

Sustainable entrepreneurship and eco-innovation: lessons from pioneering entrepreneurs

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Abstract:

A new type of entrepreneurship is attracting greater interest from researchers, as scientists and public and private stakeholders focus on the Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE) sector. This paper examines how innovation shapes sustainable entrepreneurship, particularly responsible and eco-innovation. Although sustainable entrepreneurship is not the same as the Social and Solidarity Economy, both aim for social and environmental goals. Using an exploratory qualitative approach, this study aims to better understand how innovation is used in businesses focused on sustainability through case studies and interviews with French sustainable entrepreneurs.

Keywords: Sustainable entrepreneurship, sustainable entrepreneur, responsible innovation, eco-innovation.

JEL Classification Codes : L26, M13

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1. INTRODUCTION

The scientific community has long focused on entrepreneurship aimed at reducing environmental impact, known as "ecopreneurship," especially on the entrepreneur as an individual (the ecopreneur). The special issue of Greener Management International (issue 38), published in 2002, summarizes the main writings on this topic. In 2009, Greener Management International published another special issue dedicated to sustainable entrepreneurship (issue 55). Alongside this, and starting in 2007, several publications appeared in the Journal of Business Venturing, highlighting the concept of sustainable entrepreneurship as it is understood today.

This paper aims to help explain the link between sustainable entrepreneurship and responsible innovation. Instead of building a general theory, it takes an exploratory approach to see how innovation works in businesses focused on sustainability. The paper has three parts. First, it reviews the literature on sustainable entrepreneurship and responsible innovation to clarify key ideas and frameworks. Second, it presents a qualitative analysis using well-known Anglo-Saxon cases and interviews with French sustainable entrepreneurs. Third, it discusses the findings and suggests directions for future research.

2. Theoretical framework: sustainable entrepreneurship and innovation

Early research (Pastakia, 1998; Isaak, 2002) connected sustainable entrepreneurship to environmental and welfare economics. This link is based on the idea that market failures from environmental damage create business opportunities. Other researchers (Gibbs, 2006; O'Neill et al., 2006; Schaltegger & Wagner, 2011) see it through the lens of "*creative destruction*", focusing on how innovation creates value. As a result, sustainable entrepreneurship sits at the crossroads of sustainable development and entrepreneurial innovation (O'Neill et al., 2006).

Dean & McMullen (2007) base their analysis on Shane and Venkataraman's (2000) definition of *classical* entrepreneurship and on welfare economics, arguing that market failures arising from environmental degradation create entrepreneurial opportunities. Cohen & Winn (2007) also position themselves within the field of *classical* entrepreneurship and focus their research on the relationship between market failures (or imperfections) and entrepreneurial opportunities that promote sustainable entrepreneurship.

2.1. The opportunity paradigm: discovery vs construction

Sustainable entrepreneurship means finding and leveraging opportunities to drive change within a sector, making it more socially and environmentally responsible (Hockert & Wüstenhagen, 2010). Entrepreneurial opportunities are also linked to new ways of connecting resources and goals, such as introducing new products, services,

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materials, or methods (Eckhardt & Shane, 2003). The main theme in research on sustainable entrepreneurship is spotting and using these opportunities. This idea is part of the opportunity paradigm, discussed by Kirzner (1978) and Shane and Venkataraman (2000).

There are two main views on what constitutes entrepreneurial opportunities. One view says opportunities exist in the market and just need to be found (Verstraete & Fayolle, 2004; Kirzner, 1978; Shane & Venkataman, 2000; Shane, 2000). Dean & McMullen (2007) also support this market-based view for sustainable entrepreneurship. The other view says opportunities are created by entrepreneurs themselves (Gartner et al., 2003; Chabaud & Ngijol, 2004; Julien, 2010). However, most research on sustainable entrepreneurship has focused on identifying opportunities rather than creating them.

2.2. The innovation paradigm: schumpeterian change

Schumpeterian thought has often informed research in entrepreneurship, particularly in sustainable entrepreneurship (Schaltegger, 2002; Beveridge & Guy, 2005; Gibbs, 2006; Schaltegger & Wagner, 2008; Schaltegger & Wagner, 2011). Sustainable entrepreneurs have been defined as innovative actors who promote sustainable development (Gerlach, 2003). Eco-preneurs dismantle traditional (conventional) production methods, goods and services, market structures, and consumption patterns, replacing them with environmentally superior goods and services (Beveridge & Guy, 2005). They contribute to achieving change through environmental and societal innovations (Schaltegger & Wagner, 2011). The implementation of change is the primary motivation of committed entrepreneurs.

2.3. Sustainable innovation

Innovation plays a key role in sustainable development strategies (Rennings, 2000; Ouali & al., 2025). Rennings (2000) redefined innovation to address new sustainability challenges. He describes eco-innovations as actions by organizations, policies, or associations that (1) develop and introduce new ideas, attitudes, products, or processes, and (2) help reduce environmental impact or meet ecological goals (Rennings, 2000). Eco-innovation can be technological, organizational, social, or institutional. Technological eco-innovation can be 'curative' (downstream) or 'preventive' (upstream) (Rennings, 2000). According to the Oslo Manual (2005), eco-innovation is any innovation that reduces environmental risk, pollution, or other negative impacts from resource use throughout its life cycle (Rennings, 2000; Kemp & Pearson, 2007). Eco-innovation also includes social changes, like new lifestyles or consumption habits, and institutional changes, such as new incentives or regulations that support sustainability

(Rennings, 2000). Innovation is often seen as a driver of sustainable entrepreneurship, highlighting the creative nature of these entrepreneurs (Schaltegger, 2002; Beveridge & Guy, 2005; Gipps, 2006; Cohen & Winn, 2007; Schaltegger & Wagner, 2011). Technological innovation is most supported in economies that value environmental standards because it is easier to measure. Still, social innovation is also important for the “*Triple Bottom Line*”.

3. Research question and methodology

This paper looks at how innovation helps create sustainable businesses. Here, sustainable entrepreneurship means creating, identifying, and leveraging new 'sustainable' business opportunities arising from gaps in the social and environmental markets. Innovation is widely seen as a key driver of economic growth and is even called “*the engine of entrepreneurship*” (Julien & Marchesnay, 2011, p. 35). In sustainable entrepreneurship, does innovation create new opportunities, or is it primarily a tool for spreading existing responsible solutions? Answering this helps us decide if sustainable entrepreneurship is mainly about putting responsible innovations into practice and helping them grow. To explore this, the study uses a dual qualitative method that connects historical examples with current practices.

The literature has long focused on the cases of Ben Cohen and Jerry Greenfield (Ben & Jerry) and Anita Roddick (The Body Shop). Isaak's works (1998, 2002) allow us to reposition the inquiry around the individual sustainable entrepreneur and the role of innovation in the creation of their business. Isaak based his analysis on biographies, articles, and press releases. We re-examine the historical narratives of pioneering "countercultural" entrepreneurs, specifically Anita Roddick (The Body Shop) and Ben Cohen & Jerry Greenfield (Ben & Jerry's), based on the foundational work of Robert Isaak (1998, 2002). The reuse of such qualitative data is a legitimate tool in organizational science to address new research challenges (Chabaud, 2006). Indeed, Isaak's (1998, 2002) meta-analysis of studies on Anita Roddick, Ben Cohen, and Jerry Greenfield provides a basis for the study of the case of French sustainable entrepreneurs. This will allow the researcher to develop both an analytical framework and a comparative tool between these entrepreneurs, considered fascinating and exceptional individuals, and French sustainable entrepreneurs. To provide a contemporary contrast, we conducted semi-structured interviews with two French sustainable entrepreneurs. These individuals were selected based on their alignment with our core definition of sustainable entrepreneurship : discovering and exploiting opportunities arising from market failures in the social and environmental sectors. The interviews, lasting approximately 1.5 hours each, followed a four-part guide: the entrepreneur's profile, the nature of the business/product, the environmental context, and future prospects. This allows for an abductive reasoning process, comparing historical Anglo-Saxon models with current French practices to develop a comprehensive typology of innovations.

4. From counterculture to value-based

To understand the role of entrepreneurship in the dissemination of responsible innovations and given the relative development of entrepreneurship research in France, an exploratory study is essential (Paturel, 2004). The objective of this exploratory study is to understand a phenomenon within a given context or situation (Dumez, 2011) to answer the question: What do sustainable entrepreneurs do? And how do they do it? (Yin, 2012, cited by Dumez, 2011). The main challenge lies in constructing the sample. Indeed, there is no specific classification system for companies in the sustainable development sector (organic products, renewable energy, waste management, etc.).

Robert Isaak's (1998) case studies on sustainable entrepreneurs offer a strong foundation for this research. Using abductive reasoning, these cases help identify the types of innovation used by early 'countercultural' entrepreneurs and show how entrepreneurship spreads responsible and sustainable innovations. Instead of creating a fixed list of innovation types, the analysis identifies common patterns in the literature. These patterns are then compared with real-world examples from current French sustainable entrepreneurs to explore similarities, differences, and unique contexts.

4.1. The anglo-saxon entrepreneur: an emblematic figure in sustainable entrepreneurship research

In his 1998 book "Green Logic: Ecopreneurship, Theory and Ethics," published by Greenleaf Publishing, Robert Isaak profiled Anita Roddick and Benjamin & Cohen. He also derived his definition of an ecopreneur from them, describing them as someone who seeks to transform a given economic sector by creating a business with long-term commitments to respecting nature and the environment (Isaak, 2002).

Anita Roddick: The Body Shop

Anita Roddick belonged to the generation of young British hippies, having traveled extensively around the world. For her, entrepreneurship stemmed from a vision of life as a continuous adventure, a countercultural odyssey. However, the need to create her own business became imperative after her husband left. Her adventure with The Body Shop was born from her rebellion against the cosmetics industry, its exploitation of women's images, animal testing, marketing campaigns, and imposed packaging. Her products were packaging-free, made with natural ingredients, and, most importantly, without any advertising campaigns. Nevertheless, Roddick mastered the art of communication. As a committed individual, she promoted her brand through humanitarian campaigns.

Source: Isaak (1998)

Influenced by a hippie lifestyle, Roddick viewed entrepreneurship as an extension of a broader life philosophy centered on exploration, independence, and social

engagement. She used her products to spread her ideas. Leading humanitarian campaigns (and later creating a foundation) under the name "The Body Shop" brought her considerable renown, both personally and for the brand. In a different way, she launched products that reflected her own convictions. Roddick succeeded in establishing a new consumption model within the cosmetics industry and a new marketing approach.

Benjamin Cohen & Jerry Greenfield: Ben & Jerry

Ben & Jerry are school friends who founded their ice cream company in 1978. Like Anita Roddick, Ben and Jerry were part of the hippie generation of the 1970s. They both sought an activity that would bring them pleasure while also benefiting the community. As with Roddick, their initial motivation was to create their own jobs using skills they already possessed. Ben worked part-time as an ice cream truck salesman. To increase the company's visibility, they organized free ice cream days, participated in humanitarian campaigns, and traveled the world in their branded van distributing scoops of ice cream.

Source: Isaak (1998)

Ben & Jerry's similarly belonged to the hippie generation of the 1970s. They used their know-how (homemade ice cream making) to pursue their values. They succeeded in offering a mass-market product in the United States: ice cream, but made differently with natural ingredients and a manufacturing process inspired by homemade recipes. Furthermore, they leveraged their cause to raise brand awareness, and *vice versa*.

These Anglo-Saxon entrepreneurs share the characteristics of being deeply committed individuals shaped by a specific socio-cultural context marked by a rupture with industrial and consumerist norms. Isaak (1998) describes them as "countercultural" entrepreneurs, whose innovations aimed not only at economic success but also at transforming consumption habits and societal values.

Table 1. Forms of innovations among pioneering Anglo-Saxon sustainable entrepreneurs

Entrepreneur	Innovation introduced	Type of innovation	Main socio-environmental implications
Anita Roddick (The Body Shop)	Use of natural, plant-based ingredients and reduction of chemical components	Product innovation (incremental)	Reduction of harmful substances; promotion of healthier products
	Rejection of traditional advertising campaigns	Marketing innovation (radical)	Challenge to dominant representations of women; alternative communication practices
	Use of humanitarian and activist campaigns to promote the brand	Marketing innovation (radical)	Alignment between commercial activity and

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			ethical values; enhanced social awareness
Ben Cohen & Jerry Greenfield (Ben & Jerry's)	Production of ice cream using natural ingredients and homemade recipes	Product innovation (incremental)	Promotion of healthier consumption choices
	Use of humanitarian campaigns linked to brand identity	Marketing innovation (radical)	Defense of social causes; value-based brand differentiation
	Distribution of free ice cream during symbolic events using branded vehicles	Marketing innovation (incremental)	Strengthening community ties; alternative customer engagement

Source : Self elaboration

Their main motivation was to create their own jobs. What set them apart from other entrepreneurs was their ability to change consumption habits through their products, production methods, or marketing. They started change by introducing new ways of doing things, consuming, and selling their products[1]. These entrepreneurs were not just reacting to pressure or acting out of self-interest. Bernoux (1998) sees innovation as a way to bring about change and meet needs that are not well served. The social climate of the 1970s encouraged this drive for change. These entrepreneurs were part of the hippie generation, which broke away from traditional values and lifestyles. This movement helped speed up the idea of 'Consuming Differently,' now a key phrase for those who support sustainable development.

4.2. The french sustainable entrepreneur

E1: Manufacture of eco-friendly paint

E1 manufactures eco-friendly paint made from plant-based oils. The entrepreneur has 20 years of experience as a paint technician. Over the years, and following health problems, he realized that "we had to try to do something a little cleaner, especially when you know you're sick because of this paint." E1 then turned to nature and designed a product based on oils extracted from plants, many of which are grown in France or Europe, while preserving soil sustainability: "...the goal isn't to squeeze every last drop of juice..." The entrepreneur conducts test himself in a small laboratory within the factory before launching his product. He is "passionate about paint," he was "born into it," and can't imagine doing anything else but painting. However, aware of the health risks associated with using conventional paint, he decided to develop his own cleaner and less hazardous (or even non-hazardous) product for both health and the environment. He believes he manufactures a unique product, which he sells worldwide, that defies all standards, but he feels he doesn't receive enough support from public authorities because he is a small-scale artisan. The product is certified by independent organizations because E1 believes that "major certifications are just marketing and serve no purpose..." Furthermore, his products are constantly reviewed and modified, and he launches at least two new products each year.

E1 sees himself as an 'anti-establishment' entrepreneur, driven by the belief that current production methods harm the environment and future generations. He brought change by creating an innovative, eco-friendly product. He refused to partner with paint manufacturers because he disagreed with their policies, choosing instead to market his product himself and start his own company. This example illustrates a type of sustainable entrepreneurship in which product innovation expresses ethical beliefs and addresses environmental market failures. Unlike the Anglo-Saxon cases, the main goal here was not job creation but making change through responsible innovation.

E2: Organic grocery

E2 is an agricultural engineer with a master's degree in marketing. In 1998, she and her husband took over a small shop and created their own brand. The business is an organic grocery store, selling organic and certified organic food, cleaning, cosmetic, and wellness products. E2 previously worked as a marketing manager in an agricultural cooperative. The entrepreneur became aware of the effects of treatments used in mass agriculture: "When you work in intensive farming, you really see the harmful effects of pesticides, insecticides, etc. So either you decide to keep looking in the mirror and telling yourself that you're doing a job that aligns with your values, but I can't make money and not be true to what I believe." She is someone who doesn't prioritize profit; she won't allow herself to do a job that goes against her values. But she feels compelled to consider the economic aspect in relation to her responsibility to her employees. However, she states: "...I'm not here, like some chains, to do business for business's sake, and not organic for organic's sake; for me, organic is paramount...". E2 emphasizes its independence from other franchised or networked organic stores. This independence allows it to choose its suppliers, maintain traceability of the products it sells, and, above all, adapt to the competition by differentiating itself. The entrepreneur places great importance on certifications; all her suppliers are certified, "...for me, it's a guarantee of quality...". She also places great importance on her social responsibility towards her employees, stating that she fully covers the health insurance of her employees, well before the application of the law which came into force in January 2016. And she is very proud of being able to retain her employees: "we have almost no staff turnover".

E2 describes herself as an "activist" entrepreneur, whose engagement is driven primarily by personal values. She perceives the organic food market as increasingly instrumentalized by large retailers "seeking to improve their public image", often at the expense of genuine ethical commitments. Her brand arrived at a time when organic stores were considered cults, catering to a clientele of hippies, eco-conscious middle-class individuals, and vegetarians. The entrepreneur, therefore, wanted to change mindsets and democratize organic grocery stores by offering a wide variety of products at the best prices. She leverages a network of 500 suppliers to guarantee the best quality at the best price.

Table 2. Forms of innovations among French entrepreneurs

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Entrepreneur	Innovation introduced	Type of innovation	Main socio-environmental implications
E1 – Eco-friendly paint manufacturing	Development of plant-based, non-toxic paint	Product innovation (radical)	Elimination of chemical substances; reduction of health and environmental risks
	Use of certification delivered by an independent, non-mainstream organization	Organizational innovation	Rejection of costly and symbolic certifications; emphasis on credibility over marketing
E2 – Organic grocery	Creation of the first organic grocery store offering a full range of certified organic products	Social innovation	Transformation of local consumption habits; democratization of organic food
	Full coverage of employees' health insurance (100%)	Social innovation	Employee retention; preservation of skills; enhanced social responsibility

Source : Self elaboration

Anglo-Saxon entrepreneurs were mainly motivated by the need to create their own jobs in a countercultural setting, while the entrepreneurs in this study are mostly driven by the desire to act independently and follow their values. In both groups, innovation is a key way for entrepreneurs to make an impact, whether by changing products, consumer habits, or organizations. Entrepreneurship is the way ethical ideas are put into practice through real economic activities.

5. DISCUSSION

The major difference between Anglo-Saxon and French sustainable entrepreneurs lies in the factors that led each group to pursue sustainable entrepreneurship. The firsts were primarily driven by the need to create their own jobs. But also by their belonging to a society and an era (the 1970s) where everything was being questioned. Where a certain segment of the population, in complete rupture with industrial society and consumerism, preferred to adopt lifestyles more oriented towards nature. The latter expresses primarily a need for independence to act in accordance with their convictions. This is despite the fact that they operate in an environment impacted by considerable social and environmental challenges as described by Isaak (1998, 2002). The innovations introduced by Annita Roddick and Ben & Jerry's were indeed a break from the consumption model of the time. Responsible innovations or eco-innovations also have a strategic dimension for companies. They are more of a tool for differentiation, allowing them to overcome the constraints of competition. They allow, in a way, for the

containment of technological and even economic development through the rational use of economic resources and the minimization of ecological and social impacts.

Sustainable entrepreneurship has strong potential to create new combinations, as Schumpeter described, that lower social and environmental impacts while creating economic value. It is a way to launch new products, services, or consumption models. This aligns with Schumpeter's view of entrepreneurship as a process of 'creative destruction' driven by innovation (Schumpeter, 1935).

Eco-innovations offer these solutions, and entrepreneurship spreads them. Sustainable entrepreneurship also helps reduce social and environmental market failures by promoting responsible innovations.

Eco-innovations, or responsible innovations, are therefore "push" factors in the entrepreneurial process, guiding their initiators toward entrepreneurial activities. On the other hand, social and environmental market failures are "pull" factors, in that the frustration of some individuals with consumer or other economic actors' behavior motivates them to act differently. These "push and pull" factors are also subject to socio-cultural and institutional variables that should be taken into account in future research. In line with Rennings (2000) and Kemp and Pearson (2007), eco-innovations provide concrete solutions to minimize environmental risks and promote more sustainable consumption practices. The comparative analysis of Anglo-Saxon pioneers and contemporary French entrepreneurs reveals that, despite their differing contexts, both serve as essential vehicles for disseminating innovation.

The main difference between these groups is what started them on their paths. Anita Roddick and Ben & Jerry were mainly motivated by the need to create jobs in the 1970s, and their businesses were a break from traditional industrial values. In contrast, E1 and E2 are driven by a strong desire for independence and to act on their beliefs. For them, starting a business is a way to break free from industry norms and provide new solutions.

Responsible innovations and eco-innovations act as "push" factors. They provide the technical or social means that guide the initiator toward entrepreneurial activity. Social and environmental market failures—such as chemical toxicity or unsustainable farming—act as "pull" factors. The frustration with current consumer or industrial behavior motivates individuals to take action to "do things differently". In a Schumpeterian sense, sustainable entrepreneurship creates "new combinations" that generate economic value while reducing social and environmental impact.

6. CONCLUSION

The sustainable entrepreneur is considered the economic agent who addresses environmental and social issues related to consumers in general or stakeholders in

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particular. However, it is important to emphasize that there are two types of entrepreneurs: (1) the sustainable entrepreneur, convinced that it is imperative to introduce a change in consumption habits in order to reduce social and environmental impact, and (2) the opportunistic sustainable entrepreneur who seeks business opportunities and finds a business opportunity in the shortcomings of the social and environmental market. Both types of entrepreneurs may be innovative. Introducing change and mitigating these shortcomings requires introducing innovation that is sustainable (or responsible).

Innovation is known to be a driver of economic growth. This makes eco-innovation a driver of change towards a more responsible economy. As the economic agent initiating innovation in the Schumpeterian sense, the entrepreneur is also the initiator of change. There is, therefore, a close relationship between eco-innovation, sustainable entrepreneurship, and the shift in consumption habits towards a more sustainable (responsible) economy.

Entrepreneurship is thus a driving force behind the dissemination of eco-innovations, enabling profits to be generated while respecting social and environmental standards. This will in Entrepreneurship helps spread eco-innovations, allowing businesses to make profits while meeting social and environmental standards. This can inspire more people to become entrepreneurs and create new opportunities to solve challenges with more responsible products and services. Eco-innovation is central to a system where entrepreneurship supports both economic and sustainable development.s, and motivations in order to propose a reliable model. It also aims to offer support solutions for these types of entrepreneurs and thus recognize their specific characteristics compared to traditional entrepreneurs.

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[1] It should be noted that Ben & Jerry's and The Body Shop were acquired by large corporations (Unilever for the former and L'Oréal for the latter). However, this paper focuses on the cases of these entrepreneurs at the time of their company's creation.