

# Unsustainability of Sustainability: Cognitive Frames and Tensions in Bottom of the Pyramid Projects

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**Abstract** Existing research posits that decision makers use specific cognitive frames to manage tensions in sustainability. However, we know less about how the cognitive frames of individuals at different levels in organization interact and what these interactions imply for managing sustainability tensions, such as in Bottom of the Pyramid (BOP) projects. To address this omission, we ask *do organizational and project leaders differ in their understanding of tensions in a BOP project, and if so, how?* We answer this question by drawing on a 5-year study of a BOP project of a global pharmaceutical company in India. In line with the existing research, we found three kinds of frames—paradoxical, business case, and business—held differently across organizational levels and over time. We also found that the shift in frames of both project and organizational leaders was mediated by the decision-making horizon. The initial divergence across organizational levels, seen in paradoxical and business frames, was mediated by long-term decision-making horizon. However, there was an eventual convergence toward business frames associated with the shift from long- to shorter-term decision-making horizons and one that led to the project’s closure. We contribute by proposing a dynamic model of cognitive frames in sustainability, where the research has either alluded to top-down or bottom-up understanding.

**Keywords** Bottom of Pyramid · Paradox · Sustainability · Decision-making horizons

## Introduction

Multinational corporations (MNCs) increasingly see rural markets in the developing world as an untapped customer segment. They often enter these markets through Bottom of the Pyramid (BOP) projects. BOP projects singularly target the 4–5 billion people who live on less than \$2 per day and have been bypassed by globalization (Hart and London 2005; Prahalad and Hart 2002).

Often described under the broad umbrella of corporate sustainability initiatives (Olsen and Boxenbaum 2009), BOP projects are fraught with tensions (Karnani 2007; Reficco and Gutiérrez 2016). They have social goals of providing access to the underserved but must also meet the business goals of low cost and high returns (Kolk et al. 2014). Because BOP projects are integrated with the business, they are held to the same standards as any other project. Yet, these projects require significant investment in developing new products, processes, and infrastructure (Davidson 2009). In fact, alluding to CK Prahalad’s book “Fortune at the Bottom of Pyramid,” Gunther (2014) claims that a business is yet to make a fortune. Despite the potential for generating new untapped market segments, many BOP projects fail (Reficco and Gutiérrez 2016). The underlying tensions in BOP projects are likely the reason.

Research on tensions in sustainability posits that instead of ignoring or removing tensions by choosing one end over the other, actors can see the tension as paradox or “contradictory yet interrelated elements that exist simultaneously and persist over time” (Smith and Lewis 2011, p. 382). Important to the notion of paradox is seeing not

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just opposition but also interdependence between the opposing elements (Lewis 2000). Studies have shown that when actors see tensions as paradox, they are able to achieve desirable outcomes such as innovation (Jay 2013), creativity (Miron-Spektor et al. 2011) and social impact (Sharma and Bansal 2017).

Cognitive frames are critical to understanding sustainability tensions. These frames are filters that selectively admit information into the decision-making process enabling decision makers to make sense of ambiguous cues and formulate a strategic response (Hahn et al. 2014). More specifically, paradoxical cognitive frames create “awareness of multiple and conflicting economic, environmental, and social aspects of sustainability issues,” and as a result, managers consider a more comprehensive response (Hahn et al. 2014, p. 464).

Despite its importance for understanding sustainability tensions, the research on cognitive frames has either focused on a top-down perspective of ready-made frames that are applied to emerging cues (Hahn et al. 2014; Sharma and Good 2013; Sharma 2000; Zietsma and Vertinsky 2002) or a bottom-up perspective that depicts organizational actors selling social issues (Briscoe and Gupta 2016; Howard-Grenville et al. 2003; Sonenshein 2006). Cornelissen and Werner (2014), however, remind us not to reify “what are essentially dynamic and socially situated processes of meaning construction” (p. 183). Others have emphasized this point in describing a socially situated perspective on sensemaking (e.g., Maitlis 2005) and a process of organizational frame emergence seen in the interactions between cognitive frames at various levels within an organization (e.g., Kaplan 2008).

To address this gap, we ask: “do organizational and project leaders differ in their understanding of the tensions in a BOP project, and if so, how?” We answer this question by drawing on a 5-year study of a BOP project of a global pharmaceutical company in India. The project was formally launched in 2007 and was closed down in 2012. We show how the organizational leaders’ frames influenced and were influenced by the project leader’s frames over time. We found that the length of the organization’s decision-making horizon mediated this relationship through two mechanisms—temporal work and temporal shift. Temporal work is in the activities through which individuals “construct, navigate, and capitalize on timing norms” (Granqvist and Gustafsson 2016, p. 825). In our study, temporal work was in the project leader’s bottom-up attempts to translate the cognitive frame into timelines and metrics. Temporal shift is the change in the actor’s perception of time triggered by external events (Staudenmayer et al. 2002). We found that temporal shift contained the bottom-up efforts in temporal work.

This study contributes to the research on sustainability and paradox (Hahn et al. 2014; Jay 2013; Slawinski and Bansal 2015). BOP projects are seen as part of larger sustainable development agenda (Hahn 2009). They create new market opportunities for the organization while addressing a significant societal problem in the region (Olsen and Boxenbaum 2009). By studying a BOP project, we build on the argument that paradoxical frames are critical for understanding the success of sustainability initiatives (e.g., Hahn et al. 2014). We not only identify different types of frames, as described by the existing research, but also the process with which cognitive frames of different actors within the organization interact and influence a sustainability initiative’s survival.

## Literature Review

### Tensions in BOP Projects

Scholars have identified several tensions in BOP and sustainability projects. Sustainability manifests as various organizational initiatives within the organization. Tensions can be seen as the contradictions in values (Besharov 2014), identity (Jay 2013), organizational practices (Battilana and Dorado 2010; Tracey et al. 2011), cognitive frames (Hahn et al. 2014), roles and motivations (Harjula 2007) and decision-making horizons (Slawinski and Bansal 2015). For example, Battilana and Dorado (2010) described the tensions that commercial microfinance organization experiences in combining development logic and banking logic. Similarly, Tracey et al. (2011) in their study of a social enterprise selling household catalog described the tension between commercial logic of retailing and the noncommercial logic of helping the homeless by employing them. They described the reason for the enterprise’s failure as contradictions in the business model. The responsibility of managing the homeless, who often struggled with drugs and alcohol, put additional strain on the regional managers responsible for scaling up the business.

Karnani (2007) discusses tensions in the BOP project by arguing that providing poor with access to goods and services available in the developed markets is at odds with profit objectives—poor do not have the purchasing power for the firms to break even. Similarly, Davidson (2009) describes tensions as ethical versus economic concerns. For example, pricing of the products puts ethics and economics at odds—products are priced to maximize benefits yet if a firm “wrung every possible cent out of each transaction” (p. 26) with the rural poor, it is likely that the firm does not advance societal goals. Other researchers (e.g., Jaiswal 2008; Jaiswal and Gupta 2015) have discussed the

vulnerability of BOP consumers owing to lack of education and argued that marketing to economically deprived consumers can lead to misallocation of their scarce resources for non-essential products.

These tensions take different forms when we look inside organizations. Halme et al. (2012) and Olsen and Bauxenbaum (2009) claim that compared to the research describing the challenges in the external environment such as the lack of infrastructure, research on the intraorganizational challenges is relatively sparse. Olsen and Bauxenbaum (2009) describe these challenges in the Danish Biotech company Novozymes' BOP project. They described three kinds of tensions related to such initiatives—mindsets, i.e., “contradictory claims about the relationship between a company's financial performance and its commitment to sustainability” (p. 109); changes in routines where the new routines needed for the project's success disrupted the familiar existing practices; and project evaluation criteria where the criteria of net present value and business risk assessment categorized the BOP project as high risk and low returns. They found that such barriers to project implementation led to drastic change in organizational strategy toward BOP projects. Halme et al. (2012) describe similar intraorganizational challenges such as short-term profit maximization, business unit-based incentive model, and tolerance for uncertainty and ambiguity.

### Cognitive Frames and Tensions in Sustainability

Individual cognitive frames enable interpretation and sensemaking, and hence the organization's stance toward sustainability issues (Basu and Palazzo 2008; Hahn et al. 2014).

#### *Types of Sustainability Frames*

Hahn et al. (2014) argue for two kinds of cognitive frames that decision makers hold in understanding sustainability issues—*paradoxical* and *business case frame*. Actors adopt paradoxical frames when they accept that tensions exist over time, and see not only differences but also the link between opposing elements (Lewis 2000; Lüscher and Lewis 2008). They embrace duality, i.e., they sustain the opposition between paradoxical elements by seeing “interdependence without merging” (Farjoun 2010, p. 204). However, such link is often ambiguous and long term (Tetlock et al. 1993). Actors seek to sustain paradox, instead of resolving them, and can at best reach what Lüscher and Lewis (2008) describe as workable certainty or ongoing experimentation to go beyond simplistic solutions.

In contrast, when actors adopt a business case frame, they are quick to find the link that integrates the opposing elements without differentiating or sustaining the tension

(Smith 2014). Many argue that such a link puts economic objectives ahead of social goals (Carroll and Shabana 2010; Hahn et al. 2014, 2015). Decision makers with a business case frame singularly focus on those social and environmental issues that align with the firm's economic objectives.

#### *Interplay Between Cognitive Frames*

The cognitive framing perspectives have been critiqued for describing frames as stable meaning systems and hence reifying what are truly dynamic and continuously evolving ways of meaning construction (Cornelissen and Werner 2014).

We know little about how cognitive frames at different levels in an organization interact to manage sustainability tensions. A few researchers have offered insights on what this process may look like, for example, Kaplan (2008) describes how individual frames held by organizational members are negotiated for the emergence of an organizational frame. However, for sustainability tensions, we do not know enough about how this interaction dynamically changes the frames and the implications for outcomes such as the success or failure of BOP projects. Our research aims to address this gap.

### Methods

#### Research Context

This paper is based on a 5-year study of MedInd<sup>1</sup>, a global pharmaceutical company in India. MedInd had been operating in India since the early 1950s. Their target customer was primarily from the urban areas or the Tier I market. Rural and semi-urban markets, also known as the Tier II market, constituted over 55% of the Indian pharmaceutical markets (CII-PWC 2010). Further, over 70% of India's population lived in rural areas (Government of India 2001). Despite the large numbers, rural patients had little access to medical infrastructure, including high-quality doctors, medicines, and aftercare. Rural India's challenging conditions, such as the lack of roads to reach remote villages, made the cost for the pharmaceutical companies much higher than the benefits of selling to this customer base.

MedInd's top management realized that it could not achieve industry leadership without a strong presence in the Tier II market. Tapping opportunities in rural markets required significant investments. At the same time, many

<sup>1</sup> The name of the company, project and project leader have been disguised to protect the confidentiality.

competitors already had significant presence in rural markets, and hence, gaining market share as a relatively late entrant was challenging. MedInd's leadership tasked one of their Senior Directors, Pranav, to design and execute a project that could overcome these challenges.

We studied a project that MedInd called Swasthya,<sup>2</sup> a BOP project for MedInd's entry into the rural markets in India. The project was designed to enhance rural doctors' knowledge and, as a result, improve the health care delivered to rural patients. MedInd organized workshops where rural doctors received the knowledge shared by city doctors based on workshop modules created by MedInd. The unique feature was the dissemination of "unbiased" knowledge, i.e., knowledge that was not specific to the firm's products. MedInd hoped to generate goodwill that would result in the doctors' willingness to write prescriptions for MedInd's products.

We selected MedInd and its project Swasthya to answer our research question for a few reasons. First, BOP projects are fraught with tensions and MedInd's data could help us glean deeper insights into how these tensions are managed. Second, we had deep and long-term access to project Swasthya as it unfolded over the years. Access to closed-door decision making is challenging since "access is not a single event but an ongoing process that at any time can be interrupted or turn sour" (Dutton and Dukerich 2006, p. 22). Also, access is necessary but not sufficient for gathering rich data since access is different from cooperation (Wanat 2008). Cooperation is based on long-term relationships. One of the authors over the years developed such a relationship with MedInd's key decision makers and managers involved in the project, which afforded him their cooperation. As the project unfolded and the decision makers developed "new insights and understanding of their experiences" (Taylor et al. 2016, p. 114), he could talk to them informally and learn about their everyday organizational lives in the project, including their understandings and interpretations.

## Data Collection

We collected data from 2010 to 2015, following the project's design, execution, and eventual closure. We began collecting interview and archival data when the second author was invited to speak at MedInd's leadership meeting in Hong Kong. Over the period of 5 years, we interviewed the project leader who was the Senior Director heading the Commercial Operations II (Tier II Market), Head—Commercial Operations, and senior executives in Marketing and Business Development, Medical, Strategic Initiatives, and Communications. We conducted 21 in-depth interviews

(see Table 1). As well, over the years, we developed a close understanding of decisions related to the project and the reasons behind them.

In addition, we collected information through secondary sources such as company annual reports, PowerPoint slides, industry reports, press releases, articles in newspapers and business magazines, and social media such as blogs and YouTube. We reviewed 123 different publications. We provide a list of publication types in Table 2.

## Data Analysis

We began the analysis by laying out a detailed timeline of events and decisions from 2007 to 2012 (see Table 3). To ensure the accuracy of the timeline, we confirmed the details with our informants.

Based on this timeline, the authors began discussing with each other the major events and turning points in the project. The second author who had been extensively involved with the project played the "insider" role. He drew on an experiential understanding of the project. The other author brought an outsider's perspective to challenge the emerging insights with theory and counterexamples. In playing these insider–outsider roles, we created a "space between" that was a space of "ambiguity, and ambivalence, as well as conjunction and disjunction" (Dwyer and Buckle 2009, p. 60). This ambiguity and ambivalence generated by our different vantage points catapulted us into the sensemaking question of "what is going on here?" (Paull et al. 2013). Below, we explain the data analysis in three linear steps; however, the analysis was an iterative process of identifying surprises in the data and making meaning of those surprises based on theory.

### Step 1: Project Framing

In laying out the timeline, it became evident that the project underwent significant shifts in how it was understood by the organizational leaders and by the project leader tasked with leading the project. We noticed the sensegiving efforts of the project leader in creating a specific understanding of the project. At the same time, the top management's understanding of the project influenced his efforts. We turned to the literature on framing (e.g., Hahn et al. 2014; Cornelissen and Werner 2014) to understand these insights.

Iterating between the literature and data, we delineated the shift in framing over the years as our concept of interest. We specifically bracketed three phases across which this shift happened. We describe the frames within each phase with distinct boundaries, fully acknowledging that the frames could spill across phases and likely have fuzzy boundaries. We also saw a difference between the

<sup>2</sup> Swasthya, a pseudonym, is a Hindi word that translates as 'health'.

**Table 1** Data collection

Date	Number of interviews	Title of interviewees	Other sources of data
June 25, 2010	1	Senior Director—Commercial Operations II	
June 28–29, 2010			Participation in a leadership meeting
December 3, 2010	6	Senior Director—Commercial Operations II; Associate Director—Marketing and Business Development, Associate Director—Medical, Senior Manager—Strategic Initiatives, and Director—Communications	
February 14, 2011	4	Senior Director—Commercial Operations II; Associate Director—Marketing and Business Development, Associate Director—Medical, Senior Manager—Strategic Initiatives	
July 7, 2011	2	Senior Director—Commercial Operations II; Associate Director—Marketing and Business Development	
July 14, 2012	3	Senior Director—Commercial Operations II; Head—Commercial Operations; Associate Director—Marketing and Business Development	
April 7, 2014	1	Senior Director—Commercial Operations II	
April 8, 2014	1	Associate Director—Marketing and Business Development	
April 11, 2014	1	Former Senior Director—Commercial Operations II	
September 1, 2015	1	Former Senior Director—Commercial Operations II	
November 9, 2015	1	Former Senior Director—Commercial Operations II	
Total	21		

**Table 2** Secondary data sources

Type	Count
Newspaper articles	22
Magazine articles	5
Industry reports	9
Company's annual reports	1
Web sites and online content	81
Blogs	4
Media briefings	1
Total	123

project leader's understanding of the project (and the shifts in his frames) and that of the organizational leaders.

Building on the literature on framing (e.g., Cornelissen and Werner 2014) and paradox (e.g., Hahn et al. 2014), we coded for the kind of frames that described the project in each of the three phases. We coded separately for the frames held by the project leader (and his team) from that held by the organizational leaders. The literature on framing argues for frame content and frame structure as the basic blocks of cognitive frames (e.g., Hahn et al. 2014). To understand the frame content, we asked ourselves “in

describing the project's objectives does the interviewee emphasize social goals (e.g., developing the knowledge of rural doctors) or profit goals (e.g., increase in revenue)?” To understand the frame structure, we asked ourselves “what is the relationship between the elements of the frame content (e.g., ambiguous link, tightly interconnected, no link)?”

We found two frames that aligned with what others (e.g., Hahn et al. 2014) have described as paradoxical and business case frames. We also found another frame, which we called as business frame. Business frames are so commonplace in organizations that not many researchers explicitly state that a decision maker adopts a business frame. However, many businesses equate sustainability projects to other business projects (Halme et al. 2012) and hence readily adopt business frames. In our study, we found that unlike business case frame that tightly linked social with business goals, business frames indicated an economic logic that singularly focused on the business goals. Even though business frames are often taken for granted in organizational research, they hold important insights when juxtaposed with business case and paradoxical frames.

**Table 3** Timeline of events

Time	Event
2007	Company took the strategic decision to focus on the rural or Tier II market. Pranav was tasked with developing the project plan for entering the Tier II market.
March 2008	Pranav presented his initial idea to the top management: create a knowledge university (Swasthya) for training rural doctors. Top management was not convinced since they believed that MedInd is in the business of selling medicines, not knowledge.
September 2008	Pranav presented the revised proposal, making the connection between Swasthya workshops and prescription generation.
September–December 2008	Company leadership approved the proposal.
January–July 2009	Pranav and his team began implementation: manufacture new low-cost products, design workshop materials, and recruit an external sales force (sales force not on company payrolls) for an easy exit, if needed. Project was structured to share costs with an existing unit with well-established brands.
July 2009	Project Swasthya piloted in three states.
2010	Project Swasthya launched in three new states and subsequently in the entire country. Based on the project's early success, project targets increased fivefold from the initial targets. Pranav began internalizing the sales force and invested in their development.
2011	As per its worldwide strategy, MedInd decided to separate Swasthya from the business unit with older well-established brands. Cost loaded on to Swasthya retrospectively from 2009. At the same time, the old leadership was replaced by new leaders.
2012	MedInd decided to exit Tier II. Swasthya transformed into platform to provide product-specific knowledge to urban doctors.

We observed shifts in the project framing over the years and coded for the shift at both project and organizational leadership levels.

### Step 2: Time

We did not embark on this study to explain time as a critical piece of the puzzle. As is the nature of inductive studies, time emerged as a focal variable in our data analysis. We found timelines and project metrics as representative of the tension between the short and long term that is linked to the business and social goals of the project. We coded for timelines and metrics within each phase and then compared the differences across the three phases of the project.

To make sense of the differences across the phases, we started with the literature on time in organizations (e.g., Bluedorn and Denhardt 1988; Butler 1995; Ancona et al. 2001; Orlikowski and Yates 2002) and eventually narrowed our focus to the smaller set of studies on time and sustainability (e.g., Bansal and DesJardine 2014; Reinecke and Ansari 2015; Slawinski and Bansal 2012, 2015). These studies described the rationale for understanding time in sustainability, as well as ways in which organizations navigate paradox in short and long term.

We also found that our data described a shift in time horizons, triggered by how actors understood the time they have. To make further sense of these insights, we turned to the literature on events and time (e.g., Staudenmayer et al.

2002). This literature provided us with an understanding of how events can shape the perception of time in organizations.

We coded for the events that unfolded across the timeline, as well as the shifts in decision-making horizons. This analytical exercise yielded the insight of the interplay between cognitive frames and decision-making horizons.

### Step 3: Mechanisms

Having established the shifts in frames, as well decision-making horizon as the key element, we asked ourselves what explains these relationships—from macro (organizational leadership level) to micro (project leadership level) frames and decision-making horizons.

We draw on Hedstrom and Swedburg's (1998) bathtub model as a heuristic device in the Findings and one that led to our theorizing in the Discussion. The bathtub model is relevant for two reasons. First, similar to others (e.g., Anderson et al. 2006; Barley and Tolbert 1997; Weber 2006), we are able to show the interaction across levels. We explain the organizational leaders' frame for understanding the project and its interaction with the project leader's frame. Second, the model provides the heuristics for the mechanisms underlying the relationship between different levels. A mechanism is a "process that explains an observed relationship; mechanisms explain how and/or why one thing leads to another" (Anderson et al. 2006,

p. 103). In our search for explanations, we identified two mechanisms—temporal work and temporal shifts. Third, the bathtub model is dynamic. We are able to explain the interactions across levels over time.

## Findings

### Phase I: 2007–2009

#### *Business Frame: Organizational Leaders*

The top management team at MedInd believed that the company would be unable to achieve further growth without tapping the large customer base in rural India (see Table 4; Fig. 1). Head—Commercial Operations described the business potential of the rural market, “for any pharmaceutical company it’s not possible to ignore 700 million people or 70% of the population [living in rural areas] because these are the people who will demand care, at least from the government.”

They tasked Pranav to develop a roadmap for the company’s entry into the rural or Tier II market. Pranav was the Senior Director Commercial Operations II (Tier II Market) unit. The organizational leaders were looking to commence a project that would put MedInd “among the top 10 players in India by expanding beyond heritage (current) brands and metro areas” (PowerPoint slides, Leadership Meeting).

#### *Paradoxical Frame: Project Leader*

With the top management’s directive, Pranav began to put together a small team and delineate his strategy. He was looking for a strategy around selling affordable medicines in rural markets. However, he soon realized that the challenge was less about the availability of medicines, since products from many pharmaceutical companies had already reached these markets. Instead, it was about the lack of rural doctors’ knowledge of how to effectively diagnose and treat patients.

Pranav saw the doctors’ clinics crowded with patients, patients reached the examination room after many hours of wait. Further, doctors often focused on treating symptoms instead of diagnosing underlying causes. In his conversations with the doctors, Pranav learned that the doctors had little opportunity to update their knowledge. They were overworked and, unlike their urban counterparts, they had limited resources such as the Internet. One of their main sources of new knowledge were the sales representatives of pharmaceutical companies. However, sales representatives provided the doctors with product-based knowledge, biased toward selling their company’s medicines.

Pranav saw an opportunity for MedInd. He proposed to MedInd’s top management a “workshop model” to provide doctors in Tier II market unbiased knowledge. During these workshops organized by MedInd, “they (doctors) can meet in an unorganized structure and share knowledge with each other.” Pranav saw the project delivering benefits for both MedInd and rural doctors and patients and argued that a link existed between the benefits for the business and society. He claimed that if they set up a structure to provide knowledge-building opportunities to rural doctors, “today or tomorrow doctors would give you returns.”

#### *Decision-Making Horizon: Long Term*

Pranav advocated for long-term metrics for decisions (see Table 5). He explained, “Sales outcome and P&L (Profit and Loss) is only one part of the measurement. I want to track doctor retention. How many doctors are coming regularly for workshops, or how many doctors I could retain for the workshops.”

A member from Pranav’s team described that their primary challenge was convincing the top management not to worry about the short-term goal of “getting more product prescriptions” (Associate Director—Medical) from the rural doctors. Even though the project had to show commercial returns, Pranav convinced MedInd’s leadership that they were building MedInd’s brand by enhancing the rural doctors’ knowledge, which was not a short-term endeavor.

He undertook specific activities to support this long-term decision-making horizon. Most importantly, he attached the project to an existing business unit managing the company’s heritage brands and non-prescription or over-the-counter (OTC) products (see Fig. 2a). As a result, the project’s operating costs did not load directly to the products sold under it. The team could spread the cost across both existing products and new generics developed for Swasthya.

### Phase II: 2009–2010

#### *Business Case Frame: Organizational Leaders*

The long-term decision-making horizon for the project helped Pranav to more clearly frame for the organization’s leaders the potential commercial benefits from the project. He argued for shifting an understanding of the project from a business project to one that was a “first of its kind.” However, the task was anything but easy. He described that he had to “walk a tightrope” where, as long as the sales were coming in, he could talk to the leadership about the long-term vision of the project. However, when the sales wavered, he had to move to “talking about the business.”

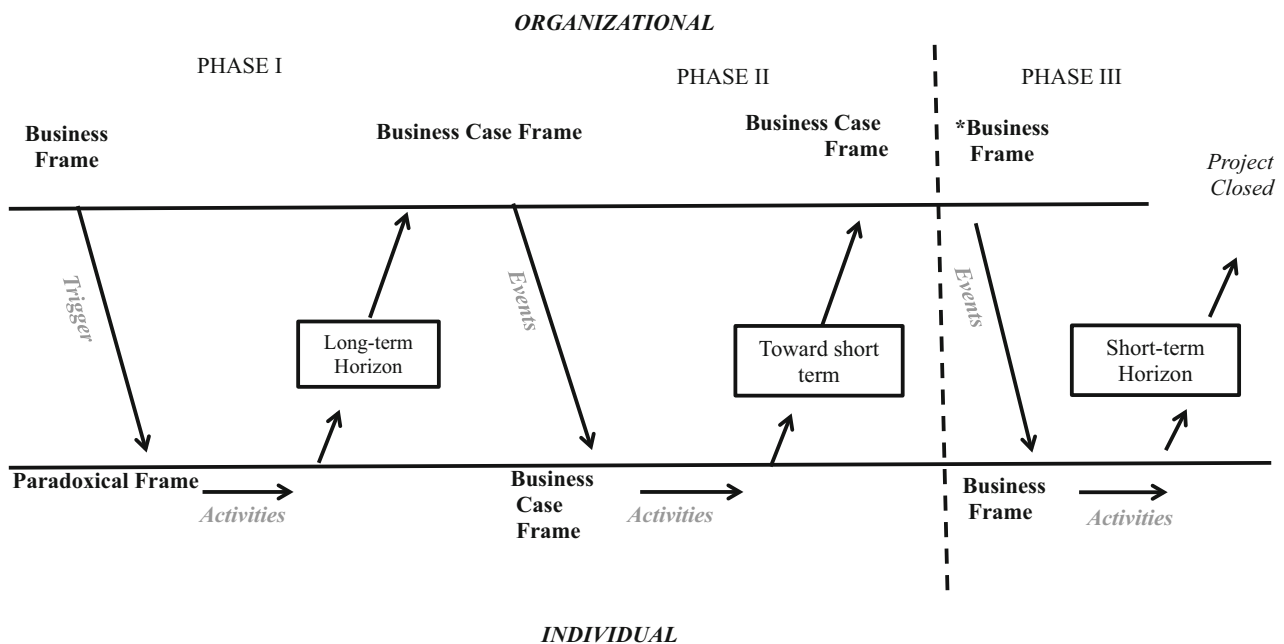
**Table 4** Shifts in framing

	Before 2009	2009–2010	2010 onwards
Swasthya leader and team members	<p><i>Paradoxical frame</i></p> <p>“Giving access to medicines for poor patients is a cause, whether returns are coming or not, today or tomorrow the doctor will give you return” (Senior Director—Commercial Operations II)</p> <p>“No pharma company is in the field of health education, they are all in diseases education. So any company will go to the doctor and will talk about the diseases, which his drug will be able to cure. But in Swasthya we are giving them (rural doctors) information about health and the diseases per se, even the ones we will not be producing. Our objective is to ensure our end-user (rural doctors) gets what he wants in terms of knowledge and in terms of skills” (Associate Director—Medical, Swasthya Team Member)</p>	<p><i>Business case frame</i></p> <p>“Swasthya provides a competitive advantage: transactions. Sales people can go and directly strike a deal with the doctor, because we are giving the doctor something (unbiased education) that nobody else is giving him” (Senior Director—Commercial Operations II)</p> <p>“We were not looking into cost reduction, we were looking at expansion because even with the costs I was confident that the returns were going to give me pay-offs” (Senior Director—Commercial Operations II).</p> <p>“Swasthya is an education model to make a difference so that we get reciprocal prescriptions for us, very clearly. How, by leveraging that gap of education, which exists in the rural interiors” (Senior Manager—Strategic Initiatives, Swasthya Team Member)</p>	<p><i>Business frame</i></p> <p>“We started Swasthya in a socialist way. Whatever were the doctor’s returns, I was giving the same benefit to all the doctors. In a capitalist way I have to differentiate (what) Swasthya (has to offer to the doctors) as per the returns [given by the doctors]” (Senior Director—Commercial Operations II)</p> <p>“Now tomorrow when I would be going into this particular market I would be tilted (sic) to the doctors who are willing to give me more business, because my focus shifts towards business” (Senior Director—Commercial Operations II)</p> <p>“So we decided to restructure Swasthya in a best possible way so that there is profitable P&amp;L for the organization.... Basically see Swasthya by its definition was not only product specific knowledge, it was anything which can be done for health infrastructure building but now in the new avatar company is redefining it as providing product specific knowledge to urban doctors” (Senior Director—Commercial Operations II)</p> <p>“My threat has come internally. So I would like to first see that my internal threat is managed so my sustainability is to get the profitability faster and in the process I may dilute my image and goodwill with the doctors. Because the more I move toward only profits, doctors will say that he is just like any other company” (Senior Director—Commercial Operations II)</p> <p>“Our current focus and priority at least should be on those activities, which have given us immediate returns. Till yesterday we had the liberty of focusing on both simultaneously, today for whatever good and bad if I am foreseeing that my revenues may lose out I need to protect my revenue base as an immediate priority. With that the perspective obviously would be that if profitability has to be protected every money that I plow in has to generate good amount of return” (Associate Director—Marketing and Business Development, Swasthya Team Member)</p>



**Table 4** continued

	Before 2009	2009–2010	2010 onwards
Organizational Leaders	<p><i>Business frame</i></p> <p>“To me Swasthya is a medical education, doctor enhancement program with a difference and that’s what it is. To get the business out of it, it has to be linked appropriately to a business selling model” (Head—Commercial Operations)</p>	<p><i>Business case frame</i></p> <p>Our aim is to achieve extra sales of Rs 500 crore each year in the coming 5 years through this project. We will invest substantial resources to develop rural health infrastructure (Managing Director)</p>	<p><i>Business frame</i></p> <p>“See it is a good initiative but we are not a charitable organization. I am not saying that it should be having huge amount of revenues but it should be self-funded and self-sustainable” (Head—Commercial Operations)</p> <p>“One thing we realized that with Swasthya we have created a differential with doctors, however they are not giving us the business that we want from them” (Head—Commercial Operations)</p> <p>“If I am going to Tier II then I should be very clear that I am talking to this [rich] segment of the Tier II i.e. the rich farmer, the rich landlord” (Head—Commercial Operations)</p>



**Fig. 1** Project framing and decision-making horizon. \*Change in leadership. New leadership came in with a business frame

Yet each time, he would “quickly come back and bring the company’s focus on long-term knowledge building.”

Organizational leaders could see the commercial benefits from the project such as establishing a strong presence in rural areas and gradual improvement in the company’s overall image in the market. They began to articulate the business benefits in media and said that their goal “was to increase the yearly revenue by INR 500 crores (USD 73 million) within the time period of next 5 years through this

project.”<sup>3</sup> They indicated they would make large investments to improve the health care in rural areas. At the same time, they discussed specific benefits from the project for rural markets and highlighted the project’s impact, specifically that MedInd conducted 554 workshops covering 3200 doctors in just 5 months (Annual Report 2009).

<sup>3</sup> We have paraphrased the quote and have not added the details of the secondary source (media article) to maintain confidentiality.

**Table 5** Shifts in decision-making horizon

	Before 2009	2009–2010	2010 onwards
Length of decision-making horizon	<p><i>Long-term</i> suspension of short-term decision making</p> <p>“A project like this one should have a little longer rope or patience from the organization on the learning curve. We cannot take decisions this way or that way in 2 years time frame” (Senior Director—Commercial Operations II)</p> <p>“I agreed to use the sales force which was already there. I thought of developing their capability, I was ok with the [time] lag” (Senior Director—Commercial Operations II)</p>	<p><i>Toward short term</i> shift in focus to decision-making with increased expectations in near future</p> <p>“We will wait for 1, 2, or 3 years (not beyond)” (Head—Commercial Operations)</p> <p>“We were over ambitious in expecting the timeframe of the returns and to some extent, we had committed that once you start investing this is the way the returns will start coming in. As a result, the organization’s expectation is that the project would give fairly faster returns” (Senior Director—Commercial Operations II)</p> <p>“Normally when we project we only see it from the opportunity point of view and we overlook the lag in the capability development and any other challenges which could have been coming in. As a result, the organization’s expectation would be that we achieve fairly faster returns. Also once we expect the returns at that level then your organization and investment is also scaled up in level of returns” (Senior Director—Commercial Operations II)</p>	<p><i>Short term</i> strong focus on the immediate</p> <p>“So at the end of the day what matters is how quickly and how you want your P&amp;L to look and what is the patience you are willing to have, how deep are your pockets. When we launched Tier II (rural market) we thought we would break even in 3–4 years, but it did not happen. So instead of continuing to do the same thing again and again we had to look at the business afresh” (Head—Commercial Operations)</p> <p>“The project’s sustenance depends on achieving profitability faster and in the process I may dilute my image and goodwill with the doctors” (Senior Director—Commercial Operations II)</p> <p>“The measurement will shift only toward the sales returns. The company will not look how many doctors are coming or not, they will only look at how much was the target, expected growth, how much is the new growth” (Senior Director—Commercial Operations II)</p> <p>“Even now we are growing very fast, but I committed to even faster growth” (Senior Director—Commercial Operations II)</p> <p>“I realized that internalization [of sales force] was needed but business was not big enough to take that big internalization. So I had to go for a gradual internalization that takes time and then the company started asking for a payback” (Senior Director—Commercial Operations II)</p>

### *Business Case Frame: Project Leader*

An important event shifted the project’s trajectory. The project gained momentum and began to provide early returns. It delivered INR 20 million in 2009 and INR 185 million in 2010 (see Table 6).

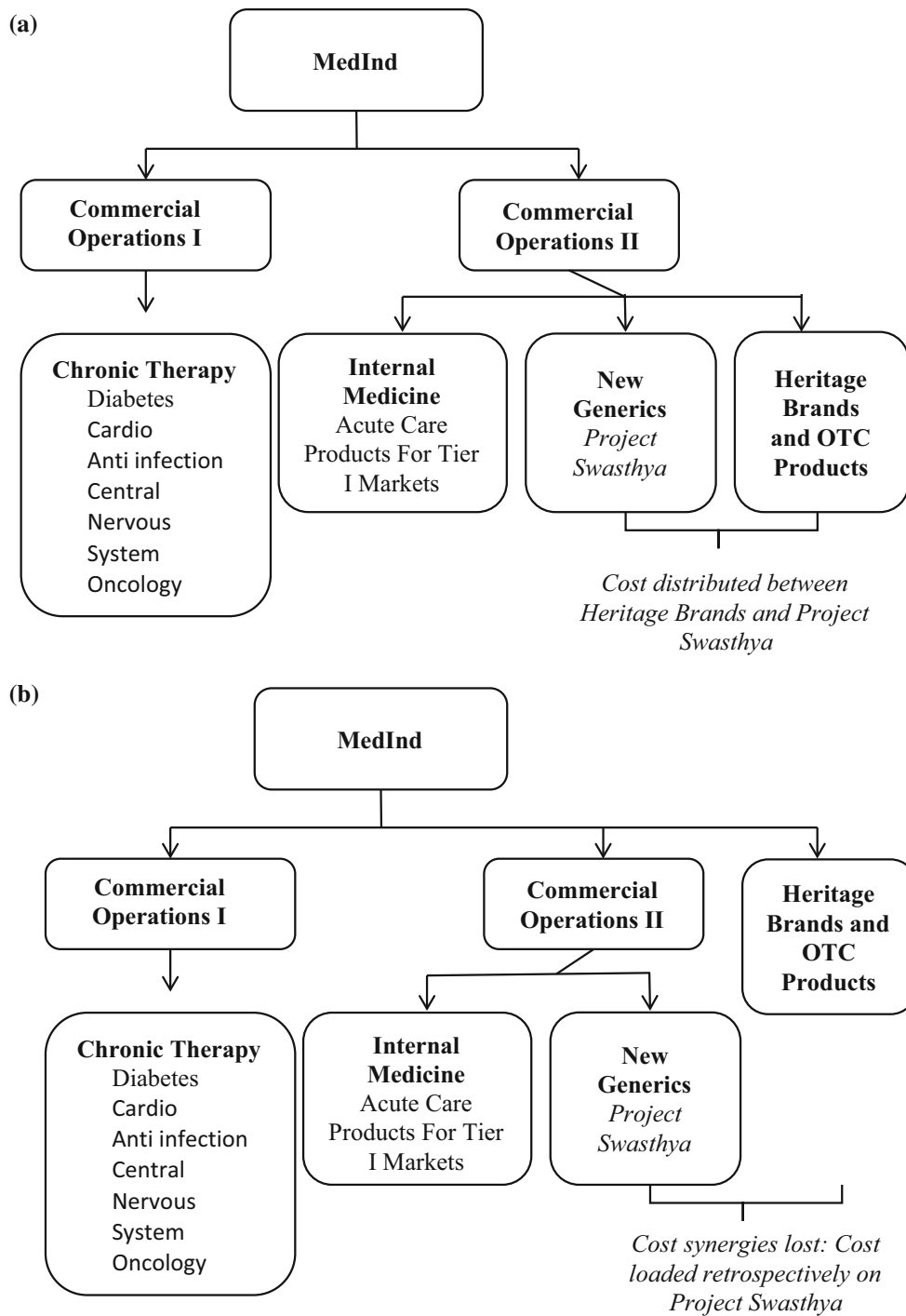
No one, including Pranav, had expected returns this early in the project’s life. Pranav’s initial expectation was that the investment in the project would gradually increase sales over a period of time. However, Pranav could now more clearly see a direct link between the social goal of improving rural health infrastructure and economic goal of returns from the project. MedInd’s leadership increased project’s 5-year sales targets from INR 1.4 billion to 4.9

billion, a fivefold increase. Seeing early success and project’s potential to generate profits, Pranav agreed to the drastically revised targets.

### *Decision-Making Horizon: Toward Short Term*

To meet the sales targets, Pranav made the decision to internalize the previously external sales force. His team carefully brought on board the high-performing salespeople, building a sales force of 300 individuals who visited the doctors, and another 100 who managed the retail relationships with stores selling medicines.

He invested in the sale force’s training, increased their salaries, and established a training department exclusively



**Fig. 2** a Project Swasthya’s organizational structure in 2009, b project Swasthya’s organizational structure after restructuring

for them. All these activities increased the project’s cost, but Pranav did not see the operating costs as a major concern since the project costs were loaded onto the products of an existing business unit (see Fig. 2a) and the project was yielding strong returns.

However, the arguments for long-term horizon for returns could no longer work in the face of unexpected

early returns. Pranav described a change toward shorter-term decision making, “I had to continuously evaluate: if there are no returns from the workshops, should I continue in those places? And those doctors who were not giving me returns, whether I should invite them to the workshops or not. And those doctors who are giving me much better returns, should I increase the investments on them?”

**Table 6** Initial, revised, and achieved targets for Swasthya<sup>a</sup>

Year	Initial targets	Revised targets	Actual achieved
2009	0		20
2010	142	178	185
2011	320	426	290
2012	533	1145	
2013	800	2440	
2014	1100	3900	
2015	1400	4960	

In 2012, project Swasthya and new generics Tier II business were discontinued. The figures after 2012 are based on the project plan

<sup>a</sup> To disguise company identity, we have rounded off some figures

### Phase III: 2010 onwards

#### *Business Frame: Organizational Leaders*

Instead of arguing for an indirect, ambiguous link, Pranav began to justify the project in terms of financial numbers. Associated with this change was that the organizational leaders once again began to singularly focus on the business gains from the project. They wanted Pranav to quickly expand the project to other states. Head—Commercial Operations explained that MedInd is “*not a charitable organization*” and hence the revenues must increase in line with the committed goals. He emphasized that a “*simple milestone is the P&L statement. What you promise and what you deliver. If you do not deliver what you promise, I (the organization) will accumulate losses.*”

#### *Business Frame: Project Leader*

Two significant events further shifted the project’s trajectory. First came the change in the company’s leadership. A new leadership had not shared with Pranav and his team the project’s history and growing pains. Like the previous leadership, they saw the project as any other business project. He knew that the new leadership only looked at “*how much was the target, expected growth, and the actual growth. So the metrics have become more like a normal pharmaceutical company’s metrics and not rural market specific.*” Pranav had to understand and justify the project in terms of profit and loss numbers.

The second major event was MedInd’s decision to align its organizational structure with the parent company’s new structure adopted globally. In the new global structure, OTC drugs were separated to create a new division. This structural alignment led to major changes for Swasthya. Most significantly, the project was separated from the heritage brands and OTC drugs division (see Fig. 2b). The project no longer had the buffer of sharing its costs with the heritage and OTC brands.

The project suffered in multiple ways. First, owing to the drastically revised targets, there was a glaring gap in the revised sales commitment of 426 million INR in 2011 and achievement of 290 million INR (see Table 6). Second, post-restructuring, the entire costs of the sales force remained with Swasthya, including the extras in the project such as the large training department, and the division for developing the knowledge modules for workshops. Pranav believed that these “*inefficiencies*” were important for a long-term vision. They were invisible earlier, but with the project separation came to the forefront. The new leadership failed to see the reason for large investments in the project without the expected returns.

#### *Decision-Making Horizon: Short Term*

Pranav had lost the buffer he had for a long-term vision. He believed that the new leadership had “*P&L myopia.*” They were too impatient to wait for a new project to “*grow organically.*” Pranav expressed that the project would stabilize and have increasingly lower losses. However, convincing the leadership team was difficult in the face of a “*bleeding P&L.*” Head—Commercial Operations explained, “*Expectations were much higher from this project. The project has made INR 29 crores (290 million), it is good or bad I do not know but [Pranav] committed certain sales so compared to that it is bad. He invested expecting the returns he committed.*”

The project was virtually closed as its focus shifted from Tier II to Tier I or urban doctors. Tier I doctors were more lucrative in terms of sales. The project was repositioned from filling the knowledge gap in Tier II market to enhancing the knowledge of doctors in the Tier I market. In this new version, there was no scope for “*unbiased education.*” The sales efforts returned to the traditional approach of a pharmaceutical company: providing doctors with knowledge of the company’s products in order to generate a sale. The rural market remained outside the scope of these efforts.

### Discussion

Bottom of the Pyramid (BOP) projects are fraught with tension such as earning returns versus investing in social goals (Karnani 2007, 2008; Simanis and Duke 2014). We know from the research on paradox that cognitive frames are essential to constructing and responding to sustainability tensions (Hahn et al. 2014). In this study, we adopt a cognitive perspective to examine whether organizational and project leaders differ in their understanding of tensions in a BOP project, and if so, how?

We found an evident shift in the organizational leaders' and the project leader's cognitive frames over time. We also found that, over the life of the project, organizational leaders' and project leader's frames influenced each other. Time, specifically, decision-making horizon, was an important mediating factor between frames. As the organization moved toward shorter decision-making horizon, there was convergence in the organizational leaders' and project leader's frames such that both frames eventually converged to business frame (see Fig. 1).

### Shifts in Frames

Cognitive frames are important sensemaking devices; different kinds of frames influence the sensemaking process differently (Hahn et al. 2014). We found three kinds of frames in our data analysis: paradoxical, business case, and business frames.

The project leader initially adopted a paradoxical frame. He juxtaposed the social goal of addressing health infrastructure gap in rural India with the business goal of entering the rural markets to increase market share. However, the project leader accepted the ambiguity between the commercial and social goals. Instead of a tight link that guaranteed both goals, he saw a potential and indirect relationship, or what scholars have described as integration that sustains differences between opposing elements (e.g., Smith 2014).

Business case frames were evident when organizational leaders articulated a clear and tight link between the social and profit goals, such as stating the exact increase in revenue over a specific time by achieving social objective of enhancing rural doctors' knowledge. Business case frame was also evident in the project leader's description of the project in terms of financial numbers and specific increase in revenue per year.

Business frame was the most common frame adopted by the organizational leaders. They understood the project as their vehicle for entry into the rural market and reverted back to that framing over time. In doing so, they ignored the contradiction between social and business goals found in the other two kinds of frames. Instead they singularly focused on the business goals.

More importantly, we found that the frames fluctuated across the life of the project. Organizational leaders shifted their understanding from a business frame to business case and finally reverted back to a business frame before the project was closed down. The project leader started with a paradoxical frame before shifting to a business case and eventually to a business frame.

Organizational leaders' and project leader's frames were farthest apart at the beginning of the project and eventually converged. Organizational leaders' frames influenced the

frame that the project leader adopted, and with limited success, he influenced how organizational leaders understood the project.

Prior studies have found that frames change as managers struggle to find meaning in an ambiguous situation (e.g., Maitlis 2005). Isabella (1990) identifies multiple stages of managers' evolving interpretations that match the process of strategic change. At each stage, managers in her study shifted their construed reality based on new information. Similarly, in a study of a religious order, Bartunek (1984) found that the order's interpretive schema underwent a change, especially in terms of its mission. She identified a dialectic process of fusing old and new ways of thinking. Along the same lines, we found that a shift in the organizational leaders' frames was intertwined with a shift in the project leader's frames. The closer the individual and organizational leaders' frames came to each other, while moving away from a paradoxical frame and toward a business frame, the greater was the project's struggle to survive.

### Mechanisms Underlying Frame Shifts

We delineate two mechanisms for the shift in cognitive frames—bottom-up temporal work and event-driven temporal shift. Bottom-up temporal work by the project leader connected the organizational leaders' cognitive frames to specific actions, changing the decision-making horizon as seen in deadlines and metrics. At the same time, temporal work interacted with temporal shifts. Temporal shifts were seen in the transformation in the project leader's understanding of time pressure and time horizons (e.g., Staudenmayer et al. 2002) and were triggered by unexpected events such as restructuring and change in organizational leadership.

#### *Temporal Work*

Granqvist and Gustafsson (2016) describe temporal work as actions that create urgency and momentum for change. In our study, temporal work was in the activities through which the project leader could connect cognitive frames to specific decision-making horizons, mediating the shifts between the frames. He capitalized on the organization's existing sense of urgency to enter the rural markets. He could also, at least initially, sustain the momentum for this change. Such temporal work was the most unbridled in the project's initial phase.

More importantly, temporal work entailed going against the existing timing norms. To survive, the project required that the organization takes a long-term horizon for decision making. With its goals for building rural doctors' knowledge, the project did not fit the usual temporal structures

such as quarterly returns and annual financial cycles. Metrics such as return on investment underpinned by such temporal structures would have made the project infeasible.

Common financial metrics such as cost and returns are inherently temporal, but the temporality is often invisible (Slawinski et al. 2015). By calculating returns at the end of the year or quarter, and by discounting the future to emphasize the present, businesses ignore the choices they make in trading societal for business interests (Bansal and DesJardine 2014).

However, financial metrics are as much an act of construction as they are reified objective reality (Boyce 2000). By buffering the project's costs at the project's start and arguing for long-term metrics, the project manager in our study capitalized on what Tyre and Orlikowski (1994) describe as windows of opportunity, a temporal perspective on change where the initial introduction of change provides a limited and valuable opportunity for experimentation. Similar to the Granqvist and Gustafsson (2016) study where actors leveraged the window of opportunity for institutional change, the project manager in our study leveraged a window of opportunity—by making the project's cost less visible and hence the metrics more favorable, he could argue for long-term decision-making horizon.

A long-term horizon enabled organizational leaders to see a link between social and profit goals. Trope and Liberman (2010) argue that actors are able to form abstract mental constructs for objects that are farther from experience. Similarly, we saw that the organizational leaders could see a potential link between social and profit goals once they adopted a long-term horizon, and decided to not expect revenue in the initial years. Their frames shifted from “business” to “business case.”

However, the temporal work was less successful in sustaining a long-term horizon as the project progressed. Kaplan and Orlikowski (2013) argue that temporal work entails creating a coherent, plausible, and acceptable account that connects past, present, and future. In our study, the plausibility, acceptability, and coherence broke down in the later stages. The project manager's projection into the future of what the project could do for the business did not match the organizational leaders' understanding. Instead, the project leader aligned his understanding with the organizational leaders'. His frame shifted from paradoxical to a business case frame. As the project ensued, the time horizon continued to be shorter, and the project leader and organizational leaders' frames converged initially on business case frame and eventually on business frame.

### *Temporal Shifts*

Important to the convergence of both the project leader and organizational leaders' frames toward business frames

were unexpected events. Staudenmayer et al. (2002) describe an event as a surprise or problem in the expected ways of working and posit that “events can change actors' perceptions of time pressures and time horizons, their sense of competing time demands, their sense of control over time and, ultimately, the way they understand time” (p. 583). Further, Granqvist and Gustafsson (2016) argue that the “actors' conceptions of how much time they have, what is urgent, and whether the time is right, have a major impact on their ensuing activities” (p. 1009). In our study, three key events—early success, change in leadership, and organizational restructuring—interacted with the project leader's temporal work. These events brought the focus back to the short term and shifted cognitive frames.

First, the project achieved early success beyond organizational expectations. The project was no longer a risky investment with low expectations of returns. Laverty (1996) has illustrated the perils of early success in fast-growing firms. In such firms, the management has to live up to the speed of the success and hence must take decisions they know to be costly in the long run. In our study, early success facilitated a temporal shift where instead of a long term and ambiguous time for returns, the returns seemed within reach. As a result, both the project leader and the organizational leaders began to pay more attention to deadlines. Such temporal shift interacted with the project leader's temporal work. He agreed to more concrete and larger revenue targets, and inevitably to a business case understanding of the project, an understanding that matched that of the organizational leaders.

The second set of events caused a further shift in cognitive frames. Organizational restructuring stripped away the buffer of costs afforded by the initial organizational structure. Research on how individuals respond to the changes in temporal structures (e.g., Blount and Janicik 2001; Waller et al. 2001) shows that when an event follows expected temporal structure, it is perceived as normal and individuals do not expend resources to understand its temporal implications. However, as Waller et al. (2002) found, a deviance from the deadline brings attention to temporal markers, i.e., actors pay more attention to time when the deadlines change. In our study, organizational restructuring had cost and time implications. It triggered the evaluation of temporal structures.

Along with the changes in the organizational structure, MedInd underwent a change in organizational leadership. The new leaders did not share the project's interpretative frames developed over the years. They interpreted the project as challenging to the core business logic. The project leader was faced with even tighter timelines. Along the lines of Ancona et al.'s (2001) claim that faster work cycles and shorter timelines are associated with concrete tasks and visible problems and solutions, the project leader

had to understand and describe the project in profit and loss terms. The convergence in the organizational leaders' and project leader's frame to business frame made the social goals even less important, eventually leading to the project's closure.

### Theoretical Contribution

This study makes two contributions. First, we add to the existing understanding of cognitive frames in sustainability by showing the interaction between cognitive frames held at different levels within the organization. As a result, we take the conversation further by not only describing the content of paradoxical, business case, and business frames adopted by decision makers but also how frames of various actors interact. Second, we contribute to the emerging conversation on the role of time in sustainability. We show that organizational actor's temporal work interacts with event-triggered temporal shifts and hence changes how actors understand the project.

#### *Cognitive Frames and Sustainability Tension*

Existing research in cognitive frames in sustainability describes the characteristics of the decision makers' paradoxical or business case frame (Hahn et al. 2014; Sharma and Good 2013; Sharma 2000; Zietsma and Vertinsky 2002). Paradoxical and business case frames differ in their content, structure, and the implications for sustainability. For example, Hahn et al. (2014) found that business case frames yield sensemaking behaviors that focus on efficiency in terms of fewer issues and focused search for information, yielding incremental change. In contrast, paradoxical frames generate detailed search behaviors and complex information resulting in radical change.

It is evident from the existing literature that cognitive frames are important in sustainability research. However, extant research offers a perspective that describes cognitive frames as ready to wear mental templates. As a result, we know less about how the decision makers' cognitive frames change and the implications that have for the success or failure of sustainability projects.

In this study, we propose a dynamic model of cognitive frames. Similar to Kaplan's (2008) notion of framing contests, we found that there was not one monolithic sustainability frame in the organization. We found that the organizational leaders' frames influenced and were influenced by the project leader's cognitive frames.

We found that the project leader's cognitive frame moved closer (from paradoxical to business frame) to the organizational leader's frame instead of vice versa. In another scenario, it is possible that convergence manifests as the organizational leaders' business (case) frames moving

toward the project leader's paradoxical frame. However, the nature of BOP projects makes this pattern less feasible. BOP projects are expected to meet the business' commercial goals, unlike sustainability projects which could be integrated or decoupled with business practices (Weaver et al. 1999). In fact, in a moment of reflection on why the project failed, the project leader expressed to us that he should have designed the project as a corporate social responsibility (CSR) rather than a BOP project. He believed that the organization would not hold a CSR project to similar revenue targets and timelines as a BOP project.

#### *Time and Sustainability Tension*

We also contribute to the emerging conversation in time and sustainability (Bansal and DesJardine 2014; Kim et al. 2015; Reinecke and Ansari 2015; Slawinski and Bansal 2012, 2015) by showing how decision-making horizon mediates sustainability frames.

We propose two mechanisms that explain the shifts in cognitive frames—bottom-up temporal work and event-based temporal shifts. We show that in undertaking temporal work, the project leader argued for ambiguous and long timelines for returns by capitalizing on organizational structures that buffered the project's costs, as well as organization's urgency to enter rural markets. Existing research on time and sustainability delineates practices for negotiating the short- and long-term horizons, such as articulating and balancing temporal assumption (Reinecke and Ansari 2015), and scenario planning to imagine alternative futures (Slawinski and Bansal 2015). We add to this literature by proposing practices related to temporal work such as using organizational structure to buffer costs and hence take the organization leaders' attention to the long term.

Finally, we build on Staudenmayer et al.'s (2002) idea that events can change actors' perception of time. Staudenmayer et al. (2002) found that temporal shifts were related to positive organizational change. However, unlike Staudenmayer et al.'s (2002) study, the BOP context brings to light the juxtaposition of short- and long-term horizons. We show that temporal shift can change the actor's perception of time, disrupting the short- and long-term juxtaposition. Unexpected events can bring the attention back to the short term resulting in the project's closure, an outcome in contrast to the positive organizational change that Staudenmayer et al. (2002) found.

### Conclusion and Future Research

We offer a dynamic model to explain how organizations manage the tensions in sustainability, specifically in the context of a BOP project. However, our study is not

without limitations. First, we use an overarching category of ‘organizational leader’ frames. It is possible that different individuals in the top management team differ in their cognitive frames. We encourage future research to test and refine our arguments by not taking organizational leaders as a homogenous category. Second, our research is in the context of BOP projects. Though BOP projects are linked to the larger sustainability agenda (Hahn 2009), other areas such as environmental conservation and protection projects might pose different challenges than BOP projects. Even though our findings can be generalized to sustainability projects, we encourage researchers to investigate the boundary conditions of our conceptual model in other kinds of sustainability projects. Third, our research context—pharmaceutical company in India—likely introduced context-specific patterns, for example strong focus on profits, and at the same time easy opportunity to create social value given the criticality of health care. Studying this phenomenon in other industries and countries can shed further light on our conceptual framework.

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