

# **The More you Look, The Less you See: A Review on The Paradox of Power Dynamics in Food System Transition**

Christian Barika Igbeghe<sup>1</sup>, Marjo Siltaoja<sup>2</sup>, Annukka Näyhä<sup>3</sup>

\*christian.b.igbeghe@jyu.fi

Jyväskylä University School of Business and Economics, University of Jyväskylä, Finland

## ***Extended Abstract***

The concept of power dynamics is fast emerging as a central theme in the discourse of sustainability transition for businesses (Anderson et al., 2019; Avelino, 2017; El Bilali et al., 2018; Kaljonen et al., 2023). Existing studies posit that power lies in social contexts thus emphasizing the significance of power dynamics in social relations inherent in business structures and interactions (Haugaard, 2002; Jenkins & Delbridge, 2020). Notably, Fuchs (2005) describes power as a tool or resource used by actors to pursue or advance their interests. Similarly, Avelino (2011) identifies power as the inherent ability of a social system to effectively leverage available resources for the realization of collective goals, which is the locus of business management. The common implication of this background is the availability of power at the disposal of actors and its intrinsic web in business ecosystems. This complexity underscores the role of power dynamics as a crucial mechanism in the political economy of contemporary businesses. In fact, it reveals that power is a kinetic force of action underpinning various business interests and interactions and can be manifested both in competitive and collaborative contexts to influence outcomes, decisions, or align situations with corporate goals.

Furthermore, Gao & Bansal (2013) and Vernay et. al. (2023) attest to the different logics underlying the operational approach to sustainability from the perspective of business and management, and transition studies. While the business ecosystems operating purely on market logic prioritize economic benefits and profits, a business ecosystem operating on sustainability logic integrates both the environmental and business interest in the pursuit of economic gains. These distinctive paradigms influence interactions and contribute to the intricate nuances within the context of business management and the environment. Hence, unravelling the intricacies of power structures and interaction in sustainability transition in the context of business and management, and transition studies is critical for effective and just sustainability transition. Therefore, this study examines how power dynamics is conceptualized in business management and transition literatures in relation to their impact on business models in sustainability transition. The work focuses on systematically reviewing peer-reviewed studies on power dynamics in business management and transition journals from 2000 to 2024, with the aim of uncovering the evolution of the concept in literature both prior to and after the introduction of the sustainability transition agenda. It utilizes an inductive approach to analyze the studies and extract relevant insights for understanding power dynamics in the context of food systems. This approach is motivated by the centrality of food systems in the sustainability agenda and the political economy of sustainable development. Additionally, the prevalence of collaborative business models in contemporary food systems also make it a context of interest.

This study contributes to the overall understanding of the influence of power dynamics on sustainability transition by identifying the fundamental concepts and mechanisms of power relations and spotlighting puzzles for further research in business and transition literature. The

systematic review is conducted in line with the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-analyses) framework to ensure transparency and rigor as described by Page et al. (2022), and Tedja et al. (2024). A total of 73 scholarly articles were systematically collated from Web of Science and Wiley databases renowned for their wide coverage of high-ranking journals in business, management, social sciences, and multidisciplinary research. The content of the articles were analyzed using ATLAS.ti 23 qualitative data analysis software (QDAS), with specific focus on the framing of power dynamics. The analysis involved coding and identification of relevant themes, and narratives on power relationships from which the comprehensive research report is generated.

Preliminary findings suggest that emerging business models and business environment inspired by the sustainability transition creates a healthy context for power dynamics as it emphasizes collaboration and collective action (Cosenz et al., 2020). However, power dynamics is not independent, it basically operates within the framework of actors' interests and priorities which makes it challenging to isolate and difficult to notice. Business models are indispensable to sustainability transition as they determine how organizations create, deliver, and maintain values while integrating environmental and social concerns (Schneider & Clauß, 2020). The three-fold priority of sustainable business models are social responsibility, resource efficiency, and long-term viability in the interest of the overall sustainability goal. Remarkably, the influence of power dynamics on business models in sustainability transition primarily shapes decision-making processes, resource allocation, and distribution of costs and benefits among stakeholders (Passeti et al., 2019). Practically, in the context of collaborative or collective action, power dynamics influences whose interests is prioritized in creating shared values (Chow & Leiringer, 2020; Sova et al., 2015). For instance, power imbalance can affect inclusivity and equity as well as resources and opportunities in creating, delivering, or maintaining values.

The results also indicate that power dynamics can be leveraged by actors in value chain relations to raise private standards, thereby exerting more pressure on weaker actors and resulting in further resource exploitation. Practically, in the interest of sustainability, the landscape of contemporary food systems has been characterized by systemic transitions shaping policies, markets, and practices, promoting collaborative business models that facilitate the movement of actors from the informal to the formal sector. This transition implicitly forges a closer tie between players as it integrates social, environmental, and economic prospects into the operations of farmers, corporations, and policy makers. (Sova et al., 2015). Additionally, power dynamics is identified to critically affect the bargaining power of artisanal and small scale farmers and producers. A typical example is the context of Sub-Saharan Africa where institutional weaknesses and vacuums engender multidimensional power dynamics, making the situation more complex than their developed counterparts with established institutional frameworks.

Further findings from transition studies like Berbés-Blázquez et al. (2016), Khaled (2018), Siangulube et al. (2023), and Wang et al. (2020) conceptualize power dynamics in the context of individuals, institutions, and organizations that shape the process to influence the outcome of the transition. On the other hand, in business and management literatures, power dynamics is observed in how individuals, entities, or groups within an organization or business context exert influence, make decisions, and manage relationships (Co & Barro, 2009; Dawkins, 2014;

Halme, 2020; Myllykangas et al., 2010). The concept in transition studies critically revolve around control of resources, agenda, power asymmetry, justice, inclusivity, equity, and vested interests that influence the direction, effectiveness, pace, and legitimacy of the transition approach. Meanwhile, in business and management studies, it is built around control of business resources, decision-making and strategy, organizational hierarchies, negotiation skills, networks, and relationships as well as expertise and knowledge. Notably, in both contexts, power dynamics evolve both formally and informally, and intersect to shape business strategies and organizational effectiveness, making it more intricate.

Although the findings depict that the concept has been more broadly examined in transition studies than in business and management works, both fields attest to the subtlety and tenacity of power dynamics in operation. Rather than being a direct manifestation of power in action or appearing like apparent coercion or confrontation, power dynamics often adopt an elusive approach that may appear normal to either maintain status quo through reinforcing power, create new paths through innovative power, or transform existing ones through transformative power.

The work also revealed that power dynamics is influenced by various institutional factors, such as the scale and level of decision-making, the structure of governing bodies, nature of business relationships, and the availability of important resources like knowledge and capital. Studies relating to food systems mostly contextualize power dynamics with respect to position, hierarchy of actors in the food chain and resource accessibility, especially in terms of empowerment. Findings also suggest that only a limited number of tools is currently available to enable development practitioners, policy makers, and researchers to explicitly understand and address the concept of power dynamics. This lack of tools serves as a weak link, hindering or limiting stakeholders' ability to effectively mitigate the potentially harmful effects of power imbalances.

Although the review is by no means exhaustive, it showcases the significant extent of literature in this area. The study further revealed that research focus on the inadvertent consequences of power dynamics such as pushing businesses into extinction, stifling operational diversity and homogenizing business approaches, amidst several other possible negative results is very limited. This highlights the need for further research into the potential adverse effects of power dynamics in order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of this phenomenon.

Based on the findings, it is evident that undermining the role of power dynamics in agricultural adaptation strategies and business ecosystem can result in inadequate interventions and ultimately fail to stimulate effective and just approaches for sustainability transition.

### **Keywords**

Sustainability organizing, power dynamics, just transition, sustainable business model, food system.

## References

- Anderson, M., Nisbett, N., Clément, C., & Harris, J. (2019). Introduction: Valuing different perspectives on power in the food system.
- Avelino, F. (2011). *Power in transition: empowering discourses on sustainability transitions*
- Avelino, F. (2017). Power in sustainability transitions: Analysing power and (dis) empowerment in transformative change towards sustainability. *Environmental Policy and Governance*, 27(6), 505-520.
- Berbés-Blázquez, M., González, J. A., & Pascual, U. (2016). Towards an ecosystem services approach that addresses social power relations. *Current Opinion in Environmental Sustainability*, 19, 134-143.
- Chow, V., & Leiringer, R. (2020). The practice of public engagement on projects: From managing external stakeholders to facilitating active contributors. *Project Management Journal*, 51(1), 24-37.
- Co, H. C., & Barro, F. (2009). Stakeholder theory and dynamics in supply chain collaboration. *International Journal of Operations & Production Management*, 29(6), 591-611.
- Cosenz, F., Rodrigues, V. P., & Rosati, F. (2020). Dynamic business modelling for sustainability: Exploring a system dynamics perspective to develop sustainable business models. *Business Strategy and the Environment*, 29(2), 651-664.
- Dawkins, C. E. (2014). The principle of good faith: Toward substantive stakeholder engagement. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 121, 283-295.
- El Bilali, H., Hausera, M., Wurzingera, M., Melchera, A., & Probst, L. (2018). Power and politics in agri-food sustainability transitions. Paper presented at the *Proceedings of the 13th European IFSA Symposium*, 1-5.
- Fuchs, D. (2005). Commanding heights? The strength and fragility of business power in global politics. *Millennium*, 33(3), 771-801.
- Gao, J., & Bansal, P. (2013). Instrumental and integrative logics in business sustainability. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 112, 241-255.
- Halme, J. (2020). Constructing consensus and conflicts: Dynamics in regional place marketing collaboration. *Qualitative Market Research: An International Journal*, 23(4), 961-978.
- Haugaard, M. (2002). *Power: A reader*. Manchester University Press.
- Jenkins, S., & Delbridge, R. (2020). Exploring organizational deception: Organizational contexts, social relations and types of lying. *Organization Theory*, 1(2), 2631787720919436.
- Kaljonen, M., Kortetmäki, T., & Tribaldos, T. (2023). Introduction to the special issue on just food system transition: Tackling inequalities for sustainability. *Environmental Innovation and Societal Transitions*, 46, 100688.
- Khaled, A. (2018). Stakeholders' relations and power dynamics in development cooperation: lessons learnt from Egypt. *Development in Practice*, 28(6), 785-798.

- Myllykangas, P., Kujala, J., & Lehtimäki, H. (2010). Analyzing the essence of stakeholder relationships: What do we need in addition to power, legitimacy, and urgency? *Journal of Business Ethics*, 96, 65-72.
- Page, M. J., Moher, D., & McKenzie, J. E. (2022). Introduction to PRISMA 2020 and implications for research synthesis methodologists. *Research Synthesis Methods*, 13(2), 156-163.
- Passetti, E., Bianchi, L., Battaglia, M., & Frey, M. (2019). When democratic principles are not enough: Tensions and temporalities of dialogic stakeholder engagement. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 155, 173-190.
- Schneider, S., & Clauß, T. (2020). Business models for sustainability: Choices and consequences. *Organization & Environment*, 33(3), 384-407.
- Siangulube, F. S., Ros-Tonen, M. A., Reed, J., Djoudi, H., Gumbo, D., & Sunderland, T. (2023). Navigating power imbalances in landscape governance: A network and influence analysis in southern Zambia. *Regional Environmental Change*, 23(1), 41.
- Sova, C. A., Helfgott, A., S Chaudhury, A., Matthews, D., F Thornton, T., & J Vermeulen, S. (2015). Multi-level stakeholder influence mapping: visualizing power relations across actor levels in Nepal's agricultural climate change adaptation regime. *Systemic Practice and Action Research*, 28, 383-409.
- Tedja, B., Al Musadieq, M., Kusumawati, A., & Yulianto, E. (2024). Systematic literature review using PRISMA: exploring the influence of service quality and perceived value on satisfaction and intention to continue relationship. *Future Business Journal*, 10(1), 39.
- Vernay, A.-L., Sebi, C., & Moratal-Ferrando, N. (2023). Business ecosystems for sustainability: why and how firms and public partners share ecosystem leadership? New Business Models Conference Proceedings 2023. Maastricht University Press. <https://doi.org/10.26481/mup.2302.03>
- Wang, W., van Noorloos, F., & Spit, T. (2020). Stakeholder power relations in Land Value Capture: comparing public (China) and private (US) dominant regimes. *Land use Policy*, 91, 104357.