RESEARCH ARTICLE

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Civil society organisations as agents for societal change: Football clubs' engagement with sustainability

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Abstract

Progress towards more sustainable societies requires moving from reactive responses to immediate problems, towards a more proactive focus on avoiding possible future problems and preparing for potential events. This requires that sustainability is endorsed by a group or opinion leader to be adopted by society. Organisations have been instrumental in fostering sustainability and can be such opinion leaders. During the last 10 years, there has been an increasing interest in organisational sustainability; however, research on civil society organisations (CSOs) has been scarce. Sports organisations (such as football clubs) are a particular type of CSO, and have been adopting sustainability, albeit slowly. Twelve interviews with representatives of Swedish football clubs (from which nine were male clubs and three were female clubs) were conducted between August and November 2021. The data were analysed using Grounded Theory's constant comparative analysis method. The findings show that football clubs have been undertaking several sustainability efforts (e.g. stakeholder collaboration, energy, health, gender and transportation) and have been connecting the sustainability dimensions throughout such efforts. The findings provide insights into the stages of sustainability awareness in football clubs, starting from the social dimension, then the environmental, economic and time dimensions. An important finding from the interviews was the potential that football clubs have in engaging and influencing society through their fans. This research provides insights into the contributions of football clubs to sustainability. Football clubs, and other CSOs, have the potential to become societal change agents and make societies more sustainable through a shared identity.

KEYWORDS
civil society organisations, football clubs, societal change, sustainability management, Sweden

1 | INTRODUCTION

Progress towards more sustainable societies requires moving from reactive responses to immediate problems, towards a more proactive focus on avoiding possible future problems and preparing for potential events (Holliday et al., 2002; Hopwood et al., 2005; WCED, 1987). This requires that sustainability, as an innovation, is endorsed by a group or opinion leader to be adopted by society (Lozano, 2014; Maurer, 1996), as presented in Figure 1. Such groups and opinion leaders initiate and encourage an idea transfer (Rogers & Goktas, 2010; Sherry, 2003).
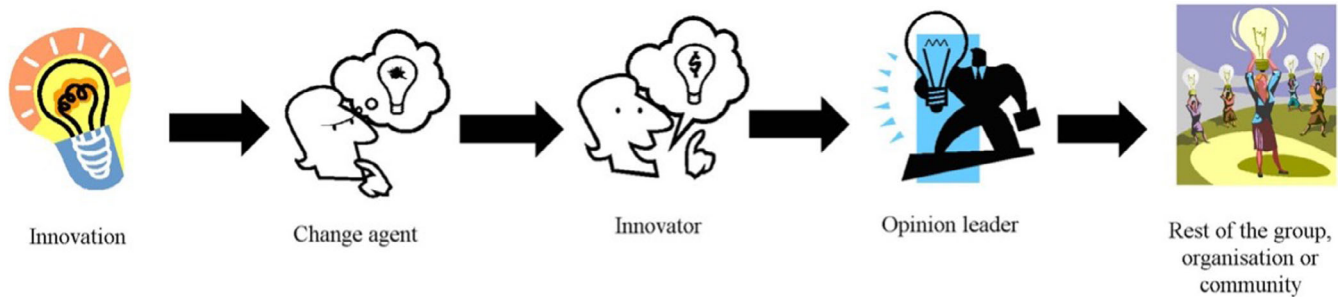
FIGURE 1 Generation and transfer of new ideas and memes. *Source*: Lozano (2006) [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

Organisations can act as opinion leaders and have been instrumental in fostering the four dimensions of sustainability (i.e. economic, environmental, social and time issues) (Danter et al., 2000; Holliday et al., 2002; D. Jennings, 2002; P. D. Jennings & Zandbergen, 1995; Lozano, 2018), for example by contributing to the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (see Onyango & Ondiek, 2021; Topple et al., 2017; van Zanten & van Tulder, 2021). However, sustainability must first be adopted by the organisation before it can be transferred to society (Lozano, 2014), where sustainability must be addressed in a holistic way considering the four dimensions and their interrelations (Escobar, 1999; Hjorth & Bagheri, 2006; Lozano & Huisingh, 2011).

During the last 10 years, there has been an increasing interest in organisational sustainability (Leon, 2013; Lozano, 2006, 2018; Rodriguez et al., 2002). A number of definitions of organisational sustainability have appeared. Leon (2013) proposed a sustainable organisation to be an economic entity that develops its plans and structures to achieve economic, environmental, social objectives and ensure its growth by allocating its resources rationally. For Rodríguez-Olalla and Avilés-Palacios (2017), organisational sustainability is a multidimensional process based on efficiency and effectiveness that focuses on results, knowledge, capacity building, networks of partners, and products and services. The most complete definition states that (see Lozano, 2018): The contributions of the organisation to sustainability entails the continuous incorporation and integration of sustainability issues in the organisation's system elements (operations and production, strategy and management, governance, organisational systems, service provision, and assessment and reporting), as well as change processes and their rate of change. These processes transform inputs into outputs, which fulfil the organisation's goal or objective and create value.

Most of the literature on organisational sustainability has focussed on corporations (Dyllick & Hockerts, 2002; Pfeffer, 2010; Schaltegger & Burrit, 2005; Tschopp, 2005), followed by education institutions, in particular higher education (Dlouhá et al., 2013; Lozano et al., 2015). Limited attention has been directed to public sector organisations (Domingues et al., 2017; Dumay et al., 2010; Guthrie & Farneti, 2008; Lodhia et al., 2012). Research on civil society organisations (CSOs), including society at large, sports clubs and non-governmental organisations, has been extremely scarce, with some exceptions such as research on the role of CSOs in urban sustainability transitions (Frantzeskaki et al., 2016), and CSOs' impacts and drivers for sustainability, where the highest impacts have been on the social dimension, followed by the economic dimension, and the lowest on the environmental dimension; and the drivers have been predominantly by internal forces with some external stimuli (Lozano, 2018).

Sports organisations (or clubs) are a particular type of CSO aimed at providing societal welfare and entertainment through training, events, competitions and collegiality (Branscombe & Wann, 1991; Thormann & Wicker, 2021). In sports clubs, a fan identity to the club provides a sense of community and identification to the individual (Jacobson, 2003). Fans identification with a sports team has, to a great extent, replaced more traditional family and community-based relationships (Branscombe & Wann, 1991; Lee & Robbins, 1995).

There has been increasing efforts to address the negative environmental and social impacts of sports organisations (Collins et al., 2009; Mallen & Chard, 2012; Trendafilova et al., 2014) and improve their positive ones (Daddi et al., 2021; McCullough et al., 2021; Trendafilova et al., 2013, 2014), for example the German government plans to implement a carbon tax (Thormann & Wicker, 2021), and the engagement of sports organisations in building stronger relations with their stakeholders (Trendafilova et al., 2014).

Sports organisations have impacts on local ecosystems, utilise reserves of irreplaceable natural capital, and contribute to carbon emissions-related to climate change (Cantelon & Letters, 2000; Dolles & Söderman, 2010; Jones, 2008). Some of the impacts on the environment of sports and sports organisations include (Mallen & Chard, 2012): noise and light pollution; consumption of non-renewal resources; consumption of natural resources; emission of greenhouse gases by consuming electricity and fuel; soil and water pollution from pesticide use; soil erosion during construction and from spectators; and waste generation from construction of facilities, and from spectators.

Figure 2 shows the three waves of environmental stages in sports (McCullough et al., 2016). Wave one is about awareness, establishing education and simple activities. Wave two is about knowledge, dissemination of education and advanced activities. Wave three is about strategy, developing outreach and sophisticated activities.

In the football industry, environmental concerns have increasingly been addressed (Bradshaw, 2021; Collins & Flynn, 2008), such as
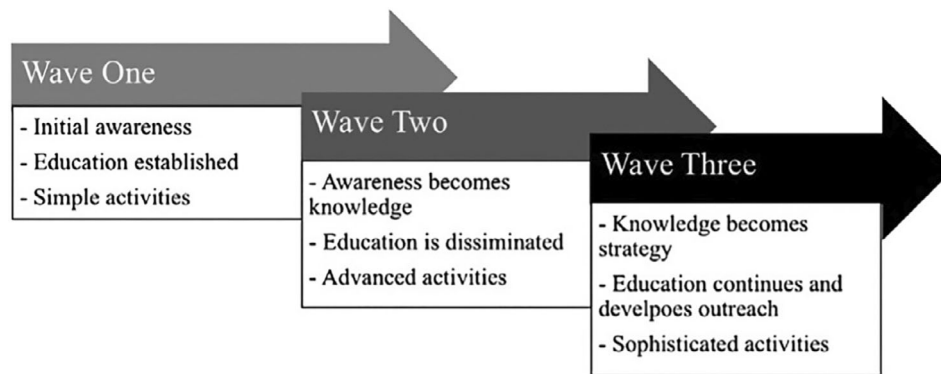
FIGURE 2   Waves of environmental stages in sport. *Source*: McCullough et al. (2016)

TABLE 1   Interviewee's football clubs

Club name	Location	Gender	League
Brage	Borlänge	Male	Second
Gais	Gothenburg	Male	Second
Gefle If	Gävle	Male	Third
Gif Sundsvall	Sundsvall	Male	Second
Hammarby	Stockholm	Male	First
Helsingborgs If	Helsingborgs	Male	Second
Ifk Luleå	Luleå	Male	Third
IK Uppsala football	Uppsala	Women	Elite
Kristianstad Women's Football Association	Kristianstad	Women	Elite
Linköping FC	Linköping	Women	Elite
Malmö	Malmö	Male	First
Sirius	Uppsala	Male	First

those from external pressures (Daddi et al., 2021). The Union of European Football Associations (UEFA), developed policies to address such concerns (Collins & Flynn, 2008); in the World Cup Football in Germany in 2006, environmental targets were introduced to identify the resources that fans consume and their environmental impact (Dolles & Söderman, 2010); and in the UK's Football Association Cup Final in 2004 the impact of staging an event was assessed (Collins & Flynn, 2008).

In spite of such efforts, few clubs have efficiently addressed environmental and social concerns (Collins & Flynn, 2008; Trendafilova et al., 2013, 2014). One of the most prominent that have done so is Manchester City Football Club through its Environmental Awareness Programme and annual environmental reports, including waste recycling, reduced packaging, procurement of local food and a transport strategy which encourages supporters' use of public transport and the provision of a safe walking route linking the city centre to the City of Manchester Stadium (Bradshaw, 2021).

This paper is aimed at contributing to organisational sustainability discourses by analysing how CSOs have been addressing sustainability, focussing particularly on football clubs.

The paper is structured in the following way: Section 2 gives details of the methods used; Section 3 presents the findings; and Section 4 provides the discussion and conclusions.

2 | METHODS

Twelve interviews with representative of Swedish football clubs (from which nine were male clubs and three were female clubs), see Table 1, were conducted between August and November 2021. The interviews were carried out in Swedish by two researchers at Sandbacka Science Park, then translated and checked again. The interviewees had positions such as club manager, sustainability or corporate social responsibility manager, and club director or president.

The respondents were assigned a random letter from A to L indicated in square brackets in the findings section to provide continuity and at the same time maintain anonymity.

The data were analysed using Grounded Theory's constant comparative analysis method (see Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Jupp, 2006), which has four stages:

1. Coding, where categories were created from the literature review, and then complemented and modified from the interviews (Sections 3.1–3.5);
2. Synthesising the responses, where the categories were classified and joined to set the structure of the framework (Sections 3.1–3.5);
3. Juxtaposing the issues, where the connections between nodes were analysed in order to create the 'interlinking issues' category (Section 3.6); and

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4. Creating the framework, where the three previous stages were integrated to propose the framework (Section 4).

2.1 | Limitations of the methods

The interviews were carried out in a Swedish context, which may limit the generalisation of the findings to other regions of the world. A major issue for this research was access to football club representatives who had been working with sustainability. There were some threats to validity regarding the interviews, such as lack consistency between the interviews, and some questions were not answered in some of the interviews. For this research the reliability might have been affected by:

1. Subject or participant error: the interviewees' limited time available, which may not have allowed to delve into some aspects of the interview;
2. Subject or participant bias: the interviewees were aware and working with sustainability issues, which may bias the responses;
3. Observer error: two interviewers carried out the interviews, and in cases had to interpret them;
4. Observer bias: the interviewers were sustainability aware, which may bias their approach.

3 | FINDINGS

This section presents the findings from the interviews. It provides the respondents views on how their clubs have been addressing sustainability issues.

3.1 | Sustainability approaches

There were different approaches and understanding of sustainability. One of the respondents indicated that it is mainly about a contribution to society [I]. Another respondent highlighted that it is mainly about social issues, and there is still much to do about the environment [E]. Yet, for one respondent it was mainly about environmental issues, although it may also contribute to health promotion and gender equality [D]. For two respondents, it was about economic, environmental and social issues [K, F]. Three other interviewees had a more holistic perspective where they highlighted that their sustainability efforts focussed on economic, environmental and social issues with the addition of long-term thinking [C, G, J]. This was complemented by another respondent who indicated that it is about internal and external work [A].

Four respondents [B, D, I, F] were aware of the SDGs. In one of the clubs, the SDGs are made visible on the team member shirts. Another club has worked mainly on three ways to achieve the goals: health, employment and inequality [I]. Another club has incorporated agenda 2030 into its business [F].

Six interviewees [A, B, D, H, I, L] provided reasons for their club to engage with sustainability, such as 'To remain relevant, you must work with sustainability issues. The supporters also make demands on the club about what they do in the community' [I], and 'It is not possible to survive if you do not work with sustainability, as there are no investors or partners who want to risk their money then' [A].

Three respondents [C, G, L] mentioned that the reputation of the club would increase by engaging with sustainability, that is 'If you work with activities that are reasonable, you would benefit from it. [It] becomes a brand builder, becomes a brand that you want to be associated with and that young people want to be associated with. Young people who today have climate anxiety will be drawn to clubs and associations that work with these values' [C]. One of the respondents [G] indicated that the club has published a sustainability report recently to set the baseline for future work.

Five interviewees [A, E, G, I, J] highlighted the following drivers for sustainability: to be an actor who can contribute to society [I]; employer branding; creation of an internal and external sense of pride; a way for the club to reach out to certain companies that you might not otherwise have reached out to; and capitalise form the enormous power to reach out to society [I].

Clubs have received support for their sustainability efforts through different sources, for example the Swedish Professional Football Leagues [A, B, F], from other clubs and associations [A, D, K], for example the Environment for Development network [E].

Nine respondents [A, C, D, E, F, G, H, I, K] mentioned the benefits from working towards becoming more sustainable, such as: becoming a catalyst for further work on sustainability [D, I]; reach different partners and society [D, G]; improve credibility [H]; help reduce unemployment [I, A]; increase internal pride [I]; reduce youth inactivity and increase health [I]; increase in the club's value and reputation [K]; become more attractive to partners [E, F]; and save money through environmental and social investments [F].

Ten respondents [A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H, I, L] mentioned the challenges they have faced when working with sustainability, such as: limited resources [A, B, C, I]; the COVID-19 pandemic [B]; continuity of sustainability efforts when other issues are pressing [L]; transportation, that is travel [D, E, J]; diverting of resources to work more actively with sustainability [C]; lack of sponsorship and support of sustainability work [D]; resource and time requirements [H]; increased stressed engaging with all issues [H]; newness of the concept in football clubs [I]; not understanding the benefits to society [I]; lack of ownership of stadium and facilities [C, I]; lack of structure and organisation around sustainability [A]; short-term views and prioritisation [C]; and unwillingness to work with sustainability [C].

3.2 | Social dimension

Four respondents [B, E, J, I] highlighted their club's willingness to have a positive impact on society, for example 'The role of sport is extremely important for society. You want to see that it has an effect in society and that it is not just a campaign' [L].

Four interviewees [B, F, I, L] highlighted their active participation with their communities, as exemplified by '[the club] has had basically a very "red association" historically, a working-class club. The ability to give back and work with one's own has always been important' [I].

Eleven respondents [A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H, J, K, L] highlighted the importance of stakeholder collaboration, especially given their increasing demands on sustainability issues, for example as with energy companies to improve the stadium [B, D], collaboration regarding gender equality issues [D, K, J], and health promotion organisations particularly diabetes reduction [A].

Eight interviewees highlighted their efforts on social issues [A, B, D, E, F, G, H, L], such as youth fund, free entrance for young people [B], training for boys and girls [A, G, L], summer camps for children and young people where they are educated in the climate issue [A, D], 'walking football' for older people [D], helping people out of work [I], provides opportunities for girls with other cultural backgrounds to play football [E, G], and seniors and pensioners' loneliness reduction through football [E].

Four respondents [C, D, J, K] highlighted the importance of gender in sustainability in football, for example through 'collaboration with UN-Women who work with gender equality issues and training of staff and players in the gender equality issue' [D], and one of the clubs has a LGBTQ+ certified stadium [C].

Two interviewees [A, G] highlighted that their clubs have engaged in health promotion activities, such as diabetes reduction through sports [A].

One respondent [A] indicated the club's efforts in employing people from excluded areas of the city.

3.3 | Environmental dimension

Seven respondents mentioned the importance of the environmental dimension [A, D, E, F, H, J, K]. One of the clubs [D] wants to become Sweden's most environmentally friendly CSO. Two respondents [A, E] mentioned that environmental issues have not been a top priority so far, as evidenced by 'Swedish football clubs work well in social sustainability … [but] feels like many are immature and lack a little competence when it comes to the environmental and there is a lot to develop' [E]. One of the clubs has an environmental policy [C].

Transportation and the stadium were highlighted as two of the main environmental concerns. Seven respondents [B, C, D, E, G, J, L] highlighted that a major environmental concern is transportation, including electric cars and charging posts at the club's office [B], travel by train [D, F, L], electric buses [D], and travel to away games that requires flying [E, F, J].

Six respondents [C, D, E, F, G, K] indicated that the stadium has a major impact on climate change. This includes from energy, day-to-day operations, the materials used, kiosks, toilets, electricity use and procurement [D], as well as water use [L]. In many cases, the stadium is own by the municipality, which restricts what the club can do regarding sustainability [C, K]. In one case [F], the club owns the stadium, which allows for more proactive changes. Two respondents [K, L] indicated their work on improving the environmental footprint of their lawn, for example 'The long-term goal is to run a large project where you can redo the entire plan and put organic coal under

it' [L]. Five respondents [B, D, F, K, L] highlighted energy as a key environmental issues in the stadium, such as lighting and electricity [B], energy consumption [D] and in the changing rooms [K]. One club [K] buys 100% renewable energy.

Two respondents [C, F] provided examples of recycling efforts, particularly through waste sorting and return deposits schemes [C]. Three respondents highlighted challenges in waste reduction and management [A, C, K], for example 'it is difficult to get the audience to sort the waste, since it is often thrown on the ground' [A], in another case the club '[installed] new waste sorting bins and provided information to the audience on how to sort their agreement at the arena' [K], in another club there is waste sorting and a return deposit in the stadium [C]. One respondent [F] indicated work with reducing food waste, for example 'a match can lead to a lot of food waste due to miscalculations or whatever it may be. This is reused in lunch restaurants or delivered to a nearby school'.

3.4 | Economic dimension

Nine respondents [A, C, D, F, G, H, J, K, L] indicated that their finances are key to sustainability, such as 'it saves money if you are environmentally smart' [L], 'Some do not want to sponsor the sustainability work but only the sporting, some say the opposite and some want to sponsor because of the breadth of both the elite and the breadth of activities' [D]; 'Everything is about finances and being sustainable is for us not just about climate and environment but very much about being a good employer who works preventively and long-term with, for example, physical and mental health. More money provides more opportunities to employ people with the skills to strengthen organisationally, which in turn makes employees happy and want to continue to develop the association together with us on the board' [G]; 'There is a group of sponsors who want to be associated with borderline football and the social sustainability that the club implement' [C].

Three interviewees [D, F, H] mentioned their procurement processes as a part of sustainability, for example 'How are the goods we buy made?' [H]. One of the respondents [D] linked sustainability efforts to their commercial purpose.

3.5 | Time dimension

Seven of the respondents highlighted the importance of long-term thinking [B, C, E, G, H, J, K], for example 'Sustainability is about building an organisation that will work over time' [G], and 'Sustainability is something that is long-term, that you have a long-term plan in everything you do' [J].

3.6 | Interlinking issues in the sustainability dimensions

The third stage in constant comparative method is juxtaposing the issues, where the connections between nodes were analysed in order

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FIGURE 3 Interlinking issues within the social dimension [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]
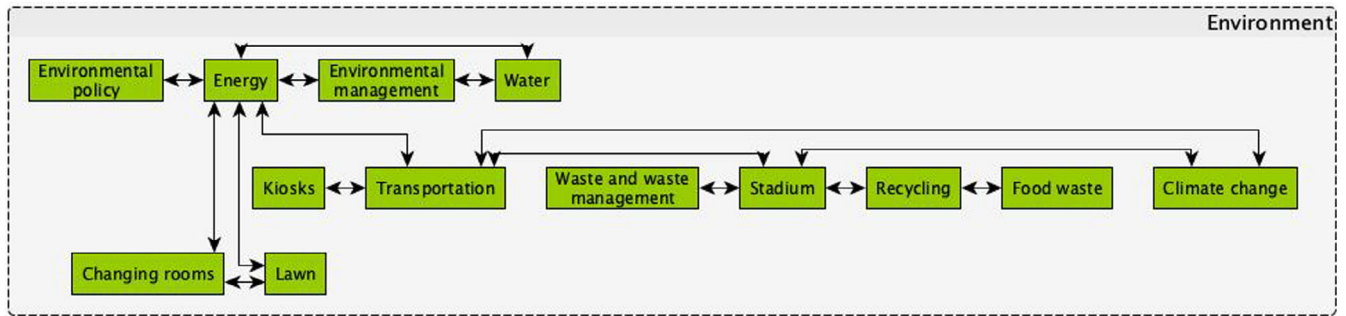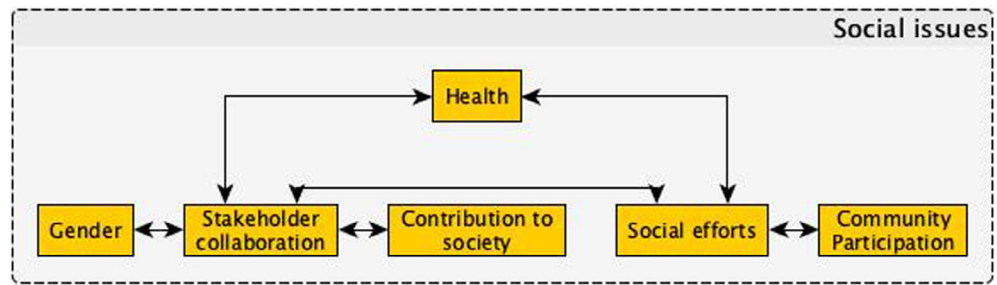
FIGURE 4 Interlinking issues within the environmental dimension [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

to create the 'interlinking issues' category. Figure 3 shows the nodes in the interlinking issues within the social dimension: community participation to social efforts; contribution to society to stakeholder collaboration; gender to stakeholder collaboration, that is 'Collaboration with UN-Women who work with gender equality issues' [D]; health to social efforts and to stakeholder collaboration (i.e. '[The club] has a major collaboration with the BEAT Diabetes Foundation. Where you are out with them in the schools and the vulnerable areas and talk about the importance of moving, eating right, informing about diabetes type 1 and 2' [A]; and social efforts to stakeholder collaboration.

Figure 4 shows the nodes in the interlinking issues within the environmental dimension: stadium to climate change; stadium to recycling; stadium to transportation (i.e. 'Travel and the stadium are what make the most impact when it comes to climate [change]' [D]; stadium to waste (e.g. 'There is waste sorting and a return deposit at the stadium' [C]); energy to changing rooms (in stadium); energy to lawn (in stadium); lawn (in stadium) to changing rooms (in stadium); climate change to transportation; energy to environmental management; energy to environmental policy; energy to transportation; energy to water; environmental management to water; kiosks to transportation; and recycling to food waste.

Figure 5 shows the nodes in the interlinking issues to another dimension category:

1. Social to environmental dimensions: stakeholder collaboration to stadium, transportation and climate change; social efforts and health to climate change; and gender to stadium;
2. Social to economic dimensions: contribution to society, health, and stakeholder collaboration to finances (e.g. 'There is a group of sponsors who want to be associated with borderline football and the social sustainability that the club implements' [C]); and
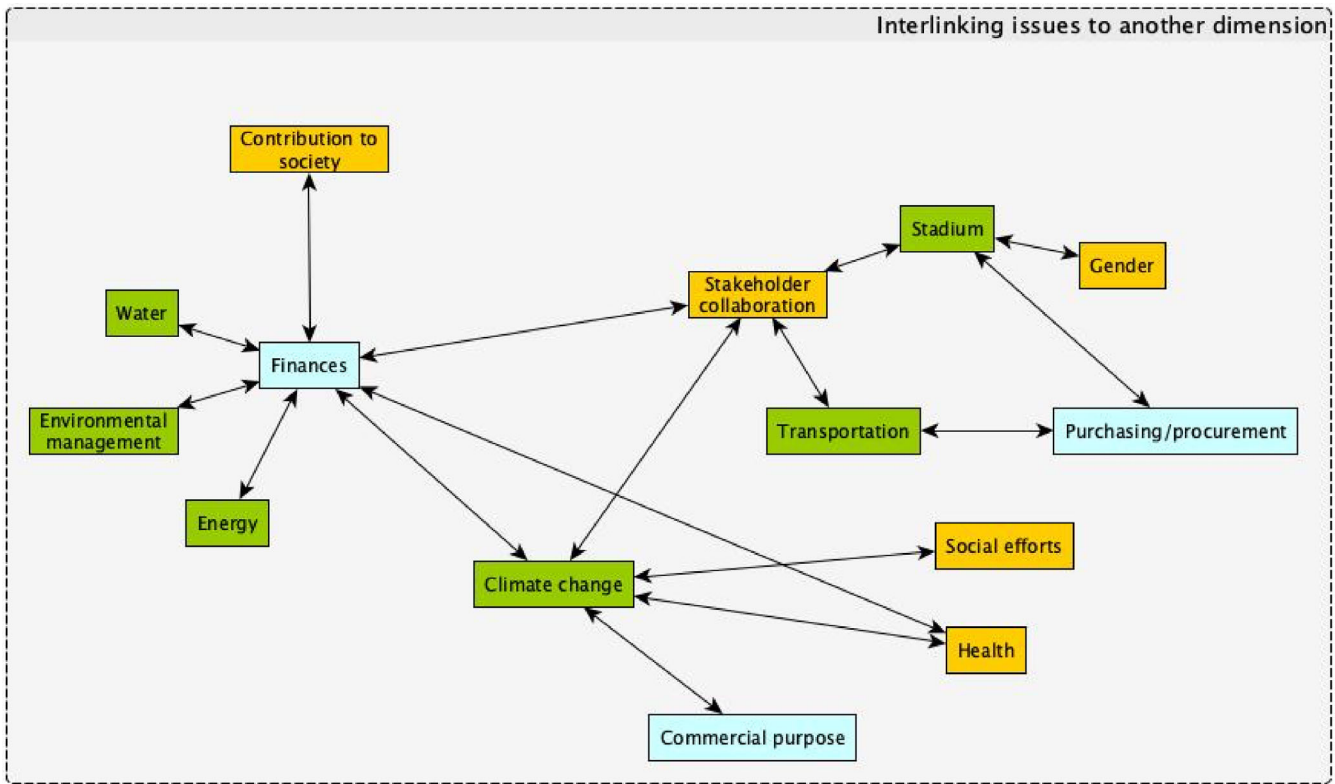
3. Environmental to economic dimensions: water, environmental management, energy and climate change to finances (e.g. 'The low-hanging fruit for the climate lies in making purchases that affect the climate less' [H]); transportation and stadium to purchasing/procurement; and climate change to commercial purpose. It should be noted that the issues most connected are finances (connected to seven issues), climate change (connected to five issues), stakeholder collaboration (connected to four issues) and stadium (connected to three issues).

4 | DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The findings show that football clubs have been undertaking several sustainability efforts (e.g. stakeholder collaboration, energy, health, gender and transportation) and have even been making connections between the sustainability dimensions, that is adopting sustainability in a holistic way (as proposed by Lozano, 2014); however, their awareness of the SDGs remains low.

The findings provide insights into the stages of sustainability awareness in football clubs, from which it can be postulated that the first one is contributing to the social dimension, followed by the environmental one, then the economic one,[1] then the time dimension, and finally, the inter-linkages between these four dimensions. This provides a new perspective on sustainability in CSOs that complements the impact perspective postulated by Lozano (2018). The findings also

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[1]Football clubs, as any organisations, must be economically viable to survive and thrive, but in this case the economic dimension refers to those activities that link explicitly to sustainability.

FIGURE 5 Interlinking issues between sustainability dimensions (green are issues in the environment dimension, yellow in the social dimension and light blue in the economic dimension) [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]
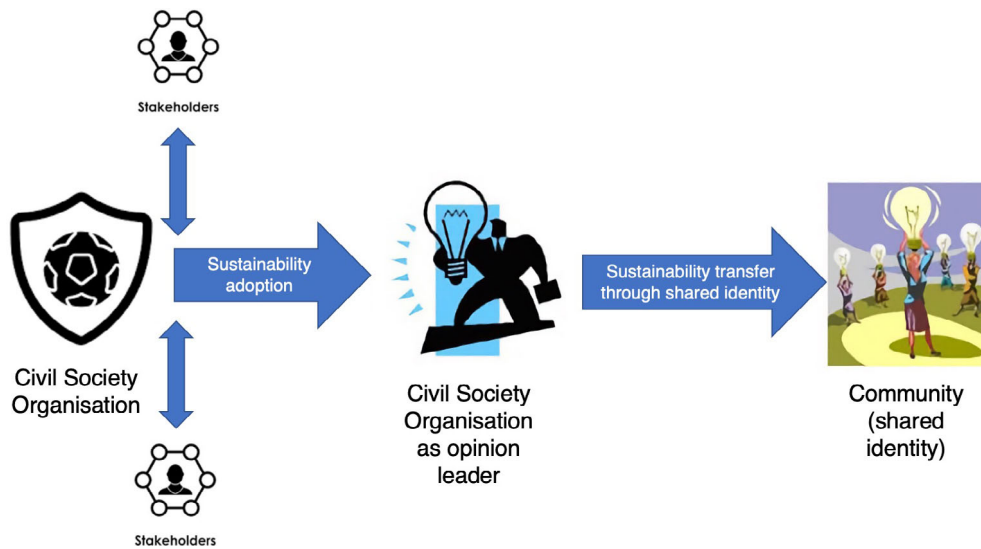
FIGURE 6 Adoption of sustainability in civil society organisations and transfer to community framework [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

provide a broader approach to the environmental stages in sport (see McCullough et al., 2016).

The findings showcase that football clubs need to be proactive in adopting sustainability to become opinion leaders and encourage the transfer of sustainability to society (as proposed by Lozano, 2014). The findings highlight that the clubs need the support from a variety of stakeholders in this process, as shown in the 'Adoption of sustainability in Civil Society Organisations and transfer to community' framework in

Figure 6, which provides new insights into the 'Generation and transfer of new ideas and memes' framework (see Lozano, 2006).

An important finding from the interviews was the role that football clubs have in engaging with and influencing their fans, which makes clubs a societal opinion leaders and change agents, and thus able to transfer the sustainability meme (as discussed by Lozano, 2006).

This research provides insights into the contributions of a particular CSOs type (football clubs) to sustainability, through training,

events, competitions and collegiality (see Branscombe & Wann, 1991; Thormann & Wicker, 2021), and most important through their fan identity (as discussed by Branscombe & Wann, 1991; Jacobson, 2003; Lee & Robbins, 1995). This research confirms the findings on sports club's environmental efforts (see Collins & Flynn, 2008; Mallen & Chard, 2012) and complements them with a more holistic perspective on the four sustainability dimensions and their interconnections, as well as the sustainability adoption stages.

Football clubs, and other CSOs, have great potential to become societal change agents and make societies more sustainable through a shared identity. With apologies to Lewis Carroll, 'The best way to explain sustainability is to do it'.

Further research should be carried out for example in a cross-comparison country of football clubs, the sustainability awareness of fans should also be explored and tested against the efforts undertaken by their clubs, embeddedness and maturity of sustainability efforts in the clubs' systems, organisational and societal sustainability change processes, the role of fans associations in sustainability transfer, and a more in-depth study should be carried out with football clubs that are sustainability leaders to highlight best practices and use them to develop multiplier effects.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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