# Building Under Pressure

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## How Institutional Pressures in Inter-Organisational Fields Shape Sustainability Outcomes

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Abstract:

Sustainability transitions in established industries often stall not because alternatives are missing, but because institutional pressures fail to travel across the actors who must co-ordinate to allow for change. Prior research has examined pressures, strategic responses and co-ordination in supply chains. How regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive pressures interact across interdependent actors in an inter-organisational field remains underexplored. This thesis examines that interaction using Swedish wooden multi-storey construction (WMC) as the empirical setting. The study analyses nine semi-structured interviews with suppliers, intermediaries, and buyers using an abductive approach. Findings show that pressures are unevenly transmitted across the field. Regulative pressure is insufficient at the national level, and coercive only where municipalities act. Normative pressure is redirected through flagship projects and absorbed by cost conventions. Cultural-cognitive pressure holds concrete and steel in place through path dependence. Power asymmetries place intermediaries in a structurally central position, where they function as a bottleneck that absorbs rather than transmits pressure driving adoption. The thesis shows that transitions in inter-organisational fields are shaped less by the strength of individual pressures than by the actors with the power to absorb, redirect or transmit it.

Keywords:

Institutional pressures, sustainability transitions, inter-organisational fields, wooden multi-storey construction (WMC)

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Gustav and Calle

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# DEFINITIONS

| Concept | Definition | Source |
|---|---|---|
| Inter-organisational field | "Local social order" of actors who consider one another in their daily activities. The field is "characterized by an orienting principle or goal". It is the bounded area within which meanings are shared and specific institutions operate. | Zietsma et al., 2017 (p. 5) |
| Wooden multi-storey construction (WMC) | Multi-storey construction solutions using wood in the structural frame, as an alternative to more common carbon-intensive solutions | Vihemäki et al., 2020 (p. 438) |
| Sustainability transitions | Fundamental, long-term changes of socio-technical systems, guided by sustainability goals and policies | Markad et al., 2016 in Vihemäki et al., 2020 (p. 1) |

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 Background

Sustainability transitions are characterised by changes to established organisational and inter-organisational practices, where environmental objectives must be translated into decisions, routines, and responsibilities (Galleli & Amaral, 2026; Silvestre et al., 2020). In management research, sustainability transitions raise the question of how actors push for, resist, or redirect change within institutional arrangements that define what counts as legitimate practice (Galleli & Amaral, 2026). Sustainability transitions thus go beyond uptake by any single firm, as organisations are bound by other actors within the same inter-organisational field (Huq & Stevenson, 2020; Saeed et al., 2018).

Institutional theory provides an analytical lens for examining how sustainability-related pressure affects organisational behaviour (Scott, 2005). Organisations are subjected to regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive pressures that define rules, obligations, and taken-for-granted understandings held by the organisation within its institutional environment (ibid). Organisational responses to institutional pressures include adaptation to external authority, professional expectations, and uncertainty (ibid). However, they may also involve compromise, avoidance, defiance, or manipulation instead of conformity (Oliver, 1991). Thus, institutional pressures should be understood as forces that actors interpret and act upon, rather than as inputs which automatically produce change (Oliver, 1991; Scott, 2005).

It is necessary to take an actor-centred view because pressures rarely stay confined within one organisation (Huq & Stevenson, 2020; Saeed et al., 2018). Institutional pressures affect both internal and external supply-chain practices, meaning that sustainability efforts depend on how expectations move across organisational boundaries (Saeed et al., 2018).

The key management problem revolves around how institutional pressures travel across actors (Huq & Stevenson, 2020; Saeed et al., 2018; Silvestre et al., 2020). Interaction is used here to mean that one actor's response changes the pressure, discretion, or constraints faced by another. This approach becomes key for examining why sustainability transitions may stall despite sustainable alternatives existing, if the pressures supporting those alternatives do not propagate in the inter-organisational field (Silvestre et al., 2020). It also highlights the

significance of examining power, risk distributions, knowledge exchange, and responsibilities in inter-organisational contexts (Huq & Stevenson, 2020; Magnusson & Werner, 2023).

A useful empirical setting to study inter-organisational fields is the construction sector, since sustainability-related change is dependent on co-ordination between various actor groups (Salmi et al., 2022; Vihemäki et al., 2020). Construction projects involve interrelated decisions across field-level governance actors, buyer actors, intermediary actors and supplier actors, which makes the sector suitable for studying how pressures move between actor groups (Salmi et al., 2022). In addition, the construction sector holds significant environmental implications (Malmqvist et al., 2021). Thus, slow or hindered sustainability transitions would hold practical relevance in addition to theoretical relevance (Vihemäki et al., 2020). Therefore, the construction industry is used as a case study for studying interactions within the inter-organisational field, instead of being the object of theoretical study itself.

Several dimensions of sustainability transitions have been found in the literature, such as the role of incumbents in sustainability initiatives, co-ordination among actors, intermediation in transition processes, and reciprocal influence between institutions and actors in social and environmental efforts (Galleli & Amaral, 2026; Magnusson & Werner, 2023; Salmi et al., 2022; Vihemäki et al., 2020). How these institutional pressures work among actors during a particular sustainability transition process, and the ways in which such interactions create, constrain, or redirect change are areas that remain underexplored (Galleli & Amaral, 2026; Huq & Stevenson, 2020; Salmi et al., 2022). This thesis addresses that gap by viewing sustainability transitions as an inter-organisational management process, using wooden multi-storey construction (WMC) in Sweden as the empirical setting.

## 1.2 Purpose

This thesis examines how institutional pressures interact across actors in a sustainability transition. Specifically, Swedish WMC is used as the empirical setting for this research. The actors within the construction inter-organisational field are analysed for their role in reinforcing, redirecting, decoupling, or blocking sustainability pressure as it moves across actor groups. This positions the thesis in the field of institutional pressures in organisations, inter-organisational fields, power asymmetry, and sustainability transitions (Galleli &

Amaral, 2026; Huq & Stevenson, 2020; Magnusson & Werner, 2023; Saeed et al., 2018; Salmi et al., 2022; Silvestre et al., 2020; Vihemäki et al., 2020).

## 1.3 Research Question

> *How do institutional pressures interact across actors in the construction inter-organisational field to shape sustainability transitions?*

In this study, an inter-organisational field refers to a relational arena of diverse and interdependent actors who take one another into account on a shared issue or recognised domain of activity, and whose interactions are shaped by common meanings, institutional pressures, and unequal field positions (Zietsma et al., 2017; Mountford & Geiger, 2021; Jacob et al., 2022).

## 1.4 Focus and Empirical Setting

We use Swedish wooden multi-storey construction (WMC) as a case for studying actor interaction in sustainability transitions. The inter-organisational field of construction is treated as a relational arena through which sustainability-related expectations, requirements, risks, knowledge, and costs move between actor groups. The focus is therefore on how actors create or fail to create change within an inter-organisational field, rather than on the technical characteristics of WMC.

The study examines suppliers, intermediaries and buyers for WMC. In this study, suppliers refer to wood processing companies, intermediaries to construction firms, and buyers to property management companies. WMC refers to large (> 2 storeys) buildings using mass timber as a central structural component, making it a less carbon-intensive material choice than the more common concrete and steel (Vihemäki et al., 2020). WMC is suitable for this study because its adoption depends on co-ordination across all three actor groups, allowing the institutional pressures to be followed from where they originate to where they are absorbed. The scope therefore supports an analysis of sustainability transitions through interaction, mechanisms, and power asymmetry across interdependent actors.

# 2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In a sector as interdependent as the construction industry, stakeholders must co-ordinate across inter-organisational fields with their respective industry standards, making institutional transitions particularly consequential. By applying institutional theory and power theory, this study investigates how a large-scale transition to WMC is affected by institutional pressures.

Scott (2005) explains how institutional theory can explain organisational change beyond economic motivations, linking to the multifaceted transition towards WMC. Furthermore, the theory's capacity to analyse multiple sources of pressure becomes particularly relevant in the case of WMC, due to supply chain dynamics, political regulation, and societal expectations.

## 2.1 Institutional Theory

Institutional theory provides a framework for how organisations are shaped and pressured by their broader environments. Institutions are, as Scott (2005, p. 8) defines them, "*variously comprised of cultural-cognitive, normative, and regulative elements that, together with associated activities and resources, provide stability and meaning to social life.*" This definition highlights how organisations operate in complex institutional environments, and ultimately implies how pressure is formed and affects the organisation.

Scott (2005), drawing on Meyer & Rowan (1977) and DiMaggio & Powell (1983), explains that organisations are not only motivated by efficiency and profitability improvements, but also by achieving legitimacy within their institutional environments. In the case of industry transitions, economic and technological factors are not the only dimensions to take into consideration, since a shift is affected by regulations, industry norms, and market assumptions.

Olesson et al. (2023) provide insight into how institutional logics capture underlying belief systems, assumptions, and values in organisations. The study shows how different logics can act as enablers or barriers for transitions towards sustainability. This helps explain resistance to change, when regulatory and technical conditions otherwise seem favourable. Commercial logic can favour risk minimisation, professional logic can prioritise established standards, and sustainability logic can prioritise social sustainability rather than environmental sustainability. In the article, change is presented as more likely when the proposed change is compatible

with the dominant logics of the organisation and its institutional environment. Incorporating institutional logics provides a dynamic assessment of trade-offs of institutional pressures for a transition.

In order to systematically analyse institutional pressure, we adopt Scott's (2005) three-pillar framework, consisting of regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive elements.

### 2.1.1 Regulative Elements

Regulative elements include laws, regulations, and sanctions that coercively govern behaviour of organisations. Compliance is secured through monitoring and enforcement. This creates considerable impact on organisational behaviour, as organisations seek to avoid sanctions and sustain operations, according to Scott (2005).

These elements are relevant for industry transitions, since regulatory frameworks set boundaries for legitimate practices. Changes in regulations can shift the boundaries set, thereby changing the incentive structure. The relationship between regulations and an organisation's behaviour is not a simple reflex according to Oliver (1991). An organisation's response can be full compliance, symbolic acceptance, negotiation, or resistance, depending on how well the regulations align with the capabilities and interests of the organisation.

### 2.1.2 Normative Elements

Normative elements introduce dimensions to social life, including values that define desirable norms, specifying how people and organisations should act (Scott, 2005). Normative elements include values that arise from professional associations, industry standards, and educational institutions, with common examples such as the standards set by the *International Organization for Standardization* (ISO). These elements shape the perception of what is professional practice, excluding the regulative elements. Normative pressures primarily operate through internalised social obligations, compared to the external force of regulative elements. Actors that align themselves with normative expectations are deemed responsible and trustworthy, while those who do not risk reputational damage and social sanctions.

### 2.1.3 Cultural-Cognitive Elements

Cultural-cognitive elements focus on shared conceptions that build social reality. The cultural-cognitive institutions shape what is taken for granted. Legitimacy is created through comprehensibility. Cognitively well-aligned organisations are perceived as appropriate, and those who are not aligned need to invest effort into signalling through explanation and demonstration to reach legitimacy.

This element is the hardest to change according to Scott (2005), and the most consequential for understanding the path dependency relevant in transitions. Solutions that are taken for granted can persist, even when preferable alternatives are technically and normatively accepted (ibid). Therefore, successfully challenging cultural-cognitive institutions cannot be accomplished by simple regulatory changes and normative standards; it also requires change in shared assumptions.

## 2.2 Institutional Theory and Power

Scott's (2005) three-pillar framework shows what kinds of pressures exist and how they are operationalised. However, the framework does not account for which pressure matters most, and by whom it is exercised. To address this, this study adopts power as a complementary dimension. Power is in this case conceptualised as the capacity to directly or indirectly shape other actors' behaviour, decisions, and beliefs (Lukes, 2005). Lukes' (2005) framework consists of three dimensions. First, an observable decision-making power: the ability of A to influence B to do something B otherwise would not have done. Second, hidden power refers to what is known as agenda-setting: shaping what issues are considered eligible for debate. Third, invisible power includes shaping perceptions and preferences. Scott's (2005) and Lukes' (2005) frameworks complement each other in the integrated model, with the goal to analyse how pressures travel throughout the inter-organisational field. Pressures across actors are conditioned by the power held by individual actors, as well as by the relationships between them, which together explain how pressures interact across the field (Paulraj et al., 2017; Marculetiu et al., 2023). The dimension of power is applied to explain why the same pressure can create divergent responses across the field.

Figure 2.2 illustrates a model combining Scott's (2005) institutional pillars with power distribution of actors, drawing on Lukes (2005). Institutional pressures are first filtered by what is permitted through regulation, then affect actors in the inter-organisational field, who respond with varying degrees of compliance. The institutional pressures are conditioned by the actors' respective power, affecting the strength and reach of the pressures throughout the field. The relative weight of each response then drives the level of adoption of a proposed solution, with the possibility of bottlenecks occurring.

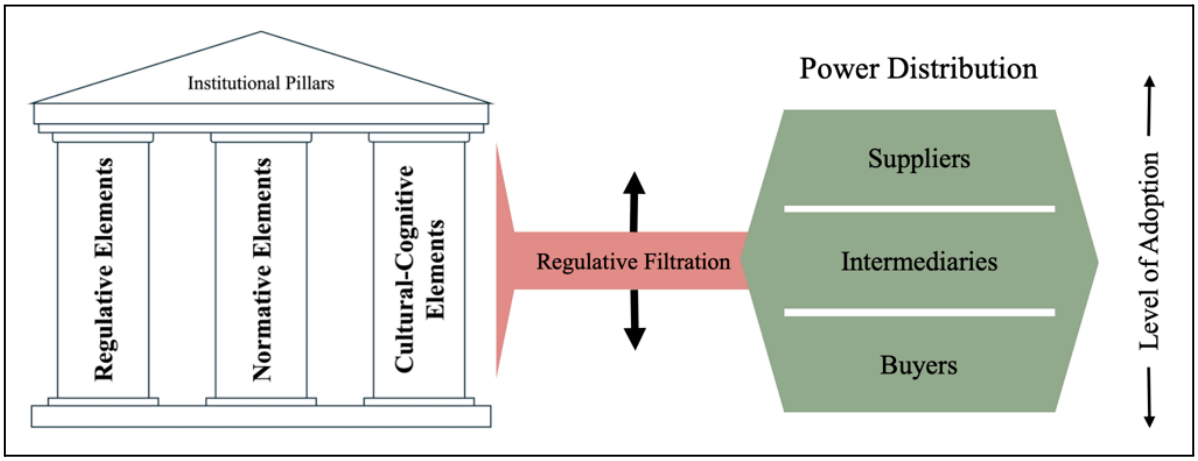



*Figure 2.2: Institutional pressures' and power's impact on adoption*

(*Note. Created by the authors based on* Scott (2005), *and* Lukes (2005))

## 2.3 Theoretical Critique

Although the pillars in the three-pillar framework are distinctly defined, they are still empirically interrelated according to Scott (2005). All institutions contain varying combinations of the elements, which must be considered when analysing the construction industry. Challenging the cultural-cognitive element is also crucial from a research perspective, to systematically provide a more analytically valid representation of an empirical setting. This framework ultimately affects the structuring of the research itself.

Chapter 3 reviews how prior research has applied institutional and power perspectives to sustainability transitions and inter-organisational fields, and identifies the research gap this thesis addresses.

# 3. LITERATURE REVIEW

## 3.1 Sustainability Transitions

Sustainability transitions are commonly understood as long-term reconfigurations of socio-technical systems in which products, services, organisations, models, regulations, norms, and user practices shift together (Vihemäki et al., 2020; Silvestre et al., 2020). In management and organisation research, they are approached as a broad set of social and environmental efforts shaped across systemic, organisational, and individual levels (Galleli & Amaral, 2026). This places institutions in the foreground and treats sustainability more as the domain in which institutional dynamics become visible (ibid).

Transitions of this kind tend to advance more slowly than their technical or environmental rationale would suggest. Niche innovations can remain marginal for long periods because incumbent arrangements are reproduced through path dependence and resistance, even when alternatives exist (Vihemäki et al., 2020). Actors are shaped by institutional pressures, and reshape them through their actions (Galleli & Amaral, 2026). Sustainability transitions are non-linear, shaped by processes rather than implementation decisions (Silvestre et al., 2020). Many firms compensate for their negative social and environmental effects and preserve legitimacy through less disruptive forms of adaptation (Shevchenko et al., 2016).

Power, established in Chapter 2, is central to that process. Established firms often command resources, relationships, and connections that allow them to influence how quickly transitions proceed and on what terms change becomes necessary (Magnusson & Werner, 2023). Expressions of power are visible not only in direct resistance, but also in the ability to delay disruptive change, preserve favourable routines, or define what counts as a reasonable adjustment (ibid). The problem of transition is therefore not only whether better alternatives exist. It is also whether existing actors can continue to shape the pace, interpretation, and acceptability of change. This shifts the analytical focus away from the individual firm and towards the wider relational setting in which firms operate.

## 3.2 Inter-Organisational Fields

The concept of the inter-organisational field becomes useful because sustainability transitions do not occur within a single organisation in isolation (Zietsma et al., 2017; Mountford & Geiger, 2021; Jacob et al., 2022). Institutional fields can be understood as bounded social orders in which actors orient themselves around one another, share meanings, and operate under recognisable institutional arrangements (Zietsma et al., 2017). Prior research has shown that fields consist of relationships and positioning of actors such that certain actors are better placed than others to define legitimate practice and influence how others respond (Zietsma et al., 2017; Mountford & Geiger, 2021; Jacob et al., 2022).

Supply-chain research supports this field-level approach due to sustainability practices often requiring co-operation beyond a focal firm (Saeed et al., 2018; Huq & Stevenson, 2020). While internal sustainability practices can be implemented within the firm more directly, external sustainability practices depend on suppliers, customers, conformity to standards, monitoring, and cross-organisational co-ordination (Saeed et al., 2018). Sustainability initiatives therefore depend on how pressure moves through relationships instead of only how strongly one organisation supports sustainability (Saeed et al., 2018; Silvestre et al., 2020).

## 3.3 Actor Positions and Power

Actors in the same organisational field do not necessarily experience the same pressure in the same way (Olesson et al., 2023; Magnusson & Werner, 2023). Sustainability transitions are shaped by conflicting institutional logics, where commercial, professional, and sustainability-related expectations may support or obstruct change depending on how they interact in the decision-making process (Olesson et al., 2023).

Power helps explain why some interpretations of sustainability become more consequential than others (Lukes, 2005; Magnusson & Werner, 2023). Power may appear as visible decision-making authority, but it may also appear as agenda-setting, where some options are considered while others are kept outside the decision space (Lukes, 2005). In transition processes, this means influential actors may shape not only final choices, but also the criteria by which alternatives are assessed in the first place (Lukes, 2005; Magnusson & Werner, 2023).

The position of an actor within its inter-organisational field is critical to the actor's ability to influence institutional expectations and strategies (Jacob et al., 2022). The position of the intermediary is especially crucial in project-based fields since intermediaries have the power to translate buyer demands into proposals, procurement arrangements, and technical choices (Lindgren & Emmitt, 2017; Salmi et al., 2022). Thus, the same actor group can both be a channel for change and a bottleneck, depending on whether they pass sustainability pressure onwards or decouple it through established decision routines (Vihemäki et al., 2020; Huq & Stevenson, 2020; Magnusson & Werner, 2023).

## 3.4 Mechanisms

Once fields are understood as sites of unequal influence and diverging motivations, the question becomes how pressures are responded to in practice. One mechanism is redirected pressure. External pressures do not affect all sustainability practices in the same way. Internal and external practices respond differently, and implementation beyond the firm depends heavily on other actors' willingness to co-operate (Saeed et al., 2018). This means pressure is experienced selectively and translated through different organisational relationships (ibid).

A second mechanism is decoupling, which refers to the dissociation between the formal structure employed to meet institutional pressures and the technical routines through which routines are carried out (Scott, 2005). In sustainability transitions, such a dissociation can exist at a firm level, supply-chain level, or inter-organisational field level where economic logic and sustainability logic conflict (Huq & Stevenson, 2020). Pressure may thus be visible in commitments or policies, while operational routines are largely unchanged.

A third mechanism is path dependence. Sustainability trajectories can be understood as sequences of learning loops that proceed at different speeds depending on capabilities, contingencies, and inherited routines (Silvestre et al., 2020). Path dependence is also linked to stakeholder resistance, specialised assets, and narrow knowledge breadth (ibid). Innovations spanning several organisations are harder to stabilise when project structures weaken feedback and knowledge re-use (Lindgren & Emmitt, 2017). Path dependence therefore persists not only because actors resist, but because learning structures often make existing responses easier to repeat than new ones.

A fourth mechanism is intermediation. Intermediaries may help reduce lock-ins by influencing policy processes and working across otherwise impermeable boundaries between different actor constellations (Vihemäki et al., 2020). Intermediary landscapes are often complex, poorly co-ordinated, and marked by differing agendas, which can limit their effectiveness (ibid). Intermediation is thus one way in which power is expressed in transition processes, as it affects which pressures travel effectively, which coalitions form, and which interpretations gain traction.

## 3.5 Research Gap

The reviewed literature establishes that sustainability transitions are shaped by institutional pressure, positions within the organisational field, and mechanisms of translation between actors (Galleli & Amaral, 2026; Magnusson & Werner, 2023; Saeed et al., 2018; Silvestre et al., 2020). Further, the literature points to how sustainability pressures require attention to how regulations, professional norms, intermediaries, procurement processes, path dependence, and co-ordination among actors define legitimacy and feasibility of practices employed (Huq & Stevenson, 2020; Salmi et al., 2022; Vihemäki et al., 2020). However, it remains insufficiently studied how such pressures interact across actor positions within a specific inter-organisational field, and how this creates or constrains change.

The significance of this gap lies in the fact that previous research generally focuses either on the dynamics of transition or on individual actors' roles, and pays relatively little attention to the effects of how one actor's response to pressure changes the constraints faced by other actors within the inter-organisational field (Galleli & Amaral, 2026; Salmi et al., 2022). Recent research calls for greater examination of issues of reciprocity between actors and circumstances in which attempts at sustainable practices may be unsuccessful or limited (Galleli & Amaral, 2026; Magnusson & Werner, 2023; Salmi et al., 2022; Vihemäki et al., 2020).

## 3.6 Summary

The literature shows that sustainability transitions are influenced by more than the presence of technically feasible alternatives. Previous studies present sustainability transitions as long-term and non-linear processes, where routines, institutional logics, and power can slow or redirect change. Moreover, the chapter highlights the inter-organisational field as a

relevant lens of analysis since sustainability transitions often involve co-ordination among suppliers, intermediaries, and buyers. Different actor positions within the organisational field cause actors to experience institutional pressures differently, and some actors are better positioned to define legitimate and appropriate practice. There are four types of mechanisms through which pressures travel across the inter-organisational field: redirection, decoupling, path dependence, and intermediation. While existing research explains these processes with regard to individual actors, it has left a gap in explaining how the interaction of these mechanisms can create or constrain change.

# 4. METHODOLOGY

## 4.1 Research Philosophy and Approach

This study adopts an interpretivist research philosophy. The research question concerns how actors understand, prioritise, and respond to institutional pressures, rather than how an objectively measurable variable affects adoption. Interpretivism is appropriate because it treats social reality as shaped through meaning, interaction, and situated experience (Pulla & Carter, 2018). The empirical material therefore consists of actors' accounts of what makes WMC legitimate, feasible, risky, or difficult to advance.

To implement this, we use an abductive approach. This allows movement between existing theory, emerging empirical material, and refinement of the analytical focus (Dubois & Gadde, 2002). The theoretical framework provides sensitising concepts, especially institutional pressures and power, while the interviews remained open to explanations not anticipated in advance. The aim was to develop a context-grounded explanation through movement between framework, empirics, and analysis.

## 4.2 Research Design

### 4.2.1 Qualitative Research Design

A qualitative research design was selected because the study examines meanings, decisions, and inter-organisational relationships. The research question requires access to how actors interpret pressures, constraints, dependencies, and responsibilities. A quantitative design would have reduced these dynamics into predefined variables, limiting the ability to identify initially unknown mechanisms. Qualitative research is therefore better suited for examining how actors explain their own actions and those of others within the field (Pulla & Carter, 2018; Saunders et al., 2023).

### 4.2.2 Semi-Structured Interviews

Data collection consisted of semi-structured interviews. This format combines predetermined themes with flexible follow-up questions, allowing participants to elaborate on issues they consider important (Kallio et al., 2016). It suited the study because the analysis depended on

participants' reasoning, role-specific knowledge, and understanding of organisational dependencies. A fully structured format would have risked excluding important explanations before the interviews had taken place.

Interviews were conducted in person when possible, and otherwise digitally through Microsoft Teams. Interviews were held in Swedish to preserve professional nuance. All interviews were recorded and transcribed with consent.

### 4.2.3 Interview Questions

The interview guide had three parts. The first introduced the participant's organisation, role, industry experience, and relation to WMC. The second focused on regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive pressures (Scott, 2005). Questions addressed how rules shaped material choices, how professional standards and stakeholder expectations influenced decision-making, and which assumptions about construction were treated as self-evident. The third invited broader reflection on enabling forces, resistance, risk, dependency, and which actors can shape outcomes. The baseline interview guide is presented in Appendix B.

## 4.3 Data Collection

### 4.3.1 Sampling

Participants were selected through purposive sampling. The aim was not statistical representativeness, but access to respondents with relevant experience of WMC, construction decision-making, and inter-organisational dependencies. Purposive sampling was appropriate because the research question required information-rich perspectives from actors positioned differently in the field (Saunders et al., 2023). Initial contacts were identified through industry dialogue and referrals, after which additional participants were approached to broaden actor groups, organisations, and functions.

### 4.3.2 Interview Participants

The final sample consisted of nine interviews: three with supplier-side actors from wood processing companies, three with intermediary actors from construction companies, and three with buyer-side actors from property management companies. This distribution allowed comparison between actors facing different pressures and occupying different positions in the

inter-organisational field. Participants in senior positions were prioritised owing to the study concerning strategic decisions and cross-organisational relationships, while specialist and managerial respondents added operational insight.

### 4.3.3 Respondent Table

Table 4.3.3 summarises the respondents by alias, actor group, role, organisation type, and industry experience (time worked in construction or real estate industries). Further interview details are provided in Appendix A.

| Alias | Group | Job Title | Organisation | Experience |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Simon** | Suppliers | Product Manager | Wood Processing Company | 20 years |
| **Stefan** | Suppliers | Head of Technical Staff | Wood Processing Company | 16 years |
| **Sebastian** | Suppliers | Head of Sales | Wood Processing Company | 18 years |
| **Isak** | Intermediaries | Specialist Climate and Construction | Construction Company | 20 years |
| **Ingemar** | Intermediaries | Technical Manager of Wood Construction | Construction Consultancy | 21 years |
| **Ian** | Intermediaries | Business Manager | Construction Company | 14 years |
| **Belinda** | Buyers | Sustainability Director | Property Management Company | 27 years |
| **Birgitta** | Buyers | Sustainability Director | Property Management Company | 11 years |
| **Benjamin** | Buyers | Business Development Manager | Property Management Company | 23 years |

*Table 4.3.3: Respondent Table*

## 4.4 Thematic Analysis

The interview material was analysed through thematic analysis. This was appropriate because it offers a systematic but flexible way to identify patterns across qualitative data and can be used within an interpretivist and abductive study (Saunders et al., 2023). Although the research design was abductive, early coding remained open to avoid forcing the material into the theoretical framework too soon.

The analysis was structured with inspiration from the Gioia methodology (Gioia et al., 2013). First, each transcript was read repeatedly to build familiarity with the material. Both authors then coded the interviews independently, staying close to participants' wording when possible. Codes were compared and consolidated through joint discussion. Related first-order codes were grouped into second-order themes, shifting the analysis from description to interpretation. These themes were then synthesised into aggregate dimensions that structure the empirical findings. The resulting data structure is presented in Figure 4.4.

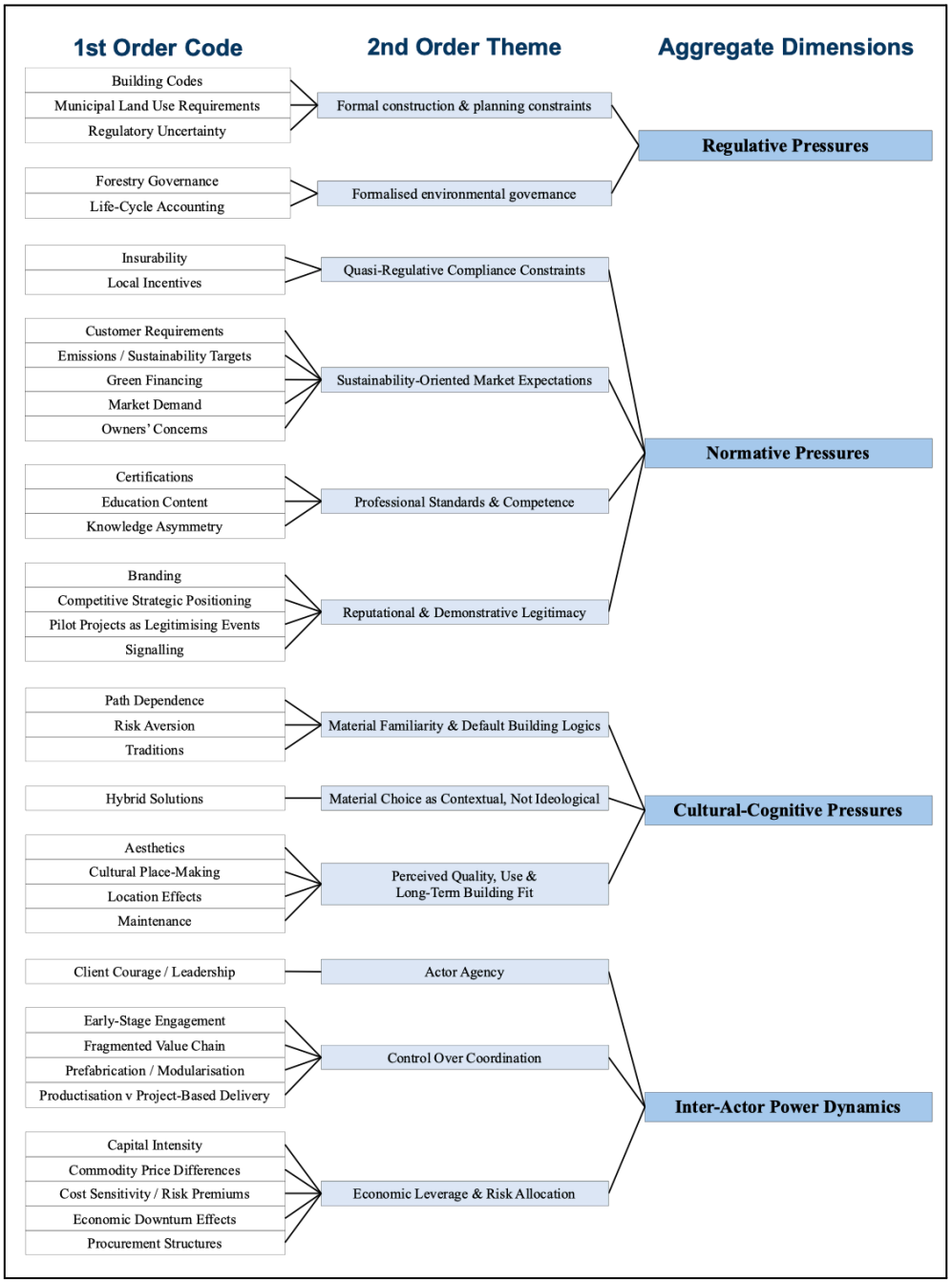



*Figure 4.4: Data structure*

## 4.5 Method Discussion

The design fits the research question because the study examines how institutional pressures are interpreted, negotiated, and acted upon. Semi-structured interviews enabled participants to explain decision rationales, dependencies, and tensions that would have been difficult to capture through standardised questions. The composition of the sample fits the inter-organisational focus, since the aim was to capture perspectives across suppliers, intermediaries, and buyers.

The design also has limitations. The material consists of retrospective accounts and reported perceptions. Participants may reconstruct decisions more coherently after the fact or present their organisation favourably. Referral-based recruitment improved access to knowledgeable participants, but may also have tilted the sample towards actors already heavily engaged with WMC. The Swedish setting is analytically useful for studying a specific institutional and industry context, but limits direct transferability to fields with different regulations, norms, or market structures.

The interpretivist approach also requires reflexivity. The interview accounts were treated as situated interpretations shaped by participants' roles, interests, and experiences. The same applies to our own interpretation of the material. To reduce premature theoretical closure, coding moved between empirical themes and theory-led categories. Quotations translated from Swedish to English were checked against the original wording to preserve meaning and professional nuance.

## 4.6 Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were addressed throughout recruitment, interviewing, analysis, and reporting. Participants were informed about the thesis purpose, interview format, recording, transcription, voluntariness of participation, and their right to withdraw before final submission. Written consent was obtained before each interview (see consent form in Appendix C). Participants were also offered the opportunity to review and reject quotations before final submission.

Confidentiality required care since the study concerns strategic decisions, commercial relationships, and views on other actors. Participants were anonymised, and organisational affiliation was reported by organisation rather than by firm name. Quotations were edited

only to remove fillers or identifying details, without changing meaning. Recordings, transcripts, and notes were stored securely and were accessible only to the authors. Findings avoid unnecessary project details that could make individuals or firms identifiable. All collected material was deleted upon final publication.

## 4.7 Use of AI Tools

OpenAI's ChatGPT 5.4 and 5.5, and Anthropic's Claude Sonnet 4.6 and Opus 4.7, were used as support tools for ideation, phrasing, and source-browsing assistance. These also helped draft database search terms. All sources were manually checked using the CRAAP test. No interview transcripts or excerpts were entered into AI tools.

# 5. EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

## 5.1 Regulative Pressures on WMC

Across interviews, regulative pressures appeared as a less predominant force in shaping the development of WMC. Interviewees indicated that regulations set outer boundaries for construction, determining what is technically permissible. However, formal regulation was not described as a key driver behind a shift towards wood-based solutions, due to a lack of thresholds in climate declarations in Sweden:

> *"We have the climate declaration law, but there is nothing in the law today that says where we need to land. If the law had been tougher, I think it would have been a strong driving force, but currently that is not the case."*
>
> Isak (Intermediary)

> *"Currently there is nothing regulating towards maintaining low $CO_2$ emissions tied to embodied carbon. Neighboring countries to Sweden do, where we see a lot happening in this segment."*
>
> Belinda (Buyer)

Further interviews mentioned the topic of regulative differences in neighbouring countries, and the impact:

> *"Sweden was actually one or two years ahead of Denmark in starting to require climate declarations. But then the threshold came in Denmark, and that is where we got overtaken."*
>
> Ingemar (Intermediary)

Isolated cases of municipalities promoting wood construction existed, however. Multiple interviews stated that local regulation had significant effects:

> *"In Växjö for example, the municipality owns a lot of land, and there it is simply said that there is no alternative if you want to build here. You must be able to present a proposal. To even get the land allocation for multi-family housing, it has to be in wood."*
>
> Sebastian (Supplier)

*"The municipalities of Skellefteå and Växjö have been pioneers in wood construction, and it has been because they saw that it is good for them, if it takes off it is good for the industry in their respective municipality."*

Stefan (Supplier)

One respondent highlighted how the framing of the local regulation affected outcomes:

*"Umeå did it in a better way than Växjö and Skellefteå. They did it by saying we shall do a climate calculation and choose based on that. The concrete and steel industry has been critical of Skellefteå and Växjö for going in and pointing with the whole hand."*

Ingemar (Intermediary)

*"I think it is dangerous to start pointing towards wood specifically. Pointing towards sustainability, absolutely, and then it falls naturally."*

Ian (Intermediary)

## 5.2 Normative Pressures on WMC

With the absence of strong regulative pressures, normative pressures emerged as primary institutional drivers of WMC adoption. The sources of normative pressures differed depending on the position in the inter-organisational field.

The buyers, in the form of property management companies, identified financiers and customers as critical external stakeholders in the context of material choice:

*"Customers, absolutely. And financiers, which maybe joint first place.* [...] *In the property segment you are usually reliant on borrowed capital and maintaining low $CO_2$ emissions is very attractive and lets you borrow at better interest rates."*

Belinda (Buyer)

Simultaneously, the cost calculation of projects ultimately decided the choice of material:

*"There was a project in* [Location] *which was clearly planned to be almost entirely in timber, as you can see in the sketches. But the cost calculation did not add up, so it became concrete."*

Birgitta (Buyer)

This was reiterated in the context of end consumers of the properties:

> *"What usually determines the decision is where you want to live and what your budget is. Almost nobody goes to their bank and says I would like to borrow 119 000 SEK per square metre to buy a new home built in timber. You borrow what you can borrow and then you look for something in that range."*
>
> Benjamin (Buyer)

Meanwhile, intermediaries identified demand from the property management companies as decisive for what gets built:

> "*We have some projects where we have shown how far you can lower climate impact, but then it's because the customer set a climate requirement for us. To achieve a very low climate impact, it requires a cooperation between us as a contractor and our customer.*"
>
> Isak (Intermediary)

> *"The reason it has changed so much is above all the pressure from customers. We have not been hugely pushing ourselves, we have waited for our customers."*
>
> Ingemar (Intermediary)

From the supply side, the picture complements the buyer side, although with a different emphasis:

> *"Everyone is standing on the sustainability barricades: "We are going to save the climate, we are building sustainably." But nobody is actually prepared to pay for the climate. It is very nice that it is low-carbon, but it cannot cost more."*
>
> Simon (Supplier)

Educational institutions were presented as an origin of industry standards:

> *"If you look at how many people work with concrete and steel construction at Sweden's universities, and how much of the curriculum is on concrete and steel versus timber for civil engineering students, and then you go into the companies: it is the same thing."*
>
> Stefan (Supplier)

*"If you go back a decade or two, you essentially learned how to build a carport in wood. That changed dramatically. Many students now have done a lot of timber work, but on the consultancy side we have not had enough timber projects to utilise this."*

Ingemar (Intermediary)

## 5.3 Cultural-Cognitive Pressures on WMC

Several interviewees noted timber as carrying a degree of unfamiliarity, thereby reinforcing these preconceived preferences:

"*We do not yet have enough good examples where you have also in some way planned the construction project because it is a wood construction project* [...] *You perceive it as greater risk-taking because you aren't wholly comfortable and instead of* [familiar supplier] *delivering the support beam, who you've co-operated with 22 times, it's instead* [unfamiliar supplier]*."*

Belinda (Buyer)

*"When you build the cost estimate, every uncertain line gets rounded up.* [...] *Suddenly you have a cost estimate that looks too expensive, but you have never actually built it so you don't know. That's not the same as it being more expensive. It's the cost of not knowing."*

Simon (Supplier)

"*You give a price based on what you're used to, which is concrete and steel. They've built in the same way for 100 years, meaning they're very set in their ways about how things should be done."*

Stefan (Supplier)

Intermediaries also identified the perceived risk of working with less familiar materials as a key factor in what gets built:

*"I think the resistance is more internal than external, tied to uncertainty and risk assessment. That is not specific to wood. It follows from doing something unfamiliar."*

Isak (Intermediary)

*"If you don't have the experience, you go down the safe lane."*

Ian (Intermediary)

Interestingly, some respondents mentioned a positive shift towards the acceptance of WMC, as flagship projects built legitimacy:

> *"*[Large flagship projects] *moved the needle forward for everyone. Not just for us as a supplier, it also does so from construction companies to customers, property owners, consultants, and so on. We challenge ourselves by showing that it's actually possible."*
>
> Sebastian (Supplier)

> *"In the beginning we met resistance at the municipal level. People said jokingly "Can't you build a real house?" That was around 2015. Now it is completely the opposite; people are happy and welcoming. The cultural reception has turned."*
>
> Benjamin (Buyer)

For buyers, wood was also connected to the cultural fit, with material choice described as part of making a project feel rooted in its local surroundings.

> "*We wanted this to become something that blended in as a natural part of* [The local area]*, we really have tried to keep cultural sustainability at the site.*"
>
> Birgitta (Buyer)

## 5.4 Power Dynamics Between Actors

Interviews revealed how power dynamics influence how pressures travel through the construction inter-organisational field. Actors in the middle of the field shaped the proposal of material alternatives, causing a bottleneck:

> *"It is no secret that several of the large construction companies today have interests in the concrete industry. It is not to say that they are opponents of timber construction, but there are self-interests in using other materials than timber, and that makes them somewhat hesitant in some cases."*
>
> Sebastian (Suppliers)

> *"We have won the politicians. We have won the architects. The engineers have done their homework. The property owners and developers say they want it. The one piece missing is the construction entrepreneur.* [...] *How do we get construction firms to feel they earn money by building in timber?"*
>
> Simon (Suppliers)

Construction companies were specifically regarded as key influencers of material choice:

> *"That pressure did not come from the timber supplier* [...]*, but the building entrepreneur. But that's the big construction companies in Sweden. They aren't very pro-wood."*
>
> Belinda (Buyers)

This was elaborated on by an intermediary:

> *"An old-school contractor can simply say: it will not work, it will burn. They plant that in the client. To tip the project away from the traditional, you need brave buyers who dare to push back."*
>
> Ian (Intermediary)

The current construction downturn added another dimension to these power dynamics. From the supply side, the downturn was described as reducing the amount of available projects, making it harder for WMC actors to scale and build repeated experience.

> *"We are in a very troublesome recession too. Today it's like everyone is fighting over every project available with every incentive and means you have. Regardless of what material you advocate, it's like a free-for-all for a small project today, so it's not enough. Too little is being built for us to shift gears at the pace we'd like with sustainable wood construction."*
>
> Sebastian (Supplier)

From the intermediary side, this economic pressure shifted priorities away from material preference and towards project feasibility.

> *"When the industry isn't doing too well you have to find every penny* [...] *In my role I want a project, then whether it's wood or concrete isn't important to me.* $CO_2$*? Absolutely, we can work on finding better* $CO_2$ *solutions in a concrete frame. Then the concern is being more efficient there.* [...] *We're not very bound to any particular material."*
>
> Ian (Intermediary)

From the buyer side, tighter margins are also described as pushing actors back to what was perceived as financially safer.

*"Unfortunately, we are in a situation where construction prices have risen a lot. Interest rates have gone up, it's a tougher rental market, so the project margins are razor thin. And that causes a sort of will to go back to what you call "traditional methods". [...] Right now there is a sort of convention or a desire to build with concrete because it's seen as cheap."*

Belinda (Buyer)

Even though municipal influence can be significant in shaping a project one way, cost logics still dictate how a project proposal is assessed.

"*The municipality is probably the one that controls the most and maybe who you listen to the most. We can listen to the contractor given that they give a good price on the cost estimate, so that we have a doable project.*"

Birgitta (Buyer)

## 5.5 Summary

The empirical findings present the different levels of institutional pressures on the WMC field. Regulative pressures were described as setting outer boundaries rather than driving adoption due to a lack of thresholds in climate declarations at a national level. Meanwhile, certain municipalities created stronger local conditions through regulation. Normative pressures emerged as prominent, with sources differing by position. Buyers pointed to customers and financiers, intermediaries pointed to buyer demand, and suppliers noted that climate ambition did not necessarily translate into willingness to pay. Cultural-cognitive pressures appeared as path dependence based on supplier relationships, education, and risk assessment. Power dynamics revealed intermediaries, in the form of construction firms, as central to material choice, with a bottleneck occurring when institutional pressures were applied.

These four areas are analysed in the following chapter and synthesised into the model created from the theoretical framework, outlining the interaction between actors to answer the research question.

# 6. ANALYSIS

This chapter analyses the empirical findings of the study, through the theoretical framework developed from Scott (2005) and Lukes (2005) in Chapter 2. Four areas identified as most prominent from the empirical material are examined to address the research question, and synthesised to create a model of how actors interact and influence one another.

## 6.1 The Absence of Regulation Promoting Sustainability

Regulative pressure is the institutional pillar with the strongest coercive force since it determines what activities organisations can undertake legally (Scott, 2005). In sustainability transitions, this aspect becomes important because regulations provide an opportunity to reconsider the issues organisations need to take into account before they become subject to pressures from other sources such as professional standards or market expectations (Scott, 2005; Oliver, 1991). However, the empirical material suggests that regulation in the Swedish WMC field exists mainly in a permissive form rather than a coercive one. Participants describe regulation as defining what can be built, but not as requiring actors to choose lower-carbon or bio-based material solutions.

This distinction carries weight. While regulation is not completely missing, it is not seen as pushing WMC adoption. Climate declarations are described as lacking coerciveness since they require calculation without, in the respondents' view, attaching sufficient consequences to the result. As respondent Isak states, "*We have the climate declaration law, but there is nothing in the law today that says where we need to land. Without a clear stick, projects fall back on what they always did"*. Similarly, Belinda said that there is currently *"nothing regulating towards maintaining low $CO_2$ emissions tied to embodied carbon"*. As a consequence, regulative pressures are decoupled from affecting project decision-making directly.

This weakens pressure transmission within the inter-organisational field. With the lack of a regulatory floor, it becomes easy for each actor to continue to treat sustainability as a project-specific approach rather than a shared field-level requirement. As such, more pressure is exerted by normative and cultural-cognitive pressures despite their lack of enforceability (Scott, 2005).

The municipal examples showcase this working in reverse. For Växjö and Skellefteå especially, participants point out land allocation and municipal ambition creating significantly stronger conditions for the use of WMC. This does not mean that material-specific regulation is unproblematic, as Ingemar and Ian, both intermediaries, caution against pointing too narrowly to wood. Yet, there is evidence here that if public actors tie sustainability conditions to decision-making processes, WMC stops being just an option.

## 6.2 Normative Pressure through Cost Calculations

Where regulative pressure is insufficient to bring about field-level change, normative pressure becomes a crucial means through which sustainability transitions are transmitted. Scott (2005) characterises normative pressure as the internalisation of obligation rather than coercive forces. In inter-organisational fields, this requires standards that are shared strongly enough to travel across actor positions. When these standards are adopted unevenly across the field, normative pressure remains segmented.

The empirical findings reveal that cost calculations act as a mechanism through which sustainability transitions are weakened as they move through the field. Costing at the early stages of a project serves as a gatekeeper, deciding which of the proposed solutions can be considered appropriate before a material is selected. Although it may seem economic, it is institutionally normative in the sense that cost control is treated as responsible and professionally legitimate behaviour. As Ian comments, when market conditions are weak: *"you have to find every penny"*. In these circumstances, whether the project uses wood or concrete becomes secondary to making the project work financially. Cost calculation therefore becomes one of the ways in which normative expectations are interpreted.

This does not mean that cost estimation itself is flawed or incorrect. Rather, procedures followed during the assessment process appear to be better calibrated for concrete and steel than for WMC. The use of concrete and steel has the advantage of accumulated knowledge, standardised supplier relationships, and familiar risk assumptions, while WMC is more often assessed through uncertainty. In this sense, unfamiliarity can lead to financial risk. Belinda's observation that actors return to "*traditional methods*" because concrete is perceived as cheap illustrates this well. What matters here is not only material cost, but also what can be counted on within established practice. Estimating risk is normatively legitimate, but the assumptions used to estimate it are shaped by path-dependent knowledge structures.

There is not a lack of pressure towards sustainability, but the pressure is redirected. Buyers may have their climate targets, green financing requirements, or customer expectations, while suppliers may have WMC capacity and incentives. But these pressures are absorbed when they reach project-level cost control routines. This supports the literature on sustainability in inter-organisational settings. Pressure there is often translated through intermediary actors rather than transmitted unchanged across the field (Saeed et al., 2018; Huq & Stevenson, 2020). Normative pressure therefore shapes the transition, but not necessarily by amplifying sustainability as a binding criterion for material selection. In this case, it instead preserves established practice by defining financially cautious material selection as the professionally appropriate response.

## 6.3 Cultural-Cognitive Pressures: Perceived Risk of Uncertainty

The empirics indicate concrete and steel as dominant in the construction industry. This is not primarily ideological, since actors across the field acknowledge WMC's technical viability and sustainability advantages. The persistent use of concrete and steel can be explained by two factors. First, professional and educational training has been centred around concrete and steel. Therefore, unequal distribution of technical confidence in choosing WMC can be found between different actors and individuals in the inter-organisational field. Moreover, project routines of intermediaries have created path dependence in choosing certain materials, procurement, logistical processes, and contractor relations based on familiarity with established materials, extending Silvestre et al. (2020). Introducing WMC disrupts both material choice and co-ordination within the inter-organisational field.

Thus, WMC requires actors to invest in comprehensibility by explaining, demonstrating, and justifying the less familiar choice. This is in line with Scott's (2005) idea of legitimacy through comprehensibility. Cultural appropriateness is assumed when no effort is needed to convince others about the chosen solution. However, unfamiliar options must be justified. Investment in making such a case is not equally shared because suppliers have the largest burden of explanation, and must convince buyers of the advantages for them and intermediaries of the technical advantages. Buyers need to feel that there are enough advantages to specifically demand WMC from intermediaries, who in turn will adopt it only when demand is specific and sufficiently large.

Risk perception thereby constitutes a cultural-cognitive path dependency, as risk is perceived to be higher when there is a lack of knowledge and experience. The implication for the research question is that cultural-cognitive pressure interacts with the regulative and normative pressures such that it limits the pool of actors with adequate cultural-cognitive resources and understandings to respond to sustainability ambitions operationally instead of only declaratively.

## 6.4 Power Dynamics: How Bottlenecks Occur

Magnusson & Werner (2023) show that incumbents may slow transitions by controlling the practical terms on which alternatives are assessed. A bottleneck, in this sense, is an agenda-setting position rather than a site of refusal. Intermediaries make up this position structurally. Buyers depend on them to produce proposals and estimates, and suppliers depend on them to create the demand that justifies investment in WMC capacity. When intermediaries decline to offer WMC alternatives because of unfamiliarity or cost estimates, the effect is equivalent to Lukes' (2005) agenda-setting, and WMC is not placed on the project agenda even when surrounding actors are inclined towards it, supporting Vihemäki et al. (2020).

The bottleneck is therefore not a result of any individual actor's disposition towards WMC. Instead, it is an emergent result of how institutional pressures combine at a structurally central position in the inter-organisational field. Weak regulative pressure provides no floor beneath the intermediaries' cost calculations. Normative pressure exists, but is absorbed through cost conventions. Cultural-cognitive pressure leaves actors less confident in adopting unfamiliar alternatives. Applying the empirical findings to Figure 2.2, Figure 6.4 illustrates the bottleneck effect determining the level of adoption. Due to the low regulative pressure promoting the transition, the bottleneck is sustained.

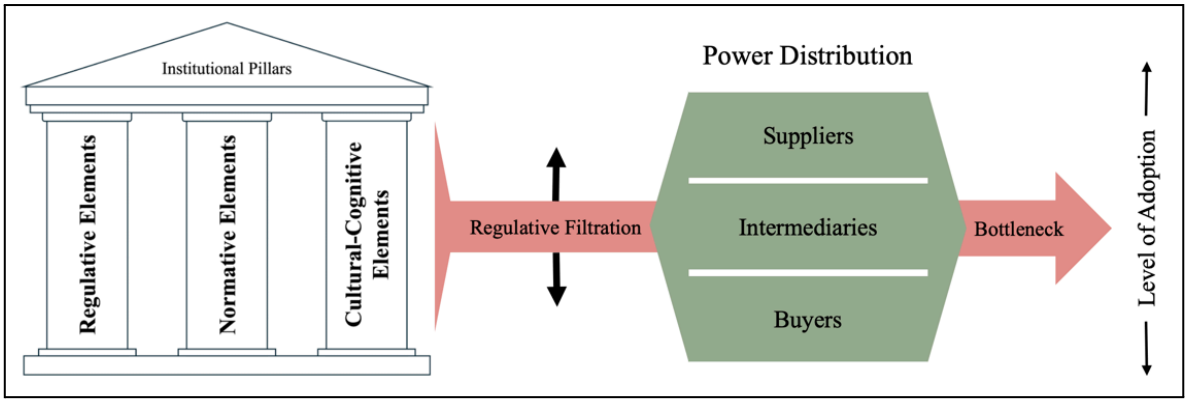



*Figure 6.4: Bottleneck determining level of adoption*

(*Note. Created by the authors based on* Scott (2005), *and* Lukes (2005))

## 6.5 Interaction in the Inter-Organisational Field

To answer the research question, it is necessary to move from the analysis of individual pressures to the analysis of how they interact across actor positions. The previous sections have stated that none of the three institutional pressures is individually sufficient to explain the adoption of WMC. What the empirical data reveals is that these pressures interact rather than operate in parallel, and that their interaction is conditioned by the unequal distribution of power across actors in the field.

Figure 6.5 represents this interaction. The figure shows how pressure moves through the inter-organisational field and where it can break down before a decision is adopted. The arrows represent exercises of power, where the direction of the arrow represents the direction of who has power over whom, and by what leverage. For an action or practice to be adopted for a project, all power conditions must be met, i.e. all solid-arrow conditions must hold.

Full arrows represent a power negotiation that must be met for every project, and red arrows represent critical points where negotiation is more sensitive to breakdown, and thereby failure of the field to adopt a practice. Dashed lines represent what an actor or project can disseminate over time, through repeated interactions and engagements.

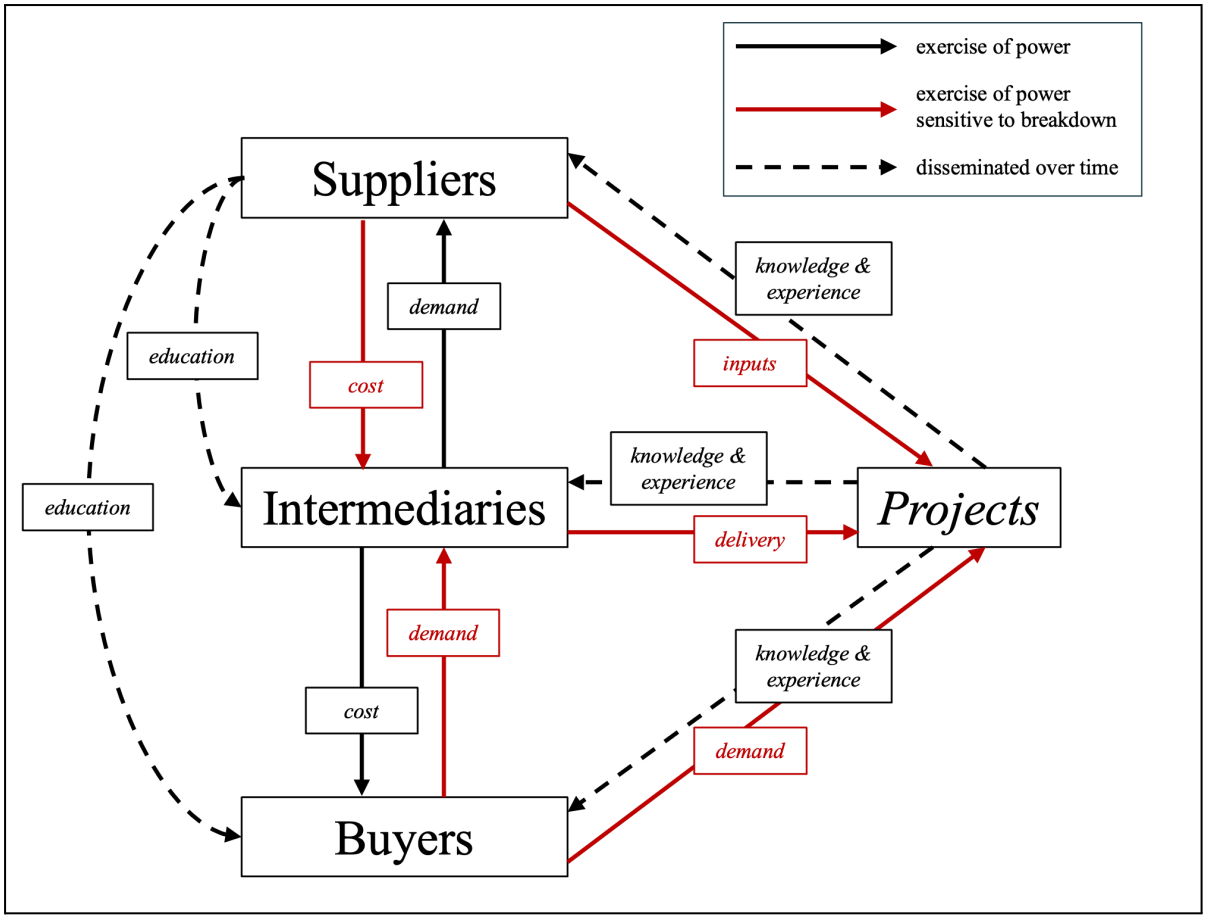



*Figure 6.5: Power and interactions in the inter-organisational field*

(*Note. Created by the authors*)

The broader theoretical conclusion is that sustainability transitions in inter-organisational fields do not stall because any single pillar of institutional pressure is missing. They remain partial when the interaction across pillars produces a distributional outcome in which the actors with the greatest structural power to drive change are the actors least affected by the pressures at play. In the case of WMC, the regulative gap removes the floor beneath the bottleneck, cost conventions absorb normative pressure instead of transmitting it, and path dependence places the burden of change on actors without the power to make it unavoidable. Therefore, the transition advances marginally only where demand is unusually strong, actors are willing to accept uncertainty, and local regulation introduces the coercive pressure missing at the national level, but the transition does not become field-wide.

# 7. DISCUSSION & CONCLUSIONS

## 7.1 Answering the Research Question

The study examined the following question: *How do institutional pressures interact across actors in the construction inter-organisational field to shape sustainability transitions?*

The findings suggest that transitions are shaped by how pressures are carried, interpreted, and limited between actors. In the Swedish WMC case, regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive pressures are all present, but they do not reinforce one another strongly enough to produce field-wide adoption. Regulative pressure remained insufficient to make WMC unavoidable in mainstream project decisions. Normative pressure created expectations around sustainability, but was often redirected through cost calculations. Cultural-cognitive pressure preserved familiar routines, since concrete and steel remained more comprehensible to many key actors than wood-based alternatives. This refines Saeed et al.'s (2018) and Huq & Stevenson's (2020) accounts of how pressure travels through supply chains. Rather than reading transmission as a property of the chain itself, the findings show that the type of pressure determines where in the field it is most likely to be absorbed.

Thus, the answer to the research question lies in the interaction between pressure and field position. Institutional pressures do not affect all actors equally. Buyers may express sustainability ambitions, suppliers may develop WMC capacity, and intermediaries may recognise the technical possibility of wood. Yet adoption depends on whether these positions are connected in a way that turns expectation into a choice. The empirical material shows that this connection often breaks down around cost, risk, and unfamiliarity, illustrated in Figure 6.5. WMC can be legitimate in principle while still being treated as difficult, expensive, or uncertain in the decision situations where material choices are made. This complements Salmi et al.'s (2022) account of municipalities as drivers of change in Nordic wood construction by showing that, at the national level, the same dynamic runs in reverse; in the absence of strong municipal or regulatory anchoring, normative pressure is absorbed into established cost conventions instead of reshaping them.

Power explains why this breakdown matters. Buyers require intermediaries to put forward options for projects, while suppliers need intermediaries to create a demand for WMC solutions. When intermediaries do not pro-actively seek to normalise timber alternatives, the

transition is blocked before it becomes a buyer choice in practice. This supports the study's use of power as a complement to institutional theory, as the question becomes a matter of which actors are positioned to decide whether pressures travel further throughout the field. Ultimately, this extends Magnusson & Werner's (2023) account of incumbent power in sustainability transitions by locating that power at a structurally specific position rather than at the level of the incumbent firm. Intermediaries slow the transition through their agenda-setting capacity linked to the cost estimate stage (Lukes, 2005), rather than through visible resistance.

The broader conclusion is that WMC can occur locally without becoming adopted field-wide. Projects move forward when sustainability expectations are unusually strong, when buyers accept uncertainty, when suppliers and intermediaries co-ordinate early, or when local governance strengthens the regulative pressure for WMC. However, these conditions do not currently describe the field as a whole. Instead, the sustainability transition remains partial because institutional pressures are decoupled through unequal actor positions rather than converted into shared practice across the inter-organisational field.

## 7.2 Implications

The implications of the study follow from the central finding that sustainability transitions depend on how institutional pressures interact between actors, and on the unequal power actors hold over one another. The following sections discuss what this means for research, practitioners, and policymakers.

### 7.2.1 For Research

The findings demonstrate that research on sustainability transitions should approach institutional pressures as relational and positional rather than general field-level conditions. Based on the empirical material, the presence of all three types of institutional pressure does not guarantee field-wide adoption, since their effect depends on where they are translated into calculable and feasible project alternatives. Research that identifies the existence of pressure may therefore overstate its effect if it does not also examine where in the inter-organisational field pressure is translated into project choices.

As for power, actors holding sustainability ambitions may not be the actors able to make adoption unavoidable. Intermediaries instead hold the power to shape whether alternatives are

left outside the project plan, that is, where pressure breaks down. Future research on sustainability transitions should therefore separate legitimacy, project-level adoption, and field-wide adoption, since this study shows that an alternative can become legitimate without becoming normalised practice.

### 7.2.2 For Practitioners

The findings suggest that sustainability ambitions need to be made operational before narrowing down the material choice based on cost considerations, procurement routines, and familiar construction practices. While buyers may express demand for WMC and suppliers may possess the ability to deliver wood-based solutions, the empirics show that adoption often depends on whether intermediaries are able or willing to make WMC calculable and feasible during the project process.

Therefore, early-stage co-ordination between the three actor groups becomes crucial. Buyers need to define sustainability requirements early enough to affect project design. Intermediaries need to build competence and knowledge that allow WMC to be priced and proposed without excessive uncertainty. Suppliers need to support this process by making technical knowledge accessible to both buyers and intermediaries, to provide sufficient competence to translate sustainability ambitions into mainstream practice. Support for sustainability is insufficient, as it needs to be connected to the routines where material choices are made.

### 7.2.3 For Policymakers

For policymakers, the study suggests that regulations affect decision-making processes by changing the environment within which actors operate rather than merely by expressing sustainability aspirations. A lack of strong regulative pressure from the national level has left sustainability ambitions dependent on local requirements, voluntary commitments, and the willingness of actors to work amidst uncertainty. This helps explain why WMC progresses unevenly across projects rather than becoming a field-level expectation.

Accordingly, policy interventions should focus on where pressure breaks down. If cost calculations are a main route through which sustainability pressure is transmitted, then policies affecting carbon accounting could be more consequential than broad sustainability goals alone. For the purposes of promoting sustainability, governance actors must attach

consequences to non-compliance with sustainability ambitions, as actors can otherwise continue treating sustainability as one consideration among several rather than a binding requirement. If unfamiliarity with WMC increases perceived risks, then municipalities can tender out more projects predicated on its use to help build familiarity among field actors, and encourage the continued accumulation of knowledge and experience of working with WMC.

## 7.3 Limitations of the Study

The empirical data consists of interviews with actors in various positions within the construction inter-organisational field (suppliers, intermediaries, and buyers). This provides insight into the influence of institutional pressures experienced by actors involved in project and material decisions. However, the field is not fully covered. Governance actors, such as municipalities and national regulators, are discussed through participant perspectives, omitting direct examination of their reasoning regarding regulative pressures.

Participants in the sample can also be expected to be generally more positive towards WMC, given the study's expertise requirements in the area. This creates a possible selection bias, as the findings may overrepresent actors already engaged with the transition and underrepresent actors who treat WMC as irrelevant, risky, or commercially unattractive. The study therefore provides stronger insight into how pressures move among engaged actors than into the full range of resistances across the inter-organisational field.

## 7.4 Recommendations for Future Research

Future research should examine the role of governance actors more directly. This study discusses them, but through the perspectives of buyers, intermediaries, and suppliers. Interviews with municipal authorities and national regulators would give a fuller picture of the interaction between the field and regulators, and how it affects pressures and resulting outcomes.

Comparative research across the Nordic countries could further examine how different regulatory frameworks affect the balance between regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive pressures. Several participants specifically raised the matter of stricter regulatory environments for WMC in Denmark and Finland, which raises an opportunity to

compare how regulatory pressures have affected interaction within the inter-organisational field.

Longitudinal research could follow a construction or sustainability project in real time, and analyse perceptions and responses for each step in an implementation process. Such research could examine when or how a sustainability objective enters the agenda, the impact of cost calculations, and how actors negotiate responsibility across the project process. Such a design would reduce reliance on retrospective accounts.

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# APPENDICES


## Appendix A

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# Appendix A: Interviews Conducted

| Alias | Group | Job Title | Affiliation | Experience | Interview Location | Date | Length |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Belinda** | Buyers | Sustainability Director | Property Management Company | 27 years | Stockholm SWE | 30.03. 2026 | 51:05 |
| **Stefan** | Suppliers | Head of Technical Staff | Wood Processing Company | 16 years | (Online) SWE | 07.04. 2026 | 56:33 |
| **Sebastian** | Suppliers | Head of Sales | Wood Processing Company | 18 years | (Online) SWE | 08.04. 2026 | 56:12 |
| **Isak** | Intermediaries | Specialist Climate and Construction | Construction Company | 20 years | (Online) SWE | 21.04. 2026 | 53:44 |
| **Benjamin** | Buyers | Business Development Manager | Property Management Company | 23 years | Stockholm SWE | 22.04. 2026 | 1:00:46 |
| **Ian** | Intermediaries | Business Manager | Construction Company | 14 years | (Online) SWE | 27.04. 2026 | 57:38 |
| **Ingemar** | Intermediaries | Technical Manager of Wood Construction | Construction Consultancy | 21 years | (Online) SWE | 29.04. 2026 | 1:04:10 |
| **Birgitta** | Buyers | Sustainability Director | Property Management Company | 11 years | Stockholm SWE | 04.05. 2026 | 55:25 |
| **Simon** | Suppliers | Product Manager | Wood Processing Company | 20 years | (Online) SWE | 05.05. 2026 | 1:25:12 |

*Table A: Respondent Table Interview Details*

Brief version given in Section 4.3.3

# Appendix B: Interview Guide

**Part 1 - Personal and Organisational Background**

- *What does your organisation primarily do?*
- *What is your role at said organisation? How long have you worked here? What is your previous experience?*
- *How would you describe your organisation's position in the construction value chain in practice? Where do you feel you can shape outcomes, and where are you mainly dependent on other actors?*
- *If not, has your organisation considered a transition to wood construction/become part of the wood construction value chain?*
- *On a personal level, how do you usually respond to change in your work? Would you describe yourself as someone who is generally eager to try new approaches, more cautious and wanting things to be proven first, or more skeptical unless change becomes necessary? And why?*

**Part 2 - Institutional Pressures in Practice**

- *Thinking of the most recent major decision in which a wood-based solution was considered, what external pressures most shaped the outcome, and how did they do so?*
- *In that case, which pressures felt non-negotiable because of formal rules or requirements, which came from stakeholder or industry expectations, and which reflected taken-for-granted assumptions about "how things are done"?*
- *Can you describe a situation where a regulatory or formal requirement pushed your organisation further or faster than it otherwise would have gone?*
- *Can you describe the opposite: a situation where norms, stakeholder expectations, or prevailing beliefs mattered more than regulation?*

- *When regulations, procurement criteria, certification expectations, and industry assumptions point in different directions, how do you decide which signal to prioritise?*
- *Have you seen formal rules increase the legitimacy of wood construction inside your organisation or towards external stakeholders?*
- *Have you also seen cases where regulatory pressure constrained experimentation or slowed implementation?*
- *In your experience, what makes a sustainability issue move from "important" to "something we must act on now"? What usually triggers that shift?*
- *In wood construction decisions, where do taken-for-granted beliefs or industry mindsets still matter more than formal policy? (for example around risk, fire, durability, insurability, quality, or scalability?)*
- *When you try to push beyond minimum compliance, what kinds of resistance do you encounter, and do those resistances come mainly from regulatory constraints, stakeholder norms, or entrenched ways of thinking?*

**Part 3 - Transitions**

- *From your perspective, what do you consider to be the most prominent pressure affecting transitions in your organisation's customer offering?*
- *Was the external or internal pressure the stronger enabling/disabling factor?*
- *Looking ahead, what would need to change (in your opinion), for wood construction to become a more normal way of building rather than something project-specific / exceptional?*
- *How do you perceive your suppliers', customers', and competitors' willingness to transition towards new standards?*

# Appendix C: Consent Form

## Consent to participation in student's survey / interview

**The student's project.** As an integral part of the educational program at the Stockholm School of Economics, enrolled students complete an individual thesis. This work is sometimes based upon surveys and interviews connected to the subject. Participation is naturally entirely voluntary, and this text is intended to provide you with necessary information about that may concern your participation in the study or interview. You can at any time withdraw your consent and your data will thereafter be permanently erased.

**Confidentiality.** Anything you say or state in the survey or to the interviewers will be held strictly confidential and will only be made available to supervisors, tutors and the course management team.

**No personal data will be published.** The thesis written by the students will not contain any information that may identify you as participant to the survey or interview subject.

**Secured storage of data.** All data will be stored and processed safely by the SSE and will be permanently deleted when the projected is completed.

**Your rights under GDPR.** You are welcome to visit https://www.hhs.se/en/about-us/contact/data-protection/ in order read more and obtain information on your rights related to personal data.

| Project title | Year and semester |
|---|---|
| Institutional Pressures in Sustainability-Oriented Industry Change | 2026 Spring |
| **Aim of the study** | |
| To understand institutional pressures aiding in and inhibiting the construction sector from using more wood as a primary material | |
| **Students responsible for the study or interview** | |
| Carl Törn *s-id 26071* & Gustav Broman *s-id 26075* | |
| **Supervisors and department at SSE** | **Supervisor e-mail address** |
| Anna Söderblom, *Department of Management and Organization* | anna.soderblom@hhs.se |
| **Type of personal data about you to be processed** | |
| I consent to having my personal data processed in accordance with GDPR, and deleted upon completion of the project. This personal data includes name, email adress, and the recording and transcription of the interview. Personal identity markers, organisational affiliation, and interview findings will be anonymised in the final paper. | |

**I have taken part of the information provided above and consent to take part in this study:**

| Signature | Place and date |
|---|---|
| Name | |

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