

# Rethinking the Role of Circular Economy in Socially Sustainable Organizations

## Case: Ekomaa Recycling Store

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### ABSTRACT

Studies of the circular economy are often approached from the perspective of the economic and environmental impact. Using the case study of Ekomaa Recycling Store in Kouvola, Finland, this study examines the intersection of all four dimensions of sustainability, highlighting the social dimensions. The comprehensive sustainability framework is recognized as a key component of strategic decision-making, particularly in the circular economy context. In February 2025, semi-structured interviews (6) were conducted with stakeholders, including the organization's operational staff, managers, and strategic planners. The analysis is framed using four dimensions of sustainability and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Our findings indicate that Ekomaa's impact extends beyond social sustainability, reinforcing the economic and environmental aspects of the circular economy. The workplace acts as a transformative environment where employees internalize sustainable practices. However, strategically incorporating sustainability could improve stakeholder engagement, resource distribution, and long-term adjustment. This study highlights Ekomaa as a best practice for integrating circular economy practices with social sustainability principles. It emphasizes the need for stronger sustainability strategies that foster participatory work cultures, behavioral transformation, and knowledge sharing. The results reveal that organizations that engage in circular economy initiatives can enhance social sustainability by embedding sustainability principles into their decision-making processes.

*Key Words: Sustainable Development, Circular Economy, Social Sustainability*

## 1. Introduction

This study explores how a socially sustainable organization transitions toward circular economy operations and practices. The case study of Parik Foundation's Ekomaa Recycling Store chain in Kouvola, Finland, focuses specifically on one of the network's largest stores. While the findings and conceptual framework applied in this study are particularly relevant to this primary location, they also provide valuable insights for the broader Ekomaa chain, and beyond.

While the circular economy is often examined through economic and environmental lenses, this study highlights the importance of a multidimensional sustainability framework—integrating social, economic, environmental, and cultural aspects—as a key factor in strategic decision-making and future planning. The comprehensive approach is particularly suitable for examining Parik Foundation, as the organization seeks to enhance its operations through a holistic understanding of sustainability.

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The Parik Foundation, established in 2001, is a non-profit initiative operating in South-Eastern Finland. Its mission is to organize and develop productive and social welfare work activities as a social service for young people, the long-term unemployed, and others in a weak labor market position. The Foundation also organizes and develops employment, rehabilitation, and other related activities. The goal is to enhance its clients' work and functional capacity, independent employment activity, and life management (Parik Foundation s.a.).

Central to Parik Foundation's operations are the Ekomaa Recycling Stores, which serve as a platform for rehabilitative work activities, enabling participants to transition into the labour market while enhancing their skills and sense of belonging in society. The recycling stores operate primarily on household donations, promoting a circular economy and sustainable consumption. Unwanted household goods, such as furniture, household appliances, dishes, clothes, toys, and books, are accepted, inspected, priced, and then sold in Ekomaa stores, thereby extending the lifespan of these items and reducing the need to produce new ones. This process aligns well with the principles of reuse and recycling, promoting sustainability and resource conservation (Chad 2023; Parik Foundation s.a.).

While Parik Foundation has a long-established role in rehabilitative employment and social work-driven labour inclusion, its circular economy functions have largely developed in an organic, rather than strategic, manner. This study investigates how this social sustainability-driven organization can further embed circular economy principles by adopting a more systematic and comprehensive sustainability approach. By analyzing semi-structured interviews (n=6) conducted in February 2025, the study seeks to identify how daily operations reflect sustainability in practice, even when these practices are not explicitly visible at the strategic planning level. The gap and the causes between strategic-level and daily operations would be an interesting study case itself, but in this study, we concentrate on exploring the variety of operations.

Findings indicate that multidimensional sustainability awareness could enhance Parik Ekomaa's future positioning, improving resource allocation, role clarification, and long-term impact. The case study framework provides valuable insights into how organizations can strengthen their circular economy practices by recognizing sustainability as a holistic decision-making tool. The analysis is guided by selected UN Sustainable Development Goals, offering a broader perspective on how socially responsible organizations can integrate circular economy practices into their strategic vision.

This study is a part of the EU co-funded project "The Treasures Lost at the Waste Sorting Station", which aims to examine the evolving role of recycling stores and enhances cooperation between various stakeholders to reduce waste and promote circular economy opportunities. The project is carried out in collaboration with South-Eastern Finland University of Applied Sciences (Xamk) and Parik Foundation, with Kymenlaakso Waste Ltd. as a key partner.

The paper begins with a theoretical framework that defines sustainability and its goals, progressing to circular economy principles and their applications, particularly focusing on social sustainability. After this, the research design and methodology section explain the suitability of a qualitative case study approach for sustainability research, utilizing semi-structured interviews as the chosen method. Results are presented through a table matrix,

categorized according to the four dimensions of sustainability. The paper concludes with a discussion and conclusion, reflecting on the findings and their implications.

## **2. Theoretical Background**

### **2.1 Sustainability Challenges**

The research on sustainability often has more than one focus (Chan et al. 2025) because the sustainability challenges are complex and interconnected as they affect diverse societies and natural environments on a global scale (Kates et al. 2005). Therefore, solutions must also be comprehensive and inclusive. In this paper the term sustainability is broadly used to indicate a set of guiding principles and values based on the Brundtland Commission's standard, which argues that the needs for human, economic, and social development should be met now and in the future within the restraints of the planetarian systems (Kates et al. 2005).

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), defined by the United Nations (UN), were adopted in 2015 as a universal call to action. Seventeen global objectives aim to create a sustainable and equitable world by ending poverty, protecting the planet, and ensuring that people enjoy peace and prosperity by 2030. (United Nations Development Programme s.a.) The SDGs primarily focus on three pillars: environmental, social, and economic sustainability (Chan et al. 2025). Yet, the comprehensiveness of the three pillars has been challenged (UCLG 2010), and there are some flexible interpretations between actors of which SDGs are considered most important, even though the targets for each goal are global. For example, in Europe, the SDGs are often targeted toward urban environments (Chan et al. 2025). There have also been discussions on the role of culture as a possible fourth dimension and on the need to address it to become fully interconnected with the previous three dimensions of sustainability (UCLG 2010). The EU cultural policies recognize SDGs and incorporate them into their strategic frameworks (Ferran Vila et al. 2021).

Although the social dimension is seen as an integral part of the SDGs, its complexity should not be taken for granted. The SDGs connected to social sustainability are often linked to complex social situations which seem to make them relatively difficult to implement (Chan et al. 2025). On the other hand, context-specificity and different stakeholders are raising sustainability challenges that particularly highlight the social dimensions in depth (Sharif 2023). In this paper, social sustainability is at the forefront of analysis, aligning with the core mission of the case organization, while also considering the perspectives of the fourth dimension of sustainability-culture-as an integral part of the examination.

### **2.2 Circular Economy- A Tool for Multidimensional Sustainability**

Economic growth and sustainability are often positioned as conflicting goals. However, the SDGs tend not to track absolute trends in resource consumption, thereby placing economic growth ahead of ecological sustainability (Eisenmenger et al. 2020). In the early 2000s, the Ellen MacArthur Foundation introduced the term Circular Economy (CE) to bridge this divide. The CE concept itself was in use earlier than this (Winans et al. 2017), but it took time for the importance of using resources efficiently, reducing waste, and ensuring product durability (circular economy) to be emphasized and understood as

involving everyone and everything (Meshram 2024). The definition also has its critics, who argue that this ambiguous concept means different things to different people although the same criticism is levied against sustainability and the SDGs, too (Kirchherr et al. 2017). However, CE's goal is commonly shared. CE ensures continued prosperity without harming the environment by closing the loop of material flows. (Iofrida et al. 2024; European Commission 2015.) Yet, the conceptualization is often done through centralized, large-scale models emphasizing technical efficiency and close-loop resource flows managed by government or major firms rather than community-driven CE operations at the local level (Kirchherr et al. 2017).

In their work, Murray et al. (2017) found that circularity has a positive effect on specific aspects of sustainability. Therefore, a proactive CE concept can be seen as a tool to achieve the SDGs (Pitkänen et al. 2023). According to this concept, solutions to environmental challenges are economically and socially beneficial, and inaction leads to higher costs and greater risks to well-being in the long run (Hyytinen et al. 2024). Yet, CE is not automatically seen as a solution to all sustainability challenges (Iofrida et al. 2024). Geissdoerfer et al. (2017) underline that the current research oversimplifies the concept of CE by disregarding a comprehensive perspective on sustainability and focusing instead on reducing resource input, waste, and emissions. Some definitions and practicalities equate CE purely with recycling, and the combination of reduce, reuse, and recycling, commonly referred to as the 3R framework, is overlooked (Kirchherr et al. 2017). Greater conceptual clarity in the CE debate would benefit both practitioners and policymakers, especially in harmonizing expectations and outcomes.

As a tool, CE has no clear promotion of social well-being or quality of life (Padilla-Rivera et al., 2020), and there is limited information available about the social dimension in the CE context (Iofrida et al. 2024; Kircher et al. 2017). The predominant focus of CE is on the environmental and economic dimensions of sustainability (Mies & Gold 2021). However, social impacts are covered by expanding interest (Padilla-Rivera et al. 2020). To understand the social dimension of CE, Garcia-Saravia Ortiz-de-Montellano and van der Meer (2022) conducted a review of the indicators of circular processes and impacts, which shows that CE plays a fundamental role in creating fairer societies and enhancing the quality of life. Its impact extends to three key groups: (1) employees within the company, (2) users and consumers through products and services, and (3) communities and stakeholders beyond the organization. (Garcia-Saravia Ortiz-de-Montellano & van der Meer 2022.) By complementing top-down initiatives with bottom-up engagement and models that are embedding social inclusion and community empowerment the social sustainability dimension can be integrated into the CE framework (Bauwens et al. 2020; Kirchherr et al. 2017).

An organization's ability to enter the CE does not depend only on its size or position in the value chain. Additionally, motivation and capabilities play a crucial role. (Sarja et al. 2021.) Yet, the discussions often focus on the volume of consumption and investment rather than structural sustainability (Hyytinen et al. 2024). Overall, economic and social behavior is not only shaped by supply and demand; it is also influenced by market dynamics such as pricing, government incentives, environmental advantages, and social trends and attitudes (Hazen et al. 2017). While a reduction in economic activity may initially lead to lower resource use and pollution, it can also increase unemployment and economic

instability (Hyytinen et al. 2024) and risk resistance (Markard et al. 2021). Unwanted results are making environmental policies politically challenging to sustain (Hyytinen et al. 2024).

### **2.3 Organization-Specific Initiatives for Social Sustainability**

Social sustainability (SS) is bound to our daily lives in many ways, and therefore, consideration of social aspects is essential (Sharif 2023). According to Hamdi Bashir et al. (2024), in organizations, the most highly used SS practices fall into the following categories: 1) health, safety, and well-being, 2) worker rights and conditions, and 3) ethics and integrity. Some practices are widely implemented, such as providing employees with safety equipment, displaying emergency contact numbers in visible locations for potential accidents, ensuring regular breaks, and maintaining consistent salary payments. In fact, the CE contribution to social development manifests in the present, while other dimensions may require longer-term assessment (Garcia-Saravia Ortiz-de Montellano & Van der Meer 2022).

In Finland, the societal norms and policy frameworks support sustainability-driven business, and the adaptation of CE practices is socially normalized (Rovanto & Finna 2023). However, there is still significant room for improvement. Fulfillment is achievable through education, inclusion, and legislation, which have been recognized as key leverage points in the transition toward a sustainable circular economy (Mies & Gold 2021). Yet, there are several obstacles in practice. Diversity and gender balance are not always considered when forming teams. Overtime practices may be unfavorable from the employee's perspective, and there is often a lack of training regarding local customs and traditions. Additionally, providing new job opportunities for employment expansion is not guaranteed (Bashir et al. 2024). Alongside contractual arrangements, working conditions, and motivation through benefits (Mies & Gold 2021), the education of recycling store workers plays a significant role in this case study, as recruitment is strongly based on expertise in counseling and social work. Findings have revealed that the human-centered work curriculum orientates merely on the human component, and the sustainable, human-nature interaction is less obvious (Akinci et al. 2025).

The skills and knowledge of the permanent staff in a social employment organization are not the only factors to consider regarding the CE. In fact, the informal workforce makes a significant contribution to daily operations. Since the CE has the potential to create employment opportunities (Padilla-Rivera et al. 2020), the participants in rehabilitative work activities, internships, and similar programs can also find this new perspective beneficial. This suggests that the organization's social dimension extends even further than usual, encompassing a broader network of individuals involved in its activities. However, the transition depends on how all different workers receive the required education on CE (Padilla-Rivera et al. 2020).

### **3. Research Design and Methodology**

The qualitative case study approach is well-suited for exploring real-world phenomena within their context, especially in the preliminary, exploratory stage of a development project (Rowley 2002). Given that sustainability and CE initiatives involve different stakeholders in the respective case organization, a qualitative case study helps capture these diverse experiences, motivations, and constraints of interviewees. Typically,

multiple data sources are used to collect data (Rowley 2002). However, this study primarily utilizes semi-structured interviews, a widely used qualitative method in the social sciences (Ruslin et al. 2022). It is also important to note that this study is part of a larger project, and the researchers have a broader prior understanding of certain aspects related to the case organization's operations, which extends beyond the scope of this study.

The semi-structured interview method was chosen due to its flexibility and ability to balance predefined themes with open-ended exploration, ensuring a rich, contextual understanding of where and how sustainability and CE are embedded within an organization's operations (Ruslin et al. 2022). The method is particularly useful when there is only one opportunity to interview a respondent, and multiple interviewers are collecting data, as the semi-structured questions provide reliable and comparable qualitative data. A recording is used instead of notetaking to maintain data quality and rapport between the interviewer and interviewee. (KnowHow 2018.)

Ruslin et al. (2022) highlight that semi-structured interviews are widely used because they allow interviewees to express their viewpoints more freely in an open-ended format, compared to standardized questionnaires (Ruslin et al. 2022). In this case, questions were sent to the interviewees in advance for review, but the interview request emphasized that each respondent's input would contribute to completing the overall picture. The questions were adjusted when needed while still adhering to the main topics outlined beforehand (Ruslin et al. 2022). By doing so, the combination of open-ended and theory-based questions captured both experiential and conceptual data (Galletta 2013). The fragmented nature of responses was seen as an opportunity to provide additional value to the research and the organization itself.

Each question corresponds with the research aims and is positioned within the protocol to facilitate a structured yet comprehensive exploration of the subject (Galletta 2013). In this study, the categorization is done under the four dimensions of sustainability, with their content aligning either directly or indirectly with the UN's SDG. The focus is on four key goals: Decent Work and Economic Growth (SDG 8), Reduced Inequalities (SDG 10), Responsible Consumption and Production (SDG 12), and Partnerships for the Goals (SDG 17). This approach ensures comprehensive coverage of the organization's sustainability and circularity at various levels from the perspectives of different stakeholders. Yet, the scope stays reasonable for the practical purposes of the study results.

During the formulation of the questions, their limitations were also acknowledged. Not all respondents necessarily have sufficient insight or exposure to comprehensively address areas beyond their specific expertise or job role. Despite this, the format's flexibility and adaptability maintain direction better than unstructured interviews (Ruslin et al. 2022).

This study employs qualitative content analysis (QCA) to systematically examine the operational and strategic aspects of the Parik Foundation's Ekomaa Recycling Store within the context of circular economy and sustainability. QCA is particularly suitable for analyzing complex social phenomena, as it enables the identification, classification, and interpretation of themes emerging from qualitative data. Given the study's emphasis on social sustainability and organizational transition toward circular economy practices, this method allows for a structured yet flexible analysis of stakeholder perspectives. While mixed thematic analysis and blended coding could offer more integrative interpretations of unrelated responses, the QCA in this study was intentionally aligned with the research

aim: to examine how the stakeholders' views correspondent with the four established dimensions of sustainability and the chosen SDGs.

The analysis framework was structured according to the interview protocol to ensure conceptual coherence between the interview responses and the prefunded categories. For the comprehensive overview, refer to Appendix 1. This structure follows the interview questions, but it may block insights that are inherently multidisciplinary. Although, depending on the respondent's perspectives, the same function may have been mentioned in response to different questions; accordingly, it appears in multiple sections of the data presentation. This way the crossing themes between dimensions of sustainable development are embedded also in the data analysis. The social, economic, environmental and cultural factors interact in real contexts. As such, the analysis considers both the structured policy orientation and the nature of the sustainability transitions in the workplace.

#### **4. Results**

The interviews indicate widespread recognition of the need for changes both at strategic and operating levels in the Parik Foundation. A major challenge is for all stakeholders to take responsibility and contribute to sustainability and CE actions. This means that some organizational structures should be rethought, and new positions and roles are needed to reach the set goals. However, all the interviewees are seeing a positive future for the organization. There are several ways to improve and develop more impactful practices.

##### **4.1 Social Sustainability as a Core Function**

The interview results confirm that SS is deeply embedded in the Parik Foundation's mission, particularly through rehabilitative work programs, apprenticeships, training contracts, work testers, and services for disabled clients (Table 1.). The recycling store serves as a platform for employment inclusion, allowing participants to develop their skills, confidence, and work readiness. This aligns with SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) as it supports job creation and skill development for individuals in vulnerable labour market positions. The CE sector can create employment opportunities (Padilla-Rivera et al. 2020), and the practical jobs at Ekomaa Recycling Store lower the employment threshold for entering the open market, directly addressing economic and social sustainability. Pansera et al. (2024) argue that CE models should involve workers' subjectivity by enabling them to receive recognition for their practices and by empowering them to drive CE transition. A greater emphasis on workers' agency could also enrich the concept of socially sustainable CE at the Parik Ekomaa Recycling Store.

However, successful workforce integration into sustainability and CE operations depends on proper education (Garcia-Saravia Ortiz-de Montellano & Van der Meer 2022). The interviews indicate that while employees receive guidance on daily tasks and the work community supports green values, structured CE training remains limited for both informal and permanent workers. Some interviewees felt that the capabilities and knowledge within the Parik Foundation are perceived as something that already exists rather than a systematically developed training process. This is reflected in job placements that align with individuals' prior experience or qualifications. While there are transitions

between tasks, they are not typically based on additional training provided by the employer. This aligns with broader practical challenges, as a lack of training and smooth transitions between job roles present difficulties from the perspective of employees (Bashir et al., 2024). More systematic capacity-building efforts could further enhance employability and economic growth, reinforcing SDG 8 by improving continuous learning and visible skills recognition.

At the community level, the diverse range of work activities strengthens the local capacity to support individuals in vulnerable labour market positions, making Parik Foundation an essential partner for the region's employment and welfare services. This aligns with SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), as employment support programs target marginalized groups. Additionally, a strong dialogue with the public sector also promotes equal opportunities and workforce integration.

Within the current legislative framework, municipalities are responsible for managing employment services, and rapid job placement generates cost savings. However, subsidized employment does not automatically guarantee placement in the open labour market. The recent restructuring of employment subsidies has shortened the duration of supported employment, presenting challenges for long-term rehabilitation and career progression. As a result, the Parik Foundation is facing a new reality where work placements are increasingly temporary. While the transition to the labour market is beneficial for the system, it also creates gaps in skilled labour for the Parik Foundation.

**Table 1:** Interview responses on policies related to Social Sustainability

UN Sustainability Goals	Social Sustainability
<b>Goal 8. Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- To employ as many local young people, immigrants and those in a weak labour market position as possible</li> <li>- Organize coaching and work activities as apprenticeships, training agreements, work trials, and activities for disability services and substance abuse rehabilitants</li> <li>- Internal training possibilities somewhat unstructured</li> <li>- Transitions between tasks within the foundation depends on personal interests and existing capabilities</li> </ul>
<b>Goal 10. Reduce inequality within and among countries</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Employees with special needs promote tolerance and understanding</li> <li>-The foundation offers genuine jobs in accordance with the open labour market, which lower the threshold for entering the open labour market</li> <li>-Foundation supports the sports hobbies of children and young people</li> <li>- Legislative framework in turbulence in Finland</li> </ul>
<b>Goal 12. Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-The recycling store is an important part of recycling activities</li> <li>-The foundation promotes a change in values</li> </ul>



<b>Goal 17. Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development</b>	-The activities are important for the welfare area, various units of the city of Kouvola, companies, communities that act as partners, as well as consumers as donors or customers
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4.2 Ecological Sustainability Efforts Are Growing

From an ecological perspective, the Ekomaa Recycling Store’s primary goal is to enhance recycling efficiency and maximize material reuse. This supports SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production) as the store plays a crucial role in giving products a second life. (Table 2.) Indirectly, this also contributes to the “Reduce” principle of the 3R framework, as the purchase of second-hand goods by consumers can lower the need for producing new items and conserve raw materials. An interesting detail is the somewhat contradictory stance on the sale of ultra-fast fashion. On the one hand, reusing all clothing that has already been produced would align with ecological principles. However, Ekomaa has chosen a different, more long-term approach, aiming to break the cycle of ultra-fast fashion by not reselling these items. This also has a strong connection to SS as the practice supports health and safety goals, given the uncertainty surrounding the toxicity of these products (Bashir et al. 2024).

At the level of communication, significant work still needs to be done to ensure that this decision is widely understood as a promotion of ecological practices. Currently, the policy offers clear benefits from a social sustainability perspective, particularly regarding the well-being of employees and customers. There are no guarantees about the safety or non-toxicity of these low-quality garments, making their exclusion from circulation a responsible choice in terms of health and consumer safety. However, Ekomaa’s CE functions have evolved organically rather than strategically, and the store’s support for recycling and reusing still leaves a limited comprehensive perspective on sustainability (Geissdoerfer et al. 2017). The organization’s diversity and broad customer base distinguish it from other intermediate labour market operators, which makes it a uniquely valuable partner in the local sustainability ecosystem.

Table 2: Interview responses on policies related to Ecological Sustainability

UN Sustainability Goals	Ecological Sustainability
<b>Goal 8. Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all</b>	-Recycling and reuse path>know-how and development -Solutions to products that end up being reused as materials -Ultra-fast fashion does not end up in sale
<b>Goal 10. Reduce inequality within and among countries</b>	-Developing awareness -Development of staff competence -Commitment to values and rules

<b>Goal 12. Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns</b>	-Reducing the amount of waste: Products end up being reused as such or as materials -Internal Operation supports circularity -Projects and cooperation processes
<b>Goal 17. Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development</b>	-Cooperation with stakeholders -Joint projects - New operating environment with the establishment of the waste sorting station

### 4.3 Economic Sustainability Plays a Significant Role Regionally

As a non-profit organization, Parik Ekomaa operates on a break-even basis. Its goal is not commercial growth but financial stability. Employment initiatives are central to the Foundation's mission. These efforts particularly target individuals in vulnerable labour market positions, including young people and immigrants. Such initiatives align with Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 8, as they contribute to financial stability for these groups. (Table 3.) In a broader sense, this indirectly contributes to local purchasing power, thereby impacting the operating conditions of other businesses. However, it should be noted that employment subsidies from public funding play a significant role in funding the organization's core operations.

The CE practices also have their own role in generating substantial revenue. In the future, as collaboration with Kymenlaakso Waste Ltd deepens, efforts to expand the store's recycling operations and improve regional recycling practices will continue. The donated products are received and processed based on their condition and recyclability. Approximately 80% of the donated goods are put up for sale, while low-quality items are removed. All usable goods are made available for sale, and even refurbished products can be customized and resold.

However, marketing specialty products remains a challenge. Without an online store, collectors and buyers of rare, high-value items struggle to find Parik's recycling shops. Efforts are underway to improve product reception and prepare repairable goods for sale. Additionally, expanding social media marketing and distributing free goods are being considered as options. These upcoming developments align with several SDGs by raising awareness of local services (SDG 10), by ensuring sustainable consumption (SDG 12), and by implementing sustainable partnerships (SDG 17).

**Table 3:** Interview responses on policies related to Economic Sustainability

UN Sustainability Goals	Economic Sustainability
<b>Goal 8. Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all</b>	-A major recycling operator -Material reuse needs developing -Work activities to local young people, immigrants and those in a weak labour market -Number of clients in rehabilitative work activities on the rise -Online shop development

<b>Goal 10. Reduce inequality within and among countries</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Ultra-fast fashion is received but not passed on</li> <li>-Raising awareness of the circular economy</li> <li>-Producing local services</li> <li>-Customer needs are taken into account</li> <li>- Non-profit, targets stability, yet the growth opportunities exists</li> </ul>
<b>Goal 12. Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Refurbished products are sold.</li> <li>-Social media marketing is being expanded</li> <li>-Freeware Department under development</li> <li>-Developing the professionalism of operations: new ways to promote recycling under development</li> </ul>
<b>Goal 17. Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Marketing development</li> <li>-Diversity of funding sources</li> <li>-Partners who support the foundation's main mission</li> </ul>

#### 4.4 Cultural Dimension & Local Cooperation

Cultural sustainability is less explicitly defined in the SDGs (UCLG 2010). However, community partnerships, identity, and impact play an essential role in this study. Interviewees emphasized the importance of localized sustainability efforts, which aligns with research showing that SDG implementations in Europe tend to focus on urban environments (Chan et al. 2025). The collaboration with the local public sector has been positive. Partnerships with Kouvola municipality and Kymenlaakso Wellbeing Services County are essential. Yet, cooperation with Kouvola Flats, the Parish Union, and even the Police creates new, important outcomes and possibilities. Ongoing discussions with the city and other public entities aim to expand collaboration, particularly in pre-disassembly operations, which has significant untapped potential and presents a promising opportunity for growth. (Table 4.)

Ekomaa's sustainability and CE operations offer diverse opportunities for cooperation and impact, but there is still room for development. The interviewees emphasized the need for stronger partnerships in the sorting and processing of materials. Currently, bilateral partnerships could be developed into ecosystem-based cooperation, allowing Parik to strengthen its role in partner networks. This finding supports Sarja et al. (2021), who argue that an organization's ability to transition into CE depends not only on its size and value chain position but also on external collaborations. Overall, these efforts align with SDG 17, as they strengthen collaboration between municipal and private-sector actors to promote CE solutions.

Efforts have been made to increase awareness. However, broader visibility and targeted communication to decision-makers and consumers could enhance Parik's overall impact. Branding as a local and domestic player has already attracted positive attention. Parik can further strengthen its role in network-building and collaboration, amplifying joint advocacy efforts. As a partner, Parik compliments operating environmental offerings by accepting goods that may not be suitable for private use but are still valuable for recycling. At the same time, it is ensured that the operators in the city and the well-being area are aware of the services Parik offers. There is growing recognition that local, social-oriented actors operating at the grassroots play a pivotal role in CE systems. Parik Ekomaa – as

well as the other community enterprises, non-profits, and work-integration enterprises - may serve as integrator in circular value chain and foster collaboration that large-scale models may overlook (OECD 2022).

**Table 4:** Interview responses to policies related to Cultural Sustainability

UN Sustainability Goals	Cultural Sustainability
<b>Goal 8. Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Local and domestic operator.</li> <li>-Growth opportunities</li> <li>-Extensive customer base.</li> <li>-Diverse and wide range of services and activities</li> <li>-Work community supports individual development towards green values</li> </ul>
<b>Goal 10. Reduce inequality within and among countries</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Communication increases awareness</li> <li>-Recycling shop at the Centre of operations.</li> <li>-The challenges of reaching the business world.</li> <li>-Discussions to expand cooperation among stakeholders.</li> </ul>
<b>Goal 12. Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Challenge new partners to join the circular economy</li> <li>-Potential to increase activity</li> <li>-Intensifying engagement through co-operation</li> <li>-Partner with knowledge skill skills and resources</li> <li>-Raising awareness of services to new partners</li> </ul>
<b>Goal 17. Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Collaboration perceived as positive</li> <li>-Ecosystem activities as a goal.</li> <li>-Role of partnerships are multi-staged and evolving</li> <li>-Partners: public sector, companies, communities, parish</li> </ul>

## 5. Discussion and conclusions

The four sustainability dimensions and their practical solutions often overlap, as learned from interviews. Many actions can be seen as beneficial to more than one dimension and sustainability goal. However, there are some conflicting goals, too. For example, consumption, which could be seen as placing economic growth can be placed ahead of ecological sustainability (Eisenmerger et al. 2020). For an organization that does not target heavy financial growth and short-term benefits, sustainability transitions may be more attainable, as the decisions are often expected to be beneficial in the longer term.

In interviews conducted at the Ekoma Recycling Store, employees shared how the transition toward green values is facilitated by the support and inspiration of the work community, as well as by the enabling role of the organization. This process has had a positive impact on individuals, highlighting how sustainability can be fostered through collective workplace experiences. Yet, there is no systematic training model or shared knowledge on how to reach this new, more sustainable way of working. This absence may limit the long-term institutionalization of circular economy (CE) principles. Developing structured learning mechanisms could enhance both the consistency and reach of these efforts. Correspondingly, achieving success in this context requires revisiting organization

structures and introducing new roles. The reinforcement of the existing supervisory workforce with professionals in CE practices may represent a comprehensive and even radical shift from the current way of working. Yet, the Parik Ekomaa Recycling Store can be an influential local actor in CE and sustainability if its processes are further developed.

The fulfillment of all four sustainability objectives is not merely a practical question; it is also an ideological one. At the Parik Ekomaa Recycling Store, the actions and decisions should be supported at a strategic level and reflect the Parik Foundation's mission and values. Currently, there is a strong emphasis on SS, but some CE practices are already widely implemented. The development of sustainability can be built on this solid understanding of social sustainability and operations in rehabilitative work services. The interviewees showed deep interest in opening the discussion, and future development was seen as positive.

However, it is also important to stress that the Foundation's operating environment and traditions are heavily connected to Finnish legislation, employment practices, and sociocultural characteristics. This is evident at the Ekomaa Recycling Store, where the rehabilitative work support is reduced, and the informal employees leave the organization after a few months. This dependency makes it difficult to directly examine the study results in a broader, global context. The limited number of interviewees, although comprehensive in relation to the number of permanent staff and different job roles at the Parik Ekomaa Recycling Store, can also be considered a weakness of this study. It would be particularly useful to hear the informal workforce's own experiences of sustainability.

The insights gained from this study highlight several promising directions for future research at the intersection of CE and SS. One key area is the interplay between the experimental learning in the workplace and more formalized sustainability learning or coaching, particularly in terms of building employees' capacity for SS practices. Additionally, further research could examine employees as active agents of transitions – especially in context like Parik Ekomaa where the absence of formal planning may influence such bottom-up processes. The observed gap between strategic-level ambitions and the sustainability practices embedded in daily operations presents a compelling subject for comparative study. At a broader systemic level, comparative analyses of centralized versus community-driven CE network models are valuable, with close attention to their practical implications. Such work could be complemented by analyses of policy influence and collaboration networks in welfare-state context to understand how the supportive institutional environments shape the success and scalability of CE initiatives. Together, these directions could open avenues for examining institutional change both within Ekomaa and across diverse context.

### **Declaration of generative AI-assisted technologies in the writing process**

The authors utilized OpenAI ChatGPT -4.0 to enhance fluency, readability, and coherence of the English text in this article. All conceptual development and analysis were conducted independently by the authors. Any limitations remaining in the text are solely the responsibility of the authors.

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**Appendix 1. Overview of Interview Responses**

Four Dimensions of Sustainability	UN sustainability goals			
	Goal 8. Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all	Goal 10. Reduce inequality within and among countries	Goal 12. Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns	Goal 17. Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development
<b>Social</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- To employ as many local young people, immigrants and those in a weak labour market position as possible</li> <li>- Organize coaching and work activities as apprenticeships, training agreements, work trials, and activities for disability services and substance abuse rehabilitants</li> <li>- Internal training possibilities somewhat unstructured</li> <li>- Transitions between tasks within the foundation depends on personal interests and existing capabilities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Employees with special needs promote tolerance and understanding</li> <li>-The foundation offers genuine jobs in accordance with the open labour market, which lower the threshold for entering the open labour market</li> <li>-Foundation supports the sports hobbies of children and young people</li> <li>- Legislative framework in turbulence in Finland</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-The recycling store is an important part of recycling activities</li> <li>-The foundation promotes a change in values</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-The activities are important for the welfare area, various units of the city of Kouvola, companies, communities that act as partners, as well as consumers as donors or customers</li> </ul>
<b>Ecological</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Recycling and reuse path&gt;know-how and development</li> <li>-Solutions to products that end up being reused as materials</li> <li>-Ultra-fast fashion does not end up in sale</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Developing awareness</li> <li>-Development of staff competence</li> <li>-Commitment to values and rules</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Reducing the amount of waste: Products end up being reused as such or as materials</li> <li>-Internal Operation supports circularity</li> <li>-Projects and cooperation processes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Cooperation with stakeholders</li> <li>-Joint projects</li> <li>- New operating environment with the establishment of the waste sorting station</li> </ul>
<b>Economic</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-A major recycling operator</li> <li>-Material reuse needs developing</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Ultra-fast fashion is received but not passed on</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Refurbished products are sold.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Marketing development</li> <li>-Diversity of funding sources</li> </ul>



	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Work activities to local young people, immigrants and those in a weak labour market</li> <li>-Number of clients in rehabilitative work activities on the rise</li> <li>-Online shop development</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Raising awareness of the circular economy</li> <li>-Producing local services</li> <li>-Customer needs are taken into account</li> <li>- Non-profit, targets stability, yet the growth opportunities exists</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Social media marketing is being expanded</li> <li>-Freeware Department under development</li> <li>-Developing the professionalism of operations: new ways to promote recycling under development</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Partners who support the foundation's main mission</li> </ul>
<b>Cultural</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Local and domestic operator.</li> <li>-Growth opportunities</li> <li>-Extensive customer base.</li> <li>-Diverse and wide range of services and activities</li> <li>-Work community supports individual development towards green values</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Communication increases awareness</li> <li>-Recycling shop at the Centre of operations</li> <li>-The challenges of reaching the business world</li> <li>-Discussions to expand cooperation among stakeholders</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Challenge new partners to join the circular economy</li> <li>-Potential to increase activity</li> <li>-Intensifying engagement through co-operation</li> <li>-Partner with knowledge skill skills and resources</li> <li>-Raising awareness of services to new partners</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Collaboration perceived as positive</li> <li>-Ecosystem activities as a goal.</li> <li>-Role of partnerships are multi-staged and evolving</li> <li>-Partners: public sector, companies, communities, parish</li> </ul>