

ORGANISATIONAL RESPONSES TO SUSTAINABILITY DEMANDS: EXPLORING RESPONSE VARIETY IN THE DANISH CONSTRUCTION INDUSTRY

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Due to the construction industry's significant environmental impact; there is increasing pressure for more sustainable practices. This study explores how Danish construction companies experience and respond to sustainability demands. Drawing on institutional theory - particularly the concepts of institutional demands and organisational responses - the study is based on 100 questionnaire responses and in-depth interviews with company representatives. Findings show that companies face regulative; normative; and cultural-cognitive sustainability demands and respond in varied ways. Four distinct response types are identified: procedural; human resources; schematic; and reputational. These responses; mobilised by the companies; align sustainability demands with internal practices without directly affecting project execution. The study contributes by showing that companies experience sustainability pressures differently and therefore adopt diverse strategies. It also highlights the importance of understanding how internal organisational responses are shaped by external sustainability expectations. In line with this, we suggest that future construction management research should explore normative and cultural-cognitive responses to sustainability demands instead of focusing primarily on regulative ones, which have been the overarching focus in recent years.

Keywords: decoupling; EU regulation; institutional demand; organisational response; sustainability

INTRODUCTION

Due to its high energy and resource consumption, the construction sector faces intense pressure to reduce its environmental footprint by 2030 and transition towards more sustainable solutions. This pressure has intensified in recent years, culminating, from a Danish perspective, in the 2021 Danish Climate Act. However, sustainability is not only a political ambition driven by regulatory means, but a broader societal concern rooted in normative and cultural-cognitive beliefs. For instance, climate and

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environmental issues have ranked among the top priorities for Danish voters in recent elections (cf. Hansen and Stubager 2021). In response, the Danish Climate Act aims to cut Denmark's greenhouse gas emissions by 70% by 2030, compared to 1990 levels, exceeding the EU's target by 15% (European Commission 2023). This ambition has made sustainability and green transition central objectives across sectors, including construction, and has prompted companies to support national climate goals.

These sustainability demands are disrupting established industry practices, reshaping work routines and business models (Havenvid *et al.*, 2024). Prior research highlights that this disruption creates tensions between project efficiency and sustainability goals (Fredslund *et al.*, 2022) - a pattern also evident in our empirical data. While much research has focused sustainability demands as being distinctly regulatory (e.g., de Gier *et al.*, 2022), this study shifts the focus to their normative and cultural-cognitive dimensions. This is done by examining how sustainability demands interact with organisational responses during the transition towards a more sustainable construction industry. Specifically, it investigates how companies in the Danish construction industry experience and mobilise different responses to these demands.

The study adopts an institutional theoretical perspective, which is well suited to analysing both sustainability demands and organisational responses. Empirically, it is based on a mixed-method approach, combining questionnaire data (quantitative) and interviews (qualitative). Rather than defining sustainability a priori, we allow respondents and interviewees to articulate their own understandings, shaping how they experience and respond to related demands.

In our analysis, we identify four distinct response types found in our dataset. These responses offer insight into how companies address sustainability demands and demonstrate that they are primarily mobilised for reasons of legitimacy rather than regulatory compliance. By introducing these response types, we aim to enrich the construction management literature on sustainable construction with insights into what organisational responses look like and how they may vary (de Gier *et al.*, 2025) from one company to another.

Theory

The interaction between institutional demands and organisational responses is crucial for understanding how sectors navigate and adapt to external demands (Pache and Santos 2010). Institutional demands shape the environment within which companies operate, influencing organisational structures, strategies and daily routines (Fu *et al.*, 2024). Yet, organisations do not simply comply, they interpret and respond to demands based on their organisational characteristic (Delmas and Toffel 2008) and community affiliation (de Gier *et al.*, 2025). Hoffman (2001) highlights that these organisational responses are shaped not only by external demands but also organisations internal characteristics and position in the field. This dynamic interplay shapes how companies respond to sustainability demands.

Institutional Demands

Pache and Santos (2010: 457) state that institutional demands are "various pressures for conformity exerted by institutional referents on organisations in a given field." Scott (2008: 48) describes institutions as comprising "regulative, normative and cultural-cognitive elements that, together with associated activities and resources, provide stability and meaning to social life." Each element offers a pathway to legitimacy (Palthe 2014), which is critical for organisational acceptance.

In highly institutionalised sectors like construction (Kadefors 1995), change is often driven by macro-level disruptions, such as new regulation or shifting public expectations (Kadefors *et al.*, 2024). The sustainability represents such a disruption, placing new demands on companies from multiple sources. Scholars such as Palthe (2014) points out that regulative demands ("have to") involve complying with changing legislation. However, companies must also navigate legal uncertainty and shifting standards. Normative demands ("ought to") are driven by increasing professionalisation among consultants, contractors, clients, and investors. Finally, cultural-cognitive demands ("want to") reflect broader societal expectations, such as citizen activism and generational shifts in values, epitomised in the so-called "climate election of 2019" (Hansen and Stubager 2021). Young professionals now explicitly seek to address societal challenges through their work (YPAI 2024). In the same vein a new survey done by Universum (2024), highlighting that the most attractive employers in the Danish construction industry are all consulting companies - Ramboll, COWI, and Sweco - known for leading the sustainability transition.

Organisational Responses

When organisations face institutional demands, they typically choose to conform, decouple, or do both (Bromley and Powell 2012; Pache and Santos 2010). Conformity enables legitimacy, as organisations must align with legislation and norms to remain credible in their field (Bromley and Powell 2012: 26). However, construction companies often struggle to align strategic goals with project-level realities (Fredslund *et al.*, 2022), creating room for decoupling.

Some companies comply symbolically, while others decouple to avoid costs or maintain operational flexibility (Ahrens and Khalifa 2015). Decoupling can stem from structural fragmentation: construction is tightly coupled in projects but loosely coupled across organisations (Dubois and Gadde 2002). Teelken (2015) shows that such loose coupling fosters critical attitudes and symbolic compliance, especially during changes processes like the green transition.

METHODS

A mixed-methods design was used in this study. The rationale was to provide a "more in-depth understanding of the quantitative results" (Creswell and Creswell, 2018: 237). As Frederiksen (2022) notes, mixed methods combine methodologies to yield more nuanced and comprehensive insights. He also highlights that a sequential design, quantitative followed by qualitative, allows specific questions to clarify patterns in the numerical data. Thus, findings from the first phase informed the next phase. By integrating both quantitative and qualitative data, areas where statistical analysis alone falls short can be supported by qualitative interview data.

Data were collected in fall 2023 by the first author. First, a questionnaire was distributed to the construction sector professionals via LinkedIn and SurveyXact. Using the educational institution's official LinkedIn page greatly expanded outreach because of its broad national network. However, most responses came from individuals already connected to the institution, such as former employees, collaborators, or former students, reflecting specific opinions rather than being statistically representative of the Danish construction sector. The questionnaire included themes on: (1) company size, (2) sustainability in relation to everyday work activities, (3) personal experiences and perceptions of sustainability, (4) sustainability

in relation to legitimacy acquisition, (5) symbolic sustainability activities, and (6) time, cost, and quality regarding sustainability ambitions.

We received 109 responses: 23 partially answered and 86 complete. The responses were collected from a heterogeneous group of professionals within the Danish construction industry, representing a wide range of experience levels—from recent graduates to highly experienced practitioners. Notably, the majority (43%) of respondents reported having more than 16 years of professional experience. The closing question in the questionnaire asked whether respondents could be contacted for a follow-up interview, and 27 consented. After analysing the quantitative data, four professionals representing different companies were selected for follow-up interviews. The purpose of the interviews was to gain a deeper understanding and elaborate on their questionnaire responses. All interviews were recorded, and all interviews were in person interviews. The interviewees are listed in table 1.

Table 1: Overview of interviewees

Interviewee:	Contractor	Consultant	Project developer	Non-profit client organisation
Role in company:	CEO	Department director	Procurement manager	Operations manager
Experience:	20 years	25 years	4 years	3 years
No. of employees:	~16	+2000	~80	~130
Interview duration:	38.21 min	22.57 min	34.26 min	44.35 min

The interviews were semi-structured, following the questionnaire themes while allowing in-depth elaboration. All four informants have held or currently hold management roles (representing strategic, tactical and operational level) and participated in the online questionnaire before agreeing to interviews.

FINDINGS

We analysed two data sets. The first set consists of the quantitative responses (each theme had between 4-10 questions) while the second set comprised qualitative insights from the four interviews. Since our interest is to explore companies' responses to sustainability demands, we focus on how organisations experience and, consequently, respond. Findings are presented in sections. The first part focuses on highlighting regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive sustainability demands. Analogously, the second part focuses on how companies responded to the experienced demands.

Sustainability Demands

Looking at the empirical data through the lens of institutional demands, companies are pressured on a regulative, normative and cultural-cognitive level. In relation to the regulative dimension, new national and EU sustainability regulations such as EU Green Deal are pushing the companies. For instance, "To what extent is sustainable transition a priority?" 40 of 88 answered "much" or "very much." And 68 of 88 said their company was actively reducing CO2 in projects. A contractor noted that: "...small businesses are being pressured by the new demands (e.g., the EU-Taxonomy) for documentation, as we are indirectly affected by it and have to deliver regarding reporting and so on. You feel that pressure all the time, and we [small businesses] are navigating in the dark." small companies feel constant pressure from documentation demands like the EU taxonomy. It is also highlighted that several large project developers are pushing the demands for green solutions and the transition to an extent that is stricter than the regulatory requirements. For example, one of Denmark's

largest pension funds stated in its 2020 annual report that all new projects must obtain a DGNB certificate. By 2024, the fund reported having restructured half of its approximately €2 billion portfolio to align with sustainable investment criteria, emphasising that sustainable property investments and financial returns are mutually reinforcing (PFA 2024). This corresponds with the project developer's assertion that "... all new customers require their buildings to be certified" (e.g., DGNB).

In relation to the normative dimension, it is noted that major industry actors, such as pension funds, are setting standards that exceed legal requirements—for example, by requiring square metres with an environmental footprint below 7 kg CO₂/m², compared to the legal threshold of 12 kg CO₂/m²—a tendency acknowledged by the project developer stating "... customers are placing additional demands, particularly concerning CO₂ emissions. For example, they request levels below 7 kg CO₂/m². Although this can be challenging to achieve, it is something we are able to deliver".

This is also reflected in the questionnaire results. When respondents were asked, "Is sustainability more important today than 2-3 years ago?", 50 out of 94 answered "much" or "very much". Both the contractor and the project developer agreed that high sustainability demands from customers have become the new normal in the industry. Furthermore, it is reported that if companies fail to meet these expectations, clients are likely to take their business elsewhere.

In relation to the cultural-cognitive dimension, public opinion also plays a role. A Epinion (2024) survey found 43% of Danish voters prioritise the climate and the environment, which is an increase from 18% in the last EU election in 2019. This demand for action can be seen in the data as well as in the consultant's statement: "Almost every application that the department receives from young and newly graduated applicants' states that they want to work with sustainability." This creates a cultural-cognitive pressure on the organisation to address sustainability concerns if they wish to attract future employees.

Outlining Four Organisational Responses

Looking at the organisational responses drawn from the interviews, there are four different ways the companies respond to the sustainability demands, each corresponding to a particular type of response. Identifying these response types is crucial for understand why companies do or do not conform/decouple to experienced demands.

Contractors adopt what could be called a "procedural response," viewing sustainability as a necessity for aligning with everyday procedures and ensuring organisational survival. They adjust their business operations and daily activities to meet sustainability requirements. This is evident in the interview with the contractor, who states that the construction company - of which he is both CEO and owner - has invested a significant amount of capital in Environmental Product Declarations (EPD), not due to customer demands, but because they want to be first movers. He also argues that such investments will be necessary to stay competitive and ensure survival. This is backed by 31% (12 out of 39) of the quantitative responses from contractors, who said that adopting sustainability practices is "highly" or "very highly" important for delivering services and tasks. Or, as the project developer puts it about his company's subcontractors: "If they do not adapt, they will simply not be assigned projects, which can threaten their survival."

For consultants (i.e., architects and engineers), sustainability demands are dealt with through a "human resources response," meaning it is a prerequisite for recruiting and retaining talented employees. As the consultant explains: "There is a huge focus on sustainability in the workforce. We have an entire department with around 80 people working nationally on sustainability, because almost all projects involve customers demanding it." He also sees growing pressure from employees: "The young generation of applicants wants to work with sustainability and includes this demand in their job applications. So, we want to offer them sustainability-focused work to attract them." stating that there is high competition between the consulting companies, when it comes to projects involving sustainability.

Project developers exhibit a "schematic response," treating sustainability as a requirement for meeting environmental certification standards, such as DGNB. Their response is centred on aligning with these standards to meet customer expectations. As the project developer says: "There are many customers who want a green portfolio, mostly in the form of certified buildings. They use these certifications to sell the buildings. So, there is a clear commercial interest. They can simply sell them at a higher price if they are certified."

Similarly, the consultant notes that sustainability is also good for business, with the price for an engineering project increasing by 10-15%, a point confirmed by the professional client, who states that project costs have increased by approximately 5%. When asked: "how has sustainability changed your construction projects?" 47% of respondents said that it has made projects more expensive.

Finally, professional clients/non-profit housing associations demonstrate a "reputational response", treating sustainability as essential for maintaining a positive corporate image. Their approach to sustainability is shaped by politics, democracy, and diversity. As the non-profit client explains: "Our organisation has a general sustainability strategy, but sustainability is also driven by our residents, so the strategy comes from the bottom up. There are differences between departments, especially due to the makeup of residents." He adds that while some departments focus on biodiversity, circularity and sustainability and similar initiatives, other departments do not prioritise sustainability but has a more traditional focus on e.g., cost and maintenance.

DISCUSSION

The findings in this study should be seen as indicative rather than representative of the Danish construction sector. They reflect the views of the participants involved but do not constitute a statical representation of the industry. A larger-scale survey with more respondents could potentially yield different insights. Similarly, the qualitative findings are based on a limited number of interviews, and the selection of different participants—particularly those without managerial roles—might have offered a more practical, on-the-ground perspective of how organisations respond to sustainability demands. The validity of the study could also have been strengthened if the questionnaire had been kept open longer and more interviews had been conducted with a broader and more diverse sample. Therefore, while the results reflect the views of those who participated, we argue that the identified patterns are highly generalisable, as they are likely to recur across organisational contexts with similar roles and pressures.

As previously noted, societal demands often generate a tension between productivity and sustainability goals (e.g., Fredslund *et al.*, 2022). This tension is evident in the quantitative results. Of the 92 responses—most from contractors or consultants (e.g., site managers, architects, engineers)—88 respondents stated that they view the sustainable transition in construction positively. However, when asked whether it is acceptable to deviate from sustainability requirements, 61 out of 86 responded that such deviation is legitimate if the requirements seem unreasonable or harm project timelines or costs. This supports Hoffman's (2001) argument that responses to institutional demands are shaped by internal organisational characteristics and constraints. It also highlights the risk of decoupling between strategic sustainability visions and project-level decision-making.

Thus, these results align Ahrens and Khalifa's (2015) suggestion that compliance is often driven by self-interest, and that institutional demands require meaning-making to become actionable. In line with this, the study intentionally left the concept of sustainability undefined for both questionnaire and interview participants. While this approach allowed respondents to express their own interpretations, which was central to the study's interest, it also poses limitations. The lack of a shared definition may have led participants to interpret questions differently, resulting in responses grounded in varying assumptions. One consequence is that all organisational changes may be framed as responses to sustainability for legitimacy reasons, even when they are primarily driven by business logics rather than broader environmental or social concerns.

Despite these limitations, the study contributes to construction management research by showing how sustainability demands are internalised differently across companies. A key takeaway is that sustainability, despite its broad conceptual scope—including environmental, social, and economic dimensions—is generally reduced to environmental aspects. More specifically, sustainability becomes something practical and deliverable, often through certification schemes and documentation. This is significant because such schemes do not necessarily equate to sustainable practices (Consumer Ombudsman 2024). Instead, they can provide an impression of compliance without reflecting a deep commitment to underlying goals such as CO₂ reduction. This is also evident when looking at one of the questionnaire's findings: 53 out of 86 respondents answered 'yes' when asked if there is a discrepancy between what is communicated at the strategic level and what is being done at the project level.

Revisiting the Four Response Types

This final section elaborates on the four types of organisational responses identified in the study (see table 2), which we consider to be the study's main contribution. Importantly, the study finds that most responses to sustainability demands are not primarily regulatory, but rather normative and cultural-cognitive and aligning the characteristics with Palthe's (2014) behavioural reasoning. This is significant because it shifts the focus from compliance through enforcement to more voluntary internalisation of sustainability expectations.

Table 2: Identified responses to sustainability demands

Response type:	Central actors	Characteristics	Source of legitimacy	Behavioural reasoning
Procedural	Contractors	Sustainability as a necessity for aligning with everyday procedures	Normative	ought to
Human resources	Consultants	Sustainability as a prerequisite for recruiting and retaining talented employees. This is regarded as a key competitive factor between consulting firms.	Cognitive - Cultural	want to
Schematic	Developers	Sustainability as a requirement for complying with environmental certification schemes	Normative	ought to
Reputational	Clients	Sustainability as critical for ensuring positive corporate reputation	Cognitive - Cultural	want to

As demonstrated, the four company types respond differently to sustainability demands based on how these demands intersect with their core activities, strategic priorities, and sources of legitimacy.

Contractors adopt a procedural response, viewing sustainability as embedded in their everyday activities. Their main concern is operational efficiency, and failure to adapt to sustainability demands is perceived as a potential threat to survival.

Consultants demonstrate a human resources response, leveraging sustainability as a strategic instrument to attract and retain highly qualified staff. In response to growing expectations from both employees and clients, sustainability emerges not only as a core element of the business case but also as a critical dimension of strategic human resource management.

Project developers display a schematic response, aligning their practices with certification standards such as DGNB. Since certified buildings hold greater market value, developers align their sustainability efforts with these frameworks to enhance commercial viability.

Non-profit client organisations take a reputational response, driven by public legitimacy, political expectations, and democratic values. Sustainability is guided from the bottom-up by community stakeholders, making it less about compliance and more about symbolic alignment with public values.

CONCLUSION

Based on the presented findings, and the interest of the study to investigate how actors in the Danish construction industry experience and respond to demands aimed at promoting sustainability, it can be concluded that companies adopt distinct types of responses, depending on the nature of the demands they are facing. These responses—procedural, human resource, schematic, and reputational—reflect how sustainability becomes internalised into everyday work activities, incentives, and legitimacy strategies. Furthermore, it can be concluded that the sustainability demands experienced by the companies may originate from national and international regulatory frameworks but have progressively evolved into normative and cultural-cognitive demands. This evolution has led to an enhanced professionalisation of companies' sustainability practices and their capacity to leverage these practices as potential new business opportunities. Internal pressures on companies, as elucidated by the informants, primarily emanate from newly graduated employees who, even during the recruitment process, insist on engaging in sustainability work. This cultural-cognitive pressure, particularly from the younger generation, is described as a catalyst that motivates experienced colleagues and pushes the company towards more

sustainable practices. This observation is interesting as the industry in general faces significant issues attracting new employees and therefore this pressure can propel the green transition as it is a demand from the young generation when applying for a job.

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