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Changes in Sustainability Priorities in Organisations due to the COVID-19 Outbreak: Averting Environmental Rebound Effects on Society

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Abstract: The COVID-19 outbreak has affected societies and organisations in an unprecedented way. This has resulted in negative impacts to economic and social issues, but it is a “blessing in disguise” for environmental issues. This paper analyses how the outbreak has affected organisations’ sustainability priorities. Prior to the COVID-19 outbreak, such priorities were on the economic dimension followed by the environmental and social dimensions. A survey was sent to 11,657 organisations to analyse such changes, with a 5.60% response rate. The results show that for organisations, the main priority is now on the social dimension, followed by the economic one; however, the environmental dimension has suffered a negative impact in prioritisation, regardless of organisation type, country where they are based, organisation size, or the time they have been working on sustainability. We are currently facing an environmental conundrum, where air quality has improved and pollution has decreased in societies, but organisations are starting to neglect such environmental issues. The COVID-19 outbreak is an opportunity for organisations to better contribute to sustainability by ensuring that the efforts that have been undertaken in the last three decades are not forgotten, and that societies and organisations are better coupled to face such crises and avert rebound effects.

Keywords: organisations; sustainability; environment; priorities; COVID-19 outbreak

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 outbreak has halted economic activities throughout the world [1–3], a scenario not seen since the influenza pandemic in 1918. Several countries and territories have instituted lockdown measures for their organisations (e.g., schools, industries, and businesses), suspended travelling, and closed international and state boundaries [4]. Such effects are extremely rare. Even in 2007–2008, when social and environmental concerns were eroded due to short-termism [5], e.g., austerity measures made municipalities less efficient [6], and companies reduced their corporate social responsibility efforts and investment [7], the immediate effects on society were not so severe.

The COVID-19 outbreak has heavily affected the industrial and manufacturing sectors [1]. Global oil demand declined drastically and oil prices fell sharply as industrial and transport sectors came to halt worldwide [1,8]. COVID-19 has had severe negative impacts on human health and the world economy, but it has also led to improvements in the environment due to limited social and economic activities [1,3,9]. Global energy demand declined by 3.8% in the first quarter of 2020, with most of the impact felt in March, and it is expected to decline by 8%, or almost 2.6 gigatonnes (Gt), to the levels of 10 years ago [10]. CO₂ emissions decreased by 25% in China and 6% worldwide [9]. The particulate

matter concentrations (PM_{2.5} and PM₁₀) in April 2020 were much lower than those in 2019, suggesting a considerable improvement in the pollution level during the lockdown [4,11]. There has also been a considerable reduction in environmental noise across the world [12], and improvement in surface water quality [4].

The COVID-19 outbreak may be considered as a “blessing in disguise”, where pollution is reducing and nature is reclaiming itself; however, the positive impact on the environment may only be temporary if society does not learn from the lockdown and reduce pollution on the long-term [1].

Recent publications on COVID-19 have been on areas such as basic science, diagnosis, drug and vaccine development, social and economic impact, and public health [13]. Google Scholar [14] and Frontiers [15] data show that research has focussed mainly on medicine and health, particularly through an epidemiological approach, with limited research on sustainability issues, and almost none on organisations.

Organisations are an integral part of modern societies [16,17]. Organisations are affected by forces and conditions that operate beyond their boundaries [18], and at the same time, they still have the ability to react to their immediate environment [19]. In rare cases, unpredictable circumstances, such as the COVID-19 outbreak, affect organisations in unprecedented ways [20]. They, as semi-open (or semi-closed) systems [21], are in continual interaction with their external environment, with constant feedbacks between the organisation and external stimuli [22]. Organisations are connected to larger systems and thus affect the balance of the economic, environmental, and social spheres [23–25].

In this context, organisations (civil society organisations (CSOs), companies, and public sector organisations (PSOs)) have been instrumental in contributing to making societies more sustainable [17,26–29]. Organisations have been focusing more on the economic dimension (almost equally in the short-, medium-, and long-term), than on the environmental and social ones, which tend to be more important in the medium- and long-term (see Figure 1) [24].

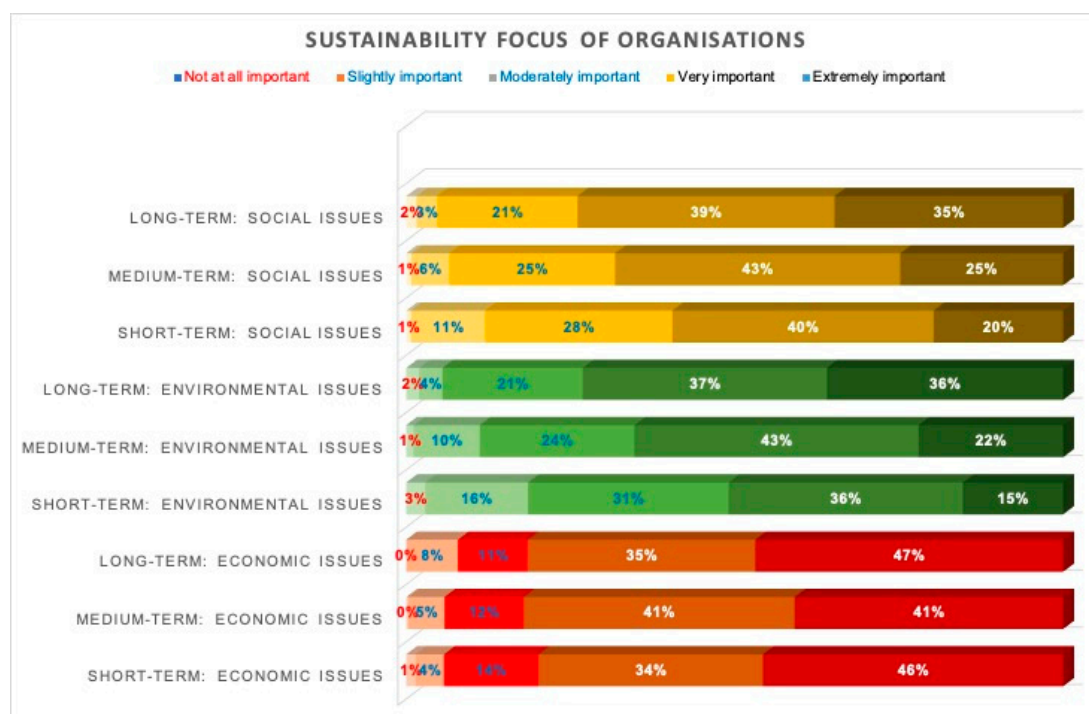


Figure 1. Sustainability focus of organisations [30].

Organisations have been developing several initiatives in different areas to promote sustainability [31,32]. For example, companies have been integrating sustainability into their strategic and operational decision-making processes [33], implementing green chemistry [34], using eco-friendly

materials, such as green cement [35], and increasing their energy efficiency [36]. Educational institutions have included sustainability in their mission and vision statements [37], reduction of greenhouse gas emissions [38], and water conservation activities [39]. PSOs have also been undertaking sustainability efforts, such as voluntary sustainability reporting based on the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) Sustainability Reporting Guidelines [40], and environmental reporting practices [41].

Crises, such as the one in 2007–2008 and the current COVID-19 one, can provide opportunities for organisations to better contribute to sustainability (see [7,42,43]).

This paper focusses on how organisational sustainability priorities have changed during the COVID-19 outbreak.

2. Methods

A survey was developed to investigate how COVID-19 has affected organisations and their sustainability efforts. The data collection took place for four weeks starting on 2 April, 2020. The survey was sent in English. The survey consisted of the following sections:

1. Organisation characteristics;
2. Sustainability questions, including the priorities prior to and during the COVID-19 outbreak;
3. Internal and external factors affecting the organisation;
4. Impacts on system elements due to COVID-19;
5. Sustainability and digitalisation training and engagement.

This paper is focused on Sections 1 and 2 of the survey (the other sections are analysed in other papers currently under preparation).

The survey was sent to a database of 11,657 contacts from different organisations. One reminder was sent out, after which 653 full responses were obtained, i.e., 5.60%. The few non-response items were treated as empty cells in the final database, following Radler and Love [44].

The questions on sustainability priorities were on five-point scale from “Not important” to “Extremely important”. Three statistical analyses have been carried out: (1) Descriptive statistics; (2) a “static” approach, comparing the differences in means in the responses of some groups at a particular time (using the Kruskal–Wallis test), focusing on a particular variable (countries, organisation type, organisation size and years working with sustainability); and (3) a “dynamic” approach, comparing the situation for each group prior to and during COVID-19 and calculating the difference, i.e., the time of the survey. These were done with IBM SPSS 24 [45].

2.1. Limitations of the Methods

The survey was open during the four weeks of maximum lockdown for most countries, which resulted in a lower response rate than typically expected in surveys open for such a long time. The response rate may have also been affected by the limited time available for potential respondents due to other priorities (e.g., airline companies), self-isolation, COVID-19 infection among staff, and staff with children having to stay at home to look after them. Reliability might have been affected by the perception of, usually, one respondent from each organisation, and by issues with understanding the questions (which were only made available in English). The number of respondents (653) may not allow generalisation to organisations worldwide. The generalisability of the results may also be limited due to using a non-random sampling procedure. A non-response bias may be caused by organisations that were contacted but which refused to complete the survey. Generalisability could be improved by a study based on a randomly selected sample drawn from the total number of organisations active in sustainability.

3. Results

From the sample, 369 of the respondents were male, and 265 were female. The rest selected the “prefer not to say” option. The responses about the type of organisation were 317 from civil

society, 138 from corporate/business, and 198 from public sector organisations. The responses about the size of organisations were 82 from 1 to 49 employees, 61 from 50 to 249 employees, 55 from 250 to 499 employees, 65 from 500 to 999 employees, 216 from 1000 to 4999, 159 from more than 5000 employees, and 15 did not know. From the responses, 4.56% of the organisations have been working with sustainability issues less than 1 year, 9.61% between 3 and 5 years, 25.08% between 5 and 10 years, 15.15% between 10 and 15 years, and 30.46% more than 15 years.

The respondents were asked about their sustainability priorities, prior to and during the COVID-19 outbreak. After a descriptive analysis using the whole database, four classification variables were selected to test the differences in sustainability priorities: (1) Organisation type, (2) countries where the organisation has its headquarters or it is based, (3) organisation size, and (4) number of years that the organisations have been working on sustainability. The analyses against “gender” as a variable did not show any statistically significant differences.

3.1. Descriptive Analysis

A descriptive analysis was carried out to analyse the changes in the sustainability priorities of all organisations. Figure 2 shows such priorities (in percentages) prior to and during COVID-19. Economic priorities were most important prior to the COVID-19 outbreak. More than 80% of the organisations considered the economic priorities extremely important or very important, followed by social priorities (26% of the organisations considered them extremely important and 41% very important). Prior to COVID-19, 54% of the respondents considered the environmental priorities extremely or very important. The COVID-19 outbreak changed these priorities. Organisations increased their social priorities and they decreased their environmental and economic priorities, with the former being the most affected by 6% increase of “not important”.

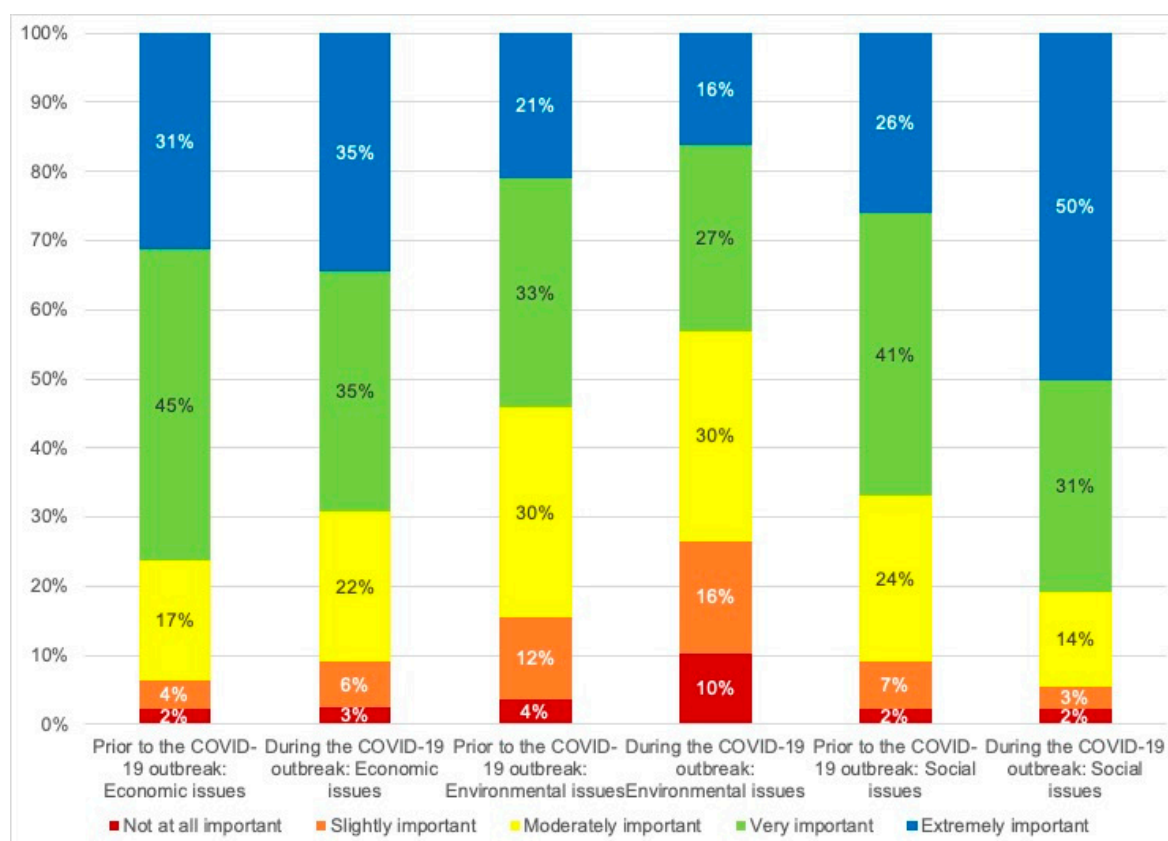


Figure 2. Sustainability priorities of all responding organisations prior to and during the COVID-19 outbreak.

3.2. Organisation Type Analyses

A Kruskal–Wallis test was carried out to test the mean differences among the organisation types (Table 1): (1) CSOs, (2) corporations, and (3) PSOs. This resulted in statistical differences in all the sustainability dimensions, prior to and during the COVID-19 outbreak. The results show that corporations have concentrated more on economic priorities and less on social ones than the other organisation types, whereas CSOs placed the lowest priority on environmental issues during both periods of time.

Table 1. Kruskal–Wallis test among different types of organisations.

Variable	Type of Organisation	N	Mean Rank	p-value
Prior to the COVID-19 outbreak: Economic issues	CSOs	282	282.13	***
	Corporations	132	345.91	
	PSOs	177	280.88	
Prior to the COVID-19 outbreak: Environmental issues	CSOs	282	272.90	***
	Corporations	132	320.00	
	PSOs	175	311.76	
Prior to the COVID-19 outbreak: Social issues	CSOs	281	298.01	**
	Corporations	132	262.71	
	PSOs	174	311.26	
During the COVID-19 outbreak: Economic issues	CSOs	280	267.39	***
	Corporations	132	386.03	
	PSOs	173	263.47	
During the COVID-19 outbreak: Environmental issues	CSOs	281	272.07	***
	Corporations	132	310.95	
	PSOs	175	318.11	
During the COVID-19 outbreak: Social issues	CSOs	281	311.69	***
	Corporations	132	238.09	
	PSOs	173	306.23	

*** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$.

The averages of organisation type sustainability priorities were calculated prior to and during the COVID-19 outbreak, then the differences between the two periods were compared. As Figure 3 shows, all organisation types reduced their priorities on environmental issues and increased their priorities on social issues. Corporations increased their priorities on economic issues during COVID-19, while CSOs and PSOs reduced them.

	Prior to COVID-19			During COVID-19			Differences		
	Econ. issues	Env. issues	Social issues	Econ. issues	Env. issues	Social issues	Diff econ. Issues	Diff env. Issues	Diff social issues
CSOs	3.901	3.436	3.833	3.757	3.068	4.345	-0.144	-0.369	0.512
Corporations	4.273	3.674	3.629	4.477	3.318	3.856	0.205	-0.356	0.227
PSOs	3.915	3.674	3.931	3.757	3.400	4.335	-0.158	-0.274	0.404

Figure 3. Sustainability priorities by type of organisation and differences within each sustainability dimension, prior to and during COVID-19. Green indicates the highest number, in relative terms, in the column, yellow the middle point, and red the lowest one for the sustainability priorities. Blue indicates a positive change between during the COVID-19 outbreak and prior to it, whereas red indicates a negative change.

These analyses show that the different organisation types have had different sustainability priorities, but they all have been affected in a similar way due to COVID-19, with the exception of economic issues.

3.3. Organisation Headquarter/Base Country Analyses

Figure 4 shows the breakdown of the countries where the respondent's organisations have headquarters or are based. The figure shows, in green, the eight countries (Finland, Germany, Italy, Netherlands, Spain, Sweden, United Kingdom, and United States) selected for subsequent analyses, since they had the most responses and constituted half of the sample responses.

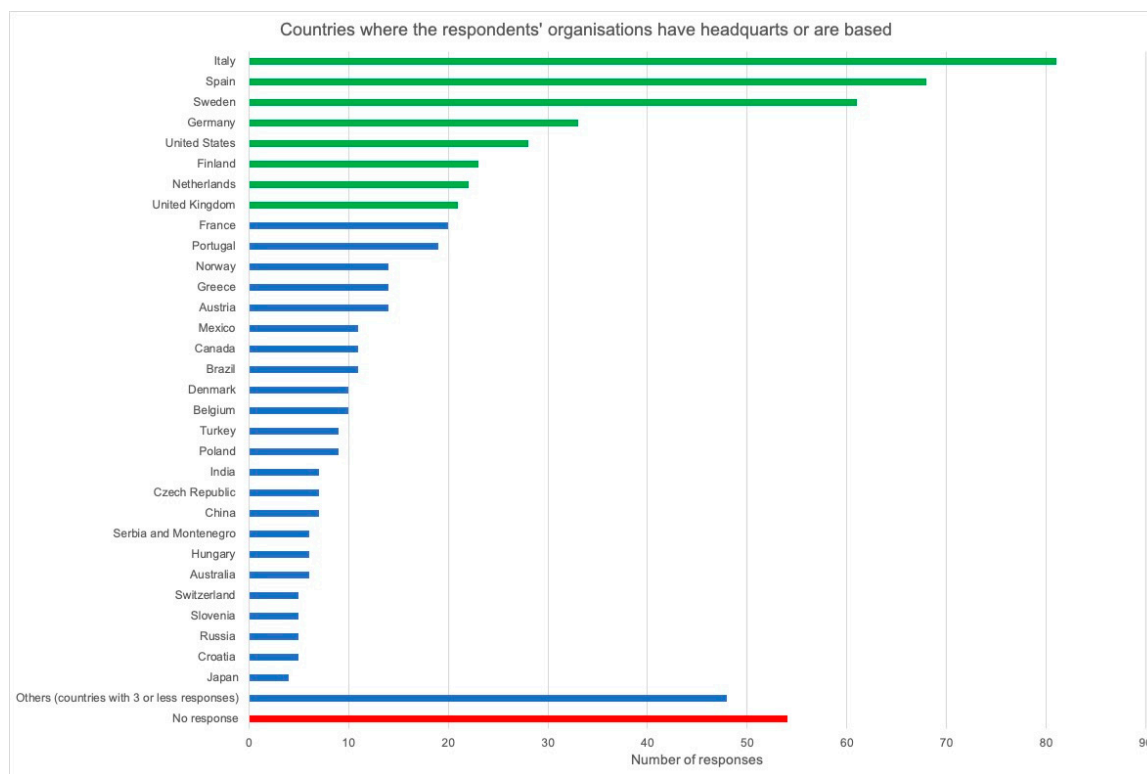


Figure 4. Number of responses from the countries where the respondent's organisations have headquarters or are based. Countries used for the comparison analysis are represented in green, and in red the ones that chose "No response".

As Table 2 shows, there were statistical differences in the environmental dimension among these countries, prior to and during the COVID-19 outbreak. In the economic and social dimensions, there were differences only during COVID-19, implying a change in the relative priorities after the start of the outbreak.

Prior to the outbreak, Swedish and Dutch organisations had more environmental priorities than organisations from other countries, while Italian organisations were the least focused on environmental aspects.

During COVID-19, the organisations with the highest economic priorities were from the United Kingdom and United States, whereas Italian organisations manifested the lowest economic priorities. Organisations from the United Kingdom had more environmental priorities than the rest, and those from the United States had the least focus. The biggest differences were in social issues (according to the *p*-values) where Italian organisations had the highest focus on social issues, whereas organisations from Germany had the lowest.

The averages for organisations in the eight countries' sustainability priorities were calculated prior to and during the COVID-19 outbreak, then the differences between the two periods were compared, as shown in Figure 5. Organisations from all eight countries decreased their environmental priorities but increased their social ones. Organisations from three countries increased their economic priorities

(Netherlands, United Kingdom, and United States). The organisations from the other countries decreased their economic priorities at different levels.

Table 2. Kruskal–Wallis test among countries where the organisations are based.

Variable	Country	N	Mean Rank	p-Value
Prior to the COVID-19 outbreak: Economic issues	Finland	20	154.525	0.297
	Germany	32	162.844	
	Italy	71	155.092	
	Netherlands	21	134.190	
	Spain	61	147.230	
	Sweden	55	136.600	
	UK	17	177.294	
	US	28	179.500	
Prior to the COVID-19 outbreak: Environmental issues	Finland	20	148.550	**
	Germany	32	143.297	
	Italy	72	134.042	
	Netherlands	22	184.341	
	Spain	62	142.403	
	Sweden	56	185.973	
	UK	16	171.719	
	US	28	154.714	
Prior to the COVID-19 outbreak: Social issues	Finland	20	137.475	0.336
	Germany	31	156.484	
	Italy	72	158.382	
	Netherlands	22	156.932	
	Spain	61	159.172	
	Sweden	55	128.355	
	UK	16	171.094	
	US	28	167.929	
During the COVID-19 outbreak: Economic issues	Finland	20	147.050	**
	Germany	32	160.875	
	Italy	70	132.614	
	Netherlands	21	159.000	
	Spain	61	144.680	
	Sweden	54	145.509	
	UK	17	198.882	
	US	28	188.607	
During the COVID-19 outbreak: Environmental issues	Finland	20	144.925	**
	Germany	32	138.813	
	Italy	72	137.271	
	Netherlands	22	180.909	
	Spain	62	147.581	
	Sweden	55	184.991	
	UK	16	190.250	
	US	28	132.339	
During the COVID-19 outbreak: Social issues	Finland	20	167.900	***
	Germany	32	119.828	
	Italy	71	185.282	
	Netherlands	22	155.659	
	Spain	61	161.057	
	Sweden	54	122.204	
	UK	16	163.000	
	US	28	127.018	

*** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$.

The analyses show that, independently of the change in the economic priorities, organisations from these eight countries modified their environmental and social priorities in the same direction (decreasing the environmental ones and increasing the social ones).

	Prior to COVID-19			During COVID-19			Differences		
	Econ. issues	Env. issues	Social issues	Econ. issues	Env. issues	Social issues	Diff econ. Issues	Diff env. Issues	Diff social issues
Finland	4.050	3.500	3.600	3.900	3.100	4.250	-0.150	-0.400	0.650
Germany	4.094	3.406	3.935	4.000	3.031	3.969	-0.094	-0.375	0.033
Italy	3.944	3.361	3.944	3.629	3.028	4.648	-0.315	-0.333	0.703
Netherlands	3.810	3.955	3.864	3.952	3.636	4.273	0.143	-0.318	0.409
Spain	3.958	3.391	3.915	3.755	3.066	4.395	-0.203	-0.326	0.480
Sweden	3.855	3.946	3.618	3.796	3.673	4.019	-0.058	-0.274	0.400
UK	4.021	3.896	3.945	4.153	3.683	4.340	0.132	-0.213	0.395
US	4.214	3.571	3.964	4.286	2.893	4.000	0.071	-0.679	0.036

Figure 5. Sustainability priorities by countries and differences within each sustainability dimension, prior to and during COVID-19. Green indicates the highest figure, in relative terms, in the column, yellow the middle point, and red the lowest relative figure for the sustainability priorities. Blue indicates a positive change between during the COVID-19 outbreak and prior to it, whereas red indicates a negative change.

3.4. Organisation Size

A Kruskal–Wallis test was done to test the mean differences among the following six groups in accordance with the organisation’s number of employees (see Table 4): (1) 1–49 employees, (2) 50–249, (3) 250–499, (4) 500–999, (5) 1000–4999, and (6) >5000.

Table 3. Kruskal–Wallis test among different organisation sizes.

Variable	Size (employees)	N	Mean Rank	p-Value
Prior to the COVID-19 outbreak: Economic issues	1–49	76	253.447	0.122
	50–249	57	307.289	
	250–499	52	289.577	
	500–999	59	274.771	
	1000–4999	188	287.638	
	>5000	148	313.291	
Prior to the COVID-19 outbreak: Environmental issues	1–49	75	342.887	***
	50–249	56	322.688	
	250–499	52	256.212	
	500–999	59	288.051	
	1000–4999	186	267.882	
	>5000	150	289.333	
Prior to the COVID-19 outbreak: Social issues	1–49	75	271.907	0.714
	50–249	57	293.825	
	250–499	52	274.731	
	500–999	59	271.949	
	1000–4999	185	299.230	
	>5000	148	292.882	
During the COVID-19 outbreak: Economic issues	1–49	75	328.407	*
	50–249	56	306.446	
	250–499	52	281.337	
	500–999	58	251.500	
	1000–4999	186	275.401	
	>5000	147	291.105	
During the COVID-19 outbreak: Environmental issues	1–49	75	355.687	***
	50–249	56	305.268	
	250–499	52	281.192	
	500–999	58	309.112	
	1000–4999	187	265.273	
	>5000	149	273.993	

Table 4. Cont.

Variable	Size (employees)	N	Mean Rank	p-Value
During the COVID-19 outbreak: Social issues	1–49	75	240.920	**
	50–249	56	253.500	
	250–499	52	291.596	
	500–999	59	289.305	
	1000–4999	185	307.654	
	>5000	148	298.561	

*** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.10$.

There were statistical differences according to organisation size, especially during the COVID-19, where small organisations were more concerned about economic and environmental issues than the others. Large organisations were more concerned about the social dimension.

The averages for organisation size sustainability priorities were calculated prior to and during the COVID-19 outbreak, and the differences between the two periods were then compared. As Figure 6 shows, organisations of all sizes reduced their environmental priorities during COVID-19 and increased their social priorities. Only the small organisations increased their economic priorities.

	Prior to COVID-19			During COVID-19			Differences		
	Econ. issues	Env. issues	Social issues	Econ. issues	Env. issues	Social issues	Diff econ. Issues	Diff env. Issues	Diff social issues
1 - 49	3.789	3.867	3.693	4.160	3.693	3.960	0.371	-0.173	0.267
50 - 249	4.070	3.750	3.877	4.018	3.339	4.071	-0.052	-0.411	0.194
250 - 499	3.981	3.346	3.769	3.904	3.135	4.231	-0.077	-0.212	0.462
500 - 999	3.898	3.576	3.712	3.724	3.345	4.254	-0.174	-0.231	0.542
1000 - 4999	3.957	3.441	3.876	3.812	3.064	4.330	-0.146	-0.377	0.454
> 5000	4.088	3.567	3.838	3.912	3.107	4.297	-0.176	-0.459	0.459

Figure 6. Sustainability priorities by organisation size and differences within each sustainability dimension prior to and during COVID-19. Green indicates the highest number, in relative terms, in the column, yellow the middle point, and red the lowest relative figure for sustainability priorities. Blue indicates a positive change between during the COVID-19 outbreak and prior to it, whereas red indicates a negative change.

3.5. Years Working with Sustainability

A Kruskal–Wallis test was done to test the mean differences among the following six groups according to the years that the organisation had been working with sustainability (see Table 5): (1) less than 1 year, (2) between 1 and 3 years, (3) between 3 and 5 years, (4) between 5 and 10 years, (5) between 10 and 15 years, and (6) more than 15 years.

Table 5. Kruskal–Wallis test among different years working with sustainability.

Variable	Years Working with Sustainability	N	Mean Rank	p-Value
Prior to the COVID-19 outbreak: Economic issues	Less than 1 year	28	263.518	0.176
	Between 1 and 3 years	53	284.783	
	Between 3 and 5 years	90	301.656	
	Between 5 and 10 years	144	297.347	
	Between 10 and 15 years	89	319.843	
	More than 15 years	176	270.369	
Prior to the COVID-19 outbreak: Environmental issues	Less than 1 year	27	102.037	***
	Between 1 and 3 years	53	210.151	
	Between 3 and 5 years	90	234.567	
	Between 5 and 10 years	144	268.122	
	Between 10 and 15 years	87	313.971	
	More than 15 years	177	375.153	
Prior to the COVID-19 outbreak: Social issues	Less than 1 year	27	194.519	***
	Between 1 and 3 years	53	214.792	
	Between 3 and 5 years	90	285.867	
	Between 5 and 10 years	143	293.364	
	Between 10 and 15 years	87	302.328	
	More than 15 years	176	315.673	
During the COVID-19 outbreak: Economic issues	Less than 1 year	28	318.036	0.568
	Between 1 and 3 years	53	267.547	
	Between 3 and 5 years	90	283.728	
	Between 5 and 10 years	142	282.708	
	Between 10 and 15 years	88	309.898	
	More than 15 years	174	284.851	
During the COVID-19 outbreak: Environmental issues	Less than 1 year	27	123.056	***
	Between 1 and 3 years	53	235.887	
	Between 3 and 5 years	89	234.669	
	Between 5 and 10 years	145	283.231	
	Between 10 and 15 years	87	317.075	
	More than 15 years	177	350.096	
During the COVID-19 outbreak: Social issues	Less than 1 year	27	186.019	***
	Between 1 and 3 years	53	238.472	
	Between 3 and 5 years	89	310.949	
	Between 5 and 10 years	144	299.514	
	Between 10 and 15 years	88	290.432	
	More than 15 years	175	298.011	

*** $p < 0.01$.

There were statistical differences in the environmental and social priorities prior to and during the COVID-19 outbreak. Organisations that have been working with sustainability for the longest time were more concerned with environmental and social issues.

The averages for the organisations' sustainability priorities against the time they have been working with sustainability were calculated prior to and during the COVID-19 outbreak, then the differences between the two periods were compared. As Figure 7 shows, organisations, regardless of years working with sustainability, reduced their environmental priorities during the COVID-19 outbreak but increased their social priorities. Organisations with the least experience working with sustainability (less than a year) were the only ones that increased their economic priorities.

	Prior to COVID-19			During COVID-19			Differences		
	Econ. issues	Env. issues	Social issues	Econ. issues	Env. issues	Social issues	Diff econ. Issues	Diff env. Issues	Diff social issues
Less than 1 year	3.714	2.185	3.185	4.071	1.889	3.556	0.357	-0.296	0.370
Between 1 and 3 years	3.943	3.019	3.321	3.774	2.792	3.887	-0.170	-0.226	0.566
Between 3 and 5 years	4.056	3.233	3.833	3.878	2.843	4.348	-0.178	-0.391	0.515
Between 5 and 10 years	4.007	3.472	3.846	3.908	3.207	4.264	-0.098	-0.265	0.418
Between 10 and 15 years	4.157	3.736	3.931	4.057	3.414	4.295	-0.100	-0.322	0.364
More than 15 years	3.892	4.102	3.972	3.879	3.672	4.320	-0.013	-0.429	0.348

Figure 7. Sustainability priorities by years working with sustainability and differences within each sustainability dimension prior to and during COVID-19. Green indicates the highest number, in relative terms, in the column, yellow the middle point, and red the lowest relative figure for sustainability priorities. Blue indicates a positive change between during the COVID-19 outbreak and prior to it, whereas red indicates a negative change.

4. Discussion and Conclusions

The COVID-19 outbreak has affected societies in a way not seen since the influenza pandemic of 1918. This has resulted in negative impacts on economic and social issues, but it is a “blessing in disguise” for environmental issues at a societal level. This paper is one of the first that analyse how the outbreak has affected organisations (as an integral part of societies) and their sustainability priorities.

A survey was sent to almost 12,000 organisations worldwide with the object of analysing their answers in respect of any changes in their priorities due to COVID-19. This achieved a response rate of 5.60% after keeping the survey open for four weeks. The results of the survey clearly show that at this difficult time for organisations, the main priority is to take care of their employees (social issues) and then to survive (economic dimension); however, environmental issues have suffered a negative impact in terms of prioritisation, regardless of organisation type, country where they are based, organisation size, or the time they have been working with sustainability issues. This is in contrast to a normal state of activities, i.e., prior to the COVID-19 outbreak, where such priorities were centred on the economic dimension (as discussed by [27]).

This research highlights that organisations and societies are facing an environmental conundrum, where, for example, air quality has improved and pollution has decreased in societies worldwide, but organisations are starting to neglect such environmental issues. Organisations have to transform crises, such as the COVID-19 outbreak, into an opportunity to better contribute to sustainability (see [7,42,43]), by ensuring that their sustainability efforts undertaken during the last three decades, and in particular for the environmental dimension, are not forgotten. In this way, we will avert environmental rebound effects and ensure that societies and organisations are better coupled to face challenges, such as COVID-19, in the future. This will help to make the world more sustainable for this generation and future ones.

As the COVID-19 outbreak evolves, more research into organisations and their sustainability efforts during this period is needed. Some lines of research could include: Investigating how the outbreak has affected the internal priorities of an organisation (e.g., whether operations or management have been more affected); analysing differences across continents; linking governmental decisions and those of organisations; and comparing the benefits and challenges of moving towards a more digitised world.

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