



MANAGEMENT OF THE ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT OF SUSTAINABLE SMALL AND MEDIUM ENTERPRISES IN A B IMPACT ASSESSMENT CONTEXT

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Background

Due to a recent interest in sustainable entrepreneurship, third-party certifications emerged, normalizing and codifying sustainability principles in companies. The B Corp Certification which was created and is attributed by the non-profit organization B Lab, is one of these third-party certifications. It was designed to be a holistic tool that assesses through the B Impact Assessment (BIA) a company's sustainability performance in its entirety as well as its accountability and transparency. However, only a limited understanding exists in the academic literature on the obstacles preventing numerous businesses to manage efficiently their environmental impact within a BIA context and on mechanisms that help organizations modify their practices during this assessment.

Objective

This research is aiming at answering the research question *How do sustainable SMEs identify barriers preventing them from managing their environmental impact and implement actions to overcome them in a BIA context?* The data collected during the interviews aims at generating academic and practice-driven knowledge to help SMEs improving their environmental impact management and providing them key knowledge to better understand the B Impact Assessment.

Theory

Three levels of analysis have been found in the academic literature when it comes to answering the research question: SMEs and sustainability, SMEs' sustainable impact management and BIA, SMEs' environmental impact management and BIA. These three level of analysis have been chosen to help situate where the barriers linked to SMEs environmental impact management during the BIA are rooted: whether there are ingrained in the relationship between the international economic system, the concept of sustainability and SMEs' structure; or a result of the association between SMEs, sustainable impact management and BIA; or are they solely linked to the connection between environmental impact management and this specific assessment process. These levels also permit to study if the characteristics found in each of these three levels of analysis have an influence on the other level features.

Method

A cross-sectional exploratory qualitative approach inspired by transdisciplinary research approach is chosen to answer the research question. Seven sustainable experts (consultants, university professors, CEOs of small B Corps companies and sustainable managers) are interviewed through semi-structured interviews with the aim of understanding their perceptions on possible barriers that they might encounter when managing their environmental impact in a BIA context and what actions they can implement to overcome them and improve their BIA score. The interviews are recorded and transcribed. Then, these interviews are analysed through a thematic analysis to extract from them the most significant concepts.

Discussion and Conclusion

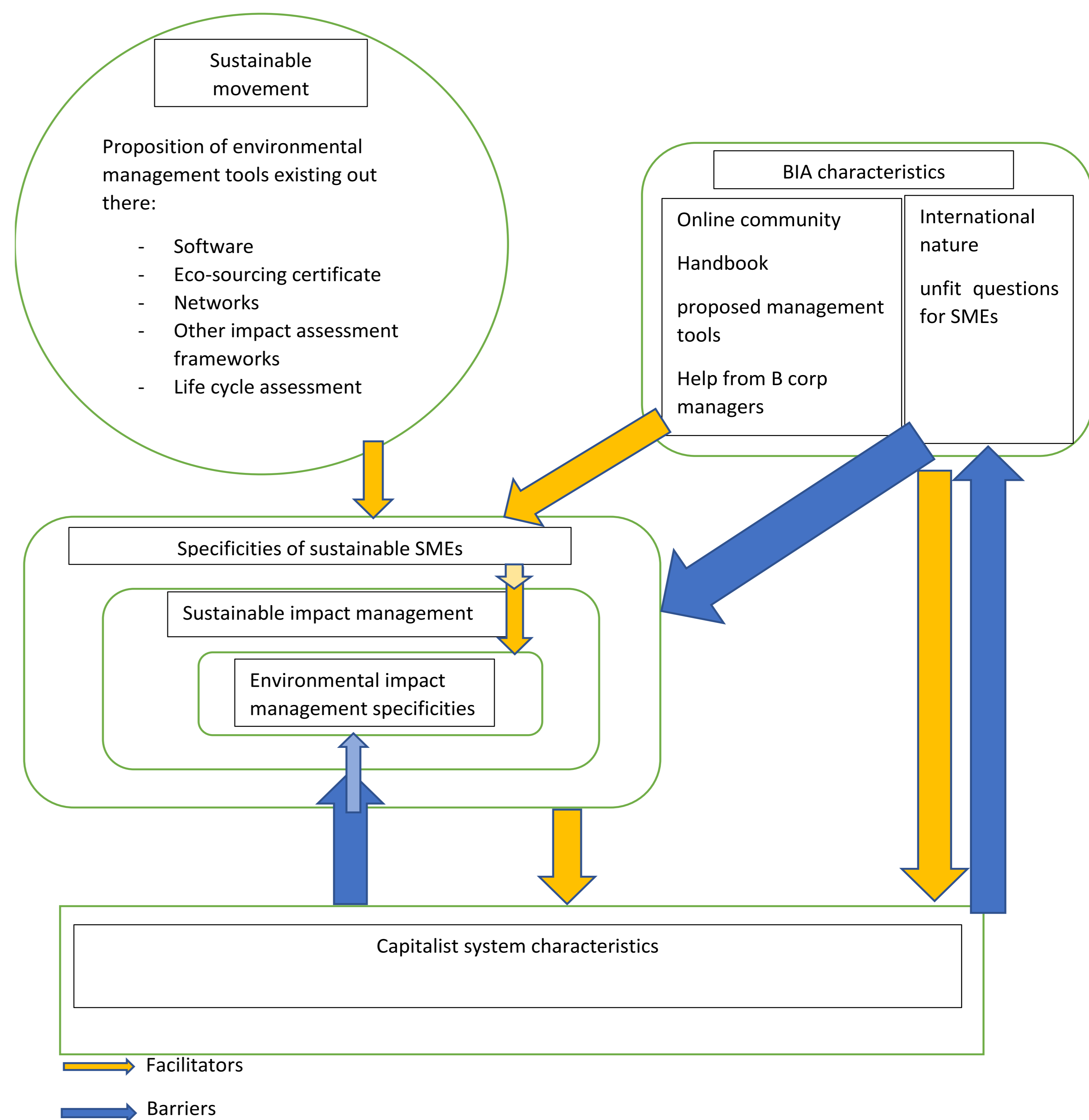


Figure 1. Barriers and facilitators of sustainable impact figure

The analysis shows that the specific characteristics of the capitalist system in which the BIA and most of contemporary sustainability SMEs are ingrained in are the main sources of barriers. The connection between SMEs, sustainability and the capitalist economic system powerfully constrains the capacity of implementation of sustainable impact management strategies. These barriers overflow over environmental impact management strategies and are strengthened by the unique nature of environmental impact. This study highlights also that the economic system influences the organizational structure of the BIA which creates new barriers for sustainable SMEs. But the resilient and flexible nature of sustainable SMEs as well as BIA tools might alleviate the previously exposed barriers. Sustainable SMEs can also choose to use external tools to improve their environmental impact and to overcome the barriers rooted in the BIA. This study highlights that CEOs, managers of sustainable SMEs and the B Corp certification have in common the willingness to change the system by communicating about sustainability and by normalizing sustainable practices.