III Międzynarodowa Konferencja Naukowa
Instytutu Zarządzania UEP
ZRÓWNOWAŻONE ZARZĄDZANIE ORGANIZACJĄ
3rd International Scientific Conference
of the PUEB Institute of Management
SUSTAINABLE ORGANIZATION MANAGEMENT
21–22 października / October 2026

Born sustainables. Leaders of sustainable transition?

Magdalena Śliwińska

Poznań University of Economics and Business, Institute of International Business and Economics

Introduction and research aim

Despite broad recognition of social and environmental threats, the global economy still operates in an unsustainable manner, and expectations that the largest states and multinational corporations will drive systemic change have largely remained unfulfilled. This raises the question of who can lead the sustainable market transition.

Research aim: to investigate whether "born sustainables", enterprises created explicitly to pursue a specific sustainable development goal – can become leaders of sustainable transition despite lacking dominant market positions.

Research question: Can a born sustainable enterprise initiate systemic change in its sector and assume responsibility for its implementation?

Research methods

Method:
1) critical review of the literature on sustainable business models;
2) qualitative, in-depth single case study of Tony's Chocolonely (the Netherlands, founded 2006), a typical „born sustainable" established to eliminate slavery from the chocolate industry.

Analytical framework:
1) three dimensions of sustainable transformation (society, state, market), Śliwińska (2026)
2) four phases of sustainable market transformation, Simons & Nijhof (2021).

Data sources: Tony's Chocolonely Annual Fair Reports, company and Tony's Open Chain websites, industry reports and literature on sustainable business models.

Results and discussion

Tony's Chocolonely subordinated its whole business model to one mission – making 100% slave-free the norm in chocolate, broadened in 2023 to "Together, we'll end exploitation in cocoa" – pursued through three pillars: creating awareness, leading by example and inspiring to act. Its five sourcing principles (long-term partnerships with farmers' cooperatives, a higher cocoa price with a Tony's premium on top of the Fairtrade premium, investment in farmers' knowledge and productivity, and full traceability of beans) raise the bar beyond Fairtrade standards.

This focused approach proved commercially viable: in 2017 Tony's became the leading chocolate brand in the Netherlands (18.8% share, +53% sales) and today holds 6.2% of US premium chocolate bars and 3.1% and 1.3% of all chocolate bars in the UK and Germany. Through Tony's Open Chain (2019), joined by Mission Allies such as Albert Heijn, Ben & Jerry's and Waitrose, the firm extends its standards to the whole cocoa industry.

The case shows influence in all three dimensions of transformation – raising social awareness of modern slavery, offering a market alternative with higher ethical standards and shaping political agendas – and a role in each phase: it helped mature the initiation phase, triggered competition on ethical sourcing, initiated multi-stakeholder collaboration (the phase the sector is in now) and is likely to shape the coming institutionalisation of the "new normal".



Conclusions

Born sustainables can act as game changers: despite lacking market leadership in size or share, Tony's Chocolonely assumed a leadership role in the systemic change of the cocoa sector.

Implications:

(1) smaller players can lead systemic change by setting standards and inspiring others;

(2) born sustainables shape a new paradigm of competitiveness including social and environmental capital;

(3) individual action can evolve into co-created structural change.

References

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