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Enablers and Constraints of Environmental Sustainability Integration: A Structuration Perspective on Professional Sports Organizations

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ABSTRACT

Integrating environmental sustainability (ES) into organizational strategies and operations remains a persistent challenge, particularly in fields where environmental concerns are not yet embedded within dominant institutional norms and standards of behavior. In such contexts, ES risks being overshadowed by economic and operational priorities, hindering meaningful organizational change toward sustainability. This study addresses this challenge by examining how ES is integrated within organizations operating in a field where it is still in the early stages of institutionalization—namely, the European football sector. Drawing on structuration theory, the research applies the notions of signification, legitimation, and domination as sensitizing devices to explore factors that enable or constrain organizations in gradually altering societal structures to embed environmental concerns into strategies and operations. Methodologically, the study draws on a multiple case study of four National Football Associations operating in Europe. By focusing on the football sector, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of how organizations respond to institutional pressures for ES in the absence of fully established norms, exercising agency to shape meanings, transform expectations of behavior, and mobilize power and resources to drive organizational change toward sustainability.

1 | Introduction

In today's regulatory, market, and societal landscapes, organizations face increasing demands to integrate environmental sustainability (ES) as a core element of their strategies and operations (Sroufe 2017). Yet, meeting these demands remains a persistent challenge. Although organizations are urged to embrace change toward ES, they are simultaneously pressured to uphold economic and operational goals (Olesson et al. 2023). These conflicting institutional demands—that is, “pressures for conformity exerted by institutional referents on organizations in a given field” (Pache and Santos 2010, 457)—give rise to tensions between competing financial, operational, and environmental priorities (Dahlmann and Grosvold 2017). On one hand, addressing ES demands requires embedding change into

decision-making processes and daily operations, while endorsing a long-term perspective that considers a broader range of stakeholder needs. On the other hand, economic imperatives and operational constraints compel organizations to prioritize narrower, short-term goals (Hahn et al. 2014).

When left unaddressed, such tensions can lead to trade-offs that ultimately hinder organizational change in favor of maintaining “business as usual” (Hahn et al. 2010; Van der Byl and Slawinski 2015; Dyllick and Muff 2016). These trade-offs are further exacerbated in fields where ES is still in the early stages of institutionalization (Jennings and Zandbergen 1995)—that is, where norms and practices around ES have not yet gained widespread legitimacy among field actors and are not established as standard endeavors within the field (Tolbert and

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Zucker 1996; Greenwood et al. 2002; Hambrick et al. 2004). In such contexts, organizations navigate landscapes where ES-related structures—defined as “rules and regulations, normative prescriptions, and social expectations” (Pache and Santos 2010, 457)—remain nascent (Brown et al. 2009), competing for acceptance against more deeply entrenched norms, such as profitability and efficiency (Wenzig et al. 2022). As a result, organizations face heightened uncertainty in responding to ES demands, making it difficult to prioritize sustainability amid dominant economic or operational logics (Hahn and Pinkse 2014).

In light of these challenges, corporate sustainability research has explored how organizations navigate complex institutional environments to integrate ES (Wijen 2014; Misangyi 2016; Hyatt and Berente 2017). Much of this research has taken one of two broad perspectives. The macrolevel view focuses on how institutional forces—such as regulatory frameworks, normative pressures, and cultural expectations—influence ES adoption and integration (e.g., Testa et al. 2018; Daddi et al. 2020). In contrast, the microlevel view examines how internal organizational or individual-level factors—such as capabilities, leadership values, or personal motivations—shape the integration process (e.g., Aguinis and Glavas 2013; Hahn and Aragón-Correa 2015). Although the macroperspective aligns with neo-institutional theory and field-level dynamics (Hoffman and Jennings 2015), the microperspective has highlighted organizational elements such as capabilities and resources (e.g., Scarpellini et al. 2020; Chevrollier et al. 2024), values (e.g., Howard-Grenville 2006; Linnenluecke and Griffiths 2010), and individual cognition and behaviors (e.g., Uecker-Mercado and Walker 2012; Todaro et al. 2019; Gusmerotti et al. 2023) as key drivers of ES integration.

Despite these contributions, limited research has explored the intersection of macroperspectives and microperspectives to examine how organizations purposefully reinterpret or reshape dominant structures in response to ES demands (Hoffman 2001; Dillard et al. 2004)—particularly in contexts where ES has yet to become institutionalized. This gap in the literature has left underexplored how organizations use their agency to act upon and transform the structures that constrain or enable their sustainability efforts.

The dichotomy between macrolevel and microlevel analyses thus constrains the development of a more comprehensive understanding of ES integration—one that links organizational agency (i.e., the capacity to reflect, act upon, and shape the institutional environment) with the structures that influence behavior and decision-making (Giddens 1984). Structures, in this sense, are “shared rules and typifications that identify categories of social actors and their appropriate activities or relationships” (Barley and Tolbert 1997, 96). By treating structure and agency as separate elements, existing research fails to provide a mesolevel or middle-range view (Eisenhardt and Bourgeois 1988; Hoffman and Ocasio 2001) that captures the reciprocal dynamics between actors (e.g., organizations and their members) and the institutional structures that frame organizational strategies and operations. Yet, the processes and outcomes of ES integration are deeply embedded in social structures, and it is precisely through the interaction between actors and structures

that change emerges (Howard-Grenville 2006; Delmas and Toffel 2008).

To address this gap, this study seeks to illuminate the structural dimensions that organizations draw upon to integrate ES into their strategies and operations, as well as the specific factors that enable or constrain organizational actors in acting upon these structures—especially in fields characterized by early-stage ES institutionalization. The study emphasizes the dynamics that occur in the interplay between institutional structures and organizational agency (Langley and Tsoukas 2016), thereby offering a more nuanced, processual understanding of how ES becomes embedded within organizational routines and decisions.

To achieve this aim, the study draws on Giddens’s structuration theory (ST), which overcomes the dualism between institutional and agency-focused theories by conceptualizing structure and agency as a mutually constitutive duality (Giddens 1979, 1984). Structuration refers to the ongoing interaction between human actors and social structures, where “actors are at the same time the creators of social systems yet created by them” (Giddens 1991, 204). Specifically, the study utilizes Giddens’s three modalities of structure—signification (meaning), legitimation (norms), and domination (power and resources)—to investigate the factors that facilitate or hinder organizations in transforming structures to integrate ES. This leads to the following research question: What factors enable or constrain organizations in transforming structures of signification, legitimation, and domination to drive change toward ES integration?

The empirical context of the study is a multiple case study involving four sports organizations operating in the European football sector. This setting offers a compelling case for two key reasons. First, it provides an opportunity to examine the structuration process underlying ES integration in an organizational field that is at an early stage of institutionalization—when structures promoting ES have not yet been embedded in dominant institutional norms (Barley and Tolbert 1997). This is evidenced by the sector’s lack of well-established best practices, recognized sustainability standards, and dedicated environmental policies (Daddi et al. 2022). As such, this context offers a unique vantage point to observe how organizations exercise agency in shaping and enacting ES-related structures, relatively free from the rigid constraints of institutionalized norms.

Second, the setting is characterized by intense institutional complexity. European football organizations operate in a commercially driven environment where competitive pressures, media rights, and sponsorship deals heavily influence strategic and operational priorities (Desbordes 2023). At the same time, sports organizations face growing stakeholder scrutiny because of their high visibility and public-facing roles, which generate strong expectations to address social and environmental issues (McCullough et al. 2016). These organizations are also embedded in complex stakeholder ecosystems involving regulators, public authorities, commercial partners, and highly engaged fan communities—each of which plays a role in shaping organizational behavior (Pedras et al. 2020; Gionfriddo et al. 2023). This combination of weakly institutionalized ES norms and heightened stakeholder complexity offers a fertile ground to explore

how organizations interact with and transform institutional structures to integrate sustainability.

This study's contributions are threefold, with implications for both theory and practice. First, by leveraging ST, the study bridges macrolevel and microlevel perspectives on ES integration, focusing instead on the relational interplay between structures and organizational agency. This mesolevel lens enables the identification of factors that constrain or enable organizational change toward sustainability. Second, the study contributes to our understanding of ES integration in emerging fields by examining how organizations address and shape sustainability-related structures in the absence of fully institutionalized norms. Rather than portraying organizations as passive recipients of institutional pressures, the study emphasizes their active engagement in institutional work—modifying or reconstructing structures to align with sustainability goals (Dahlmann and Grosvold 2017; Nite and Edwards 2021). Third, the study highlights how organizational actors transform meanings, reinforce or adjust behavioral norms, and mobilize resources to facilitate sustainable change. By investigating these microfoundations of structuration, the study offers insights into how organizations can strengthen their agency to drive ES integration in complex, evolving institutional environments.

2 | Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

2.1 | ST and Environmental Sustainability Integration

Giddens's ST has significantly influenced the understanding of how the reciprocal interaction between human agency and social structures drives change in social systems (Barley and Tolbert 1997). According to ST, structures comprise norms, rules, and resources—both formal and intangible—that permeate an institutional field, simultaneously enabling and constraining agents' actions (Giddens 1979). At the same time, agents reproduce or alter those structures by reiterating them through routine behavior or purposefully acting otherwise (Giddens 1984). ST thus portrays agents as knowledgeable and reflexive actors, capable of sustaining or transforming their social environment through their actions (Macintosh and Scapens 1990). As a result of this “duality of structure,” change in social systems cannot be explained by structures or agency alone but occurs through their reciprocal and recursive influence. Although agents reproduce structures through action, they can also reinterpret or adapt these structures, gradually driving systemic change (Dillard et al. 2004).

Giddens (1984) delineates three dimensions of structures within social systems: signification, legitimation, and domination. To illustrate how these structural dimensions are enacted, Giddens introduced the concepts of modality and interaction as analytical links between social structures and agents' actions (Giddens 1979). Modalities—such as interpretive schemes, norms, and facilities—mediate the connection between structures and agency, enabling actors to draw upon structural properties in their actions (Jarzabkowski 2008), whereas interaction refers to the practices through which agents reproduce or transform these structures in social contexts (Barley and Tolbert 1997).

Signification structures generate meaning in social interactions by providing interpretive schemes to help agents make sense of organizational realities and communicate about organizational action, thereby shaping the collective understanding of “how things are done around here” (Giddens 1984). Change in signification structures occurs through new discursive practices, shared values, and tacit principles that reshape meanings collectively associated with organizational priorities and objectives (Jarzabkowski 2008; den Hond et al. 2012). Legitimation structures, in contrast, establish legitimacy by setting normative rules to guide actions toward desirable outcomes and sanction noncompliant behavior. They operate on both normative and procedural levels within organizations, determining explicit conduct aligned with accepted norms (Giddens 1984). Change in legitimation structures may involve introducing new procedures, rules, performance objectives, and metrics (Cohen 1989). Finally, domination structures generate power by authorizing action through access to resources and formal authority. These operate at the level of strategic management and governance, aligning planning with long-term objectives (Jarzabkowski 2008). Change here may include reallocating resources—whether financial, human, or organizational—and redefining formal roles, responsibilities, and incentive systems (Cohen 1989; Macintosh and Scapens 1990).

Although all social systems include these three structural dimensions, agents often leverage dominant structures to exercise agency during the structuration process (Giddens 1984, 1991). Thus, ES integration may follow different trajectories and yield varied outcomes, depending on how organizational actors engage with existing structures and reshape them to align with ES objectives (Barley and Tolbert 1997). In contexts where signification structures are dominant, agents may seek to integrate ES into the core of organizational culture by transforming the values and assumptions that guide members' perceptions of ES (Chung and Parker 2008; Wright et al. 2012). Where legitimation structures prevail, actors may translate ES concerns into operational targets and procedures to drive behavioral change (Sroufe 2017; Tabares et al. 2021). Likewise, when domination structures are central, agents may formally embed ES into strategic planning, performance evaluation, and reward systems, while reallocating resources and redefining responsibilities to strengthen a governance of ES within the organization (Chung and Parker 2008; Haugh and Talwar 2010).

However, for ES to be fully internalized, agents must diffuse environmental concerns across all structural dimensions that guide organizational action: from value systems (signification) to behavioral norms (legitimation), to strategic resource allocation (domination) (Howard-Grenville 2006; Haugh and Talwar 2010; Hyatt and Berente 2017). When ES is decoupled across signification, legitimation, and domination structures, trade-offs may emerge that hinder long-term change (Olesson et al. 2023). For example, when environmental procedures are misaligned with organizational values, employees may prioritize operational goals over compliance, perceiving that ES is not a genuine priority (Ramus and Montiel 2005; Hahn et al. 2010; Wright et al. 2012; Dahlmann and Grosvold 2017). Similarly, if improvement targets lack supporting resources and formal responsibilities, they may be abandoned in favor of economic priorities (Van der Byl and Slawinski 2015; Raw et al. 2022).

Based on these considerations, we argue that ST is well-suited to deepen our understanding of how organizations and their members navigate and transform social structures to foster ES integration over time. Unlike deterministic, neo-institutional perspectives that portray institutional norms as rigid constraints, ST recognizes the role of agency in enacting and reshaping these norms (Barley and Tolbert 1997; Dillard et al. 2004). Although institutional theory has been widely applied in corporate sustainability research (Daddi et al. 2018; Todaro et al. 2020), scholars have pointed out its limitations in explaining divergent organizational responses to ES demands (Wright et al. 2012; Gauthier 2013; Eitrem et al. 2024). For instance, Delmas and Toffel (2008, 1048) explored how differing organizational receptivity to institutional pressures results in “persistent differences among organizations that share common organizational fields,” emphasizing the influence of organizational structure and decision-makers’ framings. Other studies have found that although some firms substantively internalize ES demands, others symbolically comply without making meaningful changes, thereby maintaining “business as usual” (Christmann and Taylor 2006; Aravind and Christmann 2011; Wijen 2014; Testa et al. 2018). These symbolic actions may serve as coping mechanisms—intentional or not—for managing institutional complexity without actively resolving competing demands (Pache and Santos 2010).

These insights highlight the need for theoretical approaches that both acknowledge the broader institutional context and explore the internal mechanisms through which organizations actively engage with, reinterpret, and transform structures to integrate ES (Hoffman 2001). By emphasizing the recursive relationship between agency and structure, ST provides a means to bridge macrolevel and microlevel perspectives on ES integration and offers tools for identifying the factors that enable or constrain change. Giddens’s own guidance for empirical research encourages the use of signification, legitimation, and domination as “sensitizing devices” to analyze social change (Giddens 1989; Pozzebon and Pinsonneault 2005; Jack and Kholeif 2007). Accordingly, we propose that these three dimensions offer a useful framework to examine the enablers and barriers of ES integration in sports organizations.

2.2 | Sports Organizations and the Environment

In recent years, the sports industry has made significant strides toward ES. The United Nations (UN) launched the Sports for Climate Action Framework, which builds on the UN Paris Agreement to support sports organizations in pursuing climate action (UNFCCC 2019). This was followed by *Sports for Nature*, a UN initiative aimed at involving sports organizations in biodiversity protection (UNEP 2022). At the European Union (EU) level, the European Commission identified ES as a priority in the EU Work Plan for Sport (European Commission 2020), positioning sport as a lever to transform both collective and individual behavior toward ES (European Council 2022). In European football, the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) introduced its *Football Sustainability Strategy 2030*, which aims to mobilize the sport in support of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (UEFA 2021).

However, despite formal commitments and growing regulatory pressures, existing research suggests that the adoption of environmental practices by sports organizations remains fragmented and inconsistent (McCullough et al. 2020; Daddi et al. 2022; Hugaerts et al. 2022). Much of the literature on the relationship between sport and the environment draws from a neo-institutional perspective (Babiak and Trendafilova 2011; Uecker-Mercado and Walker 2012; Ross and Leopkey 2017; Nite and Edwards 2021; Daddi et al. 2021; Todaro et al. 2022). However, empirical findings testing the assumption that sports organizations respond to social, political, and competitive pressures by adopting ES practices have produced inconclusive results.

For instance, Daddi et al. (2021) examined the influence of normative, coercive, and mimetic pressures on European football clubs. Their findings suggest that institutional pressures exert only limited influence, a result attributed to the fragmented nature of the field, characterized by “the lack of established structures, renowned sector-specific approaches and best practices” (Daddi et al. 2021, 18). Similarly, Trendafilova et al. (2013) found that although institutional pressures contribute to ES adoption among North American sports teams, organizational responses vary significantly. Some teams “go above and beyond what the institutional environment expects of them,” whereas others adopt only “the bare minimum expected by the institutional environment” (Trendafilova et al. 2013, 308–309). Uecker-Mercado and Walker (2012) studied ES initiatives among sport facility managers in North America and noted that although many facilities had developed formal and informal environmental systems, others remained undecided. The authors concluded that the success of ES initiatives is “determined more by internal rather than external forces” (Uecker-Mercado and Walker 2012, 281).

Recent studies have also highlighted the prevalence of symbolic ES efforts in the sector. Daddi et al. (2022), for example, analyzed environmental initiatives among European football organizations and found a disconnect between limited operational practices and an abundance of external communication, partnerships, and networks. These efforts, they argue, project “an image of the state-of-the-art of the practices in use in this industry that is more positive than the actual—self-assessed—situation” (Daddi et al. 2022, 18). Hugaerts et al. (2022) studied the reporting practices of Belgian sports federations and noted that only a few provided a comprehensive ES strategy. When ES practices were reported, they frequently served a symbolic rather than substantive function. In a similar vein, Cury et al. (2023) examined the sustainability policies of Australian Olympic sports organizations preparing for the 2032 Brisbane Games. They found that these policies lacked the ambition and specificity required to achieve a “climate-positive” event, pointing to the absence of clear mitigation targets and structured implementation plans.

Taken together, these findings suggest that ES has yet to become institutionalized as a widely accepted and legitimate norm in the sports field. The lack of standardized management practices, sector-specific benchmarks, and shared expertise reflects a low level of formalization (Nite and Edwards 2021; Daddi et al. 2022). At the same time, differing framings and interpretations of ES persist (Raw et al. 2022; Sandvik and Seippel 2023). In this context, environmental initiatives often remain discretionary, as

weak ES-related structures—such as norms, rules, and power relations—allow for divergent interpretations and experimentation with sustainability practices (Uecker-Mercado and Walker 2012; Casper et al. 2012). Consequently, as McCullough et al. (2016) suggest, the early “waves” of environmentalism in sport have largely been driven by the agency of individual organizations or actors. Yet, in the absence of robust structures, such efforts tend to result in low-cost, low-intensity actions that are disconnected from broader strategic planning processes (McCullough et al. 2016).

Despite these valuable insights, our understanding of how ES becomes integrated within sports organizations remains underdeveloped. One reason is the lack of empirical studies that examine the structuration processes in fields where the institutionalization of ES is weak or emergent. Addressing this gap requires a closer look at the dynamics that enable or constrain organizations and their members to reshape existing structures and embed sustainability concerns across multiple organizational levels. These range from shared meanings and values to rules, routines, policies, decision-making, and the allocation of resources.

3 | Method and Data

To address our research question, a multiple case study was developed to gain a deep understanding of change factors and hinderers (Yin 2018).

3.1 | Sampling Approach

Purposeful theoretical sampling was adopted to focus “on theoretically useful cases—i.e., those that replicate or extend theory by filling conceptual categories” (Eisenhardt 1989, 533), thus selecting cases and informants whose characteristics match the purpose of the research (Strauss and Corbin 1998).

First, given the aim of examining factors of ES integration beyond external institutional forces in a field at an early stage of ES institutionalization, we targeted organizations operating in similar organizational fields and thus subject to analogous institutional demands. To achieve this aim, we chose organizations operating in the same sector, the European football sector. Although the dynamics of ES integration in this sector may differ from those in sectors at a later stage of ES institutionalization, this focus allows us to control for industry-specific institutional pressures while examining a field where ES structures are still emerging and evolving.

In European sports, football organizations hold significant influence because of their popularity, market expansion, and extensive network of stakeholders. We targeted football organizations that are most exposed to institutional demands for ES and also possess resources and mandates to endorse and diffuse ES in the sector, that is, National Football Associations (NFAs). Being national representatives of FIFA and UEFA, NFAs are the national governing bodies of football, as they provide rules and guidelines to football clubs and stadium managers at national and local levels. NFAs also cooperate with UEFA in organizing European official competitions and in ensuring effective governance for football organizations. NFAs are in the best position to support the “greening” of the football sector, by diffusing best

practices, setting standards of behavior, and enforcing the adoption of UEFA's requirements among local associations, clubs, and stadium managers. NFAs can “lead by example” by integrating ES into their own structures and activities.

Second, for the sake of the study, we targeted NFAs that are committed to integrating ES into their strategies and operations. This focus allows for the examination of the dynamics of ES integration by ensuring that the selected cases represent “theoretically useful cases,” thereby excluding those that do not provide relevant insights for the study's objective. To this aim, we reviewed media outlets of the NFAs associated with UEFA, such as websites and reports (e.g., annual reports and social responsibility reports), to identify organizations that adopt a proactive stance about ES issues. The following criteria were adopted to select NFAs: (i) whether the NFA had adopted a sustainability strategy or mentioned ES among its strategic pillars; (ii) whether the NFA was participating in sustainability-focused sectorial networks (e.g., European Football for Development Network) or other ES initiatives (e.g., EU-funded projects); (iii) whether the NFA, its infrastructures, or main events were certified according to voluntary environmental management schemes (e.g., ISO 14001 and ISO 20121); (iv) whether the NFA had appointed a sustainability manager; and (v) whether the NFA was disclosing information regarding its environmental performance or environmentally-friendly initiatives in football matches.

Ten environmentally proactive NFAs were identified and contacted via email and phone calls. Four organizations agreed to take part in the research, whereas the other organizations either declined the request due to time constraints or did not reply. Although a larger sample might enhance statistical generalizability, qualitative case study research prioritizes theoretical generalization, aiming to deepen the understanding of organizational mechanisms rather than represent a broader population (Eisenhardt and Graebner 2007). As previous studies suggest, multiple case studies do not require a large sample size, but rather the selection of cases that provide theoretical insights into the phenomenon under investigation (Yin 2018).

Furthermore, theoretical saturation was reached during data collection, as no new significant themes emerged from the later interviews (Guest et al. 2006). Additional cases would have resulted in redundancy rather than new conceptual insights. Finally, even within the sample of proactive NFAs, variations in ES integration levels allowed for the identification of both enabling and constraining factors, providing a nuanced perspective on structuration dynamics rather than an overly optimistic portrayal.

The four NFAs were granted anonymity to preserve the privacy of interviewees; accordingly, the nationality of the NFAs cannot be disclosed in the present study. Information about the participant NFAs is provided in Table 1.

3.2 | Data Collection

Data collection encompassed diverse primary data sources collected through both desk research and semistructured interviews with key informants (see Table 1). Desk research data included the following sources: web pages; annual and

TABLE 1 | Description of cases and data collected.

Case	Region	No. of employees^a	Annual revenue (€)^a	Clubs and affiliated members	Path toward sustainability	Interviewees	Documents or notes analyzed
Alpha	Northern Europe	159	≈ 17.3 million	2909 clubs, and ≈ 1.3 million members	Alpha initiated its path toward sustainability in 2017, with the launch of the “Football in Society” program, which aimed at promoting health, gender equality, and social inclusion in accordance with the UN SDGs. As a result of partnerships established both nationally and internationally, Alpha gradually incorporated environmental and climate issues as part of its social responsibility. This led to the launch of the “Energy Initiative” to reduce energy consumption across the federation and clubs’ facilities and to the adoption of an energy policy in 2020. In 2021, Alpha integrated a Sustainability Manager into its workforce and published its first sustainability report.	Events Manager; Facility Manager; Human Resources Manager; Marketing and Sales Manager; Communication Manager	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 1 official web page - 1 sustainability report - 2 integrated annual reports (2019, 2020, 2021) - 2 technical procedures (energy management, green procurement) - 5 job descriptions - 6 pages of site visit notes

(Continues)

TABLE 1 | (Continued)

Case	Region	No. of employees ^a	Annual revenue (€) ^a	Clubs and affiliated members	Path toward sustainability	Interviewees	Documents or notes analyzed
Beta	Southern Europe	279	≈ 229.5 million	5343 clubs, and ≈ 1.4 million members	Beta embarked on a sustainability journey in 2011 by appointing a Football Social Responsibility (FSR) manager to mirror the creation of UEFA's FSR department. In the following years, Beta engaged in EU-funded projects on sports sustainability, sparking internal discussions on ES. Approaching EURO 2020, UEFA's good governance requirements heightened attention on ES, leading Beta's FSR manager to oversee environmental aspects of their engagement as the hosting country in the championship. This positioned Beta favorably to meet UEFA's request to appoint FSR managers in each NFA by 2022. In mid-2023, Beta unveiled its sustainability strategy, with a focus on climate change and circular economy.	Communication Manager; International Partnerships Officer; Logistics & Operations Manager; Sales & Sponsorships Manager; Events Manager; Social Responsibility Manager; IT Manager; National Teams Manager; Procurement Manager; Research & Development Manager	- 1 official web page - 1 financial report (2017) - 1 Sustainability Strategy 2030 - 3 integrated reports (2019, 2020, 2021) - 2 activity reports (2020, 2021) - 3 technical procedures (suppliers' selection, stadia eligibility, and performance KPIs) - 7 pages of site visit notes

(Continues)

TABLE 1 | (Continued)

Case	Region	No. of employees ^a	Annual revenue (€) ^a	Clubs and affiliated members	Path toward sustainability	Interviewees	Documents or notes analyzed
Gamma	Eastern Europe	210	≈ 24.7 million	2300 clubs, and ≈ 2.6 thousand members	Gamma first committed to social responsibility in 2015 as part of a five-year strategic development plan addressing UEFA priorities of good governance, social inclusion, health, and education through sports. Gamma's engagement with EU-level initiatives on sports sustainability, as well as its appointment as the hosting country of EURO 2020, enhanced the centrality of ES concerns in its good governance and football responsibility agenda. This led, in 2022, to the adoption of a comprehensive sustainability strategy, mirroring UEFA requirements. The same year, Gamma embarked on the definition of an environmental management system. In 2023, Gamma was among the first European NFAs to be awarded an ISO 14001 certification.	Social Responsibility Manager; Events Manager; Public Policy & Governance Manager; National Teams Manager; Procurement Manager; National Competitions Manager; IT Manager; Grassroots Competitions Manager	- 1 official web page - 1 sustainability strategy - 2 technical procedures (environmental certification, suppliers selection) - 5 pages of site visit notes - 2 online videos

(Continues)

TABLE 1 | (Continued)

Case	Region	No. of employees ^a	Annual revenue (€) ^a	Clubs and affiliated members	Path toward sustainability	Interviewees	Documents or notes analyzed
Delta	Western Europe	177	≈ 102 million	1017 clubs, and ≈ 177 thousand members	Delta appointed a Social Responsibility (SR) Manager in 2015. In 2016, Delta reinvigorated its commitment to ES to meet the challenges posed by the construction of state-of-the-art headquarters: a multifunctional structure with offices, a training center, a hospitality facility, and a media center. Personnel were added to the SR team to supervise infrastructural works. In 2018, Delta's President established ES as a pillar of a three-year social intervention strategy, on a par with social inclusion and health. Reducing the carbon footprint of competitions and enhancing sustainability at the headquarters were set as priorities. In 2021, the newly elected President reconfirmed such priorities for the following term, leading Delta to adopt an environmental management system, which achieved ISO 14001 certification in 2023.	Commercial Director; Communication Manager; Facility Manager; Deputy CEO; National Competitions Manager; Social Responsibility Manager	- 1 official web page - 3 social responsibility reports - 1 environmental policy - 3 pages of site visit notes - 2 online videos - 1 document of strategic objectives (2020–2024)

^aThis information refers to the year 2021.

sustainability reports; strategy statements; technical documents such as audit reports, training minutes, and written procedures; and reports of national and international ES projects and multistakeholder partnerships. Inspecting these data prior to the interviews allowed the development of a preliminary understanding of the state of ES in each NFA.

Semistructured interviews and site visits were carried out by two researchers between September 2020 and October 2021. Interviews with the most relevant informants—that is, top managers and sustainability or social responsibility managers—were conducted face-to-face during site visits, whereas the majority of interviews were remotely conducted. During visits, notes were taken about the management of environmental aspects of NFAs' main facilities, such as office buildings, technical and training centers, hospitality areas, and stadia when directly managed by the NFAs.

In line with ST scholars' directions for empirical research (Pozzebon and Pinsonneault 2005; Jack and Kholeif 2007), collecting data from a diverse range of informants is necessary to gain a comprehensive understanding of change factors that affect structuration and related organizational hinderers. As for the choice of the interviewees, nine organizational roles were purposively selected *ex ante*: Top Management (e.g., CEO, President, or equivalent), Sustainability or Social Responsibility Manager, Human Resources Manager, Marketing and Sales Manager, Communication Manager, Facility Manager, Events or Competitions Manager, Operations or Logistics Manager, and Procurement Manager. When such roles were not formally appointed, we asked NFAs to identify the most appropriate informants to provide us with the required information. NFAs were also invited to discretionally involve other organizational members, whenever they believed this could contribute to the study. In only one case, we were able to interview members of the top management team. As a result, the number of interviewees varies from NFA to NFA, from a minimum of 5 to a maximum of 10.

Semistructured interviews were conducted using an interview protocol of open-ended questions. In line with scholars' directions for ST research, the protocol explored systems of rules, values, norms, practices, and resources characterized as signification, legitimation, and domination structures, in order to highlight change factors and hinderers of ES integration at each structural level (Giddens 1984). Interviews lasted 1 h each, approximately. We performed 29 interviews and obtained 323 pages of transcripts.

3.3 | Data Analysis

The analysis focused on interview transcripts as the primary source of data, whereas documental data were used for cross-checking and triangulating the findings, as well as clarifying doubts in the interpretation of interviews. To mitigate self-report bias in data analysis, methodological triangulation was ensured by cross-referencing interview data with documentary sources (listed in Table 1) (Denzin 2012). For example, when an interviewee reported the implementation of energy-saving measures, this information was verified by reviewing internal policy

documents and audit reports. NVivo12 software was utilized for compiling data into a database to aid the coding process.

A thematic analysis was performed based on an abductive coding approach. This approach combines inductive and deductive reasoning in an iterative process between theory and empirical data, where categories (or themes) are partly deduced from theory and partly derived from the inductive analysis of data (Dubois and Gadde 2002).

In the first provisional coding cycle, we checked the interview transcripts to assign deductive codes that were defined *a priori* based on notions of signification, legitimation, and domination structures. At the same time, we took note of themes inductively emerging from the data. This step produced a preliminary structure of coded data grounded on the dimensions of signification, legitimation, and domination, that is, change factors and organizational hinderers. In the coding process, the four cases were analyzed separately from each other so that we could understand the narrative of each case as a stand-alone entity and then cross-compared to highlight differences across cases (Eisenhardt 1989).

In the second coding cycle, the Gioia methodology was applied: This methodology mimics the principles of grounded theory to structure the data into first-order and second-order categories and then compile them into aggregated dimensions (Gioia et al. 2013). First-order codes adhered to terms provided by key informants, whereas, in second-order coding, axial coding was applied, and relationships among the first-order concepts were sought to develop second-order themes (Strauss and Corbin 1998). Lastly, we distilled the second-order themes into aggregated dimensions of ST, that is, signification, legitimation, and domination (Gioia et al. 2013).

This process was performed by three researchers: While two researchers were in charge of identifying emerging codes, a third researcher supported the discussion and definition of second-order categories and aggregated dimensions. This triangulation process contributed to reinforcing the coherence between deductive themes and aggregated dimensions. The data structuration process is shown in Figure 1.

4 | Results

The analysis identifies factors affecting the structuration process in the selected NFAs at signification, legitimation, and domination levels and the constraints affecting this process. Variations exist among NFAs regarding the presence or absence of these factors and their interrelationships, which also influence the emergence of tensions. The following paragraphs detail the results for each structuration level.

4.1 | Signification

4.1.1 | Values and Beliefs

Organizational members' concern for ES is rooted in their individual and collective moral orientations, which shape the underlying rationale—the “why”—for perceiving ES as a

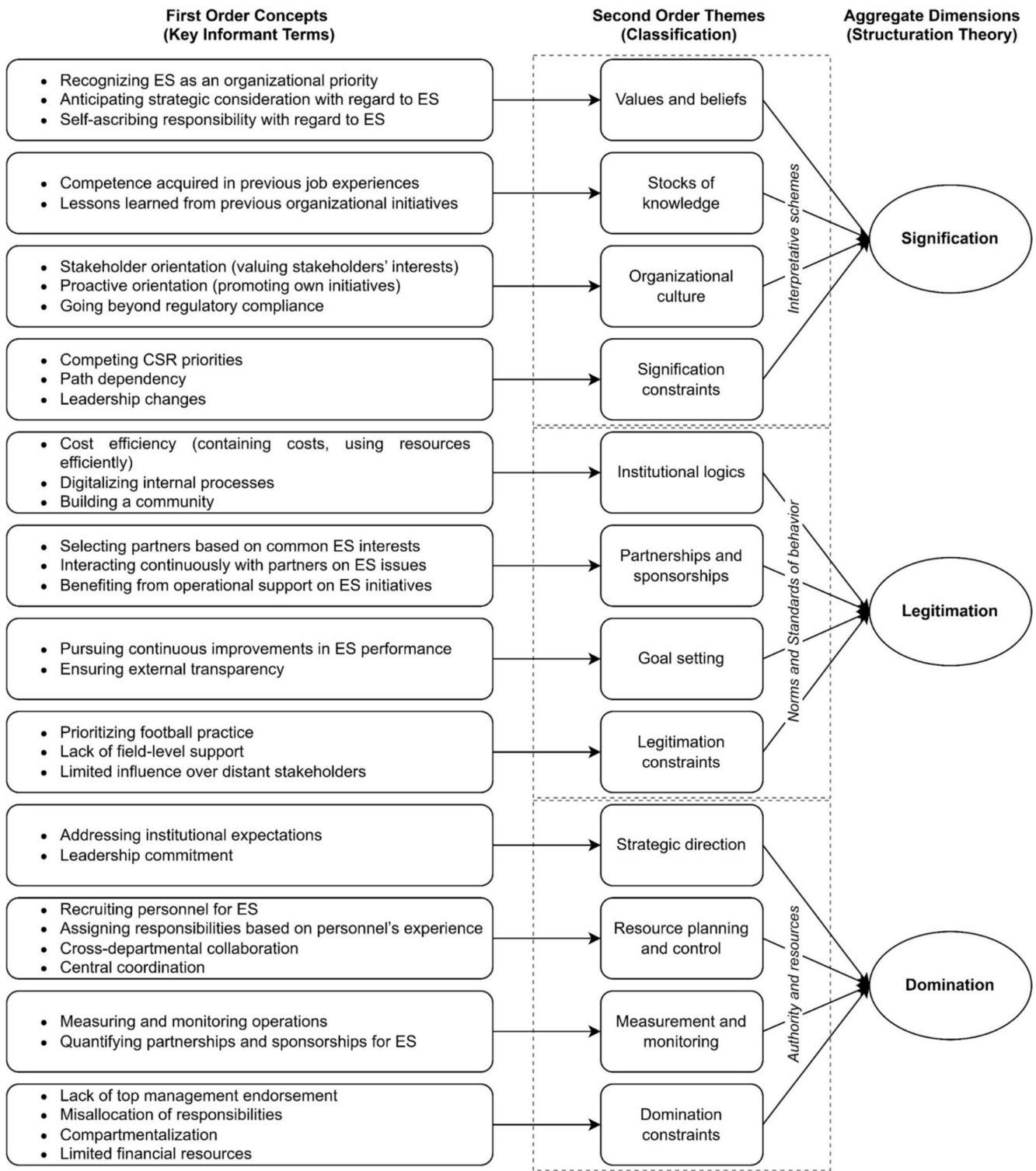


FIGURE 1 | Data structuration process.

meaningful and legitimate organizational concern. The analysis indeed noted that proenvironmental values underlie individual *sensing of ES as a priority* and, once shared among organizational members, *values and beliefs* prompt sense-making of ES as a salient issue requiring organizational action, that is, the integration of environmental concerns in day-to-day operations:

Environmental issues are very important. We talk a lot about how we should work very proactively in this area. But it's important that it's not only nice slogans. I think it's so important that we bring it down and see it in our behavior on a daily basis.

(Human Resources Manager, Alpha)

Respondents' sensing that ES issues should be prioritized is also associated with shared expectations that ES will increasingly constitute a pivotal issue, given the role that sports organizations play as societal influencers. In Beta and Delta, this belief opens up considerations—or visions—with regard to NFAs' brand positioning and market stance: shared *values and beliefs* appear to concur in *anticipating strategic considerations* with regard to the reputational and competitive impacts that greater public attention on ES may cause in the future:

Given our active role in society, [Delta] is an influencer. We believe that ES must be one of our pillars, given the brand positioning of [Delta] at a national level. One month ago, a market research ranked the organizations that most contribute to society in our country, according to people's view: we were among the top 10. This is how seriously we take our societal role.

(Deputy CEO, Delta)

This belief grounds on *ascription of responsibility* among organizational members at all levels (top and middle managers, as well as employees), which is members' perception that their organization shares responsibility for environmental degradation or, more specifically, for the environmental impacts associated with the football sector. Tackling environmental issues is not seen as a top-down directive but as an ethical responsibility embraced at all levels of the organization:

It's our responsibility to show everyone that we are working on these important issues. So, we always try to bring this topic down from a macro level to a micro level to see what we can do in our daily activities: how we behave at the office, how we deal with waste, how we travel and so on. Each and every one of us has the responsibility to do his own part.

(National Competitions Manager, Alpha)

Although individual sensing of ES as a pressing issue occurs in all examined NFAs, not all NFAs provide strong evidence that such values are translated into a shared understanding of ES as an organizational priority. In Gamma and Beta, this is due to *competition with other social responsibility priorities*—such as promoting integrity, social inclusion, and fair play—which appear to divert attention and resources from ES issues, curbing organizational members' sensing of ES as an increasingly relevant priority. This tension is well exemplified by Gamma's Social Responsibility Manager stating:

At the end of the day, it comes down to how many disadvantaged kids we want to support by having them play in our youth teams. Simply put, it's either we buy balls for them or invest in the sustainability of our infrastructures, activities and so on.

(Social Responsibility Manager, Gamma)

The integration of ES concerns in NFAs' social obligations is hampered by tensions with football-related social matters,

which may result in environmental issues being sidelined in the scope of social responsibility efforts. As a result, although ES appears to be widely legitimated within Alpha and Delta's value systems, it is somewhat questioned in Beta and Gamma, where a stronger prioritization of ES is perceived as potentially conflicting with other social priorities. Perceived tensions entail a hierarchical approach to sustainability and social responsibility issues in Beta and Gamma, wherein ES is contingent on shifting organizational priorities rather than being embedded as a core and stable value, thereby concurring to inconsistencies in how ES is perceived and enacted across the organization.

4.1.2 | Stocks of Knowledge

Although values and beliefs provide a normative foundation for environmental efforts, the knowledge, expertise, and capabilities embedded within the personnel of NFAs shape the cognitive and experiential framing of environmental initiatives, thereby guiding how such issues are addressed in practice. *Stocks of knowledge* build up from organizational members' *previous job experience* or *lessons learned*. Specifically, *lessons learned* from internal initiatives constitute an enabling factor when it comes to introducing environmental improvements incrementally:

When I was in the press office 26 years ago, we were already making online brochures, instead of printing them on paper. [...] When I moved to my current position, this led us to implement a series of online services, including the online accreditation procedure. It may sound trivial, but all the documentation relating to a credit application consumed a lot of paper.

(International Partnerships Officer, Beta)

Previous job experience refers to knowledge acquired in previous occupations or work experiences, also outside of the football sector, which appears to support organizational members in conceiving novel ideas about how to integrate ES in day-to-day operations. This is well explained by the Procurement Manager of Beta when describing the drivers behind the implementation of green procurement practices:

I worked in [Name of a local public transport company], which is a company of the Municipality of [Name of the city]. There, I had to comply with procedures regarding the use of environmental criteria in purchasing contracts, so I learned how to do it. Then, I must say that some colleagues [at the Federation] immediately showed interest in these aspects, so I found fertile ground to introduce them to green procurement.

(Procurement Manager, Beta)

However, *path dependency*—that is, the tendency to rely on established patterns and routines based on historical practices,

experiences, and views—concur in the collective framing of relevant issues and appears to constrain organizational change when it comes to altering the shared understanding of social responsibilities rooted on well-established routines. Although path dependency is evident in most of the NFAs examined, it emerged most prominently in Beta, where interviewees reported that collective efforts toward ES integration were delayed because of some departments perceiving ES as outside the narrow scope of their work routines, professional capabilities, and objectives. Specifically, the accumulation of work routines over time contributed to the rigid entrenchment of a narrow conceptualization of departments' roles and responsibilities, which did not encompass the management of environmental issues. This factor delayed the Social Responsibility Manager in Beta from catalyzing synergetic efforts toward ES integration.

4.1.3 | Organizational Culture

Values and knowledge alone do not ensure coherence in practice, as the reinforcement of signification structures throughout the organization also hinges on its cultural fabric, which integrates individual motivations, knowledge, and capabilities within a broader, shared interpretative framework. *Organizational culture* provides the collective layer through which ES becomes normalized within everyday practices, serving as a coordination mechanism aiding the integration of work processes based on a shared understanding of goals and means to achieve them (Howard-Grenville 2006).

When it comes to integrating ES, we noted that NFAs' organizational culture is characterized by three factors: *stakeholder orientation*, *proactive orientation* toward ES informed by the ambition to establish a leadership stance on this domain, and the strive to go *beyond regulatory compliance* with environmental regulatory requirements. A *stakeholder orientation* increases the likelihood that organizations commit to meeting stakeholders' demands to secure their own legitimacy. The analysis found that a *stakeholder orientation* supports NFAs in delineating operational priorities:

To implement these [ES] initiatives we consulted our stakeholders, and we understood what their main issues are. We are talking about UEFA, FIFA, European Commission, our internal stakeholders: our football clubs and regional associations.

(Social Responsibility Manager, Delta)

A *proactive orientation* toward ES emerges as a feature of the organizational culture of Alpha, Beta, and Delta. Such a stance is associated with organizational members' proactivity on environmental issues on the job and their openness to ES initiatives, contributing to a workplace where proactivity on sustainability issues is the norm. This bottom-up proactivity ensures that ES initiatives are embraced and integrated into daily practices:

Everyone working at the Federation is really proactive. Even when there were no recycling bins

here, a long time ago, people were continuously asking for them. People working here are really aware of the environment: [...] So, to be honest, I would say that culture already exists. People are not like: "Oh my gosh, there comes [Name of the Social Responsibility Manager] with another thing about the environment." It's not like that: people are aware and they want to be a part of it. We work for this to be part of the culture of the Federation.

(Deputy CEO, Delta)

Similarly, the following quotation exemplifies Beta's striving to "go the extra mile." This implies going *beyond regulatory compliance* by exceeding regulatory or UEFA requirements, as a result of an internal push. When describing the motives behind the adoption of environmental practices by the Federation, Beta's Logistics & Operations Manager stated

It came about spontaneously. It was not about complying with regulatory requirements. It was because of the ambition to do better than what is usually required from an organization like ours. This has opened the way to a broader and more precise vision of issues that are close to everyone's heart. We have had no particular pressures, absolutely none. I must say that it all started spontaneously.

(Logistics & Operations Manager, Beta)

As an obstacle to preserving an organizational culture that is supportive of the integration of ES, some NFAs note that periodical changes in the top management of the organization pose a threat to the stability of organizational culture. *Leadership changes* may indeed affect the current cultural orientation by instilling diverse priorities and visions in the organization. This concern is particularly pronounced in NFAs with a proactive organizational culture, such as Alpha and Delta. In these organizations, changes in leadership priorities and values are perceived as a potential source of misalignment between leadership and organizational culture, which could disrupt bottom-up initiatives that have, to date, been instrumental in fostering collective efforts toward ES integration.

Table 2 summarizes the results regarding the signification level of analysis.

4.2 | Legitimation

4.2.1 | Institutional Logics

The integration of ES through legitimation structures leverages specific *institutional logics*, that is, prescriptions and rules that enable actors to make sense of their environment by providing assumptions about how to interpret organizational reality and what constitutes appropriate behavior. *Institutional logics* shape NFAs' approach to ES, influencing the selection of relevant issues to address and the most appropriate strategies for environmental improvement. *Cost efficiency* emerges as a relevant institutional logic in driving

TABLE 2 | Factors of ES integration at the signification level.

Second-order codes	First-order codes	Exemplary quotations	Organizations showing evidence
Values and beliefs	Sensing ES as a priority	“Our supporters, partners, and everyone is going to ask such questions [about ES] more and more. It’s becoming an important priority for us to have the right answers.” Beta	Alpha, Beta, Gamma, Delta
	Anticipating strategic considerations	“We strongly believe that football has a major role to play in society and that we can do a lot to influence and to drive change in society.” Alpha	Alpha, Beta, Delta
	Ascription of responsibility	“It’s a responsibility for us to show everyone that we are working with these issues.” Alpha	Alpha, Beta, Delta
Stocks of knowledge	Previous job experiences	“Coming from the public sector, I was already aware of green procurement before getting my current job at [Name of the Federation].” Beta	Alpha, Beta, Gamma, Delta
	Lessons learned from internal initiatives	“For two and a half years, I have been working on the EURO2020 project. Everything I have learned during this experience; I try to implement it in our Federation.” Gamma	Alpha, Beta, Gamma, Delta
Organizational culture	Stakeholder orientation	“To implement these [ES] initiatives we consulted our stakeholders, and we understood what the main issues of our stakeholders are.” Delta	Gamma, Delta
	Proactive orientation	“We have realized that the role of the Federation is also to propose initiatives and do not wait for the partners to tell you ‘Let us do this or let us do that.’” Beta	Alpha, Beta, Delta
	Beyond regulatory compliance	“It was not about complying with regulatory requirements. It was because of the ambition to improve and do better than what is usually required from an organization like ours.” Beta	Alpha, Beta, Delta

(Continues)

TABLE 2 | (Continued)

Second-order codes	First-order codes	Exemplary quotations	Organizations showing evidence
Signification constraints	Competition with other social responsibility priorities	“When we will have environmental sustainability in our social responsibility pillars, that will mean that the top management considers this as a priority. Then, it will be easier for me to work on this.” Gamma	Beta, Gamma
	Path dependency	“At the beginning of 2011, we tried to create some synergies with the human resources, procurement, and logistics departments. However, we did not receive any feedback back then, because the Federation was not ready to deal with [environmental] sustainability issues as they were not understood as pertinent to football, so the discussion stopped.” Beta	Beta, Delta, Gamma
	Leadership changes	“This is my main fear: we will have our president only for two years. And then, another president may come with other priorities in mind. We just hope that the next one will continue with the same approach here. So, it's all about the leadership really.” Delta	Alpha, Delta

the integration of environmental concerns in day-to-day operations. This logic is associated with cost and time savings related to operational improvements of infrastructures and venues, which yield environmental benefits in terms of energy and resource efficiency:

I would say that efficiency is one of our priorities: if you talk to people in [Name of the Federation], you would understand it's the way we do things here. So, we are always looking for the best way to do things in a cost-effective way, obviously, but also in a faster way and with the least amount of waste in terms of energy and resources.

(Deputy CEO, Delta)

In Alpha and Delta, *community-building* strongly emerged as an institutional logic that pushed the Federation's ES efforts at the legitimation level. At Delta, this logic is being promoted by emphasizing the NFA as the collective “home” of the football community, where sustainability is valued as a means to serve

collective interests and where everyone is responsible for taking care of ES issues:

We want everybody to see the Federation as our home. This is because I want my home to be the best as possible, so why not considering [Name of the Federation] as my second home? [...] The most important aspect is involving our employees first. We started by sending out emails with very simple rules, like “please switch off the lights when you leave the office”, “don't open the windows when the air conditioner is on”, or “take out your trash when you leave”. It's like saying “This is your home; you cannot put your feet on the table!

(Facility Manager, Delta)

The analysis also revealed the increasingly central role of *digitalization* as an enabler of new ES practices in NFA's operations (Valero-Gil et al. 2024): In NFAs, digitalization is increasingly imposed as a logic prescribing the replacement of human

routines with automated information flows. Beta and Gamma highlighted the contribution of *digitalization* to the reduction of energy and resource consumption:

Speaking about energy savings, we are pursuing projects to dematerialize office activities. We began with the system for referees' reimbursements. The Federation bears the costs of managing referees of the federal championships, and so with this system, the collection of refund claims has been dematerialized.

(IT Manager, Beta)

The logic of *prioritizing football practice* instead appeared to conflict with the integration of ES concerns in operational and management procedures, particularly in Alpha and Delta, despite their proactive orientation. For instance, in Delta, the inclusion of ES criteria in the selection of sports venues is perceived as deviating attention from NFAs' primary objective of ensuring suitable sporting conditions during championships, as stated by Delta's National Competitions Manager:

Talking very bluntly, our priority is the sportive nature of the match. So, it's the coach who gives a proper recommendation about where to play, despite the environmental concerns.

(National Competitions Manager, Delta)

This result suggests that the juxtaposition of environmental and sporting concerns generates tensions, which are resolved in favor of NFAs' sporting mission when the integration of ES concerns appears misaligned with the more entrenched logics of *cost efficiency* and *community building*. In Alpha and Delta, overcoming tensions between environmental and sporting priorities implies aligning ES integration efforts with dominant logics, thereby ensuring that ES initiatives are framed in ways that resonate with broader organizational priorities (such as cost efficiency, community building, or digitalization). This result also implies that environmental improvement does not yet serve as an independent rationale for action; rather, it must be framed within the context of other organizational priorities to gain traction and legitimacy.

4.2.2 | Goal Setting

Building on the normative backdrop of institutional logics, *goal setting* emerges as a key mechanism through which NFAs translate these broader rationales into concrete objectives and operational commitments. *Goal setting* indeed enables the formalization of ES into management structures and operational procedures by formalizing objectives and targets, thereby directing attention and allocating resources toward ES initiatives. First, embracing a *continuous improvement* objective drives the integration of environmental concerns in the management of events, facilities, and operations:

Two main objectives were defined: improving environmental performance of our headquarters and

training campus, and reducing the carbon footprint of our events and competitions. Such objectives led to hiring [Name of the colleague], an engineer who is appointed to devise sustainable solutions for our activities, and who is also supervising sustainability projects in our headquarters.

(Social Responsibility Manager, Delta)

In Gamma, the absence of consistent improvement objectives is indeed identified as a key factor contributing to the organization's fluctuating environmental performance over the years:

Still to this day, there are no targets or objectives concerning emissions reduction and energy efficiency. There is a growing awareness about this issue, [...], but there aren't targets to reduce emissions or efficiency objectives, over the next 3, 5 or 7 years. So, one year there may be an improvement in energy consumption, but not the following year.

(Social Responsibility Manager, Gamma)

Second, embracing *external transparency* as an organizational goal appears to be a major push to structure an environmental governance system in NFAs. *External transparency* makes NFAs accountable for their environmental commitments, thus prompting their commitment toward achieving set goals:

All our commitments are regularly updated on our website. This allows anyone to review our progress daily. We have implemented a color-coded status system—green, yellow, and red—to indicate the progress of each initiative, whether it has been fully implemented, is currently in progress, or has not yet commenced. We make these KPIs of our social intervention plan publicly available, to reinforce our commitment to accountability.

(Deputy CEO, Delta)

External transparency also serves to nurture public relations with football governing bodies, such as UEFA, and to participate as active contributors in the debate about ES in sports. For instance, the recurring, annual deadline to prepare and publish a sustainability report had a positive impact on the integration of ES concerns in a wide array of procedures, as illustrated in the case of Beta:

I remember the first sustainability report we published in 2012. In reality, at that time, there was very little awareness and knowledge regarding this matter. As time passed, we published several subsequent editions. Year after year, this continuous push to formalize processes, gather data and systematize indicators led to the current point where all our procedures are regulated, and each activity or

process follows a specific standard and is monitored for external communication.

(Logistics & Operations Manager, Beta)

NFAs claim challenges in asserting control and influence over suppliers, municipalities, and other stakeholders who are essential to achieving the targets established by the organization. *Limited influence over external stakeholders* affects NFAs' ability to establish and attain ambitious ES objectives, whose achievement depends on the collaboration of external actors. For instance, in the case of Delta, this challenge was particularly pronounced in efforts to improve waste management at the training campus, given the large number of suppliers and contractors operating on site. Although specific targets for waste sorting were introduced, the difficulty in ensuring compliance among external contractors hindered the NFA's progress toward achieving its goals. In this case, goal-setting was insufficient to effectively alter legitimation structures toward ES integration, as the absence of more coercive mechanisms limited the NFA's authority over crucial external actors.

4.2.3 | Partnerships and Sponsorships

As institutional logic shapes the normative landscape and goal setting formalizes the direction for ES integration at the legitimation level, *partnerships and sponsorships* emerge as a strategic arena through which these elements are enacted and translated into practice. First, logic provides a backdrop for selecting and establishing *partnerships and sponsorships* that are fundamental for integrating ES at the level of legitimation. We indeed observed that in both selecting commercial partners and nurturing long-term relationships, alignment with logics such as societal commitment and community-building was often considered:

We try to partner with the “best in class” [for what concerns ES] because we are also the best in our field in [Name of the country]. And usually, what connects us [with partners and sponsors] are the values. So, if they don't believe in the same values as we do, if they're not ethical, or if they don't do things for the benefit of society, then we won't choose them.

(Social Responsibility Manager, Gamma)

Second, partnerships serve as a catalyst for NFAs' ES commitments, allowing them to obtain *operational support* and gain access to valuable resources, knowledge, and capabilities. Sponsorships provide NFAs with valuable insights and knowledge, enabling them to effectively pursue ES objectives and targets. NFAs leverage ES to cultivate relationships with both new and existing partners, while also attracting resources to support their internal ES projects:

Recently, [Name of the Federation] introduced a new energy policy addressed at all football clubs. At the same time, we partnered with [Name of the partner], an international business company in the energy sector. So, what we did with them was to inspect

our sports facilities to come up with solutions for reducing energy consumption. We worked like this: first, we identified an area of improvement, such as energy consumption; second, we introduced a new energy policy; third, we found a partner that can support our goal to be more energy efficient within our own activities.

(Marketing and Sales Manager, Alpha)

Ongoing engagement with partners and sponsors indeed fosters the cocreation of ES initiatives and projects. This *continuous interaction* takes place through the establishment of joint committees or working groups and also involves forging relationships with the Sustainability Managers of partner organizations:

Nowadays, all big brands have sustainability concerns: it's increasingly common that large companies have a sustainability or social responsibility department. We constantly interact with them so that every time we launch an ES project, we sit with them and discuss it together.

(Commercial Director, Delta)

Conversely, the *lack of field-level support* can hamper the integration of ES, as the scarcity of viable and effective partnerships at the national level may constitute an obstacle to the successful integration of ES in operations. In particular, Gamma asserts that it encounters challenges in leveraging external expertise to complement its internal capabilities to enhance ES initiatives. For instance, Gamma attempted to introduce a waste recycling program during matches at its stadium. However, the initiative failed to materialize as the municipal waste management company was unable to facilitate the sorting and recycling of waste generated during sporting events. The inadequacies of the national waste management system ultimately hindered Gamma's efforts to advance ES within its operations, compelling the organization to scale back its initiatives due to external constraints. This challenge illustrates how weak field-level support limits NFAs' capacity to adapt their legitimation structures in ways that would enable the sustained integration of ES.

The results regarding the legitimation level are summarized in Table 3.

4.3 | Domination

4.3.1 | Strategic Direction

Maintaining a clear *strategic direction* emerges as a critical step for integrating ES within domination structures. The analysis identifies various factors that either reinforce or constrain NFAs' agency in effectively pursuing a strategic direction centered on ES integration. First, the will to consistently address *institutional expectations* emerges as an enabling factor in elevating ES as a strategic priority. *Institutional expectations* are associated with the national context in which the

TABLE 3 | Factors of ES integration at the legitimation level.

Second-order codes	First-order codes	Exemplary quotations	Organizations showing evidence
Institutional logics	Cost efficiency	“All these initiatives have two sides: on the one hand, reducing our carbon footprint; on the other hand, cutting costs and saving money.” Delta	Alpha, Beta, Gamma, Delta
	Digitalization	“Energy efficiency comes hand in hand with the development of technology. And you cannot separate football anymore from technology.” Gamma	Beta, Gamma
	Community-building	“We want everybody to see the Federation as our home.” Delta	Alpha, Delta
Partnerships and sponsorships	Selection procedure	“We choose to work with partners that have this topic [ES] on the agenda and that are willing to work on this.” Alpha	Alpha, Beta, Delta, Gamma
	Continuous interaction	“In my opinion, the <i>conditio sine qua non</i> is to involve our partners in this field. They are so well organized that they would be certainly more than happy to receive from us certain proposals or ideas that we want to develop with them.” Beta	Alpha, Beta, Delta, Gamma
	Operative support	“We partnered with an energy company, and they have a lot of sustainability plans. So, they push us a lot to develop some initiatives with them to meet their plans.” Delta	Alpha, Beta, Delta

(Continues)

NFA operates and to public attention toward ES. According to Alpha, given the attention that national institutions and local civil society have historically paid to ES, the Federation is called to contribute to the environmental debate, consistently and proactively:

We feel pressure from our country, as [Name of the country] has worked on these questions [i.e. ES] for many years. And now, it's more important than ever. All major organizations and institutions in the country are working on these topics. We are a

big organization so, of course, we need to be on the frontline in these regards.

(Sales & Business Development Manager, Alpha)

Second, *leadership commitment* is a crucial push to formalize ES as a strategic pillar. For instance, in Delta, strategic priorities are dictated by the President, who is elected by the NFA's assembly every 3 years: In explaining how ES was integrated among the strategic priorities of the NFA, the Deputy CEO of Delta describes the process of electing the President of the NFA:

TABLE 3 | (Continued)

Second-order codes	First-order codes	Exemplary quotations	Organizations showing evidence
Goal setting	Continuous improvement	“We are just taking some small but consistent steps on environmental issues, like we are trying to use plastic bottles as less as possible, recycle them, and improve the event performance.” Gamma	Gamma, Delta
	External transparency	“Everything gets public, and this pushes us to do more on this [ES]. So, before each project and after each project, we do our communication on our website and our social media channels.” Gamma	Beta, Gamma, Delta
Legitimation constraints	Prioritizing football practice	“I think it would be interesting to include them [ES criteria]: unfortunately, it is not our priority at the moment. Talking very bluntly, our priority is the sportive nature of the match. So, it's the coach who gives a proper recommendation about where to play, despite the environmental concerns.” Delta	Alpha, Delta
	Lack of field-level support	“We do not have the capacity internally to act on environmental issues, because we cannot do it alone. We tried to establish partnerships, but it did not work out [...] It's more a discussion about the partners that we found, not about us.” Gamma	Alpha, Gamma, Delta
	Limited influence over distant stakeholders	“One thing is to have the bins there, and all the system to separate the things and recycle well. Another thing is then to actually manage and implement it on site with the people who are working and the company that should manage the process.” Delta	Alpha, Beta, Delta

When the presidential candidates apply for the job, they propose a three-year program stating what the priorities should be in the next three years, and how to address them, and then the assembly votes for the best program. The current President proposed six pillars: one of the six pillars was social intervention, which included ES as a priority. After his election, what he did was to put in place a strategic plan, saying what the Federation will pursue on this matter, and how, in the next three years.

(Deputy CEO, Delta)

On the contrary, in Gamma, a *lack of top management endorsement* emerges as a critical barrier to the integration of ES within the NFA's domination structures. Top managers set the agenda for the organization, drawing up the objectives that organizational initiatives should pursue, and allocating resources to such goals. At the same time, such objectives limit organizational members' agency to develop initiatives that do not fully comply with the strategic agenda, due to difficulties in gaining top management approval and accessing resources for implementing such initiatives:

All the projects have to be linked with the mission of the Federation and its objectives. Our strategy has three main objectives, so when we think about a potential project, it has to be somehow connected with these objectives, because we have to link it to the budget and resources that are allocated one year ahead.

(Social Responsibility Manager, Gamma)

As an example, Gamma claims to discontinue reporting environmental aspects in its social reports due to failure to consistently improve performance over the years as a result of a lack of a top-down endorsement and strategic direction:

After the first social reports in 2015 and 2016, environmental performance was no longer reported in subsequent editions of the report because it was never part of a strategy. One year there was a reduction in energy consumption and the next year there was a sharp rise, because that year we had replaced some LED bulbs, but not the year after.

(Social Responsibility Manager, Gamma)

This example highlights how the absence of top management endorsement hinders the integration of ES concerns into strategic agendas, thereby constraining NFAs' capacity to transform domination structures in support of ES integration and undermining the continuity and institutionalization of related efforts.

4.3.2 | Resource Planning and Control

Once the strategic direction is established and maintained through leadership commitment, a central feature of

domination structures is the allocation of resources and authority toward desired objectives. This includes defining formal responsibilities and establishing control mechanisms to ensure performance alignment. NFAs exhibit variations in their ability to manage human, financial, and other resources to institutionalize ES. First, *recruitment* played a crucial role in integrating ES in Beta and Delta. NFAs leveraged recruitment to access new expertise through specialized hires or external consultants:

We hired a new engineer, [Name of the employee]. He worked as an engineer in the construction of our new headquarter. We liked him so much that we hired him. He is a very important person because he knows exactly how the building was constructed, and how we can make it better. We resort to him every time we look for sustainable solutions to any problem or necessity we have.

(Facility Manager, Delta)

Second, *assigning ES responsibilities* based on relevant experience promotes coordination among organizational members and the establishment of a systematic approach to ES. Although most NFAs still lack a clear specialization of ES roles, responsibilities are often assigned on the base of existing, ongoing initiatives. For instance, Delta assigned environmental responsibilities to the CSR Manager following the priority of reducing the carbon footprint of competitions:

We've been working on this [i.e. ES] for some years now. However, more recently, we have decided to make it a priority: we began working on our headquarter and reducing the carbon footprint of competitions. So [Name of the CSR Manager] was appointed to these priorities and she has done an incredible job.

(Deputy CEO, Delta)

In contrast, in Beta and Gamma, the *misallocation of responsibilities* appears to hamper the integration of ES within domination structures. In Beta, the CSR department claims difficulties in coordinating ES efforts across organizational departments due to an unclear allocation of responsibilities concerning ES issues at the organizational level. This contributes to opacity in the authoritative and decision-making processes underlying the NFA's ES initiatives, slowing the implementation of coordinated efforts and ultimately relegating ES to the discretion of individual departments. Similarly, Gamma asserts that the substantial lack of specialized ES roles contributes to the inefficient use of internal resources, resulting in the fragmentation of efforts, practices, and small-scale programs across individual departments.

Third, *cross-departmental collaboration* increases coordination in dealing with ES concerns among organizational members, at all levels, across diverse departments. To this end, in Delta, the CSR department is located within the Communication department to facilitate synergies and

amplify the Federation's sustainability initiatives to a wider audience. This helps both departments to have a more accurate view of the organization's activities, as both departments work as antennae to receive, filter, and amplify other departments' initiatives:

Being very close to the Communication department is important. In this position, we have an advantaged view on organizational activities, because we are strongly connected with each area. At the same time, it helps us to take care of our public relations as well, as I can easily interact with UEFA to be aware of what is going on at the higher levels.

(Social Responsibility Manager, Delta)

In other instances, NFAs instead complained that organizational departments are mostly unaware of what other departments are doing, due to excessive *compartmentalization*. *Central coordination* thus appears to be crucial in ensuring the effectiveness of new ES initiatives. The appointment of a central sustainability management function facilitates departments in having a full picture of the NFA's ES efforts, thus prompting a structured approach to environmental management:

Until recently, nobody had centralized control over such key processes. Everybody worked within their own departments. So, from one year and a half onwards, we are trying to bring under the same umbrella such operations like waste management and energy management.

(Events Manager, Gamma)

The constraint of *limited financial resources* is frequently identified as a hurdle to ES integration. Given this constraint, ES is often relegated to isolated or sporadic initiatives. In particular, the COVID-19 pandemic led to the postponement of championships and cancellation of matches, straining the survival of many professional and nonprofessional clubs: This hindered NFAs' capacity to direct additional resources to ES initiatives.

4.3.3 | Measurement and Monitoring

Building on strategic direction and resource allocation processes, *measurement and monitoring* constitute a further dimension of domination structures that support the operationalization of ES integration. Although not widely implemented by the NFAs examined, assessing and monitoring environmental aspects of operations strengthens control over ES performance and thus reinforces organizational members' efforts toward achieving strategic objectives of environmental improvement. Quantifying ES efforts appears crucial to enhance awareness and attention among the higher echelons of the organization. This, in turn, facilitates the allocation of resources toward implementing improvement or corrective actions. The analysis noted that *monitoring operations* prompted NFAs to gradually structure an environmental governance system by introducing indicators mostly concerning

the consumption of resources, like energy and water, during events. In addition to operational aspects, the assessment and monitoring of ES efforts can also encompass activities beyond the direct operations of NFAs. This includes partnerships and sponsorships. Measuring collaborative efforts serves as a means to validate organizational achievements within the higher levels of the organization, while also facilitating external communication:

We are going to measure these partnership deals. I think it's important to show numbers about how we are working together with different partners and where the results come from, even in this kind of issue [ES] so that we can show our bosses that a change happened and we can promote it in our marketing material.

(Marketing and Sales Manager, Alpha)

Table 4 summarizes the results concerning the domination level of analysis.

Figure 2 summarizes the results of the study, depicting modalities and interactions across key factors that NFAs leverage to affect the structuration process underlying ES integration, across dimensions of signification, legitimation, and domination structures.

5 | Discussion and Conclusion

5.1 | Contribution to Literature

The contribution of the study lies in identifying enablers and constraints to the integration of ES within organizations. The analysis reveals the interplay between change factors that support the ES structuration process and constraints that challenge organizations as they strive to adopt a substantive approach to sustainability and ensure alignment between their intentions and actions (Hahn et al. 2010; Wijen 2014). This study also extends previous literature by linking these organizational dynamics to broader debates on tensions in corporate sustainability (Hahn and Pinkse 2014), institutional isomorphism (Hoffman and Jennings 2015), and stakeholder relations in the football sector (Pedersen and Rosati 2019; Fifka and Jaeger 2020).

At the signification level, the study identifies individual and organizational factors that enable structural change for ES integration. At the individual level, change factors include members' values and beliefs, along with knowledge and capabilities acquired through prior experiences. At the organizational level, the study found the organizational culture to play a role in fostering members' proactive stance on ES, supporting previous scholars' view on culture as a tacit coordination mechanism that underlies corporate ES efforts (Howard-Grenville 2006). Such findings align with the notion that the integration of ES is not solely driven by formal structures, rules, and procedures; rather, it is deeply rooted in the underlying cultural context of an organization. The analysis also reveals that path dependency can also emerge as tension when organizations rely solely on existing stocks of knowledge and established cultural

TABLE 4 | Factors of ES integration at domination level.

Second-order codes	First-order codes	Exemplary quotations	Organizations showing evidence
Strategic direction	Institutional expectations	“Since we are an institution for public utility, we must be concerned about everything that both governments and environmental institutions are looking into.” Delta	Alpha, Beta, Delta
	Leadership commitment	“I’m one of those people who are very happy of having the support of the top management in this regard [ES].” Alpha	Alpha, Delta
Resource Planning and Control	Recruitment	“So, four or five years ago, they decided to bring in a CSR manager and now that area has grown.” Alpha	Alpha, Beta, Delta
	ES responsibilities based on experience	“I’ve been appointed as social responsibility manager since I also supervised these aspects for UEFA EURO 2020 which will be held next year.” Gamma	Delta, Gamma
	Cross-departmental collaboration	“We work in close collaboration with all the departments of the Federation. So, for each project, we have a counterpart in each department that work with us to implement the initiative.” Delta	Alpha, Beta, Delta, Gamma
	Central coordination	“If we look at the CSR manager roles, responsibility and decision power, that person discusses with the higher levels of the organization, and of course, the main decisions that need to be taken are taken in coordination.” Alpha	Alpha, Gamma
Measurement and monitoring	Operations	“After the event, we do an evaluation, especially in those matches that involve the presence of UEFA. [...] We work together on a final report of the event and evaluate how the match went, any critical issues and possibilities for improvement.” Alpha	Alpha, Beta, Gamma
	Partners and sponsors	“I think it’s important to show numbers about how we are working together with different partnerships and where the results come from, even in this kind of [ES] issues.” Alpha	Alpha, Beta

(Continues)

TABLE 4 | (Continued)

Second-order codes	First-order codes	Exemplary quotations	Organizations showing evidence
Domination constraints	Lack of top management endorsement	“It really needs to be on the agenda of the top management. When we talk about a possible project or initiative, we have to make sure that the topic is on the agenda of the top management, otherwise, it’s hard to implement it.” Gamma	Beta, Gamma
	Misallocation of responsibilities	“Certainly, each office does its utmost within its own activities and competencies. However, we do not have a structured approach to this topic [ES]. So, I am sure that each office does the best it can do, but these activities and initiatives are not centrally coordinated.” Beta	Alpha, Beta, Delta
	Compartmentalization	“As a CSR manager, I should have an idea about all of this. I am pleased to know that such initiatives exist, and I am also sorry that they are not communicated outside each single department. [...] However, if it wasn’t for this interview, no one would have said to me: “Look, we are doing this.” Beta	Beta, Delta
	Limited financial resources	“This pandemic is affecting a lot of our football clubs financially. So nowadays, our main focus will be on trying to support clubs financially to go on and to survive. So, it’s difficult for us to request an additional budget to invest in sustainability topics.” Delta	Alpha, Delta

beliefs. Path dependency refers to the tendency to follow established routines and perspectives based on historical practices (Wenzig et al. 2022). The results highlight that while drawing on existing knowledge and cultural premises may provide a foundation for addressing ES, they can restrict the emergence of new understandings of sustainability issues and hinder the exploration of innovative responses to evolving institutional demands.

The analysis also reveals that competition with other priorities in the realm of social responsibility may hinder the translation of proenvironmental values into a shared understanding of ES as a strategic issue. Such tensions are most evident in professional football organizations, where CSR priorities shift depending on external stakeholder pressures (Junghagen 2018; Fifka and Jaeger 2020). The study contributes to this debate by highlighting the existence of subcultural tensions arising from differing interpretations of sustainability priorities among

organizational members (Ogbonna and Harris 2015), also beyond the most acknowledged tensions between sustainability and business goals (Hahn and Pinkse 2014). Conflicting priorities within the social responsibility domain lead to fragmented efforts and differing interpretations of the strategic relevance of ES (Howard-Grenville 2006). As a result, proenvironmental values struggle to gain traction within the broader organizational context. Tensions resulting from existing framings and predominant interpretations of sustainability issues, which are deeply ingrained in the organizational context (Sandvik and Seippel 2023), may obstruct organizational change and hamper the integration of ES concerns at the cultural level. This highlights the need for cultural alignment to prevent ES initiatives from being relegated to symbolic actions. This supports the notion that framings of ES should be viewed as dynamic processes in order to uncover potential tensions between ES integration and shared understandings of organizational priorities (Wright et al. 2012; Dahmann and Grosvold 2017).

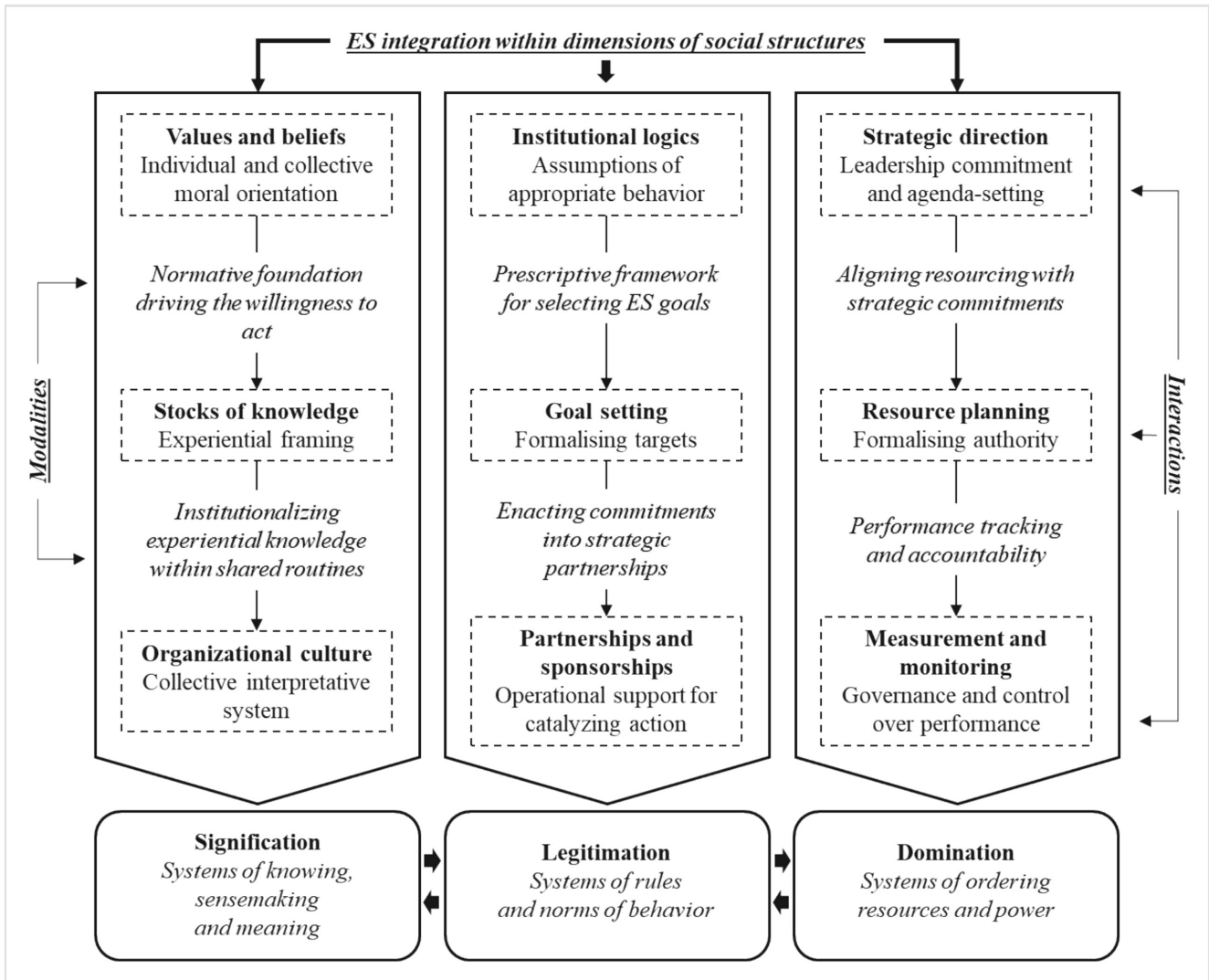


FIGURE 2 | Modalities and interactions among factors of ES integration within signification, legitimation, and domination structures.

At the legitimation level, the study reveals change factors that contribute to the institutionalization of ES practices into codified norms, policies, and operational procedures. Institutional logics of cost efficiency, community building, digitalization, and strengthening partnerships constitute effective change factors of ES integration at this level: Especially in the early stage of institutionalization, ES efforts are driven by business advantages such as cost savings, innovation, enhanced reputation, and strengthened social license to operate (Olesson et al. 2023; Valero-Gil et al. 2024; Valero-Gil and Scarpellini 2024). These align with the “business case” view of ES, which highlights the tangible benefits of environmental responsibility. However, the study also uncovers inherent tensions in embracing such a view of ES and relying solely on a logic of alignment between ES and business priorities: The analysis notes that ES is often perceived as conflicting with NFAs’ sports priorities, leading to tensions between goals of environmental protection and operational performance. Similar tensions have been already observed in European football organizations, where ES initiatives may face resistance due to perceived misalignment with competitive sports performance (Pedersen and Rosati 2019). The present study shows that, in such cases, resolution leans toward prioritizing operational performance, at the cost of delaying the

integration of ES concerns in NFA’s legitimation structures. This result adds to previous criticism of the “business case” view of ES (Dyllick and Hockerts 2002). Reducing ES efforts to competitive, operational, or commercial advantages fosters a self-centered approach that may justify inaction or symbolic ES strategies when direct benefits are insufficient.

At the domination level, the study emphasizes variations among the examined NFAs in terms of change factors that endorse ES as a strategic pillar. Differences among NFAs can be attributed to the interplay between external and internal factors (Hoffman 2001). On one hand, institutional demands arising from the national context generate pressures to incorporate ES as a key strategic element. On the other hand, the level of leadership commitment determines the extent to which NFAs respond to such demands and integrate ES concerns into their strategic direction. Lack of top management endorsement hampers members’ ability to pursue initiatives outside the established strategic agenda, generating tensions between the need to address institutional demands for ES and the mandate to pursue the organization’s strategic priorities. This lack of top-down commitment creates challenges in accessing necessary resources: As a result, organizational members face limitations

in their ability to explore solutions that may not align with top managers' agenda. These findings extend previous research on organizational inertia in football organizations, highlighting that leadership turnover and inconsistent strategic direction may heighten the stagnation of ES efforts (Junghagen 2018). Such findings also add to previous evidence that integrating ES in response to institutional pressures necessitates internal change and support of various organizational factors (Hahn and Aragón-Correa 2015). This challenges the top-down perspective of institutional perspectives and emphasizes the significance of microlevel interactions among actors in shaping the integration process, also through bottom-up initiatives (Hoffman and Jennings 2015).

Resource planning, especially in terms of human and organizational resources, is another factor of differentiation: In some NFAs, a clear allocation of responsibilities contributes to a more systematic approach to ES, whereas others struggle to stimulate collaborative efforts due to a lack of central coordination. In turn, compartmentalization arises from a failure to recognize the pervasive nature of ES issues throughout organizational action: This leads to departments operating independently and prioritizing their own isolated initiatives. Such hurdles also affect NFAs' ability to measure and monitor ES performance, resulting in significant differences in the extent to which they assess environmental aspects of operations, and quantify their efforts. This affects NFAs' understanding of, and control over, environmental performance, as well as their ability to set improvement objectives, evaluate corrective actions, and communicate about their efforts.

5.2 | Theoretical Contribution

First, the study contributes to overcoming dualism between microperspectives and macroperspectives on corporate sustainability by unpacking organizational dynamics that underlie responses to institutional pressures for ES (Gond et al. 2017). By examining how the interplay between enablers and constraints of ES integration affects the operationalization of ES concerns in a field characterized by scarce ES institutionalization, the study complements previous research that has mainly focused either on institutional forces or on organizational- or individual-level factors (Aguinis and Glavas 2013; Gond et al. 2017). The study highlights that ES integration at diverse organizational levels—from organizational culture, through operational procedures, to strategy—is the result of multifaceted organizational dynamics, which stem from the interaction between institutional forces, organizational factors, and individual agency.

Second, by adopting a process view on the interaction between constraints and enablers (Bansal et al. 2018), the study contributes to the literature on tensions underlying corporate sustainability (Hahn and Aragón-Correa 2015). Tensions especially arise at the intersections of institutional-, organizational-, and individual-level dimensions: This may occur when institutional demands for ES conflict with competing organizational priorities, or when organizational members' proactive initiatives clash with strategic directions set by the top management. The study also illustrates how tensions may stem from sports organizations' need to balance commercial imperatives

and community-oriented logics under institutional complexity (Fifka and Jaeger 2020). The study also contributes to moving beyond the dualistic opposition between symbolic and substantive implementation of ES, by highlighting the nuances involved in organizational responses to institutional demands. Scholars have often depicted the choice between symbolic or substantive adoption of ES practices as a deliberate and rational process (Misangyi 2016). The findings suggest that these responses are not solely determined by rational decision-making processes but are rather influenced by a complex interplay of external pressures and internal dynamics that determines the organization's ability to undertake a thorough process of organizational change toward ES, while actively avoiding unintentional decoupling (Wijen 2014; Hyatt and Berente 2017).

Third, the study contributes to the debate on institutional isomorphism in organizational responses to ES demands (Hoffman and Jennings 2015). Several scholars acknowledged that, even within a common institutional field, organizations display varying responses to institutional complexity due to their contingent organizational characteristics (Delmas and Toffel 2008; Aravind and Christmann 2011). ES integration is not solely the result of exposure to institutional demands of ES, but rather the result of the interplay between external and internal institutional dynamics (Hoffman 2001). By examining the dynamics of ES integration among organizations embedded in the same institutional field, the study underlines factors that contribute to heterogeneity in organizational responses to ES pressures. Although the study confirms the importance of institutional expectations in generating pressures for integrating ES, it highlights that heterogeneous outcomes stem from organizations facing various enabling and hindering factors and from their ability to mitigate tensions generated by the interplay between such factors. The study addresses scholars' calls to go beyond surface appearance and delve deeper into the inner workings of organizations (Hoffman 2001). To this aim, the study grounds on ST to extend the understanding of ES internalization as an organizational change process (Lozano 2013), which requires integrating ES concerns consistently throughout all dimensions of organizations (Haugh and Talwar 2010). The study also advances the use of ST as a suitable lens for empirically investigating organizational change processes underlying ES integration, with the aim of overcoming the constraints posed by neo-institutional, deterministic perspectives.

5.3 | Managerial Implications

The study focuses on organizations operating in a sector at an early stage of institutionalizing ES practices, as demonstrated by a lack of well-established, sector-specific approaches (Daddi et al. 2022): Managerial implications address the unique challenges faced by organizations operating in fields where sustainability efforts are still emerging due to increasing pressures for ES. The study acknowledges that resistance to integrating ES may be particularly strong in such organizations, as it requires significant modifications to the extant culture and *modus operandi*. However, the results also suggest that embracing ES presents opportunities for organizations to demonstrate environmental stewardship and establish themselves as leaders in the field.

The study highlights challenges that organizations face while pursuing ES integration: Thus, the findings have the potential to assist organizations in overseeing the change process by identifying the necessary steps, enablers, and constraints involved in incorporating ES (Alosi et al. 2023). In the first place, top management endorsement emerges as a critical enabler of ES integration across all organizational levels. At a strategic level, leaders' endorsement is critical for integrating ES concerns in the strategic direction of the organization, ensuring that adequate resources are allocated to ES initiatives, and supporting organizational members' proactive efforts. At the operational level, top management endorsement ensures consistency in organizations' ability to attend to institutional demands for ES and ensures that responses to external pressures are operationally translated into the organizational reality. At the cultural level, top management must establish and nurture ES as a pillar of the shared vision of the organization and ensure consistency in such vision also through leadership changes.

Leadership plays a crucial role in mitigating tensions resulting from interaction between enablers and barriers to ES integration: First, although endorsing a business-oriented logic facilitates integrating ES concerns at an early stage of institutionalization, leaders must ensure that this logic does not incentivize members to disregard ES in favor of business priorities, whenever sustainability and business objectives clash. This is done by providing clear directions regarding the role of ES within the organization's overall priorities (Gusmerotti et al. 2023). In addition, although ES integration may leverage existing stocks of knowledge, leaders must ensure that established patterns of behaviors and well-rooted frameworks of sustainability issues do not heighten resistance to change. This points to the role of leaders in articulating a change management process that penetrates all layers of the organization, anticipating potential friction with extant organizational culture. Embedding ES in the cultural fabric of the organization requires targeted interventions, which stem from fostering a supportive work environment where employees are empowered to contribute to ES initiatives, through realigning performance evaluation and rewarding systems, to reshaping work routines and "leading by example."

5.4 | Limitations and Future Research

Limitations of the study should be acknowledged to open avenues for future research. The first limitation stems from the sectoral context of the study. By examining NFAs, the study focuses on organizations operating in a field where ES institutionalization is at an early stage, capturing the challenges and enablers unique to emerging institutional fields. However, industries with greater ES maturity, such as the manufacturing sector, may exhibit diverse structuration dynamics due to the already established and legitimated ES-related structures in the field. A broader comparative analysis across sectors with varying levels of ES maturity could provide insights into the factors that enable and constrain organizations to produce and reproduce ES structures across different organizational fields. Similarly, the study focused on proactive NFAs that have already taken steps toward ES integration. Although this approach allowed for an in-depth exploration of structuration dynamics underlying ES integration, it excludes less proactive NFAs that may face distinct

barriers or lack strong institutional mandates for ES adoption. Future research could examine NFAs with varying levels of ES commitment, offering a more nuanced perspective on the challenges of ES integration.

In addition, future studies could broaden the range of key informants in the data collection process beyond organizational actors directly involved in the structuration process, incorporating field-level actors who influence this process from outside the organization. Although the study primarily draws from the internal actors' perspective, external stakeholders—for example, suppliers, regulatory agencies, industry associations, and civil society organizations—may provide additional insights into how organizational and field-level dynamics interact with the structuration process. Similarly, although the study emphasized leadership endorsement as a critical enabler of ES integration, future studies could provide a more detailed examination of the role of middle managers, employees, and workers on the field, in reinterpreting and shaping ES structures. Organizational change is rarely a one-directional process, and bottom-level dynamics often play a pivotal role in determining how ES strategies materialize in practice. Future research could thus adopt a bottom-up perspective, investigating how ES structures are interpreted at different organizational levels and how middle managers and workers on the field contribute to the structuration process.

Furthermore, the study employs ST as the primary theoretical lens to explain how social structures shape and are shaped by organizational actions in the ES domain. However, ST alone may not fully capture all nuances of ES integration, particularly those related to market forces, technological innovation, or global sustainability trends. Future research could integrate complementary theoretical frameworks—such as innovation diffusion theory and stakeholder theory—to offer a more holistic understanding of ES integration within fields at an early stage of ES institutionalization.

Lastly, the study draws on data collected up to 2021, as it was conducted as part of a broader research project that has now concluded. However, the European football sector has witnessed significant developments in recent years, including enhanced regulatory measures, evolving CSR policies, and debates over high-profile breakaway leagues. Future research could incorporate more recent data to examine how these developments have influenced the structuration dynamics of ES integration in NFAs.

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