

From sustainable development challenges to the construction of sustainable economic models: A theoretical discussion applied to the food service

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Abstract

Restaurateurs today face significant challenges in adopting sustainable practices, particularly regarding costs, sourcing, and customer awareness. This article offers a theoretical discussion analyzing the development of sustainable business models in the restaurant industry, drawing on existing literature on sustainable entrepreneurship, social entrepreneurship, and sustainable business models. It adopts a conceptual approach where the business model is considered a central component, based on the GRP model (Generation, Remuneration, and Sharing of Value). Finally, it highlights the structuring role of the hybridization of objectives, resources, and organizational logics, emphasizing the dynamic nature of the sustainable business model and its interplay between entrepreneurial values, market constraints, and stakeholder expectations.

Keywords: Sustainable Entrepreneurship; Business Model; Food sector; Value creation.

JEL classification codes: L26, M13

من تحديات التنمية المستدامة إلى بناء نماذج اقتصادية مستدامة: نقاش نظري مطبق على خدمات الطعام

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الملخص:

يواجه أصحاب المطاعم اليوم تحديات كبيرة في تبني ممارسات مستدامة، لا سيما فيما يتعلق بالتكاليف، ومصادر التوريد، وتوعية العملاء. تقدم هذه المقالة نقاشًا نظريًا يحلل تطور نماذج الأعمال المستدامة في قطاع الاطعام، بالاستناد إلى الدراسات الموجودة حول قيادة الأعمال المستدامة، وريادة الأعمال الاجتماعية، ونماذج الأعمال المستدامة. تتبنى المقالة منهجًا مفاهيميًا يعتبر فيه نموذج العمل عنصرًا أساسيًا، استنادًا إلى نموذج GRP (توليد القيمة، والمكافأة، وتقاسم القيمة). وأخيرًا، تسلط الضوء على الدور الهيكلي لدمج الأهداف والموارد والمنطق التنظيمي، مؤكدةً على الطبيعة الديناميكية لنموذج الأعمال المستدام وتفاعله بين القيم الريادية، وقيود السوق، وتوقعات أصحاب المصلحة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: ريادة الأعمال المستدامة؛ نموذج الأعمال؛ قطاع الاطعام؛ خلق القيمة.

تصنيف JEL: L26, M13

Introduction

Today, and particularly in the food sector, new business models are being developed while others are being replicated. These models must (1) find a balance between natural resources and consumption levels, (2) promote social equity, and (3) meet the expectations of increasingly demanding customers regarding the quality of their food, and increasingly sensitive to the social and environmental impact of their consumption. Furthermore, the decline in purchasing power and the global health crisis that began in 2020 have increased the constraints on restaurateurs, prompting them to be more ingenious in designing their value proposition.

The out-of-home food service sector was one of the hardest hit by this crisis. This reveals the structural fragility of many business models. Conversely, some segments, particularly fast food, better prepared for delivery, click and collect, and drive-through services, have been able to strengthen their market position. In this context, some restaurateurs have managed to transform these difficulties into opportunities, making social and environmental issues the foundation of viable, albeit often still unstable and evolving, business models.

These developments are part of a broader movement questioning dominant food systems, criticized for their environmental and social impacts (Rockström et al., 2009; Garnett, 2014; Lang & Heasman, 2015). More broadly, they raise questions about the capacity of entrepreneurship to contribute to the transition towards more sustainable forms of production and consumption. This article is part of a theoretical discussion. It does not aim to empirically test hypotheses, but rather to articulate and enrich existing conceptual frameworks in sustainable entrepreneurship, social entrepreneurship, and sustainable business models.

Existing research explains why sustainable entrepreneurs are motivated, like personnel values (as explained by Gahlam (2019)). It does not clearly show how these intentions become practical ways to capture and share value in the restaurant sector. This article aims to fill that gap

by introducing the GRP model as a framework for studying how resources are combined.

1. Entrepreneurship and sustainable development

Innovation plays an increasingly crucial role in redefining the economic models of restaurants. As highlighted by Schumpeter's theory of creative destruction, the emergence of new business practices could disrupt traditional models, prompting the sector to adopt more resilient and sustainable frameworks that prioritize environmental protection and social equity (Bon & Yought, 2018). Thus, the transformation of the restaurant sector illustrates, on a small scale, the broader economic shifts necessary for a sustainable future.

1.1. The rise of social and environmental issues in entrepreneurship research

Sustainable entrepreneurship involves the explicit integration of environmental and social issues into the core of business operations (Schaltegger & Wagner, 2011). These concerns, long peripheral in entrepreneurship research, now occupy a central place, in response to the limitations of dominant economic models and scientific warnings concerning planetary boundaries (Rockström et al., 2009). This growing centrality of social and environmental issues underscores the need for entrepreneurs to rethink their strategies in order to navigate effectively through this transition to sustainability (Lejuste et al., 2025).

The literature highlights that entrepreneurship is no longer viewed solely as an engine of economic growth, but also as a potential lever for social and environmental transformation (Cohen & Winn, 2007; Hall et al., 2010). This evolution has led to the emergence of related concepts – social, environmental, sustainable entrepreneurship – whose boundaries sometimes remain blurred.

1.2. Social, environmental, and sustainable entrepreneurship as concepts

The concepts of social, environmental, and sustainable entrepreneurship are often used interchangeably, even though they refer to distinct approaches depending on the emphasis placed on economic, social, and environmental objectives (Elkington, 1997; Zahra & al., 2009).

Schaltegger and Wagner (2011) offer a structuring perspective by distinguishing several forms of entrepreneurship based on the degree to which sustainability issues are integrated into the core of the business model. Environmental entrepreneurship focuses primarily on reducing ecological impact, while social entrepreneurship

prioritizes the resolution of social problems. Sustainable entrepreneurship, for its part, is characterized by the simultaneous pursuit of economic, social, and environmental impacts, with a long-term perspective.

Table 1
Distinguishing concepts through the GRP model

| Concept | Main objective | Value mechanism (GRP) |
|---------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|---|
| Environmental entrepreneurship | Reducing environmental impact | Focus on the generation (eco-conception) |
| Social entrepreneurship | Social problems solutions | Focus on sharing (re Investment) |
| Sustainable entrepreneurship | <i>Triple Bottom Line</i> balance | Complete hybridization of the 3 GRP pillars |

Source : Self realisation

While this typology provides a clear way to categorise different types of entrepreneurship, but their distinction often feels too separate and does not show how companies move between these forms over time. Our hybridisation approach addresses this gap by demonstrating how social and sustainable entrepreneurship can overlap and influence one another.

This distinction avoids a normative view of sustainable entrepreneurship. As the discourse on sustainable entrepreneurship evolves, integrating social and environmental considerations into business models is becoming essential for their long-term viability. This shift is prompting a re-evaluation of traditional performance indicators, where profitability is often prioritized over ethical considerations. For example, the adoption of the triple bottom line concept—balancing people, planet, and profit—has gained traction among restaurateurs seeking to redefine their operational ethics (Elkington, 1997). This evolving context underscores the importance of fostering an entrepreneurial mindset that not only values innovation but also prioritizes ethical responsibility, thus aligning with the broader

goals of sustainable development and intergenerational equity (Martinet, 2009).

1.3. Hybridization of logics as a central characteristic of sustainable entrepreneurship

Social entrepreneurship, initially defined by Ashoka as a personal commitment aimed at solving large-scale societal problems, has gradually moved away from a strictly non-market vision. Numerous studies show that the creation of social value now relies on economic mechanisms that ensure the organization's sustainability (Austin & al., 2006; Mair & Martí, 2006). For Yunus (2007) and Yunus & al. (2010), social entrepreneurship consists of creating and developing businesses whose primary objective is to solve a social problem, rather than maximizing shareholder profit. These businesses must be economically viable. The profits generated are reinvested entirely in the social mission.

This hybrid approach highlights the importance of the sustainable entrepreneur, capable of balancing economic innovation and positive social impact while navigating

contemporary sustainability challenges (Bon & Yeught, 2018). Entrepreneurial projects committed to sustainability are forced to reconcile impact objectives with the imperatives of economic survival, which reinforces the value of an analysis focused on the business model.

2. The sustainable business model as a central analytical framework

While sustainable entrepreneurship relies on the simultaneous integration of economic, social, and environmental dimensions, this ambition cannot be realized without an operational framework for analyzing its mechanisms. The business model thus emerges as a central tool for understanding and analysis, as it makes clear how a company articulates its mission, its value proposition, and its methods of creating, capturing, and sharing value (Schmitt, 2017). Therefore, moving beyond generic definitions of the business model leads us to examine its actual construction within a sustainable development context. This involves, in particular, understanding how project leaders translate their values and commitments into concrete organizational and strategic choices. It is from this perspective that we propose to examine, in the following section, the mechanisms for constructing a sustainable business model through a structured analytical framework, beginning with an analysis of value generation.

2.1. The business model as an interface between innovation and value creation

In this context, the business model emerges as a central concept for understanding how companies translate their sustainability commitments into concrete practices. It constitutes an interface between innovation—whether social, environmental, or organizational—and value creation (Teece, 2010; Chesbrough, 2010). The literature emphasizes that sustainable innovation alone does not guarantee the economic viability of projects. The mechanisms for creating, delivering, and capturing value are what determine the long-term viability of entrepreneurial initiatives committed to

sustainability (Bocken et al., 2014; Geissdoerfer et al., 2018).

Therefore, the interaction between innovation and value creation in sustainable business models often involves a reassessment of traditional supply chains, encouraging restaurateurs to prioritize local and sustainably sourced ingredients. This approach not only supports local economies but also reduces the carbon footprint associated with transportation, in line with the principles of the circular economy, which prioritizes the efficient use of resources and waste reduction (Micheau & Aggeri, 2016). By adopting such practices, restaurateurs can strengthen their brand image while building loyalty among an increasingly environmentally conscious clientele. However, the transition to these sustainable practices is fraught with challenges, as restaurateurs must manage the complexity of the supply chain and meet consumer expectations while ensuring their economic viability (Franceschelli et al., 2018). Thus, the successful integration of sustainable development into the business model requires a strategic approach that reconciles these multiple demands, thereby contributing to a more resilient and responsible food system.

2.2. Defining the sustainable business model: contributions and limitations of existing frameworks

Research on Sustainable Business Models highlights the need to move beyond a strictly financial approach to performance. Lüdeke-Freund et al. (2019) emphasize that sustainable business models explicitly integrate stakeholders and take into account social and environmental externalities.

Drawing on Moingeon and Lehmann-Ortega (2010), we define the sustainable business model as the set of mechanisms enabling a company to fulfill its social and environmental mission through its value proposition, its value architecture, and its ability to capture a portion of this value in order to ensure its sustainability and amplify its impact. This definition allows us to articulate entrepreneurial intent and economic constraints, while avoiding an idealized vision of sustainability.

In light of these considerations, the role of regulatory frameworks and consumer expectations in the development of sustainable business models is undeniable. The implementation of policies aimed at promoting sustainable development, such as the anti-waste law introduced in France in 2020¹, has created both challenges and opportunities for restaurateurs seeking to align their practices with these constantly evolving standards (Khosravi, 2026). However, the pressure to adopt environmentally friendly practices often encounters resistance from small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) due to financial constraints and a lack of resources. This highlights a disparity in the capacity to innovate sustainably depending on the scale of business (Rahmawati & Novani, 2024). Nevertheless, as consumer awareness of sustainable development increases, companies that effectively communicate their commitment to ethical practices can not only strengthen their market competitiveness but also contribute to a broader cultural shift towards responsible consumption. Thus, the intersection between public policies, consumer behavior and entrepreneurial innovation appears as a crucial area to explore further, highlighting the need for collaboration between actors to promote a more sustainable food ecosystem.

2.3. The business model as a coordination mechanism

The business model can also be understood as a convention, in the sense of Jouison (2008), concerning the company's ability to create value, to be compensated for this value, and to share it with its stakeholders. This approach highlights the socially constructed nature of the business model.

In companies committed to sustainable development, and for restaurants in particular, the viability of the project depends heavily on stakeholder adherence to this convention. This is especially true when the value proposition relies on compromises (higher prices, seasonality, limited offerings). The ability to cultivate an informed and responsible clientele can

significantly strengthen the viability of sustainable development initiatives, transforming passive customers into active participants in the restaurant's mission. For example, awareness campaigns highlighting the benefits of local sourcing and waste reduction not only inform customers but also build loyalty among those who prioritize ethical consumption. Consumers are more inclined to support brands that share their values (Rockström & al., 2009). The business model then becomes a mechanism for coordinating actors with sometimes divergent interests, aligning with research on hybrid organizations (Battilana et al., 2012).

The GRP helps us look at the business model as a social convention. This perspective is important for sustainable food sector, where success often relies on whether stakeholders accept higher prices or seasonal options.

Furthermore, integrating feedback mechanisms, such as surveys or community forums, can help restaurateurs adapt their offerings to better meet the evolving expectations of their clientele, thereby strengthening the social contract inherent in their business models.

3. Building a sustainable business model: A theoretical framework

The literature has long focused on the motivations of sustainable entrepreneurs, paying less attention to the concrete practices of building business models. To overcome this limitation, we employ a framework inspired by the GRP² model (Verstraete & Jouison-Laffitte, 2009), adapted to businesses in sustainable development, and structured around three dimensions: value generation, remuneration, and value sharing. Unlike purely managerial models such as the business model canvas, the GRP model incorporates the dimension of sharing value. This framework is used here as a conceptual tool in the business models of restaurants committed to sustainability.

3.1. Value generation: values, project, and proposition

Value generation is based primarily on the genesis of the project, that is, the ability of

¹ <https://www.notre-environnement.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/dp20loi20ant2754.pdf>

² Generation-Remuneration-Participation

project leaders to identify a mission and translate it into a value proposition. In sustainable businesses, this genesis is closely linked to the entrepreneurs' personal values, although the economic objective remains essential (Gahlam, 2019). Research on sustainable entrepreneurship, however, shows that the alignment between values and business model is rarely immediate (Dean & McMullen, 2007). Initiatives such as zero-waste restaurants, like Silo in the UK or Frea in Germany, illustrate this tension. The desire to drastically reduce environmental impact requires a profound reconfiguration of sourcing, production, and customer relationship practices. This implies accepting new constraints (price, seasonality, limited supply).

Silo (London)

Founded by Joost Bakker and dubbed the "no-waste" restaurant, its values are based on a zero-waste system where everything is reused in accordance with regenerative agriculture. Its business model is built on high-quality, ecological, and sustainable gastronomy. To eliminate waste, Silo had to reorganize its entire production chain: wheat is milled on-site, butter is churned in the restaurant, and drinks are fermented using live cultures. Deliveries are made exclusively in reusable containers to eliminate packaging.

Source : <https://www.silolondon.com/pages/zero-waste-philosophy>

Silo uses a zero waste system based on regenerative agriculture, changing how it makes everything from milling wheat on-site to churning its own butter (Grèzes-Bürcher & Grèzes, 2023). This method is now at the heart of its high-quality food, giving customers a clear reason to support its higher prices. It transforms the « zero waste » into a value proposition, diversifies its incomes by opening a bakery, and transforms the compost into a concrete mechanism for sharing ecological value.

Frea (Berlin)

Founded by David Johannes Suchy, Frea is the world's first zero-waste vegan fine-dining restaurant, focusing on "full flavor" without waste. Its business model is based on an ultra-fresh, seasonal, and regional menu and in-house production (pasta, chocolate, bread) to avoid industrial packaging. The restaurant uses an electromechanical composting machine, and the compost produced on-site is returned to farmers to enrich the soil. Frea has also expanded its offerings by opening a bakery (Frea Bakery).

Source : <https://www.foodunfolding.com/article/zero-waste-restaurant-lessons-from-frea>

Frea is the first fine-dining restaurant to offer a zero-waste, vegan menu. By making items like pasta and chocolate themselves, they avoid using industrial packaging. This shows how sustainability is becoming a key way for businesses to stand out.

These examples confirm that the generation of sustainable value relies less on the initial intention than on the ability to transform that intention into a value proposition that is readable and acceptable to stakeholders. It transforms the « zero waste » into a value proposition, diversifies its incomes by opening a bakery, and transforms the compost into a concrete mechanism for sharing ecological value.

3.2. The economic model: An agreement with stakeholders and resource hybridization

The project leader does not build their economic model alone. They must secure the agreement of a range of stakeholders—producers, suppliers, customers, and institutions—who possess the resources necessary for the project's development (Jouison-Laffitte & Verstraete, 2008). In sustainable catering, this dimension is particularly visible in initiatives based on short supply chains and local sourcing. Restaurants committed to local sourcing, notably Frea, rely on an implicit agreement between restaurateurs, producers, and consumers, accepting economic compromises in exchange for environmental and social guarantees (Sundbo, 2016). The economic model thus appears as a relational infrastructure, integrating shared norms, values, and expectations, echoing the work of Battilana et al. (2012) on hybrid organizations.

The issue of remuneration and value sharing is central to sustainable economic models. If we consider the principles of social entrepreneurship as defined by Yunus (2009), a project can only be considered a social business if it manages to sustainably cover all of its costs through its commercial activities, without relying exclusively on subsidies or donations.

In sustainable catering, this requirement often clashes with the economic realities of the

sector. Many projects rely on a hybrid approach to resources, combining commercial revenue, public funding, partnerships with non-profit organizations, and sometimes volunteer work. Social integration restaurants, present in many European countries, illustrate this logic: their viability depends on the interplay between catering activities, public professional integration programs, and local partnerships. These models confirm that performance cannot be understood solely through financial profitability, but rather as the ability to stabilize heterogeneous resource combinations over time (Defourny & Nyssens, 2011; Battilana & al., 2012).

4. Theoretical discussion

The results of this analysis suggest moving beyond a purely instrumental interpretation of the sustainable business model. Far from being simply a description of the value proposition or revenue mechanisms, the business model emerges as a genuine mediating mechanism between the values held by entrepreneurs, market constraints, and stakeholder expectations. This interpretation aligns with the work of Demil and Lecocq (2010), who describe the business model as an evolving system shaped by ongoing interactions between resources, activities, and the environment. This mediation is all the more crucial in the context of sustainable development, as entrepreneurs must contend with sometimes contradictory objectives: addressing social and environmental challenges while ensuring the economic viability of their business. The sustainable business model is therefore not a static state, but rather a framework for ongoing negotiation and adjustment, confirming the analyses of Schaltegger, Lüdeke-Freund, and Hansen (2016) on the dynamic nature of sustainable business models.

This paper also attempted to highlight hybridization in the construction of sustainable economic models. This hybridization manifests itself at several levels: hybridization of objectives (economic and social), hybridization of resources (market and redistributive), and hybridization of organizational logics. These results align with the work of Battilana & al. (2012) and Pache & Santos (2013) on hybrid organizations, which demonstrates that the

coexistence of multiple institutional logics constitutes both a source of tension and a driver of innovation. In the sustainable food sector, this hybridization translates into concrete trade-offs regarding sourcing, pricing, work organization, and relationships with customers and local partners. This perspective aligns with Yunus's (2009) concept of social business, while also showing that, in practice, the boundaries between social enterprise, sustainable enterprise, and commercial enterprise remain porous.

It is also essential to highlight the role of project leaders' values in building a sustainable business model. As Dean & McMullen (2007) and Shepherd & Patzelt (2011) point out, identifying sustainable opportunities relies on a particular sensitivity to social and environmental issues, often rooted in the entrepreneurs' personal histories. The business model then becomes a reflection of a quest for coherence between individual values and entrepreneurial action.

This framework, which is based on a literature review, has some limitations. First, applying the GRP model to the restaurant industry is mainly based on well-known European examples like Silo and Frea. This focus may make it harder to apply the findings to places with different economic conditions or regulations, such as countries with different purchasing power or law. Second, because we do not have primary empirical data, we cannot measure the effectiveness of resource hybridisation for long-term profitability.

Conclusion

This article is a theoretical contribution that enriches the body of work on sustainable business models by offering an analysis structured around the generation, remuneration, and sharing of value (GRP). This approach moves beyond a view focused solely on the value proposition, instead highlighting concrete methods of value capture and redistribution, often under-theorized in existing research. It emphasizes the structuring role of hybridization in the construction of sustainable economic models by showing how entrepreneurs combine market, redistributive, and reciprocal resources. This is achieved while underscoring that this hybridization is less an exception than a condition for the viability of impact projects.

Finally, this study reinforces the idea that the economic model constitutes a relevant level of analysis for understanding the tensions inherent in sustainable entrepreneurship, particularly in the restaurant sector. By highlighting the trade-offs between consistency of values, market constraints and stakeholder expectations, it

contributes to a more nuanced understanding of sustainable development as an entrepreneurial process in tension, rather than as a predefined normative objective.

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