

# A Systematic Literature Review on Cooperative Strategy and Sustainability

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**Abstract:** Achieving Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) covering complex economic, social, and environmental issues requires an active partnership between multi-stakeholders. When cooperating, stakeholders can share knowledge, expertise, technologies, and financial resources to approach sustainable development effectively. This paper aims to contribute to a comprehensive understanding of the role of cooperative strategy in sustainable development. Methodologically, this research develops a systematic literature review based on existing papers published in the last five years and available in the Scopus and Web of Science academic databases. As a result, 21 publications were selected and analyzed to identify patterns and gaps in understanding the cooperative strategy in the context of sustainability and propose directions for future research. Overall, this research provides valuable insights for practitioners and academics interested in cooperative strategies and sustainable development.

**Keywords:** Cooperative strategy, strategic alliances, joint ventures, sustainability, sustainability development, SDGs, SLR.

**JEL Classification:** M10, O19, O32, Q56,

## 1 Introduction

Sustainability has been a mainstream issue, receiving increasing attention from academics and practitioners over the last three decades (Do et al., 2019; Hübel et al., 2022). Achieving sustainability is closely connected with sustainable development, which ensures meeting current needs without compromising future needs (Pinho Santos & Proença, 2022).

The concept of sustainable development was mentioned for the first time in the report of the Brundtland Commission during the Rio Earth Summit in 1992 (Do et al., 2019). However, it became one of the most discussed topics when the United Nations (UN) adopted the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015 as part of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. By adopting SDGs, the UN tried to highlight complex challenges that called for prompt action and encouraged countries to combine forces to address these interconnected issues.

The SDGs with 169 targets cover the three main areas (dimensions, pillars, components) of sustainability, particularly the economic, social and environmental, also known as the triple bottom line of sustainability (Do et al., 2019; Dzhengiz, 2020; Horan, 2022; Miranda et al., 2023; La Bella et al., 2022; Lopes Cancela et al., 2023; Pereira et al., 2023; Pinho Santos & Proença, 2022). Since all the goals, targets, and indicators are interconnected, achieving the Agenda 2030 and SDGs requires nations, organizations, individuals, and other stakeholders to cooperate, leveraging expertise, knowledge, technologies, and financial resources (Bulmer & del Prado-Higuera, 2021; Dzhengiz, 2020; Horan, 2022; La Bella et al., 2022; Pereira et al., 2023; Pinho Santos & Proença, 2022). This notion is reflected in the last goal (SDG 17), which intends to motivate and promote effective global multi-stakeholder partnerships (public, public-private, and civil society). According to some authors, the execution and successful implementation of SDG17 are necessary for achieving the other SDGs (Bulmer & del Prado-Higuera, 2021; Dzhengiz, 2020).

The private sector's effort is crucial in reaching sustainable development goals, especially SDG 17 (Dzhengiz, 2020; Muñoz de Prat et al., 2020; La Bella et al., 2022). However, some academics believe that SDGs pose significant challenges for the business sector (Dzhengiz, 2020). Consequently, strategic alliances, joint ventures, partnerships, networks, or other cooperative strategies make it easier for companies to take their share of responsibility in resolving challenges that might be too complex to be addressed alone, e.g., climate change (Dzhengiz, 2020; Miranda et al., 2023; Muñoz de Prat et al., 2020; Pinho Santos & Proença, 2022), develop sustainability-oriented innovation (SOI), i.e., create new business interactions, models, processes, products, and services meeting the criteria of sustainability (Dzhengiz, 2020; Miranda et al., 2023; Pereira et al., 2023;), embrace new value frames, develop environmental capabilities and sustainability strategies incorporating SDGs into their core activities (Dzhengiz, 2020).

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This paper aims to contribute to a comprehensive understanding of the role of cooperative strategy in sustainable development by answering the following research questions:

- Q1. Which methodologies are most frequently employed in cooperative strategy and sustainability studies?
- Q2. How do joint ventures contribute to achieving sustainability and sustainability goals?
- Q3. How do strategic alliances contribute to achieving sustainability and sustainability goals?
- Q4. How do cooperative strategies contribute to achieving sustainability in different industries?
- Q5. What are the promising future research directions?

Methodologically, this research develops a systematic literature review based on existing papers published in the last five years and available in the Scopus and Web of Science academic databases. The review follows the PRISMA reporting guidelines to increase transparency.

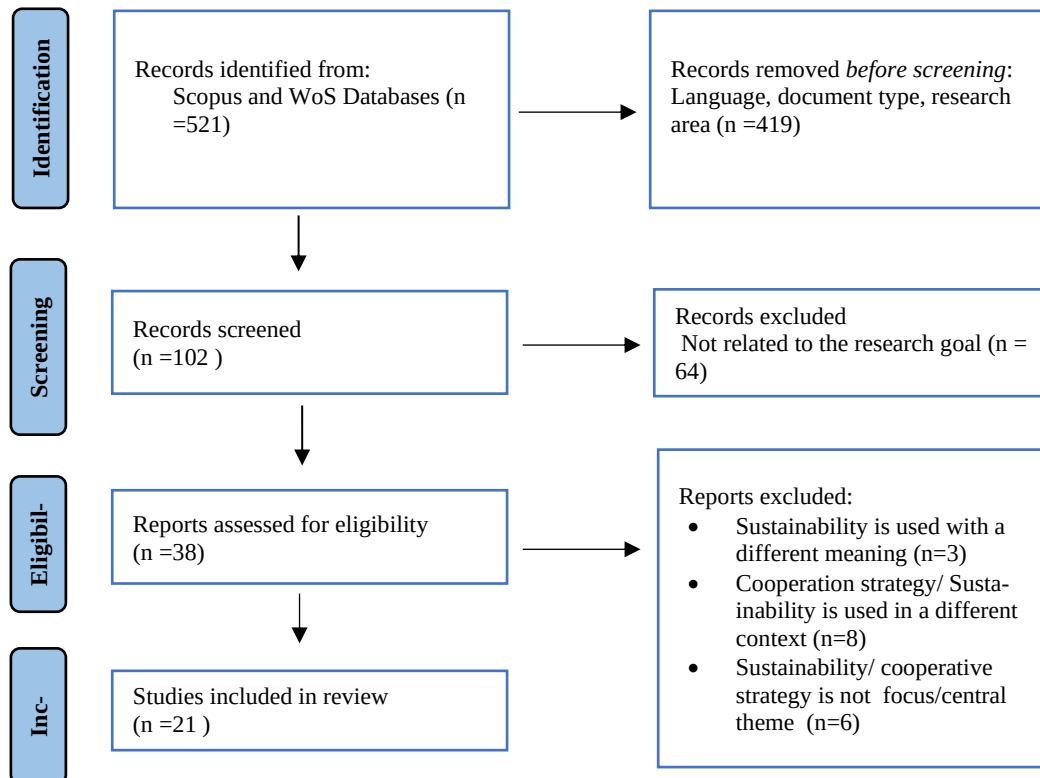
The article contributes to the theoretical literature on cooperative strategy and sustainability. It highlights the importance of cooperative strategies, especially strategic alliances and joint ventures, for effective sustainable development. Furthermore, based on the SLR, the author suggests future research directions for academics interested in the abovementioned topics.

The paper is organized as follows. After the introduction section, the author represents the methods and results of the research. Finally, the paper ends with a discussion and conclusion.

## 2 Methods

A systematic literature review (SLR) was conducted to reach the research objective and provide a comprehensive understanding of the role of cooperative strategy in sustainable development. Generally, SLRs help scholars identify, assess, and synthesize already published data in a systematic way based on a pre-defined process, develop new conceptualizations, and suggest future research directions (Dzhengiz, 2020; Miranda et al., 2023; Pereira et al., 2023). The review followed the PRISMA framework (Figure 1.)

**Figure 1** Systematic literature reviewn PRISMA flow diagram.



Source: Own processing

The Scopus and Web of Science (WoS) — Core Collection databases were chosen to identify and gather the publications for the systematic review. The WoS was a primary source since it offers access to vast publications and is considered the most rigorous and comprehensive research publication database (Dzhengiz, 2020; Miranda et al., 2023; Pereira et al., 2023). The publication date range was the last five years (2019–2024). The search process took place in September 2024. The keywords were selected based on the research objective: For sustainability, the keywords were sustainability and sustainable development, whereas, for the cooperative strategy, they were cooperative strategy, strategic alliance, and joint venture since they present the most popular cooperative strategies.

Due to the high number of documents, search results were refined to receive more precise outcomes. The search was limited to articles, review articles, and proceedings in the English language in the areas of Business and Management. The titles, abstracts, and keywords were analyzed to determine whether the papers were related to the research goal, i.e., if they were focused on cooperation strategies (strategic alliances, joint ventures, etc.) in the context of sustainability (sustainable development). After that, all full-text articles were assessed for eligibility. Finally, 21 scientific articles were included in the systematic review.

### 3 Research results

#### 3.1 Most frequently employed methodologies

8 Out of 21 articles (Table 1.) followed the case study to offer in-depth, contextual insights and explore successful sustainability practices from different industries and countries. However, these studies lack generalization as they focus on specific cases and depend on the interpretation and subjective judgment of the researcher. Six scientific articles were literature reviews on strategic alliances, joint ventures, and sustainability. Although a literature review provides a comprehensive synthesis of existing knowledge about specific topics and helps to identify research gaps and future research directions, it does not provide new empirical insights. It is highly dependent on the quality and scope of the reviewed articles. Four articles employed quantitative research using questionnaire surveys to investigate the relationship between measurable variables and receive more generalized results. However, the nature of the study and sample size are often limitations, as a larger sample size is needed to better validate, generalize, and interpret results and avoid biases. Exploratory methods (interviews), game models, and secondary data (documents) analysis got the least attention from researchers. Although interviews are a good strategy to gather useful insights and opinions about specific topics, they tend to be subjective, difficult to generalize, and require further investigation. As for secondary data analysis, it is cost-effective and efficient to analyze existing documents about R&D and finances instead of conducting primary research, however, the accessibility and availability of necessary information may be limited. Finally, although game models allow researchers to compare different models and test multiple hypothetical outcomes, this method may lack real-world applicability and empirical validation.

**Table 1** Frequently employed methods in cooperative strategies and sustainability studies

| Research method         | Articles | References                                                                                                                                                                                    |
|-------------------------|----------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Case Study              | 8        | Durugbo & Amankwah-Amoah, 2019; Hübel et al. 2022; La Bella et al., 2022; Lechler et al., 2019; Mousavi & Bossink, 2020; Pereira et al., 2022; Riosvelasco-Monroy et al., 2022; Strand, 2024; |
| Literature review       | 6        | Dzhengiz, 2020; Dzhengiz, 2020 b; Miranda et al., 2023; Muñoz de Prat et al., 2020; Pereira et al., 2023; Tetteh et al., 2019                                                                 |
| Quantitative            | 4        | Krechowicz, 2022; Lopes Cancela et al., 2023; Tetteh et al., 2021; Tumelero et al., 2019                                                                                                      |
| Exploratory             | 1        | Pinho Santos & Proença, 2022                                                                                                                                                                  |
| Game models             | 1        | Liu et al., 2024                                                                                                                                                                              |
| Secondary data analysis | 1        | Harada et al., 2021                                                                                                                                                                           |

Source: Own processing

#### 3.2 Joint ventures for sustainability

Generally, companies collaborate with external actors in sustainability processes to obtain, test and transform new ideas and technologies, diversify operations, ensure that the product/service satisfies customers' needs, reach potential customers in new markets, gain reputation/status/recognition and improve corporate image, legitimise corporate

responsibility, connect with other actors or jointly develop resources and capabilities (Dzhengiz, 2020; Miranda et al., 2023; Pereira et al., 2022).

Companies, communities, and governments see joint ventures as a vehicle to solve different problems and tackle a complex reality. The first article studying the relationships between joint ventures and sustainability appeared in 1997. Since then, joint ventures dealing with sustainability issues have been popular among academics from developing and developed countries, especially the US, Australia, UK, and Canada. Research interests seem to depend on the nature of JVs: private-public joint ventures focus on sustainable development, while private-private JVs focus on management sustainability. The most studied activity sectors are construction, mining, natural resources, chemical/biotechnology, Energy/Electric, management, and telecommunication (Muñoz de Prat et al., 2020).

Joint ventures in the construction sector are also known as construction joint ventures. Companies have engaged in international construction joint ventures (ICJVs) to survive and effectively approach sustainable development (Tetteh et al., 2019; Tetteh et al., 2021). ICJVs are a good strategy for gaining sustainable advantage/power and contributing to sustainable development by increasing corporate firms' operational efficiencies through combining complementary resources (operational capabilities, social organizing capacity, capital, etc.) to deliver mega-projects with high stakes and significant social, economic, and environmental impacts (key indicators of sustainability). There are different reasons why developed and developing countries adopt ICJVs: developed countries/jurisdictions adopt ICJVs primarily to adhere to governmental/domestic policies and hedge potential uncertainties/challenges, whereas developing countries/jurisdictions engage in ICJVs for operational competencies (Tetteh et al., 2021).

Generally, businesses cooperate and establish joint ventures to receive benefits, i.e., gain competitive advantage, transfer knowledge and experiences, share available resources and technology, new product innovation, value creation, increase sustainability, etc. (Krechowicz, 2022; Riosvelasco-Monroy et al., 2022). However, it is vital to identify and assess relationship-specific risks and risk determinants that endanger receiving these benefits, i.e., unfavorable and inexplicit contracts, orientation on self-interests, hiding internal problems and problems related to the joint venture, etc. (Krechowicz, 2022).

### **3.3 Strategic alliances for sustainability**

Companies usually form two types of alliances: inter-firm alliances with their suppliers, customers, and other firms, including their rivals, and cross-sector partnerships with organizations from the public, private, and third sectors, like governments, NGOs, and research institutions. However, they can also develop and manage extensive alliance portfolios to create product, process, or organizational innovations addressing complex sustainability challenges, e.g., environmental and social sustainability issues (Dzhengiz, 2020 b).

#### ***Strategic alliances between established companies and startups***

Increasing sustainability regulations and stakeholder pressures force established firms to assess their strategies and practices regarding sustainability requirements and develop and adopt sustainability innovations. However, unlike startups, which often introduce sustainability innovations, they face difficulties. Consequently, established companies create strategic alliances with sustainability startups to overcome these struggles, survive competition, gain competitive advantage, and contribute to the shift of markets and industries towards sustainable development. Apart from indirectly and directly improving the contribution to the sustainable mass market shift, companies in alliances with startups engage in product-related (i.e., development, marketing) and sustainability-related learning (i.e., perspectives, goals) (Hübel et al. 2022).

Strategic alliances are an essential requirement for sustainable activities (sustainable innovation) in the pharmaceutical industry. Biotech startup firms frequently partner with existing (conventional) pharmaceutical companies since the generation of innovative drugs is associated with significant Research & Development (R&D) expenses, long-term operations, and low probability of success. Furthermore, these alliances play a significant role in startup development, i.e., funding opportunities, knowledge and skills acquisition, positive influence on the stock market, and improving corporate reputation. However, existing companies, especially in Japan, tend to hesitate to enter alliances because of the business profitability (i.e., low-profit margins, lack of differentiation from competing products, etc.), strategic suitability (i.e., outside their core therapeutic areas, etc.), and organizational capacity issues (i.e., intellectual property management issues, etc.) (Harada et al., 2021).

### ***Strategic alliances between companies and universities***

One of the reasons why companies partner with universities is to access the research and development (R&D) necessary for process development and product innovation. Generally, these strategic alliances benefit both parties, i.e., expanding network, development of common growth (skills and capabilities), value creation, improving position in specific areas, knowledge transfer, achieving sustainability, etc. (Pinho Santos & Proença, 2022). Furthermore, cooperation between companies and higher education institutions plays a significant role in developing their region and surrounding community and leads to impactful social and environmental change (Pereira et al., 2023).

### ***Strategic alliances between companies and NGOs***

The most frequent and important partners in collaborations/alliances focused on social and environmental goals are private non-profit and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) (Miranda et al., 2023; Mousavi & Bossink, 2020).

Cross-sectoral collaborations/alliances between corporations and NGOs have become common practice to address complex environmental issues that are difficult to handle alone, realize environmentally sustainable innovation (ESI), and achieve sustainability. Each party has a different motive for entering alliances: NGOs often pursue economic capital, while corporations pursue social capital and see NGOs as an external source of specialized skills, knowledge, resources, and competencies that are costly, inefficient, and time-consuming to develop internally, e.g., market knowledge, local expertise, legitimacy among different stakeholders, systems for sourcing and distribution. One of the examples of a successful corporation-NGO collaboration for ESI is the long-standing partnership between KLM (corporation, airline) and WNF (NGO, part of WWF) established to fight against climate change and reduce CO<sub>2</sub> emissions by developing and promoting a market for sustainable aviation biofuels (Mousavi & Bossink, 2020).

### ***Strategic alliances for sustainable supply chain management (SCM)***

Engaging and leveraging sustainability has been suggested as an efficient solution to many challenges global supply chains have faced in recent years. Strategic alliances can contribute to building more sustainable, integrated supply chains, business models and processes (La Bella et al., 2022; Pinho Santos & Proença, 2022). Sustainable supply chains improve firms' competitiveness and financial performance and form capital for mitigating business risk consequences. For example, Vendor Flex is an efficient inter-firm strategic alliance between Amazon and its supplier (vendor) to streamline processes and increase supply chain efficiency while enabling many of the sustainability requirements, development goals, and targets to be met. By intensively using technology and exchanging knowledge and assets between partners, the processes are faster, the interaction chain is avoided, and CO<sub>2</sub> per year is significantly reduced (La Bella et al., 2022).

Sustainability issues in the supply chain are difficult to avoid, especially in for the second, third, and more upstream suppliers (La Bella et al., 2022; Lechler et al., 2019). Since these sustainability violations can damage focal firms' reputations, it is important to manage suppliers regarding sustainability and improve their compliance with the focal companies' corporate sustainability standards (CSS). Firms from the same industry are forming assessment sharing strategic alliances (ASSAs) to better manage the increasing number of suppliers with respect to growing stakeholders' sustainability expectations, improve suppliers' sustainability capabilities and compliance with CSS, and exchange best practices, sustainability-related knowledge and sustainability evaluation reports of common suppliers (Lechler et al., 2019).

### ***Cooperation in R&D***

Companies often form strategic alliances known as cooperation in R & D to complement technological-scientific capabilities and share costs and risks associated with common innovation goals. Technology partners may cooperate in R & D for several main reasons, such as transaction costs related to the creation and transfer of technical knowledge, industrial organization connected to the potential market failure of created scientific/technological knowledge, and strategic management connected to analyzing competitive forces, complementarity of dynamic capabilities, strategic networks, future technological development. Furthermore, another reason can be introducing and managing complex environmental innovations and adapting practices like organizational changes, changes in the product portfolio, and production processes aimed to reduce the "environmental footprint" and influence companies' socioeconomic performance (Tumelero et al., 2019).

### ***Sustainability-oriented innovation, green strategic alliances and coopetition***

Sustainability-oriented innovation (SOI) is an umbrella term frequently replacing sustainability/sustainable innovation or sustainability-driven/related innovation. SOI includes developing new/improved products and creating new processes that bring advantages to the environment and society. Since this type of innovation is characterized by a higher degree of complexity, uncertainty, and unpredictable financial returns for companies, the innovation process is more challenging. Usually, developing new and viable sustainable solutions requires the involvement of external partners (Miranda et al., 2023).

The demand for sustainability has driven firms to establish environmental (green) strategic alliances leveraging and exploring environmental technologies to take advantage of new market and business opportunities, improve environmental performance and reputation, and positively impact and promote environmental and social sustainability. Green Strategic Alliances (GSAs) representing green culture help companies in achieving green development and management and focus on protecting the environment, reducing emissions, conserving energy, developing a low-carbon economy, innovatively responding to emerging green societal needs, e.g., introducing new and improved products and services (Lopes Cancela et al., 2023).

Recently, rival firms have begun creating technological cooperations (coopetitions) to reduce investment costs connected to green innovation R&D, mitigate risks and avoid uncertainties, produce more eco-friendly products to meet the market demand, and achieve a „win-win-win“ situation regarding profit, environment, and social welfare (Miranda et al., 2023; Liu et al., 2024). Frequent cooperative agreements are cost-sharing contracts, e.g., innovation collaboration between Intel and Micron for sharing R&D expenses concerning memory technology, and technology licensing contracts, e.g., JAC New Energy licensing its cutting-edge new energy technology products to Volkswagen Germany. In technology licensing agreements, strong-weak combinations between leading and emerging enterprises are likely to receive win-win profits, increase consumer environmental awareness, and reach higher levels of product sustainability, facilitating low-carbon transformation (Liu et al., 2024).

### **3.4 Practical examples from different industries**

As mentioned above, establishing strategic alliances is a beneficial strategy for a diverse group of actors from different sectors, industries, and social systems. Pereira et al. (2022) discussed the significance of strategic alliances for the sport tourism industry and environmental sustainability in the example of Portuguese nautical stations. According to them, managers of nautical stations should use these alliances to improve competitiveness, promote regional development and market destinations, achieve sustainability, increase governance, and improve experience with clients using cooperative marketing. Furthermore, Durugbo & Amankwah-Amoah (2019) discussed sustainability partnerships in the Oil and gas industry in the example of Shell. Through a case study, they found that Shell cooperates with stakeholders, including scientific and conservation organizations, academic institutions, and NGOs like the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), to set standards and run programs for sustainable development. The company mostly operates its business through joint ventures that have to comply with Shell's frameworks and key corporate sustainability criteria. Finally, Strand (2024) explored how Nordic countries (Denmark, Finland, and Sweden) and companies (Novo Nordisk, Ørsted, Chr. Hansen, Neste, and IKEA) sustainability practices contribute to achieving sustainability and sustainable development goals. The Nordic approach involving long-term vision, cooperative strategies, and stakeholder (other companies, governments, international organizations and their agencies, NGOs, local communities, universities, investors, employees, customers, and other key stakeholders) engagement helped companies (Novo Nordisk, Ørsted, Chr. Hansen, Neste, and IKEA) successfully transform their business models, make massive sustainability transitions, and become global sustainability frontrunners.

### **4 Future research directions**

The SLR showed that although cooperative strategy in the context of sustainability has received a fair share of attention from academics in the last five years, there are still several areas that require further investigation. Future research should focus more on the role of cooperative strategies, especially joint ventures, in achieving sustainability and sustainable development goals. Partner selection and drivers/motives for engaging in sustainability-oriented inter-firm alliances and cross-sector partnerships are also worth exploring. Furthermore, academics can research different aspects of these alliances, such as governance structures, management, and performance outcomes.

Since most studies center around environmental sustainability and addressing complex environmental issues, it will be interesting to discuss how companies collaborate with different stakeholders (other companies, governments, NGOs,

universities, international organizations, local communities, etc.) to overcome social challenges and achieve social sustainability. Moreover, it is suggested that academics increase research areas and investigate cooperative strategies in the context of sustainability in other industries apart from the most common ones like manufacturing, pharmaceutical, construction, and aviation.

## 5 Conclusions

Sustainability has been a mainstream issue, receiving greater attention from academics and practitioners after the UN adopted the 17 SDGs in 2015. The private sector's participation is crucial in reaching sustainable development goals. Increasing sustainability regulations and stakeholder pressures force firms to assess their strategies and practices regarding sustainability requirements. Consequently, companies usually collaborate with external actors (companies, governments, international organizations and their agencies, NGOs, local communities, universities, customers, and other key stakeholders) in sustainability processes to make sustainability transitions, embrace new value frames, develop, test and transform new ideas and technologies, diversify operations, ensure that the product/service satisfies customers' needs, gain reputation, and improve corporate image. The SLR results showed that although cooperative strategy in the context of sustainability has received a fair share of attention from academics in the last five years, several areas still require further investigation.

Overall, this research provides valuable insights for practitioners and academics interested in cooperative strategies and sustainable development. Academically, the review provides a comprehensive understanding of the role of cooperative strategies (strategic alliances and joint ventures) in achieving sustainability and sustainable development goals and emphasizes the necessity to further investigate the issue. The research insights can help practitioners consider multi-stakeholder partnerships as a superior strategy to address complex sustainability challenges.

The article, like any other study, has several limitations. Firstly, the literature review was restricted to studies published in the last five years (2019-2024), which may have overlooked earlier foundational research regarding cooperative strategies in the context of sustainability. Second, the review focused on the publications available only on Scopus and Web of Science, which are considered comprehensive databases, however, using them may have excluded grey literature or regional studies available in other databases like Google Scholar. Finally, the choice of search keywords and refining search results, like limiting research results to only English-language articles, may have excluded critical perspectives on cooperative strategies for sustainability.

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