

Novel approaches to sustainable consumption and production in the Global South: From challenging dominant assumptions to setting future debates

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Abstract

The urgency of sustainability transitions is widely recognised. Yet, prevailing frameworks are predominantly developed within Global North contexts, limiting their applicability to the diverse and often complex realities of the Global South. This special issue advances sustainable consumption and production research by critically examining context-specific and transformative approaches that challenge dominant assumptions. Through an interdisciplinary lens, the selected studies explore food citizenship in Brazil, circular economy business models, and ESG prioritisation in less affluent markets, highlighting the underpinning - and sometimes undermining - mechanisms that shape sustainability transitions in these regions. The findings emphasise the role of consumer mobilisation, informal economies, and corporate sustainability strategies in shaping new sustainability pathways. By advancing these discussions, this special issue challenges one-size-fits-all sustainability models and calls for research that bridges the gap between theory and practice, fostering sustainability frameworks that are locally relevant, behaviourally driven, and globally impactful.

Keywords

sustainable consumption, global south, food citizenship, circular economy, ESG, sustainable development

Introduction

The imperative to drive sustainability transitions and transformations is increasingly well-documented (Köhler et al., 2019). In this context, substantial progress has been made in recent years in introducing a plethora of approaches that aim to strategically address significant sustainability challenges such as resource scarcity, environmental pollution, plastic waste, and the climate emergency. These areas span from promoting sustainable behaviours at individual and group levels (Aragão and Alfinito, 2021; White et al., 2019) to approaches focusing on organisational issues, including corporate sustainability (Elf et al. 2020), sustainability-based value creation (Freudenreich et al., 2020) and multi-stakeholder networks (Dias et al., 2025), as well as approaches on climate policies towards sustainable consumption (Gomes et al., 2025), among others. Examples aiming to drive sustainability transitions and transformations include new economic models such as: the circular economy (Bocken et al., 2016; Elf et al., 2022; Figge et al., 2023; Guarnieri et al., 2023; Lüdeke-Freund et al., 2019); behaviour change approaches including behavioural spillover effects (Elf et al., 2019); goal-framing theory (Thøgersen and Alfinito, 2020); and behaviour change models (Michie et al., 2011), to name the most prominent.

The successful and effective application of some of these existing and novel approaches is pivotal for achieving the urgently needed advancements in various areas across the globe. However, most prevailing frameworks are primarily developed and applied in the Global North and cannot be readily applied to the complex realities of the Global South. Indeed, the Global South is not monolithic, urgently requiring novel approaches that pay close attention to contextual and cultural settings and organisational specificities to advance the sustainability transition. Such tailored approaches are imperative for propelling sustainable transformation within this complex and dynamic landscape.

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Sustainability in the Global South: consuming and producing in less affluent nations

Before introducing the studies featured in this special issue, we aim to provide additional context and introduce key terminologies relevant to the editorial and the special issue. Indeed, it seems crucial to distinguish between various historically and politically charged terms used to describe countries often perceived as having less political, economic, or cultural influence. For instance, the term 'Third World' has lost its relevance, as it was originally used in a hierarchical framework that contrasted First and Second World nations during a specific geopolitical era (Ger & Belk, 1996). Similarly, the term Developing Countries is problematic, as all societies continuously evolve in different ways. This term also carries the Western historicist connotation of a linear civilizational progression, despite the fact that many regions—such as Africa, East Asia, the Middle East, the Indian subcontinent, and Latin America—had advanced civilisations long before European colonial expansion (Ger & Belk, 1996). Similarly, the term 'Emerging Economies' implies a centre-periphery dynamic, positioning certain nations as peripheral while defining others as being at the core of global affairs (World Economic Forum, 2015). However, this characterisation no longer reflects the contemporary global economy, where so-called emerging economies now contribute a larger share of global GDP than many developed nations, particularly when measured by purchasing power parity (World Economic Forum, 2015).

The term 'Global South' was initially introduced to refer to less economically developed nations, often geographically situated in the Southern Hemisphere, based on the Brandt Line's division of global wealth and inequality (Brandt, 1980). However, this categorisation is not universally applicable, as economic and social conditions vary significantly within the Global North and the Global South.

Despite these critiques, this editorial employs the term Global South not as a stigmatising label but as a recognition of historical geopolitical structures that have contributed to global inequalities. Additionally, we use the expression 'less affluent world' interchangeably, referring to modernising or industrialising societies in contrast to a more affluent and historically dominant West (Ger & Belk, 1996). These terminologies help understand and frame the sustainability challenges unique to these regions, which are equally complex and significant compared to those faced by the Global North.

Challenging dominant assumptions

This first Special Issue in the *Journal of Tropical Futures* sets out to advance research by providing novel approaches to sustainable consumption and production in the Global South. It recognises and stresses the urgent need for

simultaneously contextualised, culture-sensitive, and transformative frameworks. The three selected articles contribute significantly to this discourse by offering a breadth of perspectives, both methodologically and theoretically, to address complex sustainability-related phenomena.

One of the key assumptions these articles challenge is the predominance of Global North-centric approaches in sustainability research. The study by Viana et al. on food citizenship in Brazil provides critical insight into how consumer mobilisation can influence sustainable food systems in the Global South. By developing and validating a food citizenship measure, the research reveals how consumers in less affluent countries can act as politically engaged and collaborative agents of change, actively shaping food systems rather than passively consuming within them. This study underscores the importance of alternative food networks and localised consumer empowerment, offering a model that better aligns with the socio-economic realities of the Global South.

The empirical research by Queiroga et al. on circular economy business models (CEBMs) in Brazil highlights how circular managers operate as pivotal agents in fostering sustainable business innovation. Contrary to dominant narratives that frame circular economy transitions as purely policy-driven or technology-centric, this study demonstrates how business leaders in the Global South navigate informal economies, regulatory voids, and cultural dynamics to drive sustainability. These insights stress the need for adaptive, behaviourally-driven approaches rather than prescriptive frameworks designed for Global North contexts.

Furthermore, Andrade et al.'s study on ESG prioritisation in companies from less affluent markets in the tropics provides empirical evidence that sustainability strategies evolve dynamically with a firm's life cycle. It reveals that mature companies in the Global South tend to prioritise environmental and social considerations, reflecting a shift from governance-centred sustainability in the early stages. This finding directly challenges the assumption that sustainability concerns are secondary to economic growth in Global South economies. Instead, it positions sustainability as an integral factor that grows in importance alongside financial stability.

Together, these articles question the notion that one-size-fits-all models can drive sustainability transitions in the Global South. They emphasise the need for context-forging opportunities, bottom-up approaches, and behavioural shifts that align with the realities of the respective, often unique, contexts. By integrating these perspectives, this themed issue offers a foundation for rethinking sustainability transitions in ways that are both locally relevant and globally impactful.

Setting future debates

While the contributions in this special issue significantly advance our understanding of sustainability transitions in

the Global South, they also reveal critical gaps and areas for further research. Each study highlights alternative approaches to sustainability and each underscores the necessity for more nuanced, interdisciplinary, and contextually grounded frameworks. Indeed, by challenging dominant assumptions, these contributions open up several key debates that merit further exploration.

Reconceptualizing consumer agency in sustainability transitions

One of the most pressing gaps relates to the scalability and generalizability of sustainability models across diverse Global South contexts. The food citizenship study in Brazil provides a robust measure of consumer agency in food systems and how food citizens' attitudes are linked to their behaviours. It offers a way to refine and unveil consumers toward sustainable food practices. Nevertheless, future research should examine whether this framework holds across different regions with distinct agricultural, economic, and policy landscapes. Further studies could explore how food citizenship behaviours evolve in response to economic shocks, climate change, and policy interventions, providing a longitudinal perspective on sustainable consumption practices.

Making progress in the circular economy

Quiroga et al.'s paper studying circular economy business models (CEBMs) innovation in Brazil provides a much-needed perspective on how circular managers drive sustainability transition. However, given that many sustainability practices in the Global South occur outside formal business structures, future research should investigate how informal waste economies, decentralised supply chains, and grassroots entrepreneurship contribute to circularity. A deeper analysis of policy mismatches—where Global North-inspired circularity frameworks fail to accommodate local socio-economic conditions—could help bridge theoretical and practical gaps in circular economy implementation.

Bridging the ESG-sustainability divide in less affluent markets

The study of ESG prioritisation in less affluent tropical markets raises important questions about the evolution of corporate sustainability practices across different life cycle stages. They focus on companies from China, India, Brazil, Mexico, South Africa, and Australia. However, there is still limited understanding of how regulatory changes, consumer pressures, and global trade dynamics influence ESG adoption in the Global South.

Collectively, these gaps suggest the need for a more interdisciplinary and multi-stakeholder approach to

sustainability research in the Global South. Future studies should integrate insights from behavioural science, political economy, development studies, and sustainability transitions theory to better capture the complexity of these evolving dynamics. Additionally, there is a growing need for longitudinal studies and cross-country comparisons to assess the durability of sustainability commitments across different socio-economic and policy environments.

Conclusion

This special issue has provided a critical platform for rethinking sustainability transitions in the Global South, challenging dominant assumptions and foregrounding contextualised, culture-sensitive, and transformative approaches to sustainable consumption and production. The selected articles expand our understanding of food citizenship, circular economy business models, and ESG prioritisation, revealing the distinct mechanisms through which sustainability is operationalised in less affluent tropical economies.

A key insight from these studies is the importance of bottom-up, behaviourally-driven approaches that account for the socio-economic realities of the Global South. Whether through consumer mobilisation in food systems, the agency of circular managers, or the evolving corporate commitment to ESG principles, these contributions underscore the necessity of moving beyond Global North-centric models to create sustainability frameworks that are truly adaptable and effective in different contexts.

At the same time, the research in this issue exposes critical gaps and suggests future research directions. These include bridging the food citizenship-policy nexus, exploring the social and informal dimensions of circular economies, and assessing the long-term trajectory of ESG commitments in less affluent markets. Addressing these gaps will require interdisciplinary perspectives, cross-sectoral collaborations, and longitudinal studies that track the sustainability transitions of businesses, consumers, and policymakers over time.

By advancing these discussions, this special issue serves as both a catalyst and a call to action for scholars, practitioners, and policymakers invested in sustainable development. The sustainability challenges facing the Global South are urgent and complex. However, they also present an opportunity to co-create new models of sustainable production and consumption that are equitable, resilient, and locally embedded. In continuing these conversations, future research can further refine the frameworks necessary for sustainable transitions that align with the Global South's diverse realities.

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