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

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

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

## 1. Introduction

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

The COVID-19 outbreak has heavily affected the industrial and manufacturing sectors [1]. Global oil demand declined drastically and oil prices fell sharply as industrial and transport sectors came to halt worldwide [1,8]. COVID-19 has had severe negative impacts on human health and the world economy, but it has also led to improvements in the environment due to limited social and economic activities [1,3,9]. Global energy demand declined by 3.8% in the first quarter of 2020, with most of the impact felt in March, and it is expected to decline by 8%, or almost 2.6 gigatonnes (Gt), to the levels of 10 years ago [10]. $CO_2$ emissions decreased by 25% in China and 6% worldwide [9]. The particulate

matter concentrations (PM2.5 and PM10) in April 2020 were much lower than those in 2019, suggesting a considerable improvement in the pollution level during the lockdown [4,11]. There has also been a considerable reduction in environmental noise across the world [12], and improvement in surface water quality [4].

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

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

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

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

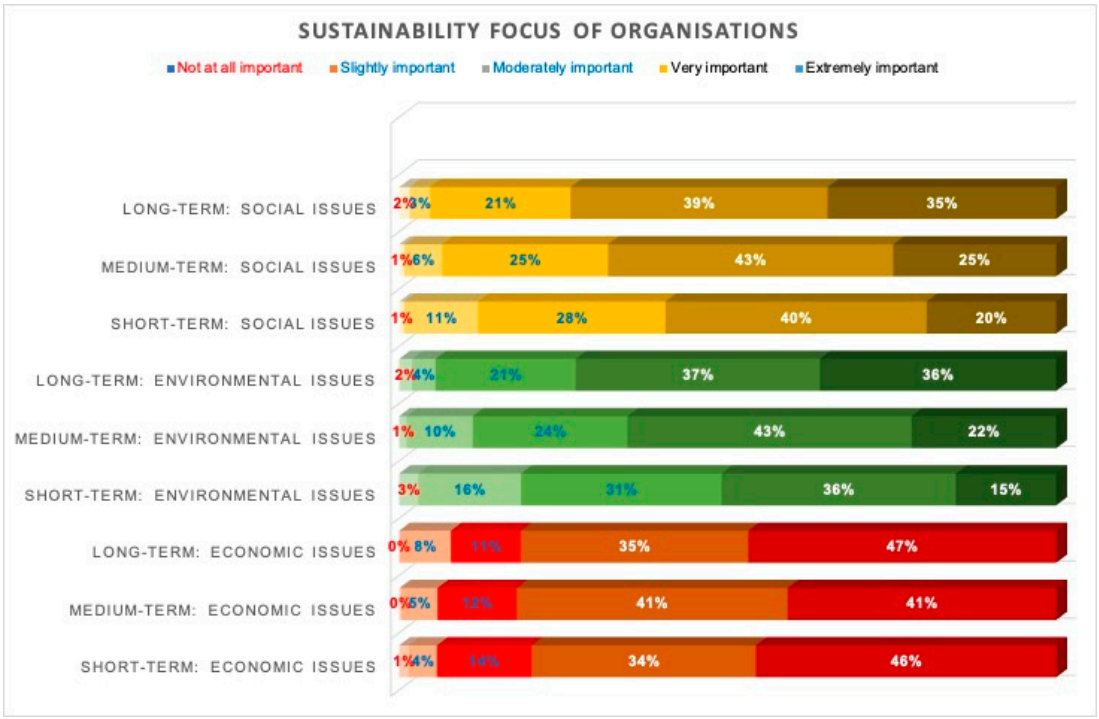


**Figure 1.** Sustainability focus of organisations [30].

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

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

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

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

## 2. Methods

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

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

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

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

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

### *2.1. Limitations of the Methods*

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

## 3. Results

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

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

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

### *3.1. Descriptive Analysis*

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

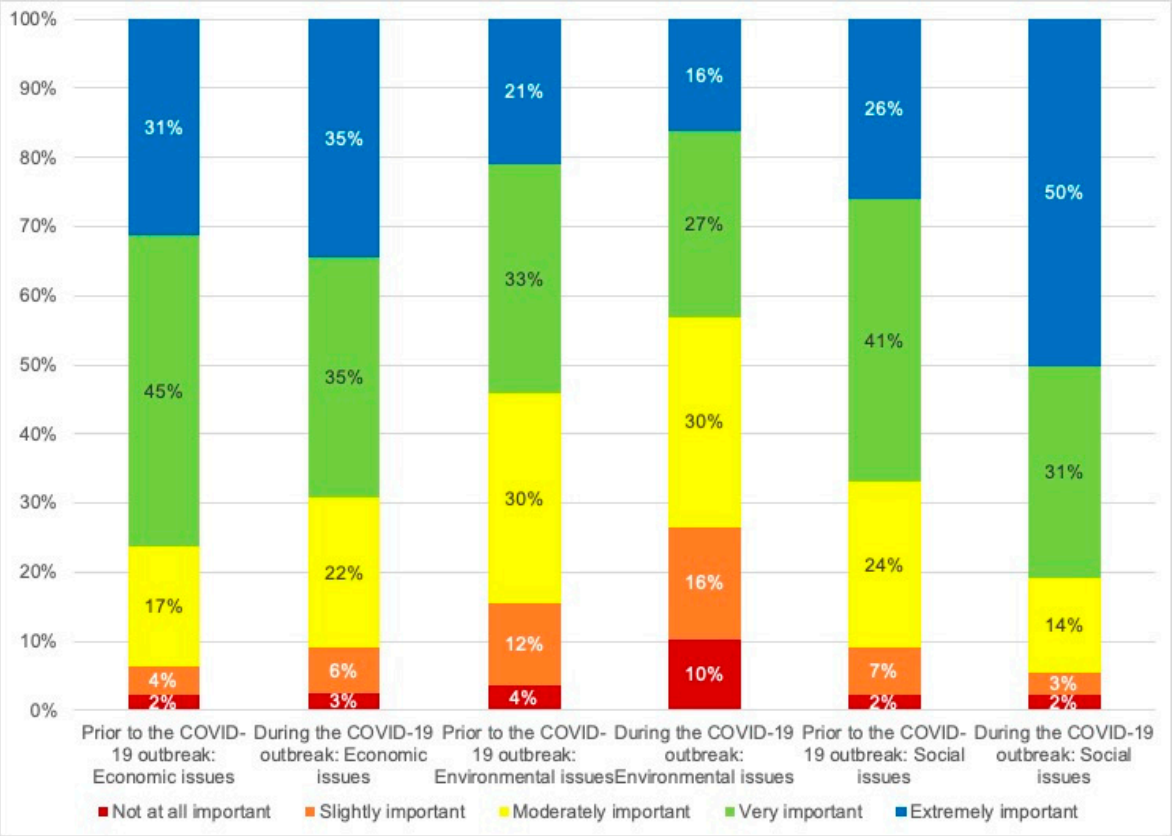


**Figure 2.** Sustainability priorities of all responding organisations prior to and during the COVID-19 outbreak.

### 3.2. Organisation Type Analyses

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### 3.3. Organisation Headquarter/Base Country Analyses

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

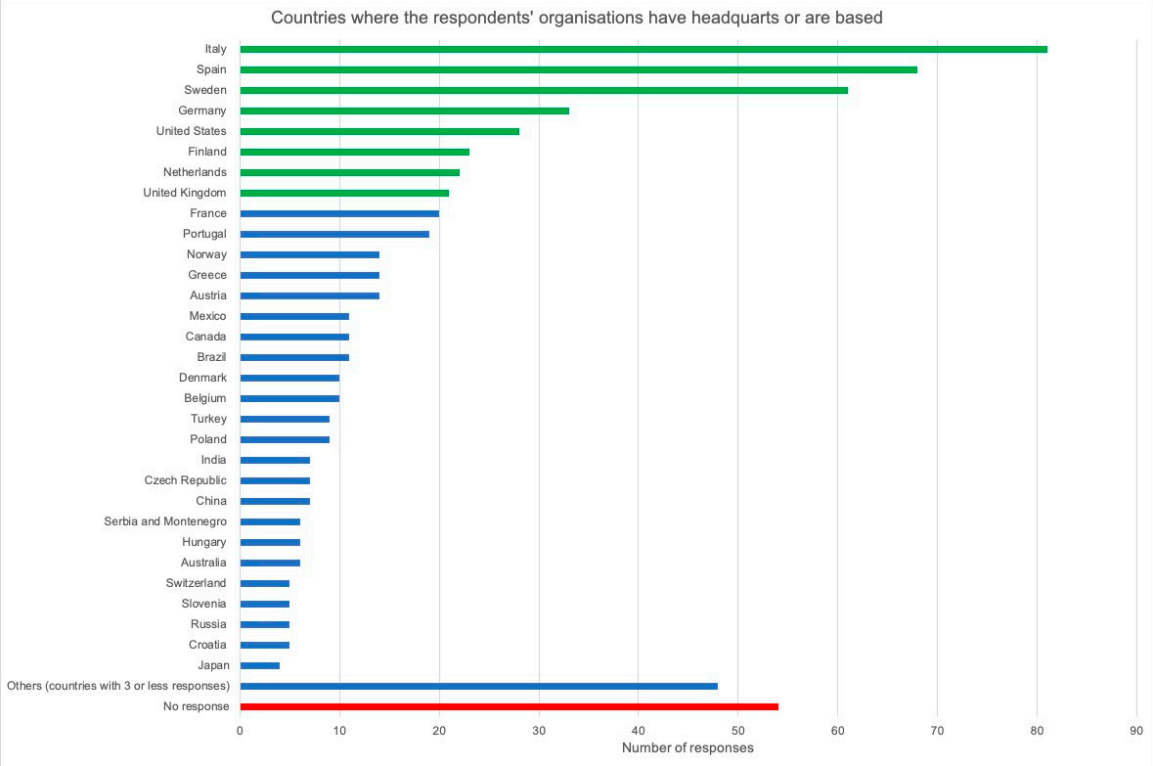


**Figure 4.** Number of responses from the countries where the respondent's organisations have headquarters or are based. Countries used for the comparison analysis are represented in green, and in red the ones that chose "No response".

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### 3.4. Organisation Size

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

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

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

**Table 4.** *Cont.*

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

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

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

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

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

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

### *3.5. Years Working with Sustainability*

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

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

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

*** $p < 0.01$.

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

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

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

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

## 4. Discussion and Conclusions

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

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

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

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

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