

Tension-Driven Innovation: Reconceptualising Sustainable Entrepreneurship Through Paradox Fields

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ABSTRACT

Sustainable entrepreneurship serves at the nexus of economic viability, ecological stewardship, and social responsibility. However, the prevailing Triple Bottom Line (TBL) framework, which treats these aspects as harmoniously aligned, fails to adequately capture the ongoing conflicts entrepreneurs face when balancing sustainability objectives. This limitation has created a theoretical gap in understanding how sustainability-related contradictions can generate entrepreneurial innovation. Therefore, this study aims to examine the limitations of the TBL framework, synthesise insights from paradox theory and the sustainable entrepreneurship literature, and propose a novel conceptual model that explains how sustainability tensions can become sources of innovation.

The study is based on conceptual theory-building research design grounded in a systematic review and synthesis of the literature on sustainable entrepreneurship, paradox theory, and the Triple Bottom Line. Through thematic analysis and theory synthesis, key concepts, tensions, and mechanisms underlying sustainable entrepreneurial action were identified and integrated.

The study proposes the Paradox Field Model of Sustainable Entrepreneurship. Economic sustainability, social sustainability, ecological sustainability, and entrepreneurial innovation comprise the four interrelated dimensions of the three-dimensional tetrahedral framework. The model identifies six persistent paradoxical tensions and explains how entrepreneurs transform these tensions into innovative outcomes through five mechanisms: tension recognition, rethinking cognitive, both/and thinking, dynamic cycling, and tetrahedral integration.

The study concludes that sustainability tensions should not be viewed as obstacles to be resolved but as productive forces that stimulate entrepreneurial innovation, offering a new theoretical foundation for future research and practice in sustainable entrepreneurship.

Keywords: Entrepreneurship, Sustainable entrepreneurship, Paradox Theory, Triple Bottom Line, Entrepreneurial innovation, Sustainability Tensions, conceptual mode

INTRODUCTION

Entrepreneurship has long been recognised as a primary engine of economic vitality, serving as a conduit that transforms market uncertainties into structured value (Schumpeter, 1942; Shane & Venkataraman, 2000). However, the modern business paradigm has undergone a profound shift. The contemporary global market no longer evaluates entrepreneurial success solely by financial metrics; it demands a dual commitment to preserving ecological boundaries and advancing social equity (Rockström et al., 2009; Raworth, 2017). This evolution has thrust sustainable entrepreneurship into the academic spotlight, positioning it not merely as a sub-discipline of management, but as a critical area of inquiry at the intersection of economic growth, planetary survival, and community wellbeing (Dean & McMullen, 2007; Shepherd & Patzelt, 2011).

Yet as sustainable entrepreneurship matures, a sharp divergence has emerged between prevailing corporate sustainability theory and the on-the-ground realities faced by business owners. The dominant framework for conceptualising business sustainability remains John Elkington's (1994) Triple Bottom Line (TBL), which traditionally portrays economic, social, and environmental imperatives as overlapping circles in a state of harmonious equilibrium. While this flat, two-dimensional model succeeded in legitimising non-financial metrics in the corporate world (Elkington, 1997), it inadvertently promoted a flawed assumption: that these three dimensions naturally converge toward a central point of win-win alignment (Hahn et al., 2015).

Empirical reality consistently contradicts this idealised harmony. In practice, the demands of profit maximisation, ecosystem preservation, and community equity do not neatly align; they systematically tug in opposing directions (Hahn et al., 2018; Van der Byl & Slawinski, 2015). Choosing to maximise market efficiency often comes at the direct expense of social investment, while adhering to strict ecological boundaries inherently constrains standard paths of industrial expansion (Margolis & Walsh, 2003; Porter & Kramer, 2011). These are not minor, fleeting operational hurdles that can be ironed out with better management. They are structural, permanent, and fundamentally contradictory demands baked into the very architecture of sustainability (Hahn et al., 2015; Slawinski & Bansal, 2015).

The flat TBL framework fails to account for these systemic frictions, leaving a glaring gap in the literature (Elkington, 2018; Norman & MacDonald, 2004). It mischaracterises the entrepreneur as an external manager balancing three static pillars from a safe distance, rather than the internal integrating force who must actively absorb and navigate these clashes (Shepherd & Patzelt, 2011). Consequently, management science lacks a structurally accurate, three-dimensional spatial model that explains how a sustainable entrepreneur can process these competing demands to generate innovative business strategies (Hahn et al., 2018). This paper addresses this specific theoretical gap by asking: How can sustainability theory and organisational paradox theory be formally synthesised to explain how the permanent frictions within sustainable entrepreneurship are converted into creative business innovations?

To build this architecture, the study explicitly draws on the foundational paradox theory established by Smith and Lewis (2011). Within organisational scholarship, a critical distinction must be made regarding the term *tension*. It is not used here casually to denote a stressful emotional state or a temporary business problem. Rather, tension is the precise, operative academic descriptor for contradictory yet interrelated elements that exist simultaneously and persist over time (Smith & Lewis, 2011). Organisational theorists use this term because it describes a permanent, productive state (Lewis, 2000; Poole & Van de Ven, 1989). Unlike a conflict or a trade-off, which implies that an entrepreneur must choose one side or settle for a weak compromise, a tension represents a structural reality in which opposing demands coexist indefinitely without cancelling one another out (Smith & Lewis, 2011; Andriopoulos & Lewis, 2009).

Rather than attempting to patch or recreate the flawed assumptions of the traditional TBL, this paper re-envisioning it through a three-dimensional geometric lens integrated into 'The Paradox Field Model of Sustainable Entrepreneurship'. By elevating the flat Venn diagram into a three-dimensional tetrahedron, this model maps economic, social, and ecological sustainability as the base vertices and introduces Entrepreneurial Innovation as the defining apex (cf. Hahn et al., 2018; Smith & Lewis, 2011). The edges of this structure represent six distinct, permanent paradoxical tensions, while the interior space forms the Paradox Field.

The primary purpose of this study is to formally introduce this model and delineate the five sequential conceptual mechanisms contextualising entrepreneurship, which are- Tension Recognition, Rethinking Cognitive, Both/And Thinking, Dynamic Cycling, and Tetrahedral Integration—that operate within the Paradox Field (Smith & Lewis, 2011; Lüscher & Lewis, 2008).

By embedding the entrepreneurial agent directly inside the structure as an integrating vertex rather than an external balancer, this paper offers a significant theoretical contribution to management science (Shepherd & Patzelt, 2011; Dean & McMullen, 2007). It moves beyond traditional win-win myths (Hahn et al., 2015) to demonstrate that the systemic structural tensions inherent in sustainable business are not indicators of market failure

but rather stem from a shortage of the ultimate creative resource for sustainable innovation (Schumpeter, 1942; Smith & Lewis, 2011).

Statement of the Problem

Sustainable entrepreneurship has emerged as one of the most consequential fields in contemporary management science, operating at the intersection of economic vitality, ecological preservation, and social equity (Dean & McMullen, 2007; Shepherd & Patzelt, 2011). As planetary boundaries tighten and societal expectations of business expand, entrepreneurs are no longer evaluated solely on financial performance; they are expected to generate profit, protect ecosystems, and serve communities simultaneously (Rockström et al., 2009). This tripartite demand is not merely an added responsibility; it fundamentally reshapes the nature of entrepreneurial decision-making, particularly in ecologically sensitive and economically developing regions, where the contradictions among economic, social, and ecological imperatives are especially pronounced. Understanding how entrepreneurs navigate these simultaneous, competing demands is therefore not an academic abstraction; it is an urgent, practical and theoretical necessity (Hahn et al., 2018; Van der Byl & Slawinski, 2015).

The dominant framework for conceptualising this challenge remains Elkington's (1994) Triple Bottom Line, which presents the economic, social, and ecological dimensions as three overlapping circles converging on a natural point of harmony. This framework has made a significant contribution by legitimising non-financial metrics in corporate practice and policy (Elkington, 1997). However, the bulk of scholarship building on the TBL has focused on measuring performance across its three dimensions rather than theorising the structural contradictions among them (Norman & MacDonald, 2004; Margolis & Walsh, 2003). Paradox theory offers the most conceptually appropriate lens for understanding simultaneous, irresolvable contradictions. Scholars such as Hahn et al. (2018) and Roome and Louche (2016) have begun applying it to corporate sustainability. Yet no study has formally brought these two bodies of knowledge together within an entrepreneurship framework. Most critically, the entrepreneur, the very agent who must absorb and navigate these tensions daily, remains absent from the architecture of existing models.

This absence constitutes a critical theoretical limitation. The TBL's flat, two-dimensional geometry cannot represent the direction, intensity, or dynamic interplay of sustainability tensions, and its implicit message of harmony actively misleads practitioners and researchers alike (Hahn et al., 2015; Elkington, 2018). More fundamentally, no existing framework positions the entrepreneur as an internal integrating force within the sustainability structure rather than an external balancer of its components.

The result is a field that can describe what sustainable entrepreneurs face but cannot explain how they convert those structural tensions into innovation. This paper addresses that precise gap: the absence of a theoretically coherent, three-dimensional model that formally integrates paradox theory, sustainability architecture, and the entrepreneurial agent to explain how tension becomes the engine of innovation.

Aim of this paper: How can sustainability theory and paradox theory be formally combined to create a theoretically sound model that explains how the tensions that exist in sustainable entrepreneurship lead to innovation?

Objective: Three main objectives are designed to accomplish the aim of the paper-

- To critically examine the theoretical limitations of the existing Triple Bottom Line framework in capturing sustainability tensions,
- To synthesise paradox theory, Triple Bottom Line theory, and sustainable entrepreneurship theory into a coherent theoretical framework,
- To propose the Paradox Field Model of Sustainable Entrepreneurship as a novel theoretical contribution to management science.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a conceptual theory-building research design to develop a novel framework for understanding how sustainability tensions generate entrepreneurial innovation. The study was conducted in four sequential stages (Table 1).

Table 1: Objective-wise Literature Review

Objective	Type	Statement	Focus Area	Method
Objective 1	Examination	To critically examine the theoretical limitations of the existing Triple Bottom Line framework in capturing sustainability tensions.	Triple Bottom Line framework	Integrative Literature Review
Objective 2	Synthesis	To synthesise paradox theory, Triple Bottom Line theory, and sustainable entrepreneurship theory into a coherent theoretical framework	Paradox theory, Triple Bottom Line theory, and sustainability	Theoretical synthesis
Objective 3	Contribution	To propose the Paradox Field Model of Sustainable Entrepreneurship as a novel theoretical contribution to management science	The Paradox Field Model	Model Development

First, an integrative literature review, which combines narrative and thematic reviews to discern purposive and systematic elements, was conducted to identify and examine the key theoretical foundations of sustainable entrepreneurship, including Triple Bottom Line (TBL) theory, organisational paradox theory, and the sustainability paradox literature. Relevant peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2005 and 2025 were retrieved from major academic databases, including Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar.

Second, the selected literature underwent purely a thematic analysis. The analysis focused on identifying recurring concepts, theoretical assumptions, paradoxical tensions, and explanatory mechanisms across the four thematic domains. Through iterative coding and comparison, four major themes emerged: paradox theory and organisational tensions; Triple Bottom Line theory and its limitations; sustainability paradoxes in business; and entrepreneurship under competing demands.

Third, a theory synthesis approach was employed to integrate insights from these diverse but related streams of literature. Following the principles of conceptual synthesis, the study compared theoretical assumptions, identified conceptual complementarities, and reconciled overlapping constructs. This process enabled the development of a unified explanatory framework linking sustainability dimensions, paradoxical tensions, and entrepreneurial innovation.

Finally, the study utilised conceptual modelling to develop the Paradox Field Model of Sustainable Entrepreneurship. The model was developed by identifying four core constructs—economic sustainability, social sustainability, ecological sustainability, and entrepreneurial innovation and mapping their relationships within a three-dimensional tetrahedral structure. The model further explains how entrepreneurs transform sustainability tensions into innovative outcomes.

The methodological contribution of this study lies not in empirical testing but in theoretical integration and model development. By systematically reviewing existing scholarship, synthesising complementary theoretical perspectives, and constructing a novel conceptual framework, the study may serve as a foundation for future empirical validity through qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-method research designs.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review identifies four thematic streams that collectively constitute the intellectual foundation of the Paradox Field Model: the paradox theory and organisational tensions; the Triple Bottom Line and its structural limitations; the sustainability paradox in business; and entrepreneurship under competing demands.

Paradox Theory: Tension as a Theoretical Concept

Smith and Lewis (2011), who published in the *Academy of Management Review*, are recognised for providing the fundamental formulation of paradox theory in organisational studies. In their paper, the term "tension" has a specific literary meaning; it is not used arbitrarily. "Contradictory yet interrelated elements that exist simultaneously and persist over time" is how they describe paradox, and tension is their operative condition. They sort organisational paradoxes into four categories: performing, organising, belonging, and learning. They contend that organisations that manage these tensions in parallel, rather than resolving them, reach what they call dynamic equilibrium, a state of fruitful coexistence that eventually fosters innovation and adaptation.

This is a significant departure from how management literature had previously handled contradiction. The dominant instinct in strategy, operations, and leadership has been to resolve tension through prioritisation. Choose efficiency or flexibility. Choose profit or purpose. Smith and Lewis argue that this either-or logic is not only limiting but also theoretically incorrect. Paradoxes cannot be resolved. They can only be worked with; earlier contributions had gestured toward this idea. Poole and Van de Ven (1989) identified four strategies for managing paradox, including acceptance and synthesis. Lewis (2000) explored how organisations reinforce rather than escape their paradoxes. But it was Smith and Lewis (2011) who gave the field a coherent, generalisable framework — one that this paper directly builds upon.

The Triple Bottom Line: A Framework and Its Limits

Elkington's (1994) Triple Bottom Line was a genuine intellectual intervention. At a time when business success meant shareholder returns, proposing that firms should be accountable to people and planet as well as profit was a meaningful challenge to the prevailing orthodoxy. The framework has since become the dominant language of corporate sustainability used in reporting standards, policy frameworks, and business education worldwide. But the TBL has a structural problem that has become increasingly difficult to ignore. Its visual representation, three overlapping circles, implies that economic, social, and ecological objectives naturally converge. The message, intended or not, is that sustainability is achievable through alignment. That tension, if it exists, is a temporary management problem rather than a permanent structural condition.

Hahn et al. (2015) were the first to formally challenge this. They showed that the three pillars of the TBL are inherently incompatible: Economic growth systematically externalises ecological costs; social equity measures often conflict with market efficiency; ecological boundaries constrain the very expansion that funds social investment. These are not occasional conflicts, but they are all structural.

In a 2018 article for the *Harvard Business Review*, Elkington himself called for a "recall" of the TBL, admitting that it had been misused as an accounting instrument rather than a transformative framework. This paper contends that the issue goes beyond misuse. It's a representation issue. The complexity of the challenges faced by sustainable entrepreneurs just cannot be captured by a flat, two-dimensional paradigm.

These structural limitations, identified across the literature, establish the theoretical necessity for a spatial re-conceptualisation of the TBL. This paper directly addresses that necessity in the theoretical synthesis.

Sustainability Paradox in Business

The explicit application of paradox theory to corporate sustainability is relatively recent, and it has produced some of the most useful thinking in this space. Hahn et al. (2018), drawing directly on Smith and Lewis (2011), identify four paradoxes specific to sustainability-oriented organisations: performing (profit versus planet), or-

ganising (efficiency versus resilience), belonging (shareholder versus stakeholder primacy), and learning (exploiting existing capabilities versus building new ones). Their contribution is important because it moves the conversation from "how do we balance sustainability dimensions" to "how do we live productively within their contradiction.

Walker et al. (2020), in a longitudinal study of 746 firms, provide empirical weight to this theoretical shift. Organisations that accepted all three TBL tensions simultaneously, instead of trading one off against another, performed significantly better than those that used trade-off logic. This is not a minor discovery. It implies that the both/and strategy is better, practical, and theoretically sound. Roome and Louche (2016) further develop this argument, demonstrating that genuine sustainability transformation in businesses requires a level of paradox tolerance not typically cultivated by traditional management training. Firms that achieve transformation resist the pressure to resolve tension prematurely.

Entrepreneurship Under Competing Demands

Shepherd and Patzelt (2011), writing in *Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice*, provide the most direct articulation of sustainable entrepreneurship as a paradoxical endeavour. They argue that sustainable entrepreneurs must simultaneously address what is to be sustained (natural and communal environments) and what is to be developed (economic value, human well-being). This dual mandate is inherently paradoxical, and they observe that the most innovative sustainable entrepreneurs are those who find ways to create value from the tension itself rather than resolve it in favour of one side.

The reviewed literature reveals important theoretical insights but also exposes the absence of an integrated framework that explains how sustainability tensions generate entrepreneurial innovation.

Research Gap

There is currently no model that unifies the entrepreneurial agent, paradox theory, and a three-dimensional sustainability framework into a single theoretical construct. In ecologically delicate and economically developing areas like Assam and the Northeast, tensions between the triple bottom line (TBL) dimensions are most pronounced.

THEORY SYNTHESIS

The Paradox Field Model of Sustainable Entrepreneurship- The literature reviewed in the previous section reveals a consistent and important absence. Paradox theory has the language but not the spatial model. The Triple Bottom Line has the architecture, but misrepresents it as harmonious. Sustainable entrepreneurship theory lacks an agent but provides a framework for the field in which the agent operates. This section brings these three streams together to construct the Paradox Field Model—a theoretical framework that, to the best of this author's knowledge, is the first to formally integrate all three.

From Limitation to Necessity: The Case for Re-conceptualisation- The TBL's structural flaw is not merely empirical; it is representational. By flattening three structurally contradictory dimensions onto a single plane, the framework implies a harmony that does not exist in practice. What the literature establishes, then, is not simply that the TBL has gaps, but that its geometry actively misrepresents the entrepreneurial condition. This paper takes that representational failure as its starting point: if the structure is wrong, the structure must change.

Paradox Theory as the Conceptual Bridge- Where the TBL lacks the language for contradiction, paradox theory provides it. Smith and Lewis's (2011) framework does not merely tolerate tension; it theorises it as productive. Applied here, they-are-each logic reframes the six sustainability tensions not as design failures of the TBL but as the permanent, generative conditions of sustainable entrepreneurship. Paradox theory supplies what the TBL cannot: a principled reason to inhabit contradiction rather than resolve it.

The Missing Agent: Entrepreneurship Theory's Contribution- Both the TBL and paradox theory, however, share one absence: the entrepreneur. Shepherd and Patzelt (2011) establish that sustainable entrepreneurs do not

balance sustainability dimensions from outside; they absorb and navigate competing demands from within the system. This paper treats that insight as structural. The entrepreneur is not the model's manager. The entrepreneur is the fourth vertex, the point without which the entire three-dimensional structure collapses into a flat triangle. The integration of these three streams necessitates a new geometric and conceptual architecture: the Paradox Field Model, developed in the following section.

The Paradox Field Model of Sustainable Entrepreneurship

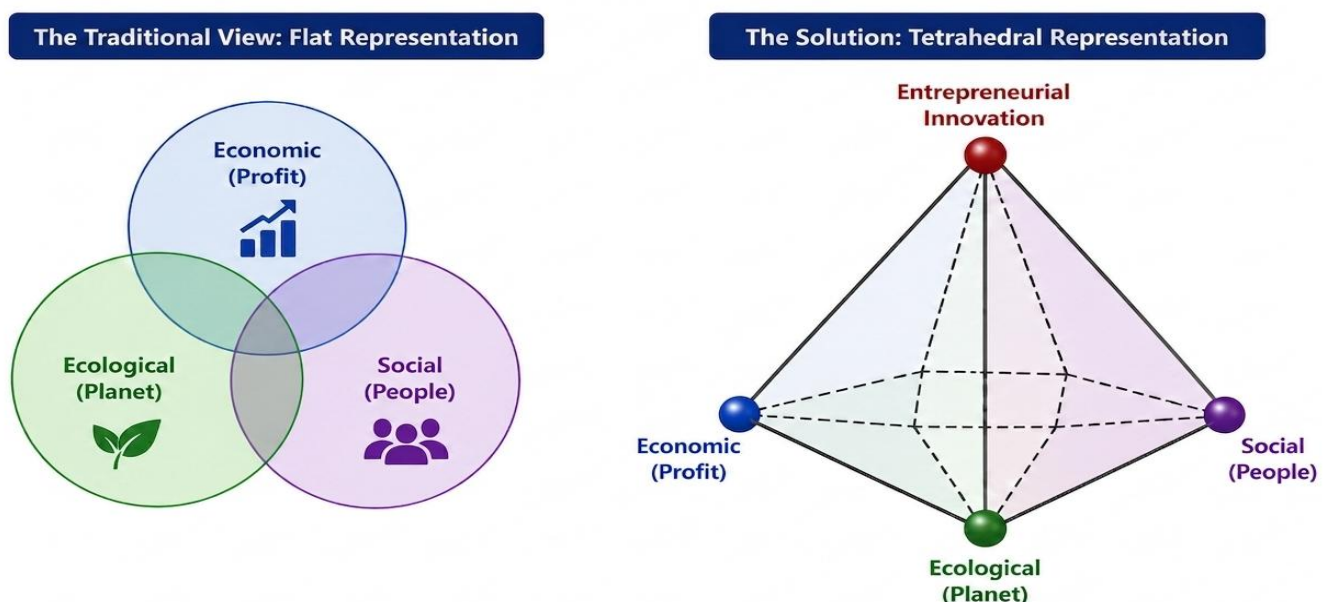
The Tetrahedron- The first and most fundamental move of this model is geometric. The Triple Bottom Line has always been represented as three overlapping circles on a flat plane. This paper replaces that representation with a tetrahedron, a three-dimensional solid with four vertices, four triangular faces, and six edges, in which every vertex is directly connected to every other.

This is not an aesthetic choice. It is a theoretical one. The flat Venn diagram suggests that the three sustainability dimensions lie on the same plane, converging toward a central point of harmony. But sustainability tensions do not flatten. They operate in multiple directions simultaneously. A three-dimensional structure is therefore more honest, as it reflects the actual complexity of what sustainable entrepreneurs navigate.

The tetrahedron also has a specific geometric property that makes it theoretically useful: it is the simplest three-dimensional structure in which every point is equidistant from every other point. No dimension dominates. No vertex is closer to the centre than another. This captures something important about sustainability: that economic, social, and ecological imperatives carry equal theoretical weight, even when they pull in different directions (fig.1).

Fig. 1- Rationale for Adopting a Tetrahedral Structure in the Paradox Field Model

Rationale for Adopting a Tetrahedral Structure in the Paradox Field Model



Source: Contents from cited Manuscripts designed by Authors with Gemini Prompt

The Four Vertices- The tetrahedron has four vertices. Three form the base. One sits at the apex. The three base vertices carry the original TBL dimensions:

- **Economic** — value creation, market viability, financial sustainability
- **Social** — community wellbeing, equity, stakeholder inclusion
- **Ecological** — planetary boundaries, biodiversity, resource integrity

The fourth vertex—the apex—is **Entrepreneurial Innovation**.

This is the model's most significant departure from the TBL. In Elkington's framework, the entrepreneur sits outside the sustainability system, a manager who balances the three circles from a distance. In this model, the entrepreneur is inside the structure. The apex vertex is not above the base in a hierarchical sense; it is the fourth point that gives the entire structure its three-dimensional form. Without it, the model collapses back into a flat triangle. Without the entrepreneur, sustainability remains an aspiration rather than a practice.

The Six Edges: Six Paradoxical Tensions- Every edge of the tetrahedron connects two vertices. With four vertices, six edges are converging to emerge tension dimensions, and each one of which represents a distinct paradoxical tension inherent in sustainable entrepreneurship:

- **Economic ↔ Social** — the tension between profit maximisation and equitable value distribution
- **Economic ↔ Ecological** — the tension between growth imperatives and planetary boundaries
- **Social ↔ Ecological** — the tension between community employment and ecosystem preservation
- **Economic ↔ Entrepreneurial Innovation** — the tension between short-term returns and long-term transformative investment
- **Social ↔ Entrepreneurial Innovation** — the tension between stakeholder expectations and disruptive change
- **Ecological ↔ Entrepreneurial Innovation** — the tension between ecological constraints and the entrepreneurial opportunity that those constraints create

The theoretical grounding of each tension is clustered.

Table 1: Six Paradoxical Tensions of the Paradox Field Model

Edges	Tension	Theoretical Grounding
E–S	Economic vs. Social	Profit maximisation vs equitable distribution of value (Hahn et al., 2018)
E–Ec	Economic vs. Ecological	Growth imperatives vs planetary boundaries (Walker et al., 2020)
S–Ec	Social vs. Ecological	Community employment vs ecosystem preservation (Ferrer-Serrano et al., 2025)
E–EI	Economic vs Entrepreneurial Innovation	Short-term returns vs long-term transformative investment (Smith & Lewis, 2011)
S–EI	Social vs Entrepreneurial Innovation	Stakeholder demands vs disruptive innovation (Shepherd & Patzelt, 2011)
Ec–EI	Ecological vs Entrepreneurial Innovation	Ecological constraints as entrepreneurial opportunity (Dean & McMullen, 2007)

Source: Compiled by Authors

Theoretically, what matters is that all six tensions are permanent in the reality of entrepreneurship. They do not disappear, even if managed well. They are not operational problems to be solved; they are the structural conditions for sustainable entrepreneurship and, as the next section demonstrates, also its greatest creative resource.

The Paradox Field: Interior Space as the Arena of Innovation- The interior space of the tetrahedron, termed the Paradox Field, is not a compromise zone where tensions are merely averaged. Instead, it serves as an active arena in which the entrepreneur simultaneously engages with competing demands, thereby generating innovative responses that would be unattainable through single-goal approaches. Five mechanisms operate sequentially within the Paradox Field (bottom box of Figure 2):

Tension Recognition — The first and most fundamental step. The entrepreneur does not run from the tension or pretend it does not exist. All three pressures, economic, social, and ecological, are acknowledged as real and simultaneous. Without this recognition, the remaining mechanisms cannot activate.

Rethinking Cognitive — Once tension is recognised, it is reframed. The three competing pressures are not the enemy. They are sharpening the entrepreneur's thinking, forcing a level of cognitive complexity that single-goal pursuit never demands. This is the shift from seeing tension as a burden to seeing it as an intellectual resource.

Both/And Thinking — The entrepreneur resists the instinct to choose one dimension over the others. Instead of asking "which one do I prioritise?" the question becomes "how can I serve all three at once?" This is Smith and Lewis's (2011) both/and logic made operational.

Dynamic Cycling — Holding all three simultaneously does not mean treating them identically at every moment. The entrepreneur cycles through dimensions over time. Today's focus may be profit, tomorrow's ecology, and next week's social impact without abandoning the others. This temporal movement keeps the paradox field alive and productive.

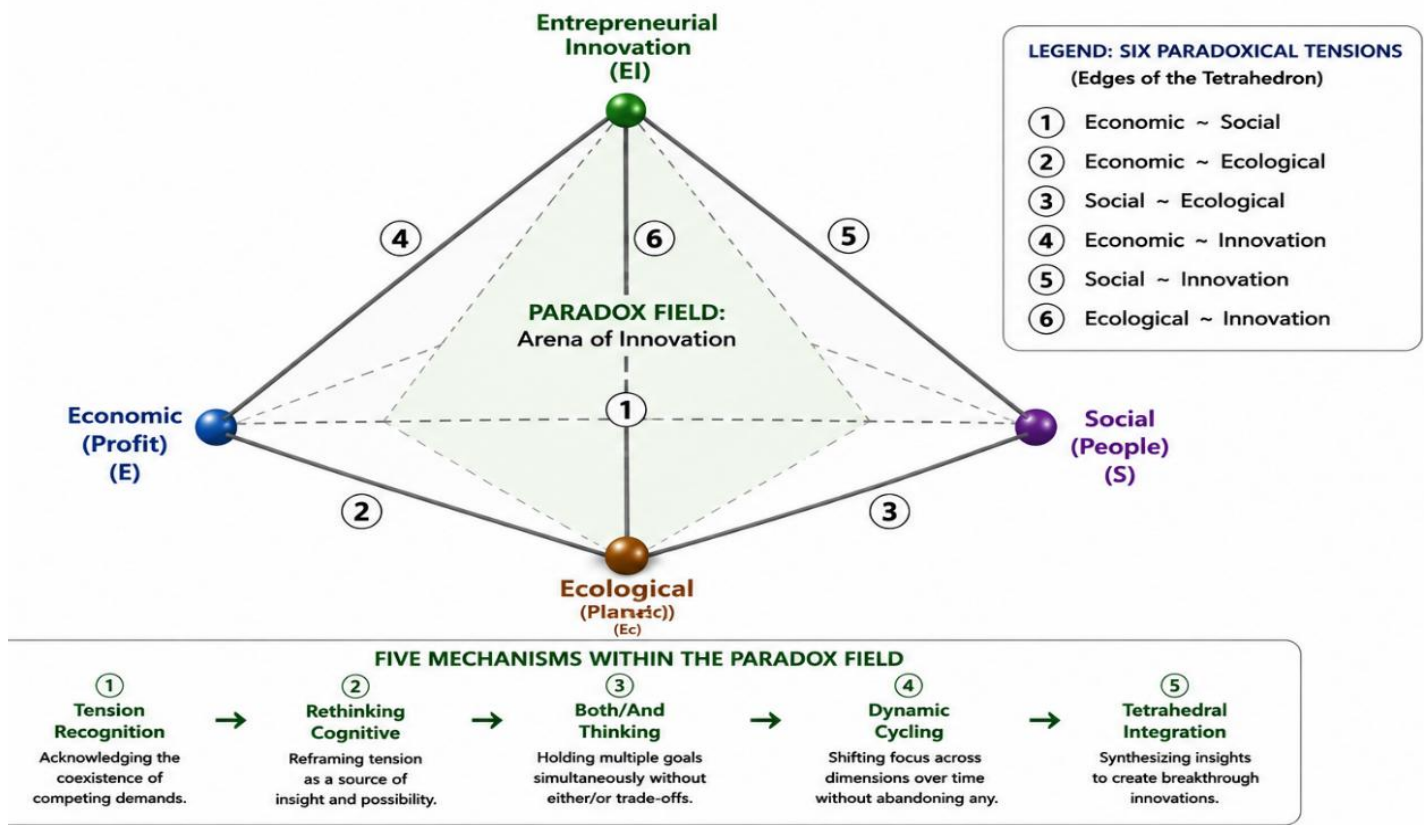
Tetrahedral Integration — The outcome of the four preceding mechanisms. When tension is recognised, reframed, held simultaneously, and dynamically cycled through, the entrepreneur arrives at a solution that no single-goal thinker would ever find. That solution, emerging from the model's full three-dimensional structure, is the innovation.

These five mechanisms do not operate in isolation or in sequence. They work simultaneously, reinforcing each other within the Paradox Field. Together, they explain the central claim of this model: that sustainable entrepreneurs who inhabit tension rather than escape it are the ones who innovate.

Figure 2: Conceptual Model of the Tetrahedral Paradox Field

PARADOX FIELD MODEL OF SUSTAINABLE ENTREPRENEURSHIP

A Three-Dimensional Tetrahedral Framework



Source: Contents from cited Manuscripts designed by Authors with Gemini Prompt.

Integrated Theoretical Contribution- This paper began with a simple but consequential observation: that sustainable entrepreneurship is structurally paradoxical, and that the frameworks available to understand it are not. The Triple Bottom Line, for all its contributions, presents sustainability as a condition of harmony. The world that sustainable entrepreneurs actually inhabit is not harmonious. It is tensioned, contradictory, and demanding, and no amount of better management makes it otherwise. The three objectives of this paper were not independent tasks. They formed a single, unfolding argument.

The first objective was to examine the theoretical limitations of the Triple Bottom Line. What this examination revealed is more than a gap; it is a fundamental failure of representation. The TBL was built on the assumption that economic, social, and ecological dimensions naturally converge. They do not. Hahn et al. (2015) demonstrated that these three pillars are structurally contradictory. Walker et al. (2020) empirically showed that firms that treated them as a trade-off consistently underperformed those that held all three tensions simultaneously. Even Elkington himself, in 2018, called for a recall of the very framework he created. A framework that its author has disowned cannot be the foundation on which sustainable entrepreneurship theory continues to be built. This paper does not patch the TBL. It reconceives it.

The second objective, synthesising paradox theory, TBL scholarship, and sustainable entrepreneurship theory, produced the intellectual architecture of the Paradox Field Model. Each stream contributed what the others lacked. Smith and Lewis (2011) gave tension its theoretical dignity. Elkington (1994) identified three dimensions of sustainability. Shepherd and Patzelt (2011) gave the entrepreneur their rightful place inside the system. These three streams produce something none of them could yield alone: a framework where tension is not a problem to be solved but a field to be inhabited, and where that inhabitation, when navigated through the five mechanisms of Tension Recognition, Rethinking Cognitive, Both/And Thinking, Dynamic Cycling, and Tetrahedral Integration, produces innovation that single-goal thinking could never reach.

The third objective is to propose the Paradox Field Model as a theoretical contribution. There is no metaphor associated with the tetrahedron. It is an exact geometric decision: a structure where all sustainability dimensions are equally spaced from one another, no dimension is dominant, and the entrepreneur is the fourth vertex that gives the structure its three-dimensional form, rather than an external balancer. The internal space, known as the Paradox Field, is not empty. Real work in sustainable entrepreneurship takes place there. Ultimately, this model contends that the tension experienced by sustainable businesses is not a sign of an unresolved issue. It is the state of their work. And when properly understood, it is their most valuable creative resource.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The Paradox Field Model does not end with its proposal. A theoretical model earns its place in the literature not just by what it argues but by what it makes possible for academics, practitioners, and the institutions that shape entrepreneurial behaviour. This section reflects on those possibilities.

Academic Implications- This model opens more doors than it closes. For researchers working at the intersection of entrepreneurship and sustainability, the field of paradoxes as a unit of analysis is largely unexplored territory. Most existing studies either measure sustainability performance across the three TBL dimensions or apply paradox theory to large corporate organisations, rarely both, and rarely in the context of small entrepreneurial firms. The Paradox Field Model invites scholars to ask different questions: not whether sustainable entrepreneurs balance their dimensions well, but how they inhabit the tensions among them and what kinds of innovation emerge from this.

How the Model Differs in Application- The most important practical difference between the Paradox Field Model and the Triple Bottom Line is not structural — it is orientational. The TBL tells an entrepreneur to balance three dimensions. This model tells an entrepreneur to navigate the tension among them. These are not the same instructions. Here, balancing implies stability, a careful allocation of attention and resources so that no dimension is neglected. Another aspect, in navigating, implies movement, an ongoing, dynamic process of holding contradictions without resolution and allowing that discomfort to produce something new. An MSME owner who feels pulled between cutting costs, reducing waste, and paying fair wages is not failing to balance. They live in a paradoxical field. This model gives that experience a name, a structure, and a pathway forward.

Designing for the Real World: MSME Context- The Paradox Field Model is not designed for large corporations with dedicated sustainability departments and compliance budgets. It is designed for entrepreneurs who face sustainability tensions with limited resources, limited time, and maximum pressure. This is precisely the MSME condition. What makes the model useful in this context is that its five mechanisms are not resource-intensive. They do not require new technology, new capital, or new staff. They require a different way of thinking, one that treats tension as information rather than obstruction. An MSME owner who learns to recognise tension rather than avoid it, reframe it rather than resent it, and cycle through competing demands rather than collapse them into a single priority is already operating inside the paradox field. The model makes that process visible, nameable, and repeatable.

Future research should operationalise the five mechanisms as measurable constructs and test them across MSME populations through structured interviews and survey-based research. That empirical work will determine whether the model holds across different industries, firm sizes, and regional contexts and where it needs refinement.

Policy Implications- Most entrepreneurship development programmes teach single-goal optimisation. Entrepreneurs are trained to maximise profit, minimise waste, or meet social targets one at a time, in sequence, as separate priorities. The Paradox Field Model suggests that this entrepreneurship training is not merely theoretically limited. It is actively counterproductive when training teaches entrepreneurs to escape tension rather than work with it.

Walker et al. (2020) empirically demonstrated that firms that embraced all three TBL tensions simultaneously significantly outperformed those that used trade-off logic. If that finding holds at the MSME level, then there is

a strong theoretical reason to believe it does. The policy implication is clear: entrepreneurship training programmes need to shift from teaching balance to teaching navigation. Paradox tolerance, both/and thinking, and dynamic cycling should be core competencies in any serious sustainable entrepreneurship curriculum, not advanced concepts reserved for corporate strategy courses.

Future Implications toward a Robust and Validated Model: A proposed model is a starting point, never becomes an ultimate destination. The Paradox Field Model, as it stands, is theoretically grounded and internally coherent. Still, its real strength will only emerge once it is tested against the messy, contradictory reality of entrepreneurial life. Qualitative fieldwork with sustainable entrepreneurs will validate whether the five mechanisms reflect how entrepreneurs actually experience and navigate tension. Quantitative testing through structural equation modelling will determine whether those mechanisms reliably predict innovation outcomes. Comparative studies across different sectors and geographies will reveal the model's boundaries where it holds, where it needs adjustment, and where the tensions it describes take on different forms.

That empirical journey will be the next step in future research. But a model that has not yet been tested is not weak; it is an open invitation. The 'Paradox Field Model' is offered to the academic community in that spirit: not as a final answer, but as a theoretically honest and practically urgent framework for understanding one of the most important challenges facing entrepreneurs today.

CONCLUSION

This paper argues that sustainable entrepreneurship is inherently paradoxical and that the theoretical frameworks currently used to understand it are insufficient. Despite its historical contribution, the Triple Bottom Line regards entrepreneurs as external to the sustainability system rather than as its constitutive agents, and portrays sustainability as a state of harmony rather than of tension. The Paradox Field Model of Sustainable Entrepreneurship addresses this gap by formally integrating paradox theory, tri-dimensional sustainability architecture, and entrepreneurship theory into a coherent theoretical framework. The model's tetrahedral geometry gives the TBL a three-dimensional form for the first time. The fourth apex vertex positions the entrepreneur as the integrating agent within the sustainability system, rather than outside it. The Paradox Field, the interior space of the tetrahedron, provides a conceptual arena within which five mechanisms operate to convert sustainability tensions into entrepreneurial innovation.

The model's central claim is that tension is not the enemy of sustainable entrepreneurship — it is its greatest creative resource. When understood theoretically and, in practice, navigated through the mechanisms identified in this paper, the paradoxes of sustainable entrepreneurship may become a generative force for entrepreneurial innovation. The future empirical validation of this claim, in the rich and theoretically significant context of other parts of the world, will serve as a foundation for future research.

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