

# **How small organisations develop sustainability-oriented strategies: Evidence from northwest Himalayas**

## **Abstract**

### *Purpose*

Using Gibson and Tarrant's (2010) resilience triangle model, this study explores how small northwest Himalayan organisations respond to contextual challenges and opportunities and embed sustainability strategies in their operational values.

### *Design*

A qualitative exploratory design through individual and group interviews with owner-managers and employees was held in five small northwest Himalayan organisations.

### *Findings*

The findings reveal multiple contextual challenges facing small organisations in northwest Himalayas, including ecological conditions, remoteness, underdeveloped infrastructure, and human competencies. The investigated organisations respond to these challenges through reactive and innovation-based services like eco-tourism, conservation, and educational initiatives. They engage communities through participatory and educational activities. Owner-managers adjust their vision and mission statements, train employees on sustainability values, and lobby the government on policy changes to embed sustainability strategies. Some organisations invest in resources and capabilities, and others in process capabilities.

### *Originality*

This study develops a framework that enhances the understanding of how process capabilities, leadership, people, and knowledge capabilities are critical to developing and embedding sustainability strategies in small organisations.

### *Practical implications*

Small organisations can improve how they predict contextual issues by developing their process capabilities; specifically, by creating practical tools with parameters relevant to ecological conditions. They can set the tools through participatory actions with the broader communities to ensure the (un)intended consequences of environmental issues are considered. Furthermore, improvements in process and human capabilities will provide new approaches to raising business opportunities, especially in post-pandemic business environments.

**Keywords:** Small organisations, sustainability strategies, resilience theory, northwest Himalayas

### **Introduction**

Small organisations are the backbone of many economies with a considerable impact on society and their regions (Barbosa *et al.*, 2020). While most research on sustainability focuses on large organisations (Boiral *et al.*, 2019), small and medium organisations represent most businesses; small organisations, in particular, represent the majority of business populations globally (World Bank, 2018). Small organisations face many contextual issues that hinder business growth and longevity (Klewitz and Hansen, 2014); including contextual challenges relating to sustainability like energy, transportation, waste management, water consumption, conservation and biodiversity. For these organisations to survive, they must continually adapt and embed sustainability strategies to remain viable amidst great uncertainty in their external environments (Burnard and Bhamra, 2011) which are sometimes turbulent, varied in severity and frequency; events in one area can often have a disastrous effect on another (Bhamra *et al.*, 2011). Previous studies reveal that organisations are increasingly implementing sustainability-oriented strategies and adopting tools to improve sustainability management (Bonini and

Swartz, 2014). However, most of these studies are focused on large enterprises (Boiral *et al.*, 2019; Wahga *et al.*, 2018) and not small organisations.

Adapting and embedding sustainability strategies requires small organisations to take intentional and rational steps to regain equilibrium (Chakravarthy, 1982; Ginsberg, 1988; Zajac and Kraatz, 1993). They may be forced to pivot, sometimes temporarily, to alternate practical approaches. Adapting to contextual factors is a key driver of sustainability behaviour (Battisti *et al.*, 2013; Yadav *et al.*, 2018), encapsulating the range of practices that incorporate social, economic, and ecological objectives into operational strategies (Pullman *et al.*, 2009). While internal and external factors influence sustainability behaviours, the techniques developed to respond to contextual drivers depend on organisations' understanding of their environment. Additionally, they depend on the owner-managers' perceptions of how contextual factors influence business operations (Coles *et al.*, 2014) and their obligations to their communities (Darnall *et al.*, 2010).

Given that extant research has mainly focused on large businesses in developed economies, there is a gap in knowledge on how small organisations in different settings respond to context-specific sustainability issues and embed responsive strategies into their operational values. This is the point of departure in this study and this paper particularly focuses on how small organisations in resource-constrained environments with low access to markets respond to environmental challenges and develop sustainability-oriented strategies. Based on interviews with owner-managers and employees, this study makes contributions on two essential issues related to sustainability research that have been largely overlooked in the literature. First, most studies have focused on green sustainability, often from corporate perspectives (Barbosa *et al.*, 2020) and lacking localised knowledge. As a result, these understandings of sustainability are mostly ecological, not broader views of sustainability challenges and opportunities. Second,

there is a lack of studies on sustainability strategies in small organisations in resource-constrained environments with relatively low access to markets. These small organisations can respond to and address unique challenges using unconventional approaches. There is an urgent need to understand how sustainability-related strategies are developed by such organisations based on perceived challenges in remote contexts. Through this investigation, this study contributes theoretically to resilience theory by exploring the importance of process capabilities, leadership, people and knowledge capabilities in creating and embedding sustainability strategies.

The paper is structured as follows: first, the paper discusses the literature on small organisations and sustainability behaviours and practices, followed by resilience theory as the underpinning knowledge guiding this study. The paper presents the methodology and method before the findings and a detailed discussion. The paper ends with a conclusion and avenues for future research.

## **Literature Review**

### *Small organisations and sustainability*

In business, sustainability is the frame by which organisations concurrently deliver social, economic, and environmental value, also known as the triple bottom line (Hart and Milstein, 2003). Considerable research on the drivers of organisational sustainability (Steur *et al.*, 2019) and the internal and external challenges facing organisations of different sizes (Jang *et al.*, 2017) provides valuable perspectives in broad contexts. Developments in these research areas indicate that small organisations face distinctive sustainability-related challenges, due to their vulnerability to, for example, power and market changes (Bhoganadam and Dasaraju, 2017), economic instability (Tanco *et al.*, 2021), poor productivity and limited opportunities for growth (Mishra, 2019). Insights into the distinctive sustainability challenges facing small

organisations in developing countries or remote contexts remain very underdeveloped (Carrigan *et al.*, 2017). Yet, small organisations' activities are considered very impactful on the environment, since they are the world's largest consumers of water and air resources (Hoogendoorn *et al.*, 2015; Jabbour *et al.*, 2020).

Contexts with close interconnections between natural resources and nature, such as the Himalayas, are dependent on biodiversity links to sustainable livelihoods (Ramakrishnan, 2007). Human activities have impacted the socio-economic environment of the Himalayas (Ahmad *et al.*, 1990), heightening degradation and destabilising ecosystems through over-exploitation of community resources. This destabilisation has significantly impacted regional business activities. Yet, there is limited research on how small organisations in these regions respond to these challenges. The distinctiveness and intricacies of the Himalayas, particularly in the north, and the Ghat systems in the south, play a critical role in determining the ecological impacts in these mountains and the adjoining plains.

Existing scholarship on sustainability and small organisations has tended to focus on the green agenda (Siegel *et al.*, 2019; Yacob *et al.*, 2019), more than sustainability management and evaluation (Singh *et al.*, 2018). Whilst sustainability initiatives in the Himalayas also primarily focus on specific environmental issues like climate change and socio-economic systems (Singh *et al.*, 2020; Chandra and Kumar, 2021), evidence from Badola *et al.* (2018) and Gaur *et al.* (2018) show that organisations in the Himalayas are increasingly responding to ecological concerns in innovative ways, set against the background of tourism which is the region's main economic sector. In this view, understanding contextual challenges in northwest Himalayas and their effects on small organisations can contribute to existing knowledge on sustainability approaches to complex environmental contexts.

*Responding to sustainability-related challenges: Behaviour and practice*

Contextual influences and organisational factors drive sustainable behaviour. Yadav *et al.* (2018)'s systematic review identified internal and external factors that drive sustainability behaviours. Internal factors include employees, organisational culture, brand image and reputation, firm size, competitive advantage, strategic intent, and environmental management capability; in contrast, external influences include government, customers, networks, and alliances. Internal factors such as culture and the organisation's mindset are vital to determining small organisations' response to sustainability (Baumgartner, 2009; Bonini and Bove, 2014). Furthermore, lean organisations with flat structures and fewer internal stakeholders (Sloan *et al.*, 2013) will impact sustainability behaviours differently.

In mapping sustainability behaviours, Klewitz and Hansen (2014) found that such behaviours range from resistant, reactive, anticipatory, innovation-based to sustainability-rooted behaviours. Resistant behaviours comprise the refusal to change or pivot, whilst reactive behaviours indicate willingness to respond to contextual factors. Anticipatory behaviours develop foresights on how the environment may change and potential impacts on the organisation; Innovation-based behaviours indicate the application of new ideas, systems or processes. Whilst internal and external pressures are determinants of small organisations' sustainability behaviours, there is limited evidence on how these pressures influence specific sustainability practices in small organisations in remote contexts with low access to markets.

Despite the uneven impacts of sustainability issues, small organisations are often slow to adopt sustainability practices (Shields and Shelleman, 2015). Condon (2004) argues that small organisations' size is advantageous over large enterprises in dealing with sustainability issues, as they can react quickly to changes in their business environments. These practices pose significant opportunities, as well as managerial and operational risks (Brammer *et al.*, 2012; Hörisch *et al.*, 2014; Jansson *et al.*, 2015; López-Pérez *et al.*, 2017). How small organisations

respond is not very well understood to date, as most studies on sustainability (including sustainable behaviours) have been explored within multinational corporations' boundaries (Darcy *et al.*, 2014) excluding the experiences of small organisations.

Small organisations are expected to respond by developing sustainable strategies, behaviours and reporting requirements (Shields and Shelleman, 2015). Sustainability practices help organisations to develop long-term plans concurrent with social, economic and environmental factors; they enable organisations to have balanced approaches to the triple-bottom-line dimensions in a holistic manner (Sohail *et al.*, 2018). As Ndubisi (2008: p.164) argues, for small organisations to achieve long-term business goals, they "must use resources efficiently and economic growth must be done in harmony with the environment."

Due to sustainability issues' criticality, organisations have considered leadership a vital pillar in addressing them (Epstein and Buhovac, 2014; Metcalf and Benn, 2013). Leaders (or owner-managers) establish and implement sustainable practices and communicate them to different stakeholder groups (Epstein and Buhovac, 2014). Effective leaders have a strategic mindset that views changes in business contexts as opportunities (Condon, 2004); they can leverage demands to develop new and more ethical approaches to meet investors' profit expectations (Porter and Kramer, 2006). To ensure the practical outcomes of the role, leaders must develop new leadership skills and attributes to address complex sustainability issues (Ploum *et al.*, 2017). Leadership skills and competencies are essential to becoming sustainable (Eccles *et al.*, 2012). Haney *et al.* (2018) found that experiential learning programmes support understanding, personal connection, and empowerment to act for sustainability.

Also, small organisations must develop relational capabilities and technologies to embed sustainability practices (Hofmann *et al.*, 2012). Relational capability is a dynamic capability that intentionally enables organisations to create and extend resources (Martins, 2016). This

capability can be vital for embedding tools that allow organisations to capture knowledge for responding to contextual tensions. Moreo *et al.* (2009) recommend integrating sustainability dimensions into a business performance evaluation tool. Through this integration, organisations can develop goals specific to context-specific challenges.

Developing the sustainability agenda and embedding sustainable practices in organisations has multiple effects on internal business dimensions. For instance, Orlitzky *et al.* (2003) identified positive corporate performance in institutions with sustainability objectives. Other studies show competitive advantage (Porter and Kramer, 2006); organisational legitimacy (Brønn and Vidaver-Cohen, 2009); customer loyalty (Ellen *et al.*, 2000); and improved brand image (Peterson, 2004). Interestingly, sustainability practices reflect specific behaviours of leaders and individuals involved in developing said practices. Sohail *et al.* (2018) found that employees with pure beliefs and actions have ethical behaviours critical to organisational sustainability. Owner-managers perceive their environment as a crucial factor affecting their business (Coles *et al.*, 2014); additionally, they feel a social obligation because they are part of a local community (Darnall *et al.*, 2010) with shared or common values.

### *Theoretical framework – organisational resilience*

Amidst turbulent social, economic, and environmental conditions, organisations will experience disruptions and discontinuities (Burnard and Bhamra, 2011). However, the broader discourse in literature is that organisations in volatile environments are better prepared for disturbances, despite capacity challenges because the market is consistently unpredictable. Given that small organisations demonstrate a range of resistant, reactive, and anticipatory behaviours towards sustainability, resilience is an integral theory underpinning this study.

Fundamentally, resilience is the ability of systems to respond to disturbances and maintain equilibrium; popularised by Holling (1973) on ecological systems, resilience theory has been



used in different disciplines, including within organisational contexts (Crichton *et al.*, 2009; Falasca *et al.*, 2008; Horne and Orr, 1997; Starr *et al.*, 2003; Waehning *et al.*, 2023).

In this paper, resilience theory draws from organisational studies to assess individual and organisational responses to instability and cessation. Gibson and Tarrant's (2010) resilience triangle model argues that interdependent capabilities: process, resources, and infrastructure; leadership, people and knowledge capabilities; are vital for organisational resilience. These capabilities have a flowing approach to review, assess, and adapt capabilities on each side of the triangle. The primary classifications provide a structure by which the study investigates small organisations' sustainability behaviours and practices in northwest Himalayas.

Gibson and Tarrant (2010) argue that strong leadership, people, and knowledge are critical enablers of organisational resilience. Successful leadership is often complex during rapid change, but leaders that predict and respond to changes in the business environment enable resilience behaviour characteristics (Alberti *et al.*, 2018). De Oliveira *et al.* (2013) claim that leaders and change processes form the basis of resilient organisations. Equally, people (i.e., employees) must step outside of fixed behaviours into an unfamiliar environment (Southwick *et al.*, 2017; Gibb *et al.*, 2022). This paper argues that a combination of capabilities related to processes, resources and infrastructure, alongside leadership, people and knowledge capabilities will enable small organisations to resist, react, and anticipate contextual changes.

Resource capability is the organisation's ability to perform specified operations, such as materials, finance, networks, and intangible resources (Pal *et al.*, 2014). Integrating resource capability requires flexibility, adaptability, efficiency, and optimism (Bhamra *et al.*, 2011). Therefore, tangible and intangible resource capabilities are critical enablers of organisational resilience. However, organisations must be proactive and agile to respond to changes in the business environment (Ismail *et al.*, 2011). Since small organisations often work in resource-

constrained environments, it is unclear what resource capabilities are available to these organisations for their future needs. This study uncovers resource capabilities within small organisations in northwest Himalaya, including how they use specific resources to respond to locational tensions. It contributes to knowledge on key resource capabilities for sustainability by small organisations in such remote contexts.

Process capability combines tools, systems, and methods to achieve desired results (Gibson and Tarrant, 2010; Gittell *et al.*, 2006; Weick, 1993). This fosters a comprehensive understanding of the resilience dynamics and phenomena (Burnard and Bhamra, 2011). Since organisations experience known and unknown changes, resilience dynamics is the ability of organisations to adopt capabilities to withstand or respond to environmental changes (Lengnick-Hall *et al.*, 2011). Existing studies have focused on organisational resilience as strategies (Carmeli and Markman, 2011) or processes (Ates and Bititci, 2011; Demmer *et al.*, 2011), yet there is limited evidence to demonstrate what resilient organisations do and how organisational resilience may be achieved (Duit, 2016). Therefore, this paper examines how small organisations combine their tools, systems, and methods to overcome locational challenges to achieve organisational sustainability.

The adopted resilience theory shows the contextual issues influencing sustainability behaviours and practices of small organisations in northwest Himalayas, the capabilities embedded in the organisations to overcome locational challenges, and how they embed sustainability-oriented strategies in their operational values.

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**Figure 1.** Resilience triangle model about here

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### **Study materials**

This paper adopts a qualitative exploratory approach to examine how small organisations in northwest Himalayas respond to environmental challenges and develop sustainability-oriented strategies in their operations. Such an exploratory study is particularly useful when the aim is to see processes and outcomes across many cases, to understand how they are qualified by local conditions, and thus to develop more sophisticated descriptions and more powerful explanations (Miles and Huberman, 1994). The unique geographical location of the selected organisations supports this approach. As discussed in the literature review, the sustainability challenges in northwest Himalayas are primarily environmental and unique to the region. Therefore, by understanding how organisations in this area respond to sustainability challenges, the study provides insights into the research questions and maximum variations of the businesses, such as the typology of organisations, specific locations in northwest Himalayas and business operations.

Specifically, the study focuses on small organisations in the northwest Himalayas union territory of Ladakh, the States of Uttarakhand and Himachal Pradesh. All three regions are remote with varying topographical diversity, each offering distinctive sustainability challenges and opportunities. Ladakh (historically part of the State of Jammu and Kashmir) is a high-altitude ‘Cold Desert’ characterised by an arid climate and stark mountain surfaces. Himachal Pradesh is a mountainous State popular for agriculture, horticulture, hydropower. Uttarakhand has a varied topography featuring snow-covered peaks, agriculture, dusty plains and rivers. In general, winters are harsh across the northwest Himalayan region; the States of Uttarakhand

and Himachal Pradesh specifically face particularly unpredictable weather throughout the year. Ecological sustainability is a significant challenge, as well as a powerful draw for tourism across this region.

Rawhouser *et al.* (2019) argues that adopting a narrow approach (i.e., focusing on one region) can result in a deeper understanding of the complexities and idiosyncrasies that characterise the reality of organisations within selected contexts, which enables the development of applicable theory. Additionally, scholars (Miles and Huberman, 1994; Ragin, 1987) suggest that, when trying to ascertain why different outcomes exist among cases, the ideal approach is to compare a limited number of cases. From a methodological viewpoint, the first author gained access to the case study organisations via a UK-based charity. The selected organisations reveal differing business models, legal structures, and strategies to deliver their goals. The organisations are as follows:

(1) Spiti Ecosphere (SE) is a social enterprise established in 2002 in Spiti valley (Himachal Pradesh). Its social objectives are to create sustainable livelihoods linked to nature and culture conservation. It supports local employment opportunities through eco-tourism, and additionally works to uplift tribal communities through educational initiatives, conservation efforts through handicraft revival and promotion, as well as wildlife insurance schemes.

(2) Kalap Trust (KT) is a non-profit established in 2013. Located in Uttarakhand, it operates three initiatives on education, healthcare, and enterprise to improve the quality of life of communities through sustainable development. Operating as a charity, KT serves roughly 60 villages in Uttarkashi, located in the northernmost part of Uttarakhand.

(3) Pagir (PA) is a non-profit established in 2007. Located in Ladakh, this charity works to protect the rights of people with disabilities. Its two main economic activities are; handicraft

product creation using recyclable materials; and tourism, specifically tour packages for wheelchair users to experience mountainous Ladakh.

(4) Ladakh Rural Women's Enterprise (LRWEN) is also located in Ladakh. Set up in 2010 as a society, it aims to contribute to Ladakh's economic growth through women's programmes. LRWEN offers employment opportunities for women to promote financial independence, social empowerment, and cultural heritage preservation. LRWEN achieves these goals by producing handmade artefacts with locally sourced materials.

(5) Snow Leopard Conservancy India Trust (SLC-IT) is a not-for-profit established in 2003 in Ladakh. Its main focus is the conservation of the highly-endangered snow leopard and conserving mountain ecosystems. SLC-IT achieves this focus by building responsible and sustainable stewardship through two enterprise programs for community development and rural tourism, as well as education and research.

A total of 9 group and individual interviews were conducted with 14 owner-managers and employees using in-depth semi-structured interview techniques. The interviews took place between May and June 2019. The size and composition of group interviews differed due to the size of the organisations. For SE, 2 group interviews were conducted with 4 individuals – 1 group interview with two owner-managers and 1 group interview with two employees. For PA, 1 individual interview with an owner-manager and 1 group interview with three employees was completed. 1 individual interview and 1 group interview were undertaken with two employees at SLC-IT. 2 individual interviews were conducted with owner-managers at KT and 1 from an owner-manager at LRWEN. Both KT and LRWEN did not have formal employees at the time of data collection.

The interviews lasted two hours on average and focused on three main themes: contextual challenges, sustainability strategies, and embedding sustainability in operational values.

Broadly, data was analysed following Miles and Huberman's (1994) working principles regarding cross-case displays. Specifically, interviews were thematically analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis process. Group and individual interviews were analysed separately to avoid difficulties in conceptualising the data (Atkinson, 2005). After transcribing interview data, reading and re-reading the transcript independently, the authors coded interview data to generate themes. The final lower and higher order codes organised into the themes is shown in Table 1.

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**Table 1.** Coding structure about here

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## **Findings**

This section presents the empirical analysis using a cross-case analysis to expose the contextual opportunities and challenges that affect the operational activities of the investigated organisations. The group and individual interviews allowed for depth in understanding how sustainability strategies are embedded in the organisations from both employees and owner-managers. The article now presents specific findings relative to the research objectives.

### *1. Contextual opportunities and challenges in the northwest Himalayas*

*Lack of competition:* This theme emerged from all organisations as an opportunity in their specific contexts due to the lack of competition from other service providers. These organisations were the first to establish business operations in their local contexts; their longstanding establishment in the Himalayan communities also provided additional opportunities for authenticity and brand recognition nationally and internationally:

When we started SE in 2002, we were the only organisation in this valley. Now, there are 20-25 commercial tourist companies (Norbo and Ishita, SE)

Sadly, the above opportunity also paradoxically led to and exacerbated their challenges, which varied depending on the geopolitical context of the State, that is, Ladakh, Himachal Pradesh or Uttarakhand. The authors identify three critical challenges facing the organisations: 1) remoteness, 2) underdeveloped infrastructure, and 3) business costs.

*Remoteness:* In this context, remoteness covers being located far from accessible facilities and utilities needed to run a business, such as electricity. For example, the founder of Spiti says,

Spiti has always had an electricity issue. Initially we would get electricity one hour every alternate day. It has improved slightly since then, but in 2010, we had not even a minute of electricity in the entire year (Ishita, SE)

Remoteness also impacts on the isolation from other services by the government and/or other providers in areas like healthcare:

A remote village...where there is no road, people are in complete isolation. There are no government schemes or programs implemented.. villagers might never have visited Leh (capital town for Ladakh) in their entire lives and they are cut off from basic medical care (Namgail, SLC-IT)

*Underdeveloped infrastructure:* There are inadequate resources to facilitate efficient business services. Through observations, the authors noted limited access to the internet. The challenge goes beyond the efficiency of business practices because it also affects team development, as volunteers are based in remote locations:

Here the connectivity is such a challenge. We had a situation a year ago where the internet was completely off for four months (Namgail, SLC-IT)

Of relevance here is the role of the internet in every sphere of sustainability. Whereas internet may not have been an issue in the past, inaccessibility via internet is a huge challenge for organisations now. Ishita from Spiti explains,

Back then when we started the internet was not there at that point in time so that was not a challenge, but now, connectivity with the internet is a huge challenge for us because if you are working all through the year, we need to be connected to the Internet, so I would say that is one of our biggest challenges that we face.

*Business costs:* All the organisations cited increasing business costs, associated with their remoteness, logistics and underdeveloped infrastructure. Due to limited infrastructure, they had to develop efficient resources to continue their business operations. As Nishanth noted:

To hire a taxi for a return journey (from headquarters in Dehradun to the base location in Uttarkashi district) costs around two hundred pounds so it is expensive. (Nishant, KT)

Hence, the organisations must continually review and assess their priorities, particularly the costs of operationalising activities. While every organisation reviewed and evaluated in unique ways, sometimes this resulted in decisions to temporarily halt established activities and reconsider alternate strategies, particularly where an activity depended on multiple changes in the external environment:

We started a tourism package called Himalaya on Wheels for the differently-abled travellers (especially wheelchair users) to see Ladakh. This began in 2009 and ran for about three years. But this was quite costly for them, as each needed to have wheelchair access, have a help, and the package was constrained to be for a duration of 7 days. We had roughly ten clients on every tour. We could not sustain the cumulative cost of this program so it closed in 2013. (Iqbal, PA)



The contextual challenges encountered by the investigated small organisations are specific to the region and relate to remote access to basic amenities, like electricity and medical care. The findings demonstrate how they initially adapt to challenges in their environment, then review and reassess their priorities, taking difficult decisions to end income-generating activities despite the financial benefits.

## *2. Embedding sustainability in operational values*

Despite the challenges faced, the organisations continuously assessed how to use their current resources to their advantage. Key concerns were how to remain in business in such challenging environments. Broadly, some organisations invest in resources and capabilities, and others in process capabilities. The authors found a range of internal capabilities that drive sustainability practices. Specifically, leadership and people drive the sustainability agenda; whilst resources, infrastructure and processes are used to embed sustainability practices.

*Leadership, people and knowledge:* Participative approaches to inspire employees to embrace the sustainability agenda are common. Owner-managers encourage workers (mostly volunteers) to welcome new income-generating projects and capitalise on resources for business longevity. Interestingly, many of the interviewed owner-managers had limited prior leadership or managerial experience before establishing their organisations. Yet, they reported that by engaging people through knowledge sharing about the nature of their small spaces and the latest infrastructural challenges, they could collectively develop sustainable organisational changes. An example of participative leadership is drawn from Namgail, SLC-IT, who said:

We have regular meetings, and we look at the requirements. We're able to sit and [decide] on the program ... and make a decision together.

Similarly, Ishita from SE receives praise from a senior manager for her participative leadership style:

Ishita is thoughtful and patient in terms of understanding, not limited to the things she is doing with the community and team building. I don't think she treats anybody as an employee, and there is mutual respect (Anubhav, SE)

*Resources and infrastructure:* The organisations assess their internal capabilities and use resources (human resources, financial resources, physical, and information resources) to respond to contextual challenges. For instance, SE engages in routine pivoting exercises, even if this means a temporary change in direction for the organisation, to build infrastructure capabilities:

Not having electricity was tough on us and led us to look at electrification options like solar electrification. We first did solar in our office because it is tough to work without electricity (Ishita, SE).

Similarly, SLC-IT strategically considers expanding resources, and despite constraints, has not engaged in active recruitment exercises since 2003:

There are a lot of people who want to come. If you just expand without much strategic thinking, a lot of people come up with different ideas. Sometimes you want to be focused. We haven't been expanding actively (Namgail, SLC-IT).

LRWEN responds to human resources constraints by encouraging strong group bonding among women:

They have a very solid group bonding. They go out on local tours like picnics to the monastery, and every year we take the entire group out..each of them brought home-cooked food. They discuss their emotional problems and strong group dynamics (Tsering, LRWEN).

Finally, PA engages in lobbying government officials, suppliers, and agents to try and better accommodate their disabled customers' needs:

We made efforts to convince the government, the guesthouses, hotels and the monastery on the outskirts of Leh to modify rooms, provide access ramps and larger rooms, and ... wider entrances, and the help had to be recruited and trained to cater to special needs of the travellers (Iqbal, PA).

*Process capabilities:* The authors found that process capabilities related to both systems and people. Both works interchangeably to respond to contextual challenges and opportunities. Each case presents a unique process for embedding sustainability in its operational values. It is noteworthy that these organisations rely on basic communication systems like email, WhatsApp and telephone/mobile networks given they have unreliable access to internet/telephony. In general, process capabilities among all the case study organisations are weak; for example, SE created a geographically-dispersed team of employees who remotely manage communications and advertising for tourism packages via emails/WhatsApp.

Similarly, SLC-IT struggles with access to the internet for regular communication with stakeholders; in addition, they lack skills and access to English written communication:

Communication of course, that has been quite a challenge. Besides the poor connectivity (ie remote location), and the (poor) internet for communicating with the donors, the community, and the beneficiaries.. the skill sets to do all these (are missing)..When it comes to reporting and writing, it becomes a bottleneck there so documentation has not been up to the mark. (Namgail, SLC-IT).

To counter the above challenges related to various process capabilities, organisations embedded sustainability strategies, which is presented in the next section.

### *3. Embedding sustainability strategies*

In this section, we reviewed sustainability strategies mainly in terms of the interplay between organisation vision and mission and business activities, resource allocation, leadership, people and processes. We identify three strategies: resistant, reactive and anticipatory behaviours. Broadly, most of the organisations were either resistant or reactive and only one organisation exhibited anticipatory behaviours.

#### Resistant Behaviours

During the fieldwork, 4 off 5 case study organisations demonstrated resistant behaviours in various aspects. SLC-IT and LRWEN were very defensive of their vision and mission. In these cases, the vision statements are specific and focused on one key driver in the organisation. In these instances, resistant organisations provide stand-alone and standardised products and services. For example, the founder of LRWEN says,

I started forming women's groups and trained them in traditional weaving and natural dyeing. Then I left the group to start an organization, the 'society' (ie LRWEN) to empower women and preserve traditional skills. I have about 30 women, aged 50+, they work at home in their villages with supplies provided by the society. There are no programs for men. (Tsering, LRWEN)

This demonstrates a lack of flexibility and unwillingness to expand their skill set or technical expertise. Resistant behaviours include a high degree of reluctance to stringent funding requirements and tight timescales, refusal to plan until they achieve financial stability and are generally resistant to any type of change due to financial instability. For example, the founder of KT says,

Right now, we are at the point where we have as a policy : we refuse to take funding from anybody who is giving us money for one year. That is why we have kept all proposals on standby (Anand, KT)

Of noteworthy mention here is resistant behaviours include strong group dynamics among workers albeit highly resistant to change in any form. In terms of leadership, resistant organisations were led by leaders or founders with minimal access to resources and limited staffing numbers.

### Reactive Behaviours

Four out of five organisations display reactive behaviours. These organisations focus on employee needs like training, education and awareness, in order to outbid competitors and may temporarily drift from organisation's vision in order to get buy-in from the community for organisation's activities. For example, the founder of SE says,

[Currently] there is a dog problem..one of the problems in Spiti is, there is no access to food during the winter. So, the dogs started eating each other or they are going into villages and hunting in packs.. There is news of them mating with wolves and preying on the same prey as a snow leopard..this has become a problem, and we will try and work with the government to get sterilizations going, but it is a slow process. (Ishita, SE)

In this sense, reactive organisations react to the ongoing activities in the local context and come up with innovative products/services and diversify activities in response to the local context. Reactive organisations continually review activities until funding ends and make decisions towards the end of a project. In terms of leaders in reactive organisations, they display laissez-faire leadership skills, that is, workers were responsible for their tasks and required minimal to

no supervision. A noteworthy point here is that these organisations were founded by graduates who studied topics quite different to the area of work. In other words, founders of reactive organisations were sufficiently opportunistic to conduct a social business in the local community.

### Anticipatory

In contrast to the above, anticipatory behaviours allowed for flexibility and quick responses to a changing environment and these behaviours were noted in only one off five case study organisations. We identify an organisation with a broad vision statement that allows for a broad set of activities as anticipatory behaviour, which facilitates organisational sustainability. These organisations also take calculated risks and launch new products/services. Of noteworthy mention is, these organisations engaged in future-proofing the organisation in terms of financial security to avoid mission-drift, and actively engage in reviewing organisational form/structure to secure financial stability. For example, the founder of SE encouraged employees' commitment to the organisation's goals empowered one senior employee to feel a sense of ownership in SE,

That is why we gave NOR a lot of responsibilities and then made him a part of the organisation so that he feels the ownership. It is not that he is employed, he is part of SE, and it is his. We saw that change in his mindset so now, he literally says, "I am SE. SE is me. It is my venture. I am not just an employee here. (Ishita, SE).

Anticipatory behaviours include flexible hiring policies in response to seasonal tourist demand wherein organisations have strong connections with the local community to hire locals for seasonal work in the event of high tourist season. Finally, subject-experts with advanced degree qualifications related to the area of work founded these organisations.

## **Discussion**

The section discusses the study's findings, including contextual challenges and opportunities, and the contributions to literature. It provides a framework that demonstrates the interplay between sustainability challenges, opportunities, and strategies for responding to constraints within remote contexts as seen in figure 2.

### *Regional, systemic and organisational challenges facing small organisations*

The findings highlight several contextual opportunities and challenges encountered by small organisations in resource-constrained environments with low access to markets, and how these factors influence their embedding of sustainability strategies. Five interrelated contextual factors: budgetary, ecological conditions, remoteness, underdeveloped infrastructure and human competencies are highlighted. These factors are categorised as regional (remoteness, ecological conditions), systemic (underdeveloped infrastructure), and organisational (budgetary and human competencies) factors. In previous studies, sustainability-related challenges for small organisations have focused mainly on power and market changes (Bhoganadam and Dasaraju, 2017), or economic instability (Tanco et al., 2021). Studies focusing on the Himalayas primarily emphasise the variation of climate conditions (Badola et al., 2018), climate change and socioeconomic systems (Singh et al., 2020). As such, this study contributes to existing literature by exposing how the regional, systemic and organisational contextual factors present opportunities and challenges at different parameters for small organisations.

Notions of sustainability focused on specific environmental concerns, such as climate change and socio-economic systems (Ramakrishnan, 2007; Singh *et al.*, 2020), including ecological or environmental contexts, highlight varied aspects of human activities and environmental factors. Findings from this study reveal that regional remoteness delivers both opportunities

and challenges for small organisations. Drawing from the interviews, remoteness in the northwest Himalayas context presented opportunities for small organisations to establish themselves as dominant players in their regions due to the limited number of competitors in specific markets. This remoteness is further utilised for brand recognition externally; their longstanding establishment within remote communities helped to give the small organisations enhanced credibility and recognition in the external marketing initiatives they ran nationally and internationally. Consequently, these findings supplement previous studies (Shields and Shelleman, 2015) that find that being a small organisation can be advantageous, in terms of the abilities to respond much quicker and more locally to distinctive, contextual challenges.

At the same time, remoteness is linked to several systemic challenges, primarily their high reliance on underdeveloped infrastructure necessary for connectivity and business operations. This vulnerability has implications for sustainability in small organisations in terms of energy use, transportation, waste management, water consumption, conservation and biodiversity. Carrigan *et al.* (2017) outlined that organisations' sustainability challenges differed considerably across different contexts. Similarly, the findings in this study highlight that differing contexts faced by small organisations inform the strategies they use to embed sustainability within their business operations.

High business costs are some of the most challenging concerns cited by the small organisations. The high costs of logistics to service customers in remote contexts are further intensified by the limited infrastructure available. The implications of underdeveloped infrastructures, such as limited access to electricity or transportation links and the related higher business costs, are highlighted in Mishra (2019) as limiting growth opportunities for small organisations. Access to finance, poor infrastructural development, lack of resources and networks are challenges found in Yoshino and Taghizadeh-Hesary (2016). To combat this issue, the investigated



organisations developed several efficiencies and innovative strategies to meet these challenges and continue their business operations. For instance, SE used solar electrification to resource electricity in their office because they cannot run their business activities without electricity. Such examples of innovative use of resources by these organisations aligns with previous studies (see Ndubisi,2008, p.164), who find that for small organisations to achieve long-term business goals, they “must use resources efficiently and economic growth must be done in harmony with the environment.”

The quest for sustainability is premised on participatory community values with stakeholders in the small organisations in northwest Himalayas. It is pivotal for how the owner-managers of these organisations anchored their sustainability strategies throughout their business plans. The distinct business models and operational activities they undertake play a role in developing business projects. Some tangibles (i.e., buildings, capital) and intangible resources (i.e., volunteers, social networks, knowledge of the environment) are combined with selected method capabilities to generate value for the businesses in the study while integrating the ethos and values of the organisation. These are important resources; however, intangible resources are most important as they are not easily replicable (Molly and Barney, 2015). This study supplements previous studies that emphasize the criticality of such intangible resources in small organisations (Bhamra *et al.*, 2011; Pal *et al.*, 2014).

#### *Embedding sustainability and resilience within small organisations*

This study’s findings additionally reveal the strategies employed by small organisations to embed sustainability within their business operations in challenging contexts. The participants identified the practices and resources that shaped the reactive and innovative behaviours of the owner-managers of these organisations. Several inter-dependent capabilities are identified as

key to sustainability practices among small organisations, the role of leadership, people and knowledge, organisational processes, resources and infrastructure.

The small organisations in this study seek to maximise their organisational resources through two critical mechanisms; they generate value by engaging different stakeholder groups and running varied income-generating services. The intentionality of the owner-managers and their mindsets are particularly critical for the strategies they adopt. Leaders with lived experience of their environment demonstrate resilience in how they predict and respond to changes in the business environment (Alberti *et al.*, 2018). As members of the communities who comprehensively understood their stakeholder needs, the leaders (owner-managers) developed business plans that addressed diverse social, economic and environmental issues to meet different stakeholder expectations. The personal motivations of owner-managers for sustainable initiatives are critical to implementing sustainability strategies. This finding adds to insights from previous studies which suggest that personal motivations are more important in developing sustainability strategies compared to public relations, marketing or strategic approaches (Jenkins, 2004).

The intentionality of leadership is seen as a prerequisite for developing specific innovative programs and services that maintain the organisation's business presence. The study's small organisations demonstrate reactive and innovation-based sustainability behaviours, following Klewitz and Hansen's (2014) taxonomy, as evidenced by their business responses to contextual challenges. For instance, KT's response to contextual issues is to pivot by focusing on education and health services. Meanwhile, PA responds actively to challenges of remoteness, accessibility, and under-developed transport systems by providing wheelchair accessibility for tourists with disabilities to explore the Himalayas. Interestingly, these organisations exhibit at least dual or multiple behaviours simultaneously, suggesting that small organisations can

respond differently to contextual issues. For example, SE engages in internal assessments of its capabilities (anticipation) and actively declines short-term funding limited to a year (resistance), prioritising longer-term horizons. Similarly, LRWEN reacts to human resource constraints by using group dynamics to recruit staff, combining tourism and wellbeing (innovation-based) practices. Overall, through their activities, the small organisations demonstrate aspects of participatory leadership, revealing supportive work environments and partnering with community stakeholders to implement innovative strategies.

Several vital factors reveal the influence of culture within small organisations. The mindsets of the owner-managers interact with the organisational structures, which are flat and participatory, to drive sustainability behaviours (Baumgartner, 2009; Bonini and Bove, 2014; Sloan *et al.*, 2013). These capabilities support aspects of the resilience triangle (Gibson and Tarrant, 2010), and add to existing studies on the importance of leadership, people and organisational processes.

Small organisations use their available resources, such as people, materials, financial resources and networks, in innovative ways to embed sustainability strategies. They rely on a combination of tangible and intangible resources to maintain equilibrium. This integration of resource capability requires flexibility, adaptability, efficiency, and optimism (Bhamra *et al.*, 2011). In Gibson and Tarrant's (2010) resilience model, the three capabilities have a flowing approach to review, assess and adapt organisational capabilities. Overall, the findings complement previous studies that suggest that small organisations are flexible by reviewing their resources continually to determine responses to contextual challenges by adapting their tangible and intangible capabilities to develop innovative services and programs. However, due to process capability constraints, these organisations do not always efficiently assess how these

resources fit their innovative strategies or the extent to which these strategies are integrated into their operational values.

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**Figure 2.** Sustainability embedment model about here

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## **Conclusions and Limitations**

In summary, this study offers theoretical contributions and practical implications for small organisations.

### *Theoretical contributions and practical implications*

In terms of theoretical contributions, the first and key contribution is this study enriches existing literature by exposing how small organisations in resource-constrained environments with low access to markets respond to contextual challenges and opportunities and embed sustainability strategies in their operational values. This study finds that contextual challenges in the premise of sustainability stretch beyond environmental factors (i.e., Singh et al., 2020; Chandra and Kumar, 2021); in this case, other contextual factors namely regional (remoteness, ecological conditions), systemic (underdeveloped infrastructure), and organisational (budgetary and human competencies) factors. The findings show that these organisations respond by choosing from a range of resisting, reactive, and anticipatory behaviours. As such, a key contribution and argument in this paper is that the type of responsiveness alone does not determine resilience. Instead, resilience in the investigated organisations is a coupling of prior knowledge of their environments, participatory actions from the owner-managers and engagement of stakeholders, alongside the agility to adapt to new contextual changes as they occur. This contribution complements existing studies that claim that claim that the size of

small organisations is advantageous where it allows them to react quickly to changes in business environments (Condon, 2004; Klewitz and Hansen, 2014; Bhamra *et al.*, 2011). This paper's second contribution adds to resilience theory in organisational contexts by exposing the typology of resources (i.e., tangible and intangible) and practices (review of internal capabilities, participatory leadership and direct communication systems) that shape reactive and innovative behaviours and interdependent capabilities. It supplements existing literature that finds that personal motivations and the role of leadership is more important in developing sustainability strategies compared to public relations, marketing or strategic approaches (Jenkins, 2004; Alberti *et al.*, 2018; Gibson and Tarrant, 2010; Sloan *et al.*, 2013).

In terms of practical implications, small organisations can improve how they predict contextual issues by developing their process capabilities; specifically, by creating practical tools with parameters relevant to ecological conditions. They can set the tools through participatory actions with the broader communities to ensure the (un)intended consequences of environmental issues are considered. Furthermore, improvements in process and human capabilities will provide new approaches to raising business opportunities, especially in post-pandemic business environments.

#### *Limitations and avenues for future research*

A limitation of this study is the focus on small organisations and future research may explore how the three interrelated capabilities interact with sustainability practices in small and medium organisations. Studies examining complementary capabilities will add to the understanding of the process capabilities and what sustainability indicators are measured. Another limitation of the study is the exploratory method; although this allows for in-depth investigation, the authors suggest using a large sample size in diverse remote contexts, perhaps multiple contexts, to understand how organisations predict, plan and prepare for externalities.

This information will allow for a topical contribution to literature as organisations shift to post-pandemic business environments and turbulent economic times. Finally, future studies could investigate how participatory leadership contributes to innovative sustainable behaviour in small organisations in more depth.

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