, that the business, media, and governmental landscape around climate and sustainability continues to delay meaningful action). With the launch of WLOC, the speakers called on more diverse leaders to be engaged in climate action, while also catering their messaging to the predominantly business-centred (and pro-development) audience.

No. 4: Frontier Opportunities for Climate Action. *Plenary (February 11, 2025).*

Description: After a politically charged speech by the Minister of the Environment and Climate Change, Steven Guilbeault (since, at the time, it was still before the 2025 federal election), GLOBE Series President Elizabeth Gamble and Nathaniel Keohane (President, Center for Climate and Energy Solutions) joined the Minister on stage to talk about Canadian opportunities for climate action.

Discussion: The initial presentation by Minister Guilbeault was scripted and sought to convince the audience that they needed a government that would deliver on taking bold climate action, while also ensuring that there is “une économie forte” [i.e., a strong economy; the presentation was bilingual, coming from a federal minister—which also means I may have missed some specific points at different points of the speech]. This represents a very similar frame to that of Brian Mulroney’s *Green Plan,* and it represents the lack of significant policy change on environmental issues in the country over time. Minister Guilbeault also argued that Canada is "leading the pack" when it comes to climate action, which contrasts with the messaging from the founders of WLOC that Canada is not doing nearly enough. For his closing line, Minister Guilbeault said "vivre le Canada" (which, again, drew on the renewed Canadian patriotism in the early days of the Trump presidency).

In the discussion that followed, Minister Guilbeault was a lot more personable. When asked how we can create durable political support for climate action, he said that "all we have to show for until recently are failed climate plans" (presumably referencing past governments), but that now, we have a 'real shot' at achieving meaningful change. [There was little evidence provided to support this claim.] The other presenters claimed that political support can be achieved through moderate, cooperative leadership, and each of the speakers often returned to a framing of "Yes, and…" when talking about climate solutions. Again, this represented a high level of optimism on the panel, as well as the enduring belief at the conference that economic growth does not have to be compromised by SD or climate action.

No. 5: From Policy to Progress: Federal-Provincial Action to Shape Canada's Nuclear Future. *Concurrent* (February 11, 2025),

Description: This session was a conversation between senior bureaucrats at the Alberta, Saskatchewan, and New Brunswick provincial governments, as well as the Assistant Deputy Minister of Natural Resources Canada, on the future of public-private partnerships on nuclear projects in Canada.

Discussion: The speakers stressed that nuclear energy has the potential to drive economic growth and foster SD. While the session was still deeply embedded in the growth paradigm (e.g., there were discussions of research and development opportunities, new growth in the sector, and regional public-private partnerships for nuclear expansion), the session reflected some awareness of energy security concerns and the need for equity-based partnerships. Interestingly, re-skilling opportunities—to help transition workers in the oil and gas industry to the renewable energy industry—were not discussed in any great detail.

The speakers did, however, emphasize the importance of having a "social license" to operate, and—contrary to other sessions—they expanded their discussion of the 'Environmental-Governance-Social' (ESG) framework to include the role of 'governance,' not just 'environmental' issues. They highlighted the many benefits of 'public-private partnerships' (P3s) and also discussed the role of "economic reconciliation" with Indigenous peoples (such as improved economic partnerships, increased investment into energy projects with Indigenous communities, etc.). The emphasis on *economic* reconciliation, however, instead of other forms of reconciliation, reflected the pro-business framing of the speakers on matters of energy, security, and culture.

Additionally, the speaker from Saskatchewan still emphasized that there is a 'role' for an "all-of-the-above" approach to energy, including for coal, natural gas, and renewable energy. Even within the professional bureaucracy, this statement represented Saskatchewan's political emphasis on energy diversification *so long as* it is not at the expense of the non-renewable energy industry.

No. 6: Building Cross-Sector Climate Action: Leveraging Collaboration in Healthcare and Beyond. *Concurrent (February 12, 2025).*

Description: This session featured a discussion with various healthcare industry professionals on the path to decarbonization, despite the lack of regulations from the government to push forward on this issue.

Discussion: As a healthcare-related session, this panel was one of the few that I attended that focused more on the *social* dimensions of the ESG framework. The speakers also mentioned the need for intersectional approaches to climate action in their industry, and they spoke about the embeddedness of 'climate' in their sector (i.e., 'the climate crisis is a health crisis').

Moreover, the speakers argued that they are not necessarily advocating to stop fossil fuels (in part because energy shortages would have catastrophic outcomes on the functioning of hospitals and the broader healthcare industry), but they are interested in the role of the sector—and that of individual physicians—in contributing to meaningful change. [I do not disagree with this assessment, but I believe that the emphasis on individual action may detract from the broader systemic issues within the sector and (the lack of) government regulation.]

In the round-table discussions after the main presentation, various participants recommended that healthcare professionals focus on making the 'business case' of sustainability by reframing climate actions as 'cost-saving' measures. This, once again, marked a shift in language/discourse away from environmental framing and toward economic framing in order to 'convince' upper-level management of the benefits of sustainability (despite recognizing the climate crisis as a serious threat to human health and wellness).

No. 7: Solutions Showcase: Black Entrepreneurs Pioneering Sustainable Businesses. *Concurrent (February 12, 2025).*

Description: This session highlighted young, Black business leaders who were committed to sustainability (broadly speaking). The session was structured as business 'pitches,' with each presenter given approximately 8-10 minutes to share their experiences.

Discussion: Based on the title, I was not expecting the session to be structured as a series of 'funding pitches.' Instead, as a 'solutions showcase,' I assumed that the session would have highlighted the direct relationship between the presenters' various business models and the Sustainable Development Goals (or other sustainable business practices).

Nevertheless, the idea of 'sustainable business,' at least in this session, did not go farther than to highlight the entrepreneurs' attempts at more conscious sourcing of materials [even then, when some presenters were asked about alternative/sustainable sourcing options to their current practices, they said that they found it too expensive to move production to North America from their Chinese suppliers]. As such, I found this to be a clear example of the co-optation of the term 'sustainability' in order to sell more products.

No. 8: Navigating ESG in Polarizing Times: Language that Unites, Not Divides. *Concurrent (February 12, 2025).*

Description: This session featured former Deputy Minister in Alberta, Steve Macdonald, as he discussed various communications strategies in the sustainability sector.

Discussion: I found this to be one of the most interesting (and relevant) sessions. Macdonald provided a unique perspective as an ex-bureaucrat from Alberta, and he outlined three ways in which climate action is currently framed. These included:

1. *Certainty*: He argued that we live in a world where people claim to hold 'absolute truths', including, in the realm of environmentalism, strongly held beliefs on what we should do about the climate crisis. But he asked the audience, how can we be comfortable with uncertainty?
2. *Curiosity:* He argued that he has seen a trend of people being less *curious*, especially on the issue of climate. He said that people are not investigating or inquiring about different issues for themselves.
3. *Complexity:* Macdonald said that "deep problems can't be solved with shallow solutions." He argued that people tend to have conversations that favour simplicity and easy answers, but this is not realistic in the climate space.

He called on the audience to consider the "magic in framing," and throughout the workshop, participants were forced to wrestle with the question, 'Does it really matter what language we use to 'sell' sustainability, so long as the work gets done?' In this sense, this session provided an interesting case study to apply the argument of my thesis. Indeed, as I considered the power of framing, I thought that *even if* the SD framework implies the need for growth or economic development, perhaps the use of the concept positions sustainability as a viable option for businesses and governments (when it otherwise would not have been). Macdonald's presentation aligned with this thinking; he said (paraphrased), "Why fight about semantics instead of the actual problems?"

Still, though, Macdonald argued that the language we use *is* important. He argued that climate can be a 'trough of disillusionment' and that the culture of sustainability is often one where everything is shaped as a 'problem.' However, based on public polling data, we know that people have 'problem fatigue.' To avoid further fatigue and to mobilize government action, he argued that it is important that we consciously choose our words and actions.

Later, in the 'workshop' portion of the session, the table of individuals I sat with reflected on how the concept of 'ESG' is too technical; instead, it would be beneficial for sustainability professionals to re-frame the goals of ESG around *risk* and *opportunity.* [This is interesting given the perspectives on risk in the literature review.]

As we returned to the full-group setting, one participant argued that sometimes resistance to ideas goes much deeper than resistance to the language used. For example, they argued that opposition to diversity, equity, and inclusion (especially in Alberta) is grounded in opposition to the ideas, goals, and equity-based *practices* of DEI, not just to the language or terminology used to describe those commitments (e.g., the acronym 'DEI' itself). Other participants recommended shifting the language from 'decarbonization' in Alberta to 'market-ready solutions' (as there is some perceived negativity with the previous term that may imply that 'carbon' is no longer wanted in Alberta). [However, I disagree with the speaker here, as I think our framing *should* indicate that less carbon must be taken from reserves in Alberta.] An Indigenous participant also shared that they shifted their language from reporting on 'greenhouse gas emissions' to 'how the project has worked to "Protect Mother Earth,"' which was another interesting perspective on language.

Ultimately, despite this group brainstorming session and interesting presentation from Macdonald, the need to return to the 'business case' of sustainability in our framing of the issue (and SD more broadly) was clear.

No. 9: Boardroom Brains: Gamifying Climate and Nature Risk Management. *Concurrent (February 12, 2025).*

Description: Aside from Session 12, this was one of the most well-attended sessions. At the end of day three of the conference, this was an interactive discussion with Joshua Goodman (Head of Corporate Sustainability, Sobeys) and Claire Purvis (Senior Director, Climate Services, Delphi) on how to assess 'risk' in the context of environmental, business, and public relations (PR) goals.

Discussion: As an interactive session, this session featured a number of 'scenarios' to which the panelists responded. In the first part, the speakers argued that since large companies have such a big platform, it is their responsibility to 'go out and educate' and ask themselves, 'how do we mitigate the risks and the problems that we (as a company) may have even caused?' They also noted that the sustainability sector is often afraid of 'trial and error' (especially the "error" part); in particular, the fear of risks to the company's reputation often creates "knee-jerk reactions," and that changes that are made too quickly may detract from the progress already in motion.

Both of these ideas are interesting in the context of this thesis. First, the idea that 'companies know best' and should educate themselves and others on matters of sustainability practices and sustainable development is interesting, especially when this responsibility often falls to government regulation to 'mandate' certain behaviours. Next, the idea that risk aversion detracts from climate action is a valid point, if not a bit disappointing when considered in tandem with the perception that 'businesses know best.' If the private sector can *truly* be accountable for strong climate action and choosing the 'best' path forward, then why have they not already done so (i.e., why is risk management holding companies back)?

Later, the panelists doubled down on this idea, and they argued that companies should take a partnership and *self-regulatory* approach to climate action. They said that many companies have committed to sustainability before a government mandate has been put in place, and that in different scenarios, some big companies might quietly keep advancing their climate targets, despite publicly committing to pull back. However, while this may be true, I question whether there is much value in 'standing down' from public commitments to sustainability when, publicly, the companies have retracted these same commitments. And, again, if companies are so confident in their ability to 'self-regulate' without government interference, I also question why we have not seen more significant progress— and what would be the driving rationale or justification for these actions, if it is not solely to boost shareholder profits or economic growth.

No. 10: The Assembly – Energy in Canada at GLOBExCHANGE 2025. *Plenary (February 12, 2025).*

Description: This was a live, dramatic performance of a real-life conversation that was previously held with Canadians from different backgrounds on the topic of climate action, the oil and gas sector, and Indigenous relations. It was presented by the Montreal-based theatre company, Porte Parole Productions.

Discussion: This was an interesting session that explored the practical challenges of climate communication between different groups. Among the actors, someone was playing a Calgary-based oil and gas executive; a Lethbridge-born environmental activist living in British Columbia; a Toronto, big-city 'activist' type; and an Indigenous woman working as an engineer with an oil and gas pipeline company.

The show highlighted the role of 'values,' rather than just 'facts,' in steering climate debates. It was very well received by the audience, with some individuals even joining the actors on stage afterwards to share their own 'climate stories.' Together, this web of stories highlighted the *cultural* dimensions of SD and the general frustration with the trend of divisiveness, polarization, and inaction when it comes to climate change. It offered a rare and raw moment during the conference where the audience was not just a collection of people from big businesses, but were just fellow people working on a common challenge. If nothing else, this session made me reflect on the power of storytelling in advancing meaningful action.

No. 11: Practical Paths: Pragmatic Strategies for Long-Term Sustainability. *Concurrent (February 13, 2025).*

Description: This was a conversation with American and Canadian business leaders on the importance of embedding sustainability into long-term business plans. This included Bell Canada, GreenPAC (an environmental leadership organization), and Veris Residential (a luxury rental company). The landscape of geopolitics, including recent anti-climate developments in the USA, was also discussed.

Discussion: The speaker from Bell Canada noted that sustainability has evolved from being just investor-driven to now being more customer- and employee-driven within the organization. Individuals are expecting more from the company for long-term sustainability plans and commitments, and Bell is responding accordingly. The representative from Veris Residential echoed this idea that sustainability is ‘good for business.’ She said that residents want sustainable options for their homes, which, in a sense, favours the economic gains over the altruistic claims of ‘it’s just the right thing to do’ as part of a ‘smart’ long-term business strategy. There was also a belief among some of the speakers that the hyper-partisan political environment has weaponized climate as an issue on the public agenda, and that public support for sustainability may be going down.

However, in terms of ‘practical strategies’ for long-term planning—as the name of the session suggests—there were very few strategies even offered. For one, the speakers said that litigation against companies has contributed to the perception of more risk in the sustainability space, with companies not wanting to ‘be exposed.’ To combat this, they highlighted that ‘money talks’ and that sustainability advocates (internal and external to the organization) need to show the ‘business case’ of the actions. Indeed, the only ‘practical’ strategy presented was to ‘follow the money’ and justify sustainability through the ‘books.’

Another interesting idea presented was the notion that “the voice of youth” will be important moving forward with sustainability commitments, because, as the GreenPAC representative argued, young people have little patience for hyper-partisan politics. However, as someone (a young person) who has been engaged in electoral politics, I am not sure I agree with this assessment. As partisanship intensifies, I have seen many young people, including myself, ‘pick a side’ in politics (especially when, in the climate space, there is very little to compromise on; political and social action *must* be taken, and politics which seek to delay climate action are more difficult to tolerate). Later, I will revisit this theme (of thinking of young people as a powerful voice in climate politics) as I analyze the interview data with young sustainability professionals.

The speakers concluded the session with the rallying call that was heard throughout the conference: “Keep fighting the good fight.” The idea that sustainability professionals were fighting an uphill battle, and were running a marathon, not a sprint, touched on another key theme of the conference. There was a feeling of camaraderie and solidarity among the participants, as well as a belief that any action, no matter how small, was moving us closer toward some collective (yet pragmatic) climate goal.

No. 12: Navigating Bill C-59: Balancing Risk Mitigation and Maintained Progress. *Concurrent (February 13, 2025).*

Description: In this session, lawyer Antonio Di Domenico discussed the implications of the new federal bill, C-59 (the anti-greenwashing bill), on businesses in Canada.

Discussion: This was the most well-attended concurrent session that I volunteered for, and there were *many* questions and concerns from the audience. Based on my estimation, there were more than 85 people packed into the conference room, making it a standing room only space. This, in itself, is interesting in the context of the conference themes; based on the perception of the ‘risk’ environment in the climate space, so many business professionals were wary about the new rules and regulations through the new anti-greenwashing bill. The speaker acknowledged this, saying the C-59 has created some uncertainty and panic, but that the goal of this session was to improve understanding about compliance while maintaining ‘momentum’ (presumably with the climate plans already in place).

Interestingly, C-59 is framed as a 'consumer protection' measure, *not* necessarily a pro-climate or environmental protection measure. The regulations were grouped as amendments to the Competition Act (a step that Di Domenico said the Competition Bureau did not ask for from the federal government—which reflects some potential tensions between how various stakeholders believe that greenwashing should be managed and regulated), and they seek to regulate the pro-climate advertising claims that companies can make and share with consumers.

Di Domenico argued that this legislation (and the fears and uncertainties surrounding it) have contributed to a phenomenon of 'green-hushing.' In contrast to greenwashing, green-hushing refers to the act of companies avoiding the potential regulatory penalties by pulling back or slowing down their progress on environmental issues or commitments. This was the first time that I had heard this term, but it surely resonated in the room. In fact, when Di Domenico prompted the audience as to whether their companies would view this legislation as detrimental to *any* progress within their companies, the oil executive whom I was sitting beside agreed that C-59 will prompt his company to 'pull back' on *all* sustainability commitments to avoid the potential for federal penalties (due to misleading advertising, false claims, etc.). This is concerning because it seems to indicate that federal action/regulation is causing the private sector to *do less* for the environment, rather than acting imperfectly—or at least, C-59 is giving companies a reason to 'back out' of sustainability commitments (however weak or meagre in nature), and position the blame on to the federal government.

In a public poll with the audience, 52% of respondents (n=79) said they had a limited understanding (i.e., 1 or 2 selected on a scale of 1-5) of the legislation. Additionally, only 5% of respondents believed they had a full understanding of the bill and its implications (i.e., number 5 selected, on a scale of 1-5). This means that even among major Canadian organizations and sustainability departments (and/or professionals), there was a very weak understanding of federal legislation and its relevance to their companies' advertising claims.

Di Domenico also argued that the 'E' of ESG has become more prolific, and that consumers are making more decisions based on their environmental consciousness. This is an interesting comment, considering that other speakers (including those from session no. 11) have noticed varying degrees of interest from consumers in environmental business commitments.

Finally, the idea that regulation is done through amendments to the Competition Act implies, once again, that sustainability can be reduced to a business and economic issue. The framing implies that the main issue is the unfair competition between businesses due to greenwashing, rather than the harms of the false commitments to environmental sustainability. It is an anthropocentric framing; C-59 considers the risk to the consumer instead of the risk to climate stability.

No. 13: Private Sector, Public Good: How Businesses are Driving Bipartisan Action. *Plenary (February 13, 2025).*

Description: This was a discussion on private sector contributions to public welfare. Speakers included: Tabatha Bull (President & CEO, Canadian Council for Indigenous Business), Jessie Sitnick (Principal, Sitnick Strategies), Fouzia Younis (British Consul General, Toronto), and Tim Faveri (Vice President, Global Sustainability, Nutrien).

Discussion: Even the title of this session deserves attention for its relevance to the thesis themes. As one of the last plenaries of the conference, the emphasis on the 'public good' from profit and growth-oriented business strategies was an interesting comparison in this session with prominent business leaders.

In line with other sessions, it was noted that we need "pragmatism and courage" to achieve meaningful climate action [which, as I noted, was a major recurring theme throughout the conference; instead of systemic change, we just need more courageous leaders]. As one of the speakers commented, however, these actions and commitments from businesses are "not [due to] altruism…rather, necessary for the health and longevity of their businesses." Again, the framing here was to position sustainability as a 'common-sense' business decision, rather than relying on the courage, empathy, and vision of the business leaders themselves—which contradicts the other 'individual-action and self-regulatory' approach that many individuals and companies advocated for throughout the conference. Indeed, the very framing of the issue and the proposed solution(s) appear paradoxical. This is explored more in the conclusion of this chapter.

Another speaker commented, "How do we talk about sustainability, without *talking* about sustainability" (emphasis reflects the original speech). Here, they implied that sustainability must inform the 'background' business decisions, while also producing less external or internal "friction." They also commented (paraphrased): 'Who, if not businesses, is going to lead the charge on climate?' This is a *very* pro-business values statement, and, once again, it implies that 'businesses know best' when it comes to sustainability, regulation, and climate action, despite being shareholder and profit-oriented. Still, the message to the audience was that "it's not a choice either or [between growing the economy and sustainability]."

Later, the Indigenous business leader made an interesting comment that "Indigenous business is the 'OG' of ESG," implying that a return to Indigenous (business) practices will support broader environmental, social, and governance goals.

Lastly, the speakers returned to the topic of language. They commented that reputational management is a core component of sustainability, and that it is important to 'sell' sustainability to the C-Suite. To this, one of the audience members (in the question period) commented that it all sounds a little 'Orwellian.' This was a rare call-out moment at the conference, and it made me reflect on whether there is a danger in changing the language that we use. For example, if we change things too much to appease the C-Suites of large corporations, are the sustainability commitments weakened and do they lose their impact? The speakers responded by saying that the core values should stay consistent, but that specific messages can change; as long as sustainability professionals are trying to build understanding and relationships, the messaging does not have to be inauthentic. However, much like the random 'Orwellian' call-out, I also argue that this continual flux of language, attitudes, and approaches is a threat to meaningful climate action.

No. 14: Closing Plenary: Moving Forward (Toward Real Change). *Plenary (February 13, 2025).*

Description: In the closing session, the organizers announced the creation of a new conference—the Food Leadership Summit—to focus on a different dimension of the business, climate, and sustainability nexus.

Discussion: In the short, concluding remarks, the speakers (including Elizabeth Gamble, President of GLOBE Series) commented on the need for "social resilience." She also encouraged the audience to "lean into [the idea that] clean is competitive." These last comments epitomized the themes of (i) economic over environmental priorities, (ii) the idea of focusing on social and government priorities (i.e., the 'S' and 'G' of ESG) only *after* environmental commitments, and (iii) the optimistic view that all can/will get better in we all 'chip in' toward climate goals.

Conclusion

As I have demonstrated through my analysis of each conference session, there is an emphasis within the private sector at this conference on pro-growth and pro-development narratives. At this event, representatives from the private sector often positioned their company (or the private sector in general) as the most qualified or appropriate body to advance climate action (i.e., without direct government interference). Even so, many of the presenters expressed some willingness to work with others through public-private partnerships or other arrangements.

The nature of *how* climate change and climate resiliency was talked about at the conference was particularly interesting, given many of the presenters' acknowledgement that climate action needed to be 'sold' as an idea to upper-level management as a smart business/economic decision. This led to an emphasis on risk management, and at times, had a 'green-hushing' effect (whereby companies continue to work toward sustainable goals [supposedly] but do not report on this progress or advertise it to their shareholders for fear of wrongful doing).

Ultimately, I argue that this evidence supports the argument that many companies have implemented the frameworks of SD and ESG, but there is a weak link between sentiment and *action.* In the next section, I turn to the interview results to highlight how young professionals understand many of these same challenges.

Part II: Interviews

Introduction

Following my attendance at the GLOBExCHANGE conference in February 2025, I conducted eight interviews with young sustainability professionals to hear a different perspective on corporate sustainability. I wanted to know, what drew them to this work? What did they think about the role of the public sector, the private sector, and P3s in addressing climate change? Did they think that the eco-social dimensions of sustainability should be considered alongside economic dimensions? How did they understand their responsibilities—as a worker, or as an activist? All these questions and more were explored.

The participants had all attended a GLOBExCHANGE conference in the past, which ensured they were a 'sustainability professional.' Many of the participants were also known to me as the researcher, either as friends in the climate advocacy space or as acquaintances from past GLOBE sessions. Other participants I approached randomly at GLOBE networking sessions, given that younger professionals were recognizable by their different coloured badges.

Once I had a list of interested participants and returned home from the conference, I conducted my formal outreach and scheduled the calls. Using the intensive interview method (Brenner, 1985; Hallstrom, 2001; Hochschild, 2005), I facilitated loosely structured interviews for 30-60 minutes via Microsoft Teams. In the interviews, I spoke with participants about their values, the perceived impact of their work, and their definition of SD. The results are presented throughout this chapter. For the full interview guide, please refer to Appendix A.

Summary

In my analysis of the interviews, I identified three core themes. These are: (i) sustainability as a discursive tool, which is primarily grounded in a meta-analysis of the transcripts; (ii) activism-as-work; and (iii) 'making the business case.' Theme 1 explores the participants' framing of sustainability and SD in the context of their work, activism, and professional goals. I find that they both embrace *and* reject neoliberal framings of sustainability, and the language of sustainability (i.e., as a discursive tool) reinforces pro-growth logics and suppresses activism. Although many of the young professionals challenge the status quo throughout the interviews, their responses are never radical *enough* to explicitly challenge the dominant paradigm of SD.

In Theme 2, I examine the relationship between the participants' framing of 'activism' and 'work,' and I argue that most of the participants' view the two as connected and interdependent. This finding helps explain why the majority of participants spoke about leaving their work, either due to frustration with the pace (e.g., both too slow [not making enough progress] and too fast [deliverables lack complexity and nuance]), or because they feel like the work is too polarized or emotionally demanding. In Theme 2, I also explore the sub-theme of 'education,' which refers less to the participants' desire for increased training, and more to the responsibility some individuals felt to educate *others* on the topic of sustainability. This, again, helps explain how the participants viewed their work as activism (and vice versa), and it reflects some of the different ways in which resistance (as a form of activism) has, itself, been commodified as paid labour in corporate and professional settings.

Finally, in Theme 3, I examine how the sustainability professionals 'make the business case' of their work and sustainability in general. I analyze sub-themes of framing, greenwashing, and the role of the private sector, and I find that, much like the results in Part I (i.e., participant observation at GLOBExCHANGE), the young professionals needed to change how they talked about their work to suit different political and social settings. They spoke about how they needed to "sell" the idea of sustainability and appease a corporate client with recommendations for cost-savings or risk-management.

Ultimately, these results reveal how young professionals are 'resistors' to dominant SD paradigms but are still confined by the expectations of the neoliberal social structure (as they try to keep their job; do good, meaningful work; and maintain their own mental well-being). This represents the ability of SD, as a powerful discourse, to ensure that TINA—there is no alternative—in how we internalize and believe we can respond to the climate crisis through corporate capitalism. As such, there are limitations on the young professionals' ability to be 'persistors' and promote meaningful inter- and intra-organizational change.

Codebook

In Table 3, I have included a full description of the codebook that I developed and used to qualitatively analyze the interviews with young sustainability professionals. The frequency of codes is listed, in addition to the file coverage. In the analysis and results, all the participants' names have been changed to pseudonyms.

The codes which covered all eight interviews include: activism-as-work, the business case, framing, identity in work, and the role of the private sector. Aside from the codes 'identity in work' and 'the role of the private sector' (which were prompted in the interview guide), it is interesting that all the participants discussed these themes. This is explored further throughout this chapter.

Table 3. Codebook for Interviews with Youth Sustainability Professionals (NVivo)

Name	**Description**	**Files**	**References**
Activism-as-work	When the research participant identified an overlap between 'activism' and their professional work, or when they expressed a desire to promote change within their work.	8	30
Leaving the work	Sub-code: Despite wanting to 'make a difference,' this code represents any time the research participant wanted to leave their professional work, for any number of reasons.	5	7
Alberta	Any time the research participants mentioned Alberta. *Note: if research participants expressed the need to include the 'fossil fuel industry' in the just transition, but this was not coded as 'Alberta.'*	2	2
Business case	Any time that the research participants expressed having to 'sell' the idea of sustainability, or said they needed to make the business case of their plans. For example, any reference to return-on-investment (ROI) was included in this code.	8	23
Define SD	Since the research participants were asked to define sustainable development, responses were coded accordingly.	4	7
SDGs	Sub-code: Any reference to the sustainable development goals. Sometimes, due to the open-ended structure of the interview guide, the researcher asked about SDGs rather than SD.	5	5
Education	This code emerged upon reviewing the transcripts more deeply. This refers to any desire among research participants to 'educate' others about sustainability (not seek out more education for themselves).	6	10
ESG	Any reference to the environmental, social, governance framework/strategy. Similar to SD, sometimes research participants were asked about ESG directly based on the structure/flow of the interview.	6	14

Effective	Sub-code: Whether ESG was deemed an ‘effective’ model, based on the participant’s framing.	0	0
Ineffective	Sub-code: Whether ESG was deemed an ‘ineffective’ model, based on the participant’s framing.	2	7
Framing	Similar to the ‘business case’ code, this includes any references when research participants identified the need to change *how* they talk about sustainability or other aspects of their job/activism/work.	8	25
Greenwashing	Any reference to the process of greenwashing (i.e., when businesses say that they are doing more for the environment than they are in practice, for consumer satisfaction or a competitive edge).	3	3
Growth paradigm	Any time the research participant identified a pro-growth angle to business practices or a persistence of status-quo, pro-economy thinking in the public or private sector.	7	18
Holistic SD	When the research participant considered different aspects of SD in their discussion, beyond thinking just about the ‘environment’ (e.g., thinking about the economic and social spheres in conjunction with the environment).	7	15
Identity in the work	Whenever the research participant talked about their identity in relation to their professional work. This was prompted at the beginning of the interview, but participants often returned to how their positionality influenced their sustainability work throughout the interviews.	8	23
Affinity with the work	Sub-code: Whether they felt some alignment between their values and their work.	5	11
Challenges or gaps of the work	Sub-code: Whether they felt some misalignment between their values and their work, or if they (as a person, with a unique identity) faced any number of challenges in their work.	4	21

Random / lack of [identity in the work]	Sub-code: This code was added part-way through the coding process to sort one unique interview. In this interview, the participant did not have any particular values or aspects of their identity that 'drew them' to work in sustainability, they just enjoyed the work and found a good-paying job. This was the only interview where the research participant did not position what they do for work in relation to their identity or love for the environment.	1	3
Innovation	This code was added later in the coding process to track any reference to 'innovation.' Surprisingly, the majority of interviews used this term, despite having no prompt by the researcher.	6	10
Limiting factors	Sub-code: Whenever the research participants identified barriers or limitations to (often, businesses' desire for) innovation.	7	18
Media	Any reference to media, including social media.	2	2
Nuance	This code was added part-way through the coding process to track any reference to 'nuance' from the research participants. The parent code was not used. I attempted to delineate between overt/explicit references to 'nuance' (i.e., saying the term), and implicit discussions about complexity/nuance.	0	0
Identifying nuance explicitly	Sub-code: Any mention of 'nuance.' This data will be cross-referenced with a word frequency search via NVivo.	4	5
Identifying nuance implicitly	Sub-code: Any discussion about nuance or complexity, especially in relation to problem-solving.	5	10
P3s	Any reference to public-private partnerships or the role of *both* the public and private sectors in solving problems.	5	9

People-centric	Anytime the research participants framed the discussion in terms of 'people.' This code was created after one participant clarified that they would consider themselves more of a 'person professional,' rather than a 'sustainability professional.' This distinction was noted throughout the interviews.	6	11
Polarization	Any reference to political or social polarization, divisiveness, or related challenges.	3	5
Political	Any reference to the political sphere or specific politicians.	6	13
Resistance to status quo	This code was used whenever the research participants seemed to counter the dominant narratives surrounding SD, sustainability, or corporate culture.	7	15
Role of private sector	This code had broad applications. Any time the research participants discussed the role of the private sector in SD or sustainability, it was noted.	8	24
Competitive edge	Sub-code: Whenever the research participants positioned sustainability in relation to a company's 'competitive edge' or ability to compete in the market, this code was used.	3	5
Role of public sector	Similar to the 'role of the private sector,' this code had broad applications. Any time the research participants discussed the role of the public sector in SD or sustainability, it was noted with this code.	7	14
SD as a concept or tool	As a parent code, this was only used if the quotation did not neatly fit into either child-code category. As such, this refers to any broad discussion of SD as a concept, set of ideas, or policy tool.	2	3
Reproduction of trad SD	Sub-code: Anytime the research participants embraced traditional, pro-growth framings of SD in their discussion (i.e., status-quo environmentalism).	6	15

	Resistance to trad SD	Sub-code: Anytime the research participants countered traditional, pro-growth framings of SD in their discussion (e.g., the use of alternate framework, anti-capitalist framings, etc.).	6	16
Siloing		Any reference to different sectors, departments, or ideas as 'siloed' or isolated. This contrasts any discussions about collaboration, teamwork, P3s, etc.	5	11
Sustainability professional		In the interviews, the research participants were asked whether they identified with the professional title: 'sustainability professional.' Their embrace or resistance to the label was recorded through the sub-codes. Any other miscellaneous discussion related to being a sustainability professional is included in this code.	5	8
	Embrace of the label	Sub-code: Any example of a research participant embracing the title of 'sustainability professional' as part of their professional work.	5	6
	Resistance to the label	Sub-code: Any example of a research participant resisting the title of 'sustainability professional' as part of their professional work. This was often in subtle ways.	3	3
Youth		Any reference to 'youth' as a distinct group to consider in the context of environmentalism, sustainability, or activism (e.g., through education).	2	6

Qualitative Analysis

In the following section, I will provide an overview of the key themes that emerged from the eight interviews with young sustainability professionals. They are presented in the same order as the summary: (i) sustainability as a discursive tool, (ii) activism-as-work, and (iii) making the business case.

For these interviews, I was most interested in whether the youth sustainability professionals rejected or reproduced so-called 'traditional' perspectives and framings of SD as a policy tool and set of ideas. Here, my coding of 'traditional,' in alignment with my central thesis argument, was whether the participants identified with, or saw value in, pro-growth and capitalistic framings of SD. I coded this as a 'reproduction of SD.' In contrast, 'resistance to SD' was coded when the participant sought to challenge existing paradigmatic structures or they identified irreconcilable flaws in the 'business-as-usual' approach. I expected to find that some participants embraced SD, while others were frustrated with their profit-oriented work.

The results, however, reveal a much more complex story of identity, activism, and apathy. Many of the participants both embraced and critiqued SD in the same interview—and sometimes, even in the same response. Their answers revealed a complex negotiation process between what they believed 'was right,' the expectations of them as workers, and the socially constructed limitations on them as 'new' or 'young' staff to influence change.

This relates to Tuck's (2009) discussion of 'complex personhood' and desire-centred research, in which she draws on the work of Avery Gordon (1997) and her colleague, Monique Guishard (2009). Tuck (2009) argues that a recognition of 'complex personhood' (i.e., the belief that individuals are deeply complex, contradicting, imaginative, and navigators of complex social worlds) is important if social science research is to be more critical and empathic.

Complex personhood can be identified in surprising and subtle ways. For example, Tuck described Guishard's experience with youth co-researchers, where

> …on the same day these youth were openly critical of corporate capitalism and globalization [as part of the research project], they waited with hundreds of other youth and adults to purchase [Air Jordan basketball shoes] that represents some of the worst

elements of global capitalism and exploitation. But she was even more taken aback by her youth companions' awareness and ease in/side that irony. (Tuck, 2009, 420)

In parallel with my own work, I view the participants' negotiations between holding a job, expectations on them as an employee, critiques of capitalism, and their training and education as evidence of complex personhood. In contrast to some of the more hard-line environmental activists I know (who are deeply anti-business/capitalist in much of their work), the research participants embraced the opportunity to 'do their part', even while highlighting the many contradictions of their work in the 'corporate sustainability' field. No one fully agreed that 'business-as-usual' was the best option, nor did anyone call for grand systemic or revolutionary changes to address the climate crisis. This finding makes sense in the context of 'complex personhood,' especially among young people.

Responding to Guishard's experience with the youth co-researchers, Tuck writes that within the context of

> complex personhood, we see that "all people remember and forget, are beset by contradiction, and recognize and misrecognize themselves and others" (Gordon, 1997, p. 4). We can desire to be critically conscious *and* desire the new Jordans, even if those desires are conflicting. (Tuck, 2009, 420)

An example of this in the interviews was when one participant recognized the need to balance the expectations of growth for *social* needs with the paradigm of SD. Using the example of personal retirement funds, they highlighted some of the structural barriers that limit the possibility for radical change:

> [The] presumption that you're going to have money in retirement is based on an economy that grows, and the only way the economy grows [is] if you… buy more, you consume more, you exploit more– so the inherent premise that we will be comfortable in a retirement, right, is based on the fact that we have to grow our economies. Which means the stock has to go up, [which] means we have to produce [more]—there's going to be

> more people. So…the very way that we've structured our societies and the way that we live and the way that we survive into old age is based on a consumption and growth model...which [does not] really favor sustainability, right? Because the idea is to grow as fast as possible and make as much returns as possible, so that you're comfy in retirement. (Alex, interview participant)

Later, when further prompted about the growth paradigm and the challenges of balancing sustainability with economic development, the participant returned to this point. They said, "I'm an advocate for de-growth, too. But, like, what do you do about millions of people's retirement funds?" (Alex, interview participant). This reveals an awareness of 'new' or radical approaches to business and the climate, while also centering the many practical limitations. I argue that this represents the push-pull dynamics of SD as a concept; SD encourages 'change,' and yet the framework limits our ability to imagine any alternatives and implement such changes.

In a different interview, another participant considered the complexity of SD. They noted how, in trying to 'market' the benefits of sustainability, a holistic approach (that centred on environmental, economic, *and* social dimensions) was critical. As they shared,

> Yeah, I think what's interesting about the economic and social overlap [in sustainability] is that it's more and more part of, not just the conversation, but, like, the argument. And I think part of that is you can appeal to different audiences with those aspects. (Eden, interview participant)

This theme of 'making the business case' (or needing to convince people on the merits of sustainability) is explored later in the results. First, though, I focus on the rigid and convincing nature of Brundtland-style SD to promote the idea of TINA in the next section.

Reproduction of 'Brundtland-style' SD

Some answers signalled a clear reproduction and/or embrace of traditional, pro-growth framings of SD and sustainability. In this example, the participant was asked whether businesses have a responsibility to consider the environment in their decision-making:

> Yeah, I think that… if their…whole business mandate is related to… a product or something that… relies on [the] environment then they need to consider all aspects of sustainable development or else…it's not gonna be able to be a profitable or sustainable business for them. You know what I mean? Like, I think that's what the trends are that we're seeing, especially…after, like, COP 16. You know, if you're, like, following the outcomes of that, just like we need to recognize that, like, if we don't implement these practices, we're not gonna be able to have businesses because we won't have anything to provide people. (Finn, interview participant)

The respondent has an awareness that the 'business-as-usual' is not working; businesses will, in some way, need to integrate the environment within their business model and risk assessments. However, they do not critique the pro-growth model of SD. They framed the 'environment' as an important variable for businesses to consider (and manage), but the primary 'risk' is identified as the threat the environment poses to the business, not the threat that business practices pose to the environment.

This culture also *reproduces* itself in corporate settings. For example, one participant noted how their older colleagues who have worked in the sustainability space "recogniz[e] that we're on a sinking ship and that, like, the work that we're doing isn't…materially changing the situation on…a grand scale" (Georgie, interview participant), but they did not advocate for sweeping changes. When they reflected on it further, the participant compared this with their own vision of change:

> I think my own view is, like, you can't really escape…the fundamental limitations of, like, wanting continuous growth or, like, wanting to make profit and…those kind of constraints…through capitalism or however we wanna frame it, like ideologically. […]
>
> But people still find meaning and empowerment in… it…. Like, I think from a psychological standpoint, it's like if… I live in Canada, and I have a background in global development or like sociology or global affairs, how do I make meaning of my skills and like make a living because, like, depending on where you come from— like, for me…I don't have like a—I didn't graduate with, like, a lot of money [so] I had to work…. But I also wanted to do a job I liked. […]

> So…you take a role that, like, you know, doesn't necessarily like solve the issue, but you're still kind of like participating in a way that is, like, somewhat productive. (Georgie, interview participant)

This is an interesting reproduction of the Brundtland, pro-growth style of SD. As readers will see throughout this Chapter, Georgie was not favourable of capitalism as a social and economic construct. And yet, in this quote, they reproduce the belief that There Is No Alternative (TINA) from growth. The "sinking ship" analogy reflects a sort of apathetic embrace of SD as a policy concept that is simultaneously *not* working to achieve its own goals, yet is framed as the only path forward. Additionally, the last part of the quote (i.e., that they "had to work" and apply their skills, and so tried to be "productive" through their work despite not being drawn to this field initially) implies that the 'activism' of sustainability work and systems-level change is not necessarily accessible to them in this role, nor is it, perhaps, their responsibility. It is, at the end of the day, *just a job.*

However, many of the participants did challenge some of the ideas of capitalism, growth, and inequity in their interviews, even if it was at a small scale. This is explored in the next section.

Challenging the status quo

The majority of participants challenged some of the 'status-quo' practices in the sustainability industry, though no one was particularly radical in their resistance. For example, some of the participants who had started their own businesses held a desire to 'do things differently,' but they also identified numerous challenges. One participant said, "I don't wanna grow by selling more. I wanna grow by, you know, expanding our impact, which isn't something that's valued in society, unfortunately" (Alex, interview participant). Another entrepreneur said that when they work with clients on sustainable urban development,

> It requires a lot more effort on their part [and] it requires a lot more money than traditionally what they would spend. [...] This industry…has a lot of…old prophecies that are hard to break. (Hudson, interview participant)

This theme—of companies being resistant to new ideas, or to pro-environment practices in general—was echoed by other participants. As one sustainability consultant noted,

> …on the topic of there being sort of a resistance to nuance, particularly if it goes against the business interest as well. …That's what kind of sucks about being in the space too, it's like you can… make your analysis more complex and then, in fact, it's… definitely more intellectually gratifying as well. And you learn a lot … although a lot of the work I do is like pseudo-academic, where it's like I'm kind of just… mangling things together to kind of get to the conclusions that we already set. And [that] was definitely confusing at first. …Like, how is this, like, allowed? [laughing] (Georgie, interview participant)

The need for different paradigm shifts in business was also raised by participants. One individual spoke about how Indigenous philosophies of environmentalism were too siloed and did not inform everyday business practices—even though centering our relationship to nature "makes sense" (Alex, interview participant). Others, too, spoke about increasing government regulation [e.g., the "EU…haven't fallen apart just because they've introduced some pretty comprehensive environmental regulations" (Eden, interview participant)], or exploring the concept of "circularity" (Finn, interview participant) in business.

Standard reporting practices were another subject of discussion. In particular, one participant expressed frustration with the metrics of 'success' in the public sector:

> I feel like when you're focused on, like, economic growth and economic well-being like that…at least from my understanding so far, it's all about like how much…sales and transfers and…movement of goods can you have and can you do, which, in practice, is a polluting thing, right? And so, if our main standard of success is achieved through detrimental action, that might not be the, you know, standard of success that we actually want to talk about. 'Oh, we have a great GDP, OK.' Well, how did you get that great GDP? Because the way that you get it from what I know is by burning up your planet. So, do you really want to be gloating about that? (Brett, interview participant)

Afterwards, the participant elaborated that other metrics such as the 'happiness index' could be used in government reporting. They cited the recent 'Impact Assessment Report' from the Office of the Parliamentary Budget Officer (PBO) as a prime example of this bias in reporting toward economic indicators (instead of using more holistic measures of 'success' in analyses). In the summary of that report, the authors write that

> Consistent with PBO's analyses of carbon pricing and the Clean Fuel Regulations, our assessment of the potential economic impact of the oil and gas emissions cap *does not account for the benefits of reducing Canada's GHG emissions.* That is not to say that these benefits should be dismissed rather, they could be considered in a cost-benefit analysis of the proposed oil and gas emissions cap regulations, which is beyond the scope of our report and PBO's mandate. (Ammar et al., 2025, p.3, emphasis added).

The limitations of PBO's mandate and scope means that readers may interpret the results (i.e., the economic impacts of an oil and gas emissions cap) as an isolated issue, rather than as something that may, in fact, have economic drawbacks in the short-term, but will support numerous social, economic, and environmental goals in the future. In this sense, sustainability (as a concept and policy tool) is effectively removed from the conversation, instead of being integrated in policy decisions that impact energy production and the environment—as the SD framework intends to do.

The only participant who did not outright critique the 'status quo' of corporate environmentalism nonetheless had an interesting, apocalyptic perspective on his work as an educator:

When I work with first year students… they inspire me…to make sure that they're …prepared for a future that might be like burning in flames. This is the most…intense scenario. Like, you know that meme? Where's that little girl looking at that house in the background? It's on fire. [...] I want them to be prepared for that, you know. And so I think that's kind of how I envision…meeting the needs of the present, but also future needs as well. [13] (Devin, interview participant)

Figure 1. "Be prepared for that:" Use of the viral 'Disaster Girl' meme in context. (Credit: Dave Roth; Fazio, 2021).

What is most interesting in this quote is the emphasis that the participant places on preparing students to *live* in this scenario, rather than *prevent* it. In this context, 'preparing' for the future is framed only as an exercise of self-preservation for the individual—not disaster mitigation for the community at-large.

This is broadly related to the next theme, activism-as-work. In the next section, I explore how the participants viewed their professional work *as* activism, and vice versa. I also

[13] As an interesting aside, the 'disaster' meme has, itself, recently been commodified. In 2021, it was sold as a non-fungible token (NFT) for nearly $500,000 (Fazio, 2021). Given the participant's use of the meme to describe the most "intense scenario" they could imagine in the climate crisis, with the world essentially burning around the subject, there is deep irony in the meme being sold on the latest market to manifest in late-stage capitalism for an exorbitant amount of money.

explore the participants' feelings of responsibility to educate others on the climate crisis, which extends the discussion on Devin's experiences working with first-year students.

Activism-As-Work

In the first theme, the interview participants spoke about their work as sustainability professionals and their interest (or lack thereof) in *change* as activists. In this section, I highlight some examples of when the participants connected these ideas and viewed their work *as* activism. Additionally, as an unexpected finding, I highlight some examples when they spoke about *leaving* their work/activism—which aligns with the sub-theme of the 'responsibility' many feel to educate others and work for the cause, despite the burden that places on young professionals.

First, one individual spoke about the impact that 'advocates' can have, and why it is necessary for sustainability work:

> I genuinely think there needs to be a paradigm shift… and that only comes from people who are willing to push the envelope. [..] If we continue to let corporations and governments function the way they do, we're not gonna have change and, again, it comes back to the power of being an advocate, right? Like you have to advocate for change. Otherwise, nothing happens. (Alex, interview participant)

While Alex does not explicitly relate this 'power' to their professional role in this quote, they do call for change in the public and private sector (presumably from both *within* and *outside* of those systems and jobs).

In a different interview, one participant understood their role as a sustainability professional as being the 'bridge' between passionate advocates (change-seekers) and those who control the levers of powers (change-makers). Here, they do not necessarily position *themselves* as an advocate, but rather, as someone who understands the desires of both 'sides:'

> …the lens I wanna take is[to] kind of bridge… both the gaps of, you know, those [who] are really passionate about the environmental side—the advocacy side, and those [on the]

> corporate side… Kind of have that Venn diagram of just meeting those two groups together. (Devin, interview participant)

Brett, by contrast, wanted to be doing work that put them in the camp of the 'changemakers.' They wanted to be a strong advocate for change, and in their current professional role, they believed that they were constrained in their ability to do more:

> But I feel like my heart lies on, like, doing the new stuff or like kind of being [in] the implementing [group] rather than the 'talking about the implementation' [group]. Kind of like being part of the movement rather than, you know, talking about what the movement has done, if that makes sense. (Brett, interview participant)

This is interesting in the context of them seeing their 'activism-as-work.' Presumably, Brett could contribute to change through other means (e.g., by volunteering, engaging in community organizing, joining a boycott, etc.) but they wanted to be part of the "movement" through their professional work.

A commitment to 'making a difference' through work was echoed by other participants. As Georgie put it, "I do believe...in my bones that like the work I'm doing is important and it's going to be relevant." [Recall, as an interesting aside from Theme 1, that Georgie also needed a job after graduation and so found themselves in the sustainability space sort of by accident. Still, there is an awareness that the work has meaning and is connected to goals which are larger-than-themselves as a form of work-supported activism.]

Another interesting sub-theme that came up in a number of interviews was the anthropocentric re-framing of sustainability [i.e., as a human concern, rather than (or in addition to) an environmental concern]. One perspective on this would be that 'people-centric' language helps sustainability professionals and their clients relate to the goals/content in more personal ways. It also helps center the 'social' and 'economic' dimensions of the sustainability framework. However, one risk of people-centric framing is that it could inadvertently neglect the root ‘environmental’ concerns that sustainability plans are trying to address, while positioning human needs as more deserving of attention and investment (despite the worsening *climate* crisis). Nevertheless, bringing the needs of people into the conversation reflects a more holistic and nuanced perspective of sustainability.

For example, when one individual was asked whether they would describe themselves as a ‘sustainability professional,’ they responded:

> Yes, I think at the end of the day, it's more or less like semantics for me because like that's [the] industry under which I work in and I'm doing it professionally in a sense of being a career which directly does sustainability consulting, right? …If I were to, like, play around with the words a little bit more, I'd say at the core of it, like I said at the start, [it] is about people, right? [...] I could say, like, I’m a person professional because I work with, you know, communities. I work with organizations and they're all made-up of people that make decisions [and] that have livelihoods and that… are feeling impacts and talking about climate change. (Cody, interview participant)

Earlier in the interview, Cody expanded on the imperative of including ‘people’ in mind when working in the sustainability sector. Again, this relates to the idea of ‘activism-as-work.’

> I think across my now, you know, seven years doing sustainability, a core theme, in addition to tackling climate change, [which is] something really, urgently, urgently needed…for the world… It's very much the people-centric [considerations]. [...] It's really about, how can we make our economy our planet more socially just, more environmental[ly] friendly, and also do so in a way where livelihoods aren't, you know, … at a bare level, but also at a quality level. (Cody, interview participant)

Ultimately, though, it is the collective and collaborative nature of the workplace that one participant said helps to facilitate this activism and broader commitment to the sustainability agenda:

> …what breeds connection in this space is, like, a commitment beyond just the position you're in or the career you're having to this sort of greater group effort, which is sort of the savior of the end of the day. (Eden, interview participant)

In the next section, I explore how the participants framed the need to educate *others,* especially outside of workplaces where everyone holds similar values.

Educating others

Many of the participants spoke about the need (or desire) to educate others about sustainability in the context of their work or activism. Some participants had started their own companies with the purpose of education (both for young people, or to shift business mindsets), while others saw it as an integral part of their everyday life and work.

For example, at the end of an interview, one of the participants and I were informally chatting about politics and the emotional toll of the news cycle. Speaking about the power of friendships, the participant shared,

> It is so relieving that when you catch up with somebody and you're like, OK, we're on the same page. Thank God. OK. Like I don't have to try to, like, show you… the light or like awkwardly tiptoe or…, you can just be like…'We're both seeing the same thing, right?' (Brett, interview participant)

Brett's comment about 'showing someone the light,' even as a joke, reflects the unpaid labour of 'educating others' that some participants feel a responsibility to do. Especially in a social climate marked by divisive, polarizing politics, this need to share their knowledge and understanding as a sustainability professional—someone who does this *for a living*—is clear. Similarly, another participant noted how

> …the whole education space is something that I'm really interested in, and [it] kind of [has] motivated me as a sustainability professional as well. I think… the whole idea of preparing students—I like to kind of use a metaphor of adding to a toolbox. Seeing, you know, how can I give them a toolbox they can use in their future, so there's different aspects of that versus just a general understanding of climate change and general understanding of sustainability. For example, if they're met with a climate denier or if they're met with backlash, how can I prepare them with the right education and the right explanation of climate change so that they're able to defend themselves and also educate others of just the basics. (Devin, interview participant)

Here, Devin not only emphasizes the importance of training young people, but they also stress how it can be a valuable tool that students can use to educate *others* and defend the idea of sustainability, thereby having ripple effects in society.

However, this form of activism-as-work can be tiresome. In the next section, I discuss how many participants spoke about wanting to leave their current professional role, for this reason and others.

What it means to 'leave'

Another interesting theme that emerged was the desire to leave environmental activism, quit their job, or transition into a different role (n=5 interviews). As one participant who works in the private sector put it, "[in my current job] we're not doing things fast enough, big enough, and that's something that inspired me to pursue a master's" (Cody, interview participant). In contrast, one participant who worked in the public sector wanted to transition to the private sector because they perceived it to be more impactful and have a faster pace than their current role. They shared:

> Yes, I've been thinking about [transitioning to the private sector] for a bit now as I like the idea of being in the camp of… the changemakers and doing new things. […] I feel like my heart lies on […doing] the implementing rather than the talking about the implementation. (Brett, interview participant)

Another participant spoke about leaving in very certain terms. In doing so, they highlighted the complex relationship between advocacy/activism and professional work:

> I'll be completely honest with you, Sydney… I don't want to work in this space forever just because it's so f*cking much. It's just like so much nuance, so much polarization. Like just too much back and forth. There's too much politics and like I wanna…live a happy life. I wanna enjoy my life, you know? And like I think…advocacy work is important. I think…this work is important stuff. But… it's almost to an extent…kind of toxic, right? Like... I have buddies in…school, right? And they're like, you know, I don't like my business and environment course because it's too political. I'm like, damn right it's political. It's like the fate of the planet is on the line, right? …and they're like 'I don't really care'

> and I'm like, great. …we have people who are in charge of our society and they don't give a f*ck about the planet. (Alex, interview participant)

In this quote, the participant touches on a number of sub-themes, including the role of politics and polarization in sustainability work. They express profound frustration with the sustainability 'space,' including the failure of leaders to recognize and respond to the climate crisis. Ultimately, though, they believe that they will eventually transition away from this work to maintain their own happiness or peace.

This relates to a complementary theme of mental well-being, passion, and grit, which is also related to the participants seeing their 'work' as activism (and vice versa, activism-as-work). Some of the respondents commented on the 'depressing' nature of their work, the demands of the job, or the need for passion for environmentalism to stay persistent. As one individual said,

> It really is a career that, not requires… but I guess, to thrive, requires passion, because it can be pretty demanding. It can be pretty depressing at times, and so you kind of have to have a little bit of fight in you. (Eden, interview participant)

Additionally, educational and professional development opportunities can be overwhelming, since the climate and sustainability space is often plagued with bad news:

> Some conferences don't do a great job where it's very, like, negative…[saying] 'oh, we're not meeting these goals.' [...] And I feel more sad going to that conference than not going to that conference. (Devin, interview participant)

Others commented on the value of their work, despite the shifting political climate around sustainability:

> Yes, it's discouraging, but I also think we all believe that, you know, there's still room and space for this type of work and it's important and it will move forward no matter what's going on with, you know, certain leaders. (Finn, interview participant)

In a different interview, another respondent reflected on the structural barriers that limit their ability to do technical, nuanced, or complex work as a sustainability consultant. This is, in part, informed by a system where the business they work for (i.e., a pro-environment and pro-sustainability firm) is bound by the same investor-driven, pro-growth logic as the clients. Therefore, in a paradox of corporate sustainability, the respondent is expected to help companies meet their sustainability goals, while *also* meeting quotas, billing hours, and the internal growth goals of their own firm. As they explain, "there's a huge paradox of working at a company that's like doing sustainability but having the pressure, that need… of growth" (Georgie).

This relates to how 'sustainability' has become a complex, growth-oriented industry in and of itself. In the next section, I consider how 'innovation' —a concept which arose in a surprising amount of interviews—reinforces the traditional logic of growth and profit within the context of sustainability. I also explore how the framing of SD has become a powerful tool in 'making the business case' of investment into climate mitigation and sustainability.

Making the Business Case

In this third theme, I examine how the participants discussed 'discourse,' framing, and the economic justification of SD/sustainability. Similar to the GLOBE Series conference, where a key theme was the need to 'sell the idea' of sustainability and justify the return-on-investment (ROI) of climate mitigation, the participants spoke about needing to 'make the business case' of sustainability in their professional roles. As one participant shared,

> …when I work[ed] at [redacted] for a real estate developer, it would always come back to what's the business case, right? So, sustainability needs to be profitable. Like for us, for example… the only reason why we did it, like I'm sure people wanted to save the planet and people wanted to make green buildings, whatever. But [it's] because we got certifications for, like, LEED buildings, right? That's the only [reason]. If LEED didn't exist, I don't think there would be a reason to do that, 'cause then when you have a LEED

platinum [rating] attached to your building, you can sell it for more. That's really the only reason why, so it always comes down [to] the business case. (Alex, interview participant)

This sentiment was echoed by other respondents as well. For example, Finn shared that, in their current work, “the main theme is basically like, kind of what I've been saying throughout. It's…making that business case. [It’s telling the client,] if you don't address it now, you're gonna lose money.”

Even when, in the case of Hudson, the participant was an entrepreneur and was (presumably) more flexible in their ability to communicate the project goals and engage in the business practices differently, they were bound by this system of needing to ‘sell’ sustainability to gain any traction or support in the private sector. As they said,

> The typical kind of notion is people will not pay for sustainability unless there's an ROI attached to it. And our mission [at their self-started company] is to prove them otherwise, that there is an ROI and we [can integrate] sustainability and you can see returns. So, we just really need to make sure that everyone who is part of this journey is aligned. (Hudson, interview participant)

Sustainability consultants have also needed to navigate the backlash on ESG and sustainability following the re-election of President Trump in the United States. The ever-changing political climate, especially in the first few months of the year (2025), made some of their clients nervous. As such, the consultants also needed to help others convince their upper-level management that investing in sustainability was a smart business decision. As Eden explained,

> So, a lot of our clients coming to us are people coming to us, [and] have questions about, like, how do I navigate this environment, especially when it's pretty uncertain right now… particularly in a North American context. So how do I navigate that? I mean, we had a lot of people early in the year who were like, how do I change my language so I don't seem extreme for God forbid mentioning the words climate change together? And I think people have, like, gotten a little away from that. But that was where we started the year, which is an insane starting point to have. [...] One of [other] the big issues we had… is people from sustainability teams coming to us saying how do I make this matter to the organization at

> large. How do I make the CEO and the board hear this and understand it and make it a priority? (Eden, interview participant)

This relates to a broader theme of corporate sustainability growing and evolving as its own industry—and the challenges of being a professional in a field that is increasingly polarized and where people are continuously trying to find new ways to 'innovate' and commodify SD.

Innovation, profit, and the landscape of sustainability professionals

In the interviews, many of the participants reflected on their unique paths to becoming sustainability professionals, and how diverse the industry is as a result. It seems that no matter your educational or technical background, there are ways to weave sustainability into your role. As one participant explained,

> In my experience, the thing that's very interesting about working in sustainability is that it's a very adaptable field, like you don't…get the degree, get the certification, become [an] analyst senior…There's just so many ways to touch on sustainability. (Eden, interview participant)

However, the unique nature of this professional field also brings a few downsides. For example, since anyone can integrate sustainable practices into their work or business, it can be difficult to set standards, especially for ESG. This means that the relative importance or value of ESG consulting or sustainability has partly diminished. As Alex shared,

> I think we've kind of, we've overplayed ESG. We're like, now no one cares about it …Everyone and their mom is an ESG consultant now, right? […] So, it's…like yeah, ESG is great. Everyone has it and like now there's not much– it's really just kind of like a check mark. It doesn't feel like there's substance to it. (Alex, interview participant)

There are also various 'offshoots' within the sustainability sector to create more jobs and help interpret the complicated landscape of sustainability reporting and disclosure. This represents the commodification of sustainability as something that a company can just 'buy' or budget for. As Georgie explained,

> Another thing that's interesting in the current space is people are really focused on regulation…and ESG disclosures frameworks…There's a lot of attention in that and, like, some people have described it as an alphabet soup 'cause, there's the Sustainability Accountants Standards Board, SASB, the Task Force to Climate-Related Financial Disclosures, TCFD, the International Sustainability Standards, IISB, Canadian Sustainability Disclosure Standards, and…there's a whole area of specialization on like ESG disclosure frameworks. [...] There's like a whole other, like, sort of… profession kinda coming out of that. (Georgie, interview participant)

This complexity means that a whole new industry has developed around 'sustainability' in the private sector. And, similar to Paul Polman's keynote address about climate change being a remarkable economic opportunity, the sustainability sector now hosts many aspiring entrepreneurs who hope to make a profit off this emerging industry. Georgie, a sustainability consultant, reflected that, "sometimes it just feels like companies just wanna make money on climate change versus, like, solving it." Since the way to be successful under capitalism is often to do things faster and cheaper than the competition, this means that there can be "a resistance to nuance, particularly if it goes against the business interest as well" (Georgie, interview participant). Evidently, the commodification of the sustainability sector has created a demanding, complex, and crowded environment for sustainability professionals.

Framing for different audiences

The idea of 'framing,' not only for the business-case, but also to suit different audiences, was another sub-theme in the interviews. Eden shared how sustainability professionals need to be "strategic" in how they communicate their goals, so that their core message resonates with many different groups of people. In our discussion, they also considered Paul Polman's perspective from the GLOBE conference. It is worth including the conversation in full:

> I can't remember that stat from Paul Polman at GLOBE, but that one about like, the 'cost to act is so much lower than the cost to address the problems later.' And so I think that's just an effective way to communicate. And these are all underlying facts that, like I said…

> just sort of putting the numbers to now or finding ways to communicate for both the economic and social [goals]. But I think it just reinforces the value to people and it helps you sort of shape the message to your audience, like some people will really resonate with the social piece and that's how you can get, you know, projects done in certain communities or also just being more cautious and sort of positively strategic in how you approach things, so you know you don't just come in and plop down a solution and move on. Understanding the social and economic benefits [of sustainability] are just becoming more and more visible and not even just important, but like, critical to getting things done, I would say. (Eden, interview participant)

Eden took a more holistic approach to sustainability in their consideration of the social, economic, and environmental dimensions, and they are using that nuanced understanding to advance their primary objectives. As they said, this is a strategy to ensure sustainability remains relevant to each business decision. Cody shared this same opinion on 'strategy' in sustainability messaging:

> Maybe the framing's different. So, language… I think as we saw in the sessions [at the GLOBE conference] too, right? It's important to frame in the way that you get the right conversations, not necessarily from a… I [could find a] synonym for this, but like, not necessarily from, like, a manipulative perspective, but one where we can… use the same language. (Cody, interview participant)

The central goal, then, is to maintain the integrity of the message, regardless of the language or format that is used to communicate the goals (e.g., saying the investment will lead to x% ROI, rather than using more social or morally grounded arguments, but achieving the same result).

However, there is a risk that this pro-business evolution in the sustainability sector will fundamentally change the nature of the work. Especially in the shifting political climate, the communication strategies may need to adapt:

> I do think it's important to stay positive and know that, like, things will progress and people are still doing the good work. Like, I feel like I listen to webinars and, you know, with the work that I do every day like people are still making a case for it. We're just, you know, translating it differently. Making it more palatable. So I think that's just important to

recognize, like, this work will always be here, [it] just might not look the same. (Finn, interview participant)

Ultimately, one of the central questions facing sustainability professionals is, "how do we just communicate it to fit people's lived realities and meet them where they are?" (Eden, interview participant). By convincing people (and the businesses they run) of the value—economic or otherwise—that sustainability can bring, these young professionals are able to successfully 'make the business case' of their work.

Conclusion

In this section, I identified three core themes from a qualitative analysis of interviews with young sustainability professionals. In the first theme (i.e., 'sustainability as a discursive tool'), I highlighted how young professionals described their relationship to their work and the extent to which they were radical in their personal and professional goals. I found that the participants sometimes rejected the 'status quo' corporate style of environmentalism, yet they did not often propose or embrace more radical alternatives in their professional work. This is somewhat expected, as young people—like any either working professional—need to work to pay bills and pay off debt, and they may not be motivated or have the resources to promote radical change at a company which facilitates that level of relative economic comfort. What *is* surprising, however, is the constant shift from participants between comfort and discomfort—both with SD and sustainability as a concept which informs their work, but also with the work itself.

For example, many of the participants spoke about wanting to leave their work as a sustainability professional, either to work for a different company/organization or to leave the 'environmental activism' space altogether. Others, too, spoke about how they would like to see or contribute to more meaningful change in this professional field, while also prioritizing the success and economic growth of their client base. This reflects the importance of SD as a discursive tool that has been embraced by many sustainability professionals; as a concept, it gives them and their organizations a goal (promote sustainability) without demanding that they be too radical (promote systems-level change).

Second, I explored the relationship between the participants' framing of their professional work and their 'activism' as an individual *within* and *apart from* their organization. The participants often viewed their work as integral to their identity and values, which both supported their enthusiasm and commitment to their work and may have been a factor that contributed to burnout.

Finally, like the results in Part I, the participants discussed the need to adapt the language of SD to 'sell' it to the clients as a profit-maximizing risk management strategy. While this does not necessarily mean that the work is of poorer quality or that the work does not get done, the need to continually 'sell' sustainability means that there are fewer shared values between those who *do* the work of corporate environmentalism and those who *approve* the work to suit their bottom line. This may also reflect a broader disconnect between activism and paid work—and help explain why so many of the participants wanted to leave or change their work eventually.

These results reflect how young professionals are both 'resistors' to dominant SD paradigms and are limited (by SD and other structural conditions) to be 'persistors' and promote change within their organizations and as activists in their communities. Ultimately, the discourse of SD upholds the belief that TINA from corporate environmentalism and the status quo in business.

Next, in Chapter 6, I look at the high-level results of methods I and II and return to my original argument on the challenges of SD. I then present a model of 'recommodification' to demonstrate the role of corporatized environmentalism in re-positioning climate action to suit economic objectives.

CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION

Sustainable development, is, itself, an oddly sustainable paradigm. The ideas of SD have persisted despite decades of resistance from *both* progressives and neoliberal capitalists: the more radical agenda has called for de-growth, paradigmatic and structural upheaval, and equity-based practices to be further integrated in the SD agenda, whereas capitalists have been known to critique the very concept of sustainability and its profit-limiting motives. No matter the form of resistance, though, SD is arguably *still* a highly successful and deeply embedded discourse that keeps out the "resistors" (i.e., those who seek to challenge the paradigm) and outlasts the "persistors" (i.e., those who seek change over time). This is despite the fact that it is a relatively 'young' or new framework, after the introduction of SD in the late 1980s through the Brundtland Report.

In the right-wing, populist style of common-sense politics, actors and discourse work together to promote the idea, at least in the hearts and minds of the populus, that 'There Is No Alternative' (TINA) from the status quo (Whiting et al., 2025). Based on the evidence provided in this thesis, I argue that SD reinforces this same argument; the discursive functionality of SD is such that it reinforces the idea of TINA in the political, economic, and social spheres of public life. SD *is* progressive so far in that it calls for the integration of those spheres (i.e., politics, economics, and the social), but it does not challenge the super-structure within which the spheres are situated (such as capitalism and a paradigm of perpetual growth). Evidently, the SD model is bound by the social and economic conditions in which it was designed; all the factors which contributed to the ideation, design, authorship, and eventual implementation of the SD agenda were grounded in a neoliberal and capitalist context.

Therefore, if we accept that there is no alternative (TINA) to the worsening climate crisis—and if, as individuals, as communities, and as states, we cannot even *imagine* an alternative to the status quo that is suitably or necessarily radical—then SD, in its current form, will continue to uphold and reinforce those same assumptions. This will create conditions for apathy, passivity, or exhaustion among the populous (and the persistence of neoliberal, pro-growth ideas of SD and economic development). These conditions also ensure there is emotional and financial weakness among those who we rely on within the corporate setting to challenge and critique our systems (e.g., young sustainability professionals; the resistors and persistors).

As demonstrated in the interviews, young people who work in the sustainability sector are tired. They are passionate, but not revolutionary—and nor, perhaps, should it be their job to change the structural conditions of corporate environmentalism. Additionally, in seeing their work 'as activism,' or in seeing their activism 'as work' (as described in Chapter 5, Part II), the value of this resistance (i.e., this *activism*) among young professionals has, itself, been commodified by the organizations which claim to promote change.

Given the results from the GLOBExCHANGE conference, including the strength of pro-growth and economic development narratives (even among the corporations' highest-ranking sustainability experts), I argue that SD has provided a framework for capitalist growth that is easier to sell as a 'good plan' to the professionals who wish to promote environmental justice and sustainability in their organizations. This means that, in effect, the professionals need to 'sell' sustainability to upper-level management as a 'smart business decision,' all while the corporations ‘sell’ the idea of corporatized SD *back* to the eager sustainability professionals they hire as a viable option for climate action and as a meaningful career opportunity. This reflects the two-way power of the SD discourse; corporations (through conferences such as GLOBE) reinforce a discourse of ‘hope’ and ‘optimism’ for the climate crisis despite taking no radical action, all while sustainability professionals must continually fight for corporations to embrace this pro-growth, ‘watered-down’ version of SD (let alone actually implement more collaborative and restorative solutions, due to the high costs of climate action).

This continual, two-way discourse becomes part of the corporate *culture,* and SD—when packaged and sold this way to sustainability professionals *and* businesses—becomes entrenched into the ‘BAU’ business paradigm (as per Hayden, 2014). SD becomes a ‘checkbox,’ rather than a policy instrument for social change, and any radical steps toward achieving *effective* SD cannot be taken. [Readers will recall from Chapter 1 that I have considered what an ‘effective’ implementation of the SD/sustainability agenda would look like, and it varies based on the context. I have argued throughout this thesis that we have, in fact, seen an *effective* implementation of SD as it was designed in the Brundtland Report (that is, with a pro-growth, pro-profit function), but to ensure an *effective* implementation of the four-pillar model of sustainability as per Hawkes (2001) and others (Giddings et al., 2002; Mulligan, 2018), there would need to be a balance between social, cultural, environmental *and* economic goals, not just economic priorities.]

In addition to delaying environmental progress, the power of corporate co-optation of SD is such that when sustainability professionals try and challenge the status quo and be ‘activists,’ the (i) commodification of SD means that this change would negatively impact their jobs (e.g., change would mean downsizing the business and potential lay-offs); (ii) the internal culture at the organization and the external culture at conferences like GLOBE reinforce the idea that the corporate/profit-oriented SD is 'working' and will bring about important, systems-level change; or (iii) sustainability professionals no longer care—based on a culture of pessimism or apathy—to challenge the dominant narratives of SD (i.e., they see no further opportunities for change). Evidently, the *cultural* dimensions of SD are important to consider, if only because these different aspects of our social and political culture (e.g., corporate perspectives and objectives, youth approaches, etc.) dictate whether SD is or will be a successful model for climate action.

This brings me back to Jon Hawkes' (2001) four pillar model of sustainability. As readers will recall, the Hawkes' (2001) model expanded on earlier models to include a *cultural* pillar alongside social, environmental, and economic dimensions. In Chapter 2, I also reflected on his argument that to achieve sustainability objectives, two social imperatives must be satisfied: first, the entrenchment of a sustainable culture, and second, direct cultural action (Hawkes, 2001). The evidence that I have provided indicates that sustainability and SD has been deeply integrated within (corporate) cultures [at least to the extent that SD is a necessary consideration within most business models, and, as I have argued above, sustainability is in many ways part of the corporate culture], but the present structures do not enable cultural *action.* Therefore, according to Hawkes' (2001) argument, SD has not been effective in promoting sustainability.

Returning to my central argument

In this thesis, I have argued that SD has been effective in fulfilling its goals, but given the overshadowing of economic growth and development within the design, layman understanding, and implementation of SD as a concept and policy tool in the public and private sector, SD has not been an effective tool in promoting *change* from the status quo (thereby perpetuating the prioritization of economic interests and further environmental breakdown). This, I have argued, is not a consequence of only one variable [say, for example, the political 'slant' of the initial author(s) of the Brundtland Report (United Nations, 1987)], but rather a combination of social and political discourse, cultural factors, and inter- and multi-generational understandings of the issues and the nature of the climate crisis. In particular, I have argued the economic context in which SD was designed and presented to the public (i.e., the broader context of *capitalism*), helped prevent any meaningful use of the concept to disrupt *economic systems* because it would be a self-disruptive act and force a more radical shift in human-environment relations. Therefore, given that SD was designed in the context of capitalism, and yet it intends to use capitalism as its economic framework for recovery *from* the effects of capitalism and (economic/environmental) exploitation, the model cannot force any meaningful or systemic change.

This paradox of SD is a prime example of the risks of modernization and challenges of social change under capitalism (Burgess et al., 2017). In their overview of Ulrich Beck's work on 'risk society,' Burgess et al. (2017) discuss how human-made solutions are constructed with the same mentality and in similar conditions as the human-made problems they wish to address, thereby limiting the possibilities for *change*. Therefore, without the presence of new ideas and models that look *beyond* the role of capitalism, other paradigms (such as universalism, Deep Ecology, or more equity-centred models of human-environment relations) are dismissed in favour of the more 'traditional,' commodified form of SD.

I am not arguing that change is impossible due to our contemporary forms of economic or social organization. This would be misguided; capitalism is a relatively novel economic system, and speculating at the permanence of such a system would mean ignoring research on the limits of growth (Bailey, 2015; Hayden, 2014). Instead, the conclusion that I have drawn from the results of this thesis is that deep, systemic change that disrupts and challenges capitalism as the *dominant* paradigm is the only path forward. While different scholars and sets of literature may disagree on *how,* many agree on the imperative for a radical reimagining of human, environment, and state relations (Hayden, 2014; Little Bear, 2025; Naess, 2005; Todd, 2015; Zimmerman, 1994).

In the next section, I model the process of (re/de)commodification and discuss the limitations of the conventional SD framework. After, in Chapter 7, I conclude with some ideas for future research and reflect on some limitations of the project.

(Re)commodification and Naess: A Model

To model these results, I first asked: *Where are the concepts of commodification and Naess' framing of Deep Ecology applicable in our discursive, practical, and policy framing of SD?* After much consideration, I argue that the implementation of the SD agenda leads to the process of *re*commodification and limits our capacity to imagine alternatives to the present world order and system of SD (e.g., TINA). [Recommodification, in contrast to (de)commodification, is explored further in the following section. In short, it refers to a *return* to the commodification paradigm, rather than the shift away from it.]

I start with a visualization of (de)commodification in Figure 2. In this simple design, I have adapted Naess' work (Naess, 2005; Zimmerman, 1994) to show the *process* of decommodification as a linear, one-way process of change, whereby societies move from a place of commodification to the self-dissolution of humans within the natural environment (and thus, decommodification). [This process and its equity-based challenges have been explored further in Chapter 3.]

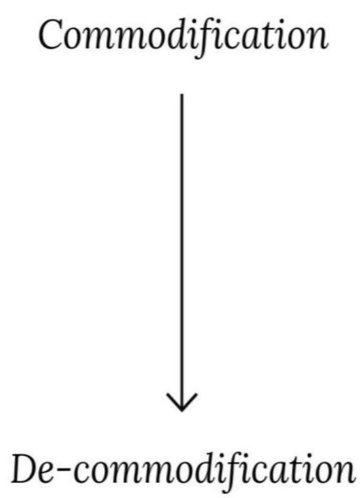

Figure 2. Conventional Model of Transition to De-Commodification

However, it is challenging to apply this model to the argument I have presented around SD. Holding Naess' argument that decommodification is necessary to address the climate crisis, the SD model—as a *climate action* strategy—should, in theory, help us transition to the decommodification of environmental resources. However, SD has been commodified through a process informed by the super-structures which surround it (i.e., corporate culture, capitalism, etc.). The introduction of SD in the Brundtland Report did not shift our understanding of environmental goods from being commodities to things of inherent worth, separate from the market system (i.e., decommodified); instead, the paradigm of SD never questioned the necessity of growth, and it *reaffirmed* the process of environmental commodification. SD was never designed to be radical or embrace the ideas of sufficiency (Hayden, 2014), decommodification (Zimmerman, 1994), or post-growth (Gough, 2010). Instead, SD gives the *appearance* of environmental progressivism and decommodification, yet the implementation of SD marks a *return* to the commodification of the environmental agenda.

This brought me to reimagine Naess' model of decommodification in Figure 3. Based on my observations and evidence in this thesis, I argue that dialogue, policy, and discourse on SD still exist within (and is created and implemented under the conditions of) certain social, political, and economic norms and expectations [namely, capitalism]. This has a limiting effect on the potential of the SD framework to promote any meaningful change, because instead of a linear process from commodification to decommodification (as per Figure 2), it is a circular system of continuous *re*commodification that is difficult for change-makers (resistors and persistors) to upend or critique *when using* the model of SD. Therefore, a new model or process of structural change (that does not embrace the same 'super-structure' of capitalism as the process of recommodification) is necessary.

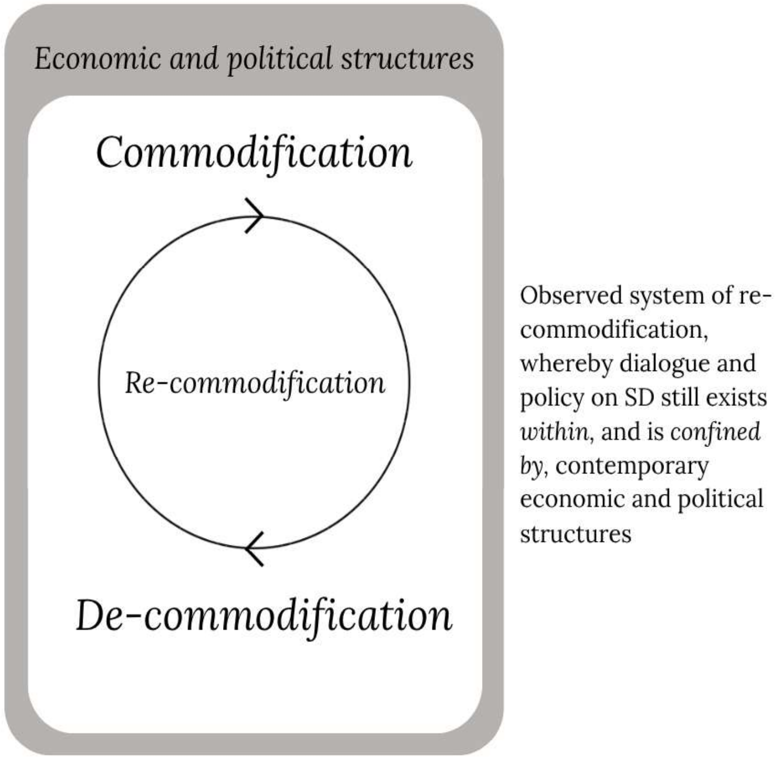

Figure 3. Observed Model of Re-Commodification

When we apply this revised model to the findings in this thesis, we see that the co-optation of SD by public and private actors is simply part of the recommodification process. As businesses have adapted to include the environment in their decision-making, their use of the SD model to be more environmentally progressive ensures that they can continue business-as-usual while *appearing* to decommodify environmental goods. This marks the recommodification of the environmental agenda, based on the pressure of the economic and political systems which surround this process (i.e., capitalism).

In the next section, I expand on this discussion and make an argument against the deliberate re-commodification of environmental goods for the purpose of conservation.

The Case Against (Re)commodification

Earlier in this project, I explored the concepts of (de)commodification as they related to universalism, climate action, and social policy. In this context, decommodification refers to the process of individuals having to rely *less* on the private income for welfare (Prince, 2019). For example, instead of needing to pay to visit a doctor, a decommodified health care system would meet the needs of the patient through the state infrastructure (and the patient's health would no longer be commodified *for the patient*, but rather, become a collective state responsibility).

Early on, I was interested in how the concept of decommodification applied to other settings, including environmental policy. As the project evolved, I also became interested in whether there was variability in the 'absolute' commodification or decommodification of social and environmental goods. This led me to consider the concept of recommodification, which I briefly introduced in the previous section.

In the welfare and social policy literature, 'recommodification' refers to the "undoing of previously extended decommodification" (Farrants, 2017, 662). Additionally, referencing the work of Pierson (2001), Dukelow (2021) writes that recommodification "involve[s] the state in... market-making" (125) and shifts "the focus of welfare [within the context of labour] from emancipation to participation in the labour market" (127). However, the scholarly discussion on the process of (de/re)-commodification in the context of *environmentalism* or environmental problems remains limited.

One independent writer, Kasper Benjamin Reimer Bjorkskov, calls for a "Re- and De-Commodification shift" (August 15, 2024) in an article in *illuminem*, but he limits his discussion to the *necessity* of recommodification: "...we must re-commodify the earth's precious resources...Only by doing so can we begin to heal the damage done to both society and the planet."

I interpret this to mean that society must re-embrace capitalist thinking and ensure that *everything* has a price; no matter how precious the environmental good, it is just that: a thing to be bought and sold if the price is right.

However, based on the evidence collected and presented in this thesis, including the observed model/system of recommodification discussed in the previous section, I disagree with Bjorkskov's (2024) argument. Instead, I argue that the inherent challenge of modernization (i.e., that human-made problems are difficult to solve with human-made solutions created under the same conditions [Burgess et al., 2017]) and the strength of SD as a discourse to promote further economic development reflect the overlapping challenges (and dangers) of *choosing* to recommodify environmental goods (as per Bjorkskov, 2024). As I have highlighted, corporations have already (re)commodified environmental goods and practices for their own benefit (i.e., for profits and growth) [e.g., just as Paul Polman described in the keynote at GLOBExCHANGE]. Not only is this strategy *working* due to its alignment with the business-oriented goals of SD, but it is often celebrated within business and political communities.

Businesses claim to be 'leading the charge,' but even alignment with the model of SD (given its pro-growth orientation) could now be considered a form of greenwashing. I argue that recommodification is yet another way to describe the ways companies are using the SD model for their own financial gain, and it is *not,* as Bjorkskov (2024) argues, our best path forward for true and effective forms of environmental, social, and economic sustainability.

Ultimately, the companies have taken a well-intentioned concept (i.e., SD) and use it to promote the same, capitalist agenda. Within the classic, three-pillar framework of SD (Mulligan, 2018), corporations have successfully captured the stories of environmental protection, green growth, and sustainability [the environmental], met policy benchmarks [the social/political], *and* have continued to grow and exploit [the economic]. In this way, they are able to align with the SD model, while also continuing to run their company in ways that prevent meaningful climate action. By recommodifying environmental goods and services (e.g., through hiring sustainability professionals to fulfill the objectives of a corporate form of SD), companies are embracing and implementing SD while failing to promote any form of radical or effective climate action. The fact that the model makes it possible to implement SD *and* prevent meaningful climate action demonstrates the inherent challenges of the SD and its inability to be a radically positive ‘solution’ to the climate crisis.

CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION

The purpose of this research project was to investigate whether SD—as a policy and conceptual tool, and as understood by young sustainability professionals in the public and private sectors—is effective in promoting climate action. To do this, I first considered the history of 'business and environmentalism' to understand how and why the private sector had a role in environmental policy, tracing the evolution of public-private partnerships and corporate sustainability as a professional 'sector' throughout the latter half of the 20th century. I then considered the power of framing and discourse to steer the environmental agenda, drawing on examples from the second Trump presidency. This background helped me contextualize the rise (and fall) of SD as a useful policy tool—starting with how it was introduced in the Brundtland Report (1987), then how it was brought into the Canadian context (through the Green Plan [1990]), and finally, in present day.

In Chapter 3, I considered a wide range of literature to explore the questions: how have different scholars come to understand the nature of human-environment relations, and why do ideas/paradigms which promote growth, profit, and development persist? I sorted my review into three sections: (i) anthropocentrism versus ecocentrism, (ii) equity versus equality in environmentalism, and (iii) environment and the state. The main takeaway from the literature review was that sustainability (and social change) is difficult when there are economic and social pressures to maintain the status quo. Through a greater understanding of these different pressures (e.g., from the capitalist economy, social norms, etc.), I argued that we can investigate the corporatization and commodification of SD; however, first, we also need an understanding of how/what ideas about the environment are formed (and by whom), who takes (political) responsibility for environmental crises, and how this relates back to core needs of the state.

Next, I collected primary data through participant observation at the GLOBExCHANGE conference in Toronto, Ontario in February 2025 and interviews with young sustainability professionals (n=8). The use of two methods helped me refine my argument and compare the discourse/framing at the corporate sustainability conference (i.e., the more public facing, refined, and marketable discourse) with the individual perspectives of staff who were relatively new to the industry and those organizations (i.e., more private or organic discourse). I found that young sustainability professionals needed to *sell* the idea of environmentalism to corporations, while simultaneously being *sold* the idea of sustainability (in its commodified, corporate-SD form) as a viable climate action strategy.

Therefore, I have argued that SD: (1) is not a particularly useful tool to advance environmental policy beyond a 'Green-Lite' framework; (2) has been co-opted by corporations looking to 'profit off of the resistance,' leading to the commodification of environmentalism; and (3) is amplified by a culture (internal and external to specific organizations) that embraces, reaffirms, and prioritizes the business- and growth-first approach to environmentalism.

Based on the models presented in the previous chapter, I have also expanded my argument to highlight the *re*commodification of SD to suit pro-growth/development goals. This 'return' to commodification is exemplified by Paul Polman's keynote address at GLOBExCHANGE (when he said that there is much *profit* to be gained from investment into the sustainability space), but the attitudes of the interview participants also reflected this pattern. In particular, the need to 'sell' the idea of sustainability (to *both* the company and its workers) reflects the cultural entrenchment of corporate (i.e., business- and growth-first) environmentalism. Taken together, the results from the conference and the interviews reveal the discursive functionality of SD as a 'Lite'-form of environmentalism and social responsibility, especially in the private sector. To move beyond this

'Green-Lite' framework and re-commit to the well-intentioned goals of sustainability and social and environmental equity, it is necessary to move beyond the original SD framework, integrate 'sufficiency' perspectives in public policy (Hayden, 2014), and explore more holistic and relational forms of human-environment-state relations.

Limitations of the Research

This thesis was an excellent learning opportunity for me, and I value the opportunities I have had over the past year to develop these ideas, explore different theories, and read from a wide range of scholars. Nevertheless, there are two main limitations to this work. The first limitation is the emphasis on breadth over depth, especially in the literature review. Throughout this project, I was interested in such a wide range of ideas (including risk and modernization, Deep Ecology, anthropocentrism, policy studies, blame avoidance, governance, and of course, environmentalism, among others) that I was limited in my ability to highlight the complexity of the different literatures in my review. While I collected my literature organically (e.g., through recommendations from my academic supervisors and in an initial search for literature in my Public Policy Studies course with Dr. Hallstrom in Fall 2024 when I began to explore this topic), the literature review connects many different ideas together, rather than critically examine only one sub-field of political science. Nevertheless, I would have liked to explore scholarship on the different areas more closely and in more detail, especially on the topic of discourse analysis, if time were not a factor for the completion of this research project.

The second limitation of this thesis is the number of interviews with sustainability professionals. In an ideal situation, I would have liked to interview more individuals, and delineate the results based on gender, age, professional field, educational background, or year they attended a GLOBE conference. With only eight interviews completed, I am unable to provide this level of detail. However, since this was an undergraduate-level thesis project, the University of Alberta Ethics Board approved this small sample size to ensure that this project still provided an interesting case study in SD discourses.

Directions for Future Research

There are many ways to extend these findings and pursue further research. I am most interested in the implications of the results on the field of environmental law, especially on the evolving debate of biospheric egalitarianism and extension of legal rights and personhood status to the environment. This would involve conducting a deeper analysis into the applications, paradigms, and policy implications of anthropocentrism versus ecocentrism (or an alternative third option, as explored in the literature review), while also centering equity-based perspectives of human-environment relations. It would also raise questions such as:

- Is decommodification possible through universal personhood status or rights-holding, given the challenges of promoting social justice (equity) *and* universalism (equality)?
- What does ecocentrism look like in practice *in law?*
- Can the observed trends of recommodification help predict some of the challenges of extending personhood rights to environmental goods? What would constitute an 'environmental good,' if more holistic and relational legal practices were implemented?
- How would the state manage this radically different landscape of human-environmental relations, and how would it honor or impede ongoing Indigenous reconciliation?

Additionally, I am interested in how *tangible* and *meaningful* implementation of sustainability policy or practices (i.e., true balance between social, environmental, and economic state priorities) would impact the current model of the welfare state. I would also like to learn more about the implications of post-growth economic policy on the state and the environment.

It is my hope that I may have the opportunity to explore these questions and many more in future studies. I strongly believe that there is a great urgency to these questions, and I hope to use this newfound understanding and appreciation for environmental policy and discourse on SD to contribute to future research and policy changes that may help mitigate the impacts of the climate crisis in deeply restorative, equitable, and compassionate ways.

Final thoughts – now what?

The failure of the SD framework to promote systemic change, and the co-optation of the SD/sustainability framework by the private sector to make more money, is perhaps an obvious, yet deeply disappointing, takeaway from this research. SD was presented in the Brundtland Report, and later in the Green Plan, to promote change from the status quo. However, the dominance of the present social, economic, and political systems (namely, capitalism) ensures that any incremental change is difficult, and radically progressive and restorative change is near-impossible. I have argued that the SD framework allows for the recommodification of the environmental agenda, and to disrupt this system, we need to look *beyond* the process of (re/de)commodification and toward other, non-capitalist (and non-universalist) ways of imagining human-environment relations.

We need radical advocacy that rejects the premise that There Is No Alternative (TINA) from the status quo, and then we need to act to implement those new ideas and embed them within policy. Through this research, I have presented evidence to better understand and model the trends of recommodification, the role of young sustainability professionals in rejecting *and* embracing

SD, and the corporatization of the SD framework. Next, we need research that not only *identifies* the problems, but which works with community-based partners to find and *implement* alternatives to the status quo. The reason is clear: the security of our planet—for all humans and the environment—depends on it.

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APPENDIX A. INTERVIEW GUIDE

Original study title: Development or Decommodification: Universalism, Sustainability, and the Albertan Welfare State. University of Alberta Ethics ID: Pro00148597

Interview Guide - *As an intensive interview, this will only serve as a thematic guide for the conversation. If the participant would like to redirect the conversation to discuss sustainability, work, or youth participation more broadly, there will be space and time for that.*

Theme 1: Identity

1. Tell me a little bit about yourself. What is your background; where do you work?
2. What is your entry point to this work? What prompted you to become engaged in conversations related to **'business and climate'**?
3. What do you think it means to be a '**sustainability professional'**?
    a. Prompt: How does your role with [the organization] align with the principles or goals of sustainability?

Theme 2: Perspectives on Sustainability

4. The United Nations has outlined the 17 Sustainable Development Goals for 2015-2030. How do you define *sustainable development*?
    a. Prompt: To what extent do you believe that companies should consider the environment in their decision-making?
    b. Prompt: Do you think that economic growth is compatible with our current climate targets?
    c. Prompt: What do you think is the most pressing issue in sustainability-based governance/ management?

Theme 3: Perspectives on Organizations and Partnerships

5. How committed do you think *your* organization (or past organizations you have worked for) are to sustainability or sustainable development?
6. What do you think is the role of:
    a. the ***public sector*** in setting or meeting climate targets?
    b. the ***private sector*** in setting or meeting climate targets?
    c. ***public-private partnerships (P3s)*** in addressing the climate crisis?

Theme 4: Eco-Social Dimensions of Sustainability

7. How often does your organization—or do you, in your work—come into contact with the 'eco-social' dimensions of problems? Are issues considered holistically (for people and the planet)?
10. Is there anything else you would like to add to supplement our discussion on business, climate, and state development?