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Work-integrated learning for social sustainability: insights from the Nordic textile industry

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Abstract

This paper explores how small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in the Nordic textile industry engage in collaboration and learning to address social sustainability in the context of complex global supply chains and emerging regulatory frameworks, such as the EU's Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive (CSDDD). Drawing on theories of work-integrated learning (WIL), collaboration, and boundary crossing, the study conceptualizes social sustainability as a dynamic and relational practice shaped through interaction among diverse actors. Using a qualitative case study approach, the paper analyzes interviews with stakeholders from Nordic textile SMEs, industry associations, and NGOs. The findings show that collaboration—internally and externally—is essential for building capacity, navigating regulatory demands, and fostering situated learning. Shared tools such as certifications, supplier manuals, and legal frameworks function as boundary objects that support coordination and mutual understanding across organizational and sectoral boundaries. The study proposes a model of work-integrated learning for sustainable development, illustrating how boundary crossing around shared artefacts enables collaborative learning and knowledge creation. Time, trust, and territory are identified as key preconditions for these processes, highlighting how SMEs can move beyond compliance and engage in continuous learning to strengthen their social sustainability efforts.

Keywords: Boundary crossing, Collaboration, Social sustainability, Supply chain, Textile industry, Work-integrated learning

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Introduction

As companies face increasing pressure to address social sustainability, collaboration and learning have become essential strategies to manage these challenges. New regulatory frameworks, such as the EU's Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive (CSDDD) (European Commission. (2024), require organisations to not only identify and mitigate social and environmental risks, but also to engage in continuous knowledge development and stakeholder dialogue around sustainability issues (Dempere et al., 2024; European Commission, n.d). Such collaborative approach with stakeholders is crucial for accessing diverse perspectives, expertise and other resources necessary to understand and respond to complex sustainability issues. At the same time, collaboration with external actors such as suppliers, competitors, NGOs, and academic institutions demands organizational learning to strengthen internal capacity to ensure adaptability to evolving regulatory requirements and stakeholder expectations (Muñoz, 2025; Veenbrink, 2024).

For many companies, this development means transision from voluntary corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives, often focused on in-house practices or local firm responsibility, to mandatory, legally binding obligations that extend deep into global supply chains (Wilhelm, 2024). Under these new obligations, firms are now accountable not only for their own operations but also for the practices of suppliers, subcontractors, and other partners often spanning multiple countries and regulatory contexts. As a result, ensuring compliance requires collaboration across all tiers of the supply chain, which can be particularly challenging in sectors with complex or fragmented supply chains. Meeting these expectations is particularly challenging for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), which often lack the internal resources, expertise, and visibility needed to assess and influence conditions beyond their first-tier suppliers (Smit et al., 2020a; Setyaningsih et al., 2024).

These collaborative and learning demands raise important questions about what social sustainability actually entails in practice. Discussions on sustainability tend to prioritise environmental issues, while the social dimension of sustainability, concerned with labour rights, equity, and human well-being receives less analytical attention and is frequently reduced to compliance or reporting routines (Pedersen & Andersen, 2023; Govindan et al., 2021; Marshall et al., 2015). Compared to environmental sustainability which is often approached through technical solutions, measurable indicators, and standardised reporting, social sustainability presents a different kind of challenge. It is less easily quantified and more deeply embedded in social relations, power dynamics, and ethical considerations. While social sustainability is increasingly emphasised in policy and corporate discourse, it still often remains vaguely defined and unevenly addressed in practice (Shaw et al., 2024).

This paper adds to the discussion on what collaboration and learning for social sustainability mean in the context of SMEs and their supply chains, and it brings forth challenges and opportunities to improve social sustainability in this context. It focuses on social sustainability as a field of practice that is shaped through interaction among diverse actors (Wood & Gray, 1991).

To conceptualise collaboration and learning in this context, this paper draws on theories on work-integrated learning (WIL), which is understood as a multidimensional and practice-based learning phenomenon that emerges through collaborative engagement across organisational and sectoral boundaries (Björck & Willermark, 2024; Vallo Hult et al., 2024). While WIL has traditionally been studied in educational settings, recent research highlights its relevance in professional and organisational contexts where learning is embedded in everyday work and shaped through interaction between diverse actors (Sunnemark et al., 2024; Chatzipanagiotou et al., 2025). In this way, WIL is used as an analytical lens to understand how knowledge is created and shared among companies, nonprofits, industry associations, and academic institutions working toward social sustainability goals. WIL is approached as a dynamic and situated process that unfolds through collaboration.

The empirical context for this study is Nordic SMEs in the textile industry. The textile industry is characterized by a mix of heritage brands, niche fashion producers, and technical textile firms, many of which operate with limited internal resources and rely heavily on outsourced production (Fernández-Stark et al., 2022). While Nordic textile companies are often associated with high sustainability ambitions (Nordic Council of Ministers, 2023), they continue to face structural challenges linked to globalized supply chains, including labor-intensive manufacturing, limited traceability, and persistent human rights risks in lower tiers (Terwindt & Armstrong, 2019; Mohajeri et al., 2020; Köksal et al., 2017). These challenges are particularly evident in the textile supply chain, where workers often belong to precarious groups—mainly female, frequently young, and migrant—occupying vulnerable or insecure positions in the job market (De Neve, 2014). Previous

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research further highlights that these issues frequently manifest as structural and operational barriers to implementing social sustainability in textile supply chains (Shaw et al., 2022). Nordic textile companies also face increasing regulatory pressure to demonstrate due diligence and accountability, particularly in light of the CSDDD. These conditions—high sustainability ambitions combined with limited resources, complex supply chains, and increasing regulatory demands—make Nordic SMEs in the textile industry a particularly relevant context for examining how collaboration and learning are mobilized to advance social sustainability in practice.

Building on this reasoning, the aim of the paper is to explore how small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in the Nordic textile industry engage in collaboration and learning to address social sustainability in the context of complex supply chains. By examining how knowledge is created and shared internally and across organisational and sectoral boundaries, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of how work-integrated learning can be used as a theoretical framework to explain social sustainability efforts.

RQ1: How do SMEs in the Nordic textile industry collaborate with internal and external actors to address social sustainability in complex supply chains?
RQ2: How can social sustainability efforts be understood from a work-integrated learning perspective?

The paper begins by situating social sustainability in global supply chains in the textile industry and introducing the theoretical framework of work-integrated learning (WIL). This is followed by a description of the qualitative case study methodology, including data collection and analysis. The findings section presents three interrelated themes that illustrate how Nordic SMEs engage with social sustainability. The discussion connects these findings to the theoretical framework, and the paper concludes by summarizing key contributions and implications for SMEs working with social sustainability.

Related research on social sustainability in supply chain

Social sustainability in supply chains concerns the well-being of individuals both now and in the future. It involves managing practices, capabilities, and stakeholder relationships to support human welfare across the entire supply chain (Nakamba et al., 2017). This includes assessing socio-economic conditions such as health, safety, wages, labor rights, and access to education and housing (Pedersen & Andersen, 2023; Govindan et al., 2021; Marshall et al., 2015; Mani et al., 2016). Companies are, in this way, increasingly held accountable not only for the direct impact of their products but also for the practices of their suppliers (Govindan et al., 2021; Koplin et al., 2007; Sancha et al., 2016). This means, they must embed social sustainability throughout their supply chains, activating responsible practices such as fair labor, transparency, and ethical sourcing. In that way, social initiatives must extend beyond internal operations to include supplier relationships, as these interactions shape decision-making and influence broader societal impacts (Amiri et al., 2024)

External stakeholders can contribute valuable knowledge and resources in these collaborative efforts, offering insights that organizations might not otherwise access (Kazadi et al., 2016). Industry associations, nonprofit organizations, and multi-stakeholder initiatives provide methodological tools, training, and platforms for knowledge exchange that help companies interpret and implement social sustainability requirements (Espínola et al., 2025). Certifications such as B Corp or GOTS are also used as frameworks to structure sustainability efforts and signal commitment to ethical practices (Edwards et al., 2018). These voluntary standards are typically governed by multi-stakeholder bodies and require third-party audits, thereby functioning as boundary objects that translate abstract principles into actionable practices. In that way these platforms foster shared learning and collective accountability, which are essential in achieving sustainability in complex supply chains (Permatasari & Gunawan, 2023; Vazquez-Brust et al., 2020).

In recent years, corporate social responsibility (CSR) has gained global attention and become increasingly important in the modern economy for social sustainability (Shaw et al. 2024). CSR is crucial in demonstrating an organization's commitment to the well-being of its surrounding community by fulfilling social obligations (Nicole et al., 2022). This growing interest is largely driven by globalization and international trade, which have increased business complexities and raised expectations for transparency and corporate accountability (Jamali & Mirshak, 2006). The developments have inspired companies to take greater social responsibility (Harjoto et al., 2018) and companies are increasingly acknowledging their responsibility for social, environmental, and developmental impacts (Kourula et al.,

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2017). Sustainability practices are now seen as essential components of organizational behavior, encompassing a wide range of initiatives aimed at promoting sustainable development while minimizing negative environmental and social effects (Permatasari & Gunawan, 2023).

Building on this, companies have increasingly integrated sustainability strategies into their operations in response to stricter regulations (Hedenus et al., 2022). Many are led by purpose-driven founders who embed social responsibility into their core business models (Harjoto et al., 2018). Sustainability is not a separate concern but must be fully aligned with the overall strategy and embedded into the core business (Henriksson & Grunewald, 2020). This means reducing negative impacts while enhancing positive social, environmental, and economic outcomes, and creating long-term stakeholder value. To be effective, sustainability must be linked to customer value, sales, and business performance. This involves analyzing the strategy and value proposition to identify areas of greatest impact and measuring progress using relevant sustainability metrics rather than relying solely on financial profit (Henriksson & Grunewald, 2020).

The textile industry, as is the case of this study, faces significant social sustainability issues, including human rights violations, unsafe working conditions, inadequate health and safety measures, low wages, and excessive working hours (Köksal et al., 2017; Mohajeri et al., 2020). These issues are often exacerbated by limited supply chain transparency, as companies typically maintain direct relationships only with first-tier suppliers, leaving deeper tiers largely unmonitored (Smit et al., 2020a). Sustainability efforts in the textile and fashion industry does also often require navigating tensions between commercial goals and ethical commitments (Thorisdottir et al., 2024).

These challenges, coupled with increasing regulatory demands, such as those introduced by the Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive (CSDDD), highlight the urgency of understanding how organisations in the textile industry collaborate with their suppliers to meet sustainability requirements and how knowledge-sharing within these collaborations supports compliance and capacity-building. Compliance refers to the ability of organisations to meet regulatory and stakeholder expectations through mechanisms such as traceability, transparency, and reporting (Smit et al., 2020a; Smit et al., 2020b). These elements ensure that sustainability claims can be verified and that supply chain activities are visible and accountable. Capacity-building on the other hand involves developing the trust and relational infrastructure necessary to support these compliance efforts. In fragmented and globalised supply chains, trust is a prerequisite for effective collaboration, especially when visibility is limited beyond first-tier suppliers (Blomqvist & Levy, 2006; Fleming et al., 2018). Without trust, the reliability of reported data, the accuracy of traceability systems, and the credibility of transparency efforts are all undermined. Thus, compliance and capacity-building are interconnected: traceability and reporting mechanisms depend on trust-based relationships to ensure that the information shared is not only available but also truthful and valid. In this way, trust functions as the foundation upon which compliance structures are built, enabling organisations to align their sustainability ambitions with operational realities (Miles et al., 2000).

Collaborating for social sustainability poses challenges for SMEs, especially in niche sectors, where finding partners and aligning goals can be difficult (Ethical Trade Sweden, 2025). Limited resources and lack of compliance capacity hinder their ability to meet due diligence demands (Setyaningsih et al., 2024; Dempere et al., 2024). The administrative burden of reporting across jurisdictions adds further strain (Smit et al., 2020a). Although not the primary targets of new regulations, SMEs are indirectly affected as suppliers to larger firms, facing compliance pressures without matching support (European Commission, 2024).

Work-integrated learning as a framework for collaboration and learning in social sustainability

To understand how SMEs in complex supply chains engage in social sustainability, this paper draws on a theoretical framework of work-integrated learning (WIL), here conceptualized as a professional and practice-driven learning process that unfolds through cross-boundary collaboration between sectors and organizations (Björck & Willermark, 2024; Vallo Hult et al., 2024; Sunnemark et al., 2024; Chatzipanagiotou et al., 2025). As such collaboration is viewed as a learning process across boundaries with help shared artefacts (such as legislation), here theorized as boundary objects.

Collaboration as a learning process

Collaboration is a fundamental process in various fields, enabling diverse stakeholders to work together toward shared goals.

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Wood and Gray (1991) describe collaboration as a process in which "a group of autonomous stakeholders of a problem domain engage in an interactive process, using shared rules, norms, and structures, to act or decide on issues related to that domain." (p.146). This definition of collaboration includes six identified key elements: stakeholders within a problem domain, autonomy, interactive processes, shared rules and norms, action or decision-making, and domain orientation. The concept of collaboration, as a contrast to cooperation, emphasizes voluntary engagement, trust, and commitment, whereas cooperation is driven primarily by external incentives, such as financial rewards (Blomqvist and Levy, 2006). In this view of collaboration, coordinating actions based on extrinsic motivation and economic rationale is insufficient in today's knowledge-driven global competition. To meet complex challenges and high levels of uncertainty, organizations must foster deeper, more interactive forms of collaboration (Blomqvist & Levy, 2006).

According to Miles et al. (2000) effective collaboration depends on three preconditions: time, trust, and territory. *Time* is needed for exchanging ideas within and across teams and for engaging in deeper activities like exploring new perspectives, gaining insights from experts and external stakeholders, and experimenting with innovative solutions. Spending time in productive interaction helps to build *trust* among collaborators. With increasing trust, individuals become more open to share ideas and explore new perspectives without fear of being taken advantage of. The concept of *territory* in collaboration refers to psychological space that develops when individuals willingly exchange ideas with others. However, territory goes beyond sense of belonging, it involves having a visible and recognized stake in the outcomes of collaboration. This can take forms such as ownership, visible awards, or recognition. When these preconditions are met, collaboration occurs, which in turn leads to knowledge creation (Miles et al., 2000). In this way, collaboration emerges as a process through which knowledge is generated in interaction.

Boundary crossing and boundary objects

In addition to the notion of collaboration, the concept of boundaries and boundary objects offer a valuable lens for understanding how learning and knowledge transfer unfold across diverse professional contexts (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011; Gellerstedt et al., 2015; Norström & Hattinger, 2016). In multi-stakeholder processes, such as those examined in this study, actors bring distinct disciplinary knowledge, perspectives, and interests, which can create boundaries that complicate interaction and mutual understanding (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011). Organizational boundaries are not fixed but strategically constructed to manage efficiency, power, competence, and identity (Santos & Eisenhardt, 2005). Learning at these boundaries requires intentional facilitation and supportive structures to bridge differences and foster collaboration. Boundary work plays a critical role in this process, helping to align diverse stakeholder interests and enabling the development of sustainable operations (Veltman et al., 2019). Rather than viewing boundaries solely as obstacles, research highlights their generative potential. As Oonk et al. (2022) argue, boundaries are essential conditions for learning, offering spaces where new connections can be formed. Crossing boundaries creates opportunities for individuals and organizations to expand their knowledge and build collaborative competencies (Veltman et al., 2019).

Boundary objects, function as mediating artefacts that support the translation of concepts, perspectives, and values across diverse social and professional domains, facilitating alignment between otherwise disconnected practices (Star, 1989; Star & Griesemer, 1989). When effectively mobilized, such objects enable actors with different backgrounds to converge around complex issues (Gellerstedt et al., 2015). Akkerman and Bakker (2011) identified four mechanisms of learning at the boundary. The first, *identification*, involves questioning and redefining one's own and others' core identities to gain a deeper understanding of different practices. The second, *coordination*, focuses on establishing communicative connections between diverse practices, such as exchanging information or using shared languages. The third mechanism, *reflection*, involves taking and making perspectives, helping individuals and groups critically assess their own and others' viewpoints. The fourth, *transformation*, represents the most advanced stage of boundary learning. At this stage, stakeholders engage in creative processes that involve crossing boundaries to develop new, hybrid solutions. This process involves combining elements from different contexts to form something novel and previously unfamiliar, such as new tools. When these four learning mechanisms are applied across different practices, boundary-crossing learning develops (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011).

Oonk et al. (2022) highlight that boundary-crossing competence is essential for sustainable development. They further argue that individuals must develop the ability to identify, appreciate, and leverage boundaries as spaces for learning and co-creation to contribute to sustainability goals. According to Akkerman and Bakker (2011), all learning is constrained

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by boundaries, and the ability to engage across them is a key aspect of boundary-crossing competence. This competence includes identifying, recognizing, and leveraging boundaries between different practices to facilitate knowledge exchange and co-creation. Collaboration is therefore essential for acquiring new knowledge.

Collaboration at boundaries: a new model of work-integrated learning for sustainable development

By integrating theories of collaboration, boundary crossing, and boundary objects, this paper proposes a new model of work-integrated learning that serves as a lens to understand how collaboration between actors leads to mutual learning and knowledge creation in the context of social sustainability. It emphasizes a circular process: as actors collaborate by crossing boundaries and around a boundary object, they learn from one another, generate new knowledge, and share gained knowledge back into the loop, supporting continuous learning (Figure 1).

Inspired by Miles et al. (2000), time, trust, and territory are identified as key preconditions for collaboration. Once these are in place, actors engage in boundary-crossing collaboration, supported by shared artefacts—boundary objects—that help translate concepts and values across practices (Gellerstedt et al., 2015). Learning acts as a bridge between collaboration and knowledge creation, enabling communicative connections and contextual understanding (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011; Jakubik, 2008). The model thus captures how collaboration, learning, and knowledge creation interact to advance social sustainability in practice.

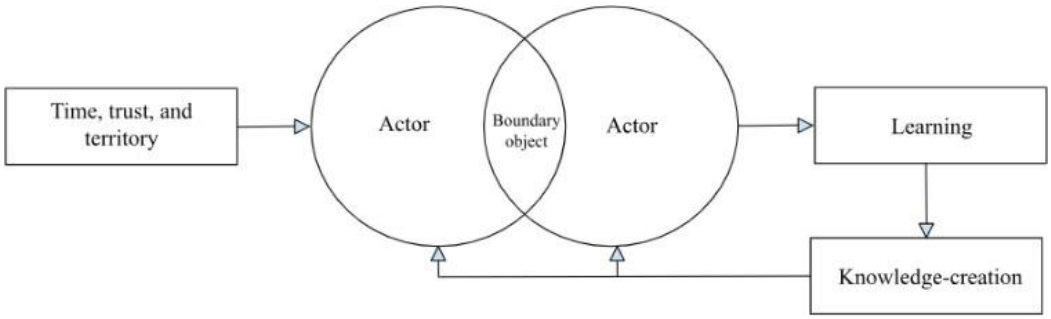

Figure 1: Collaboration at boundaries: a model of work-integrated learning for sustainable development
Source: Developed by the authors based on referenced literature

Research methodology

This study applies a qualitative case study design (Baxter & Jack, 2008) to explore how SMEs in the Nordic textile industry collaborate with external actors to address social sustainability in the context of emerging regulatory frameworks. The case study approach is appropriate for exploring complex phenomena within their contexts drawing on diverse data sources. The case in this study is defined as the collaborative practices and learning processes among SMEs and related actors in the Nordic textile industry, in response to the CSDDD. Case boundaries are both geographical and contextual: geographically, the study is limited to the Nordic region; contextually, it focuses on actors operating in the textile industry within a shared regulatory framework, that are connected through supply chains, sustainability initiatives, and collaborative platforms, forming a collective system of practice. Given the focus on one environment, this study examines a single case, analysing the process of collaboration, learning, and knowledge creation.

Data collection

The data was collected through semi-structured interviews. 11 respondents from 10 organizations across Sweden, Denmark, and Norway were interviewed. The respondents represent a diverse range of stakeholders and hold various professional roles. Selection was based on the following criteria: For companies, eligibility involved meeting the European Commission's (2003) definition of a SME, namely having fewer than 250 employees and an annual turnover not exceeding €50 million, or an annual balance sheet total not exceeding €43 million. Among the six companies that participated in this

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study, three met this definition, while the other three exceeded the turnover threshold, yet remained below the employee limit. In addition, companies were required to demonstrate a strong sustainability profile, assessed by the researchers through publicly available data, sustainability reports, and industry recognition. For other types of organisations, such as nonprofit organisations and industry associations, selection was based on their activities, such as providing training, policy guidance, benchmarking tools, and regulatory updates to companies. Finally, all participants were required to hold positions relevant to sustainability, supply chain, compliance, or product development. This diversity enabled us to capture multiple perspectives on collaboration and social sustainability.

Interview durations ranged from 27 to 65 minutes, with an average of approximately 47 minutes. The interviews were semi-structured and conducted online via Microsoft Teams between March and April 2025. They were audio- and video-recorded with informed consent and transcribed using the built in AI-based transcription tool, followed by manual verification to ensure accuracy. The interview guides included questions on: Organisational sustainability practices; Experiences with the CSDDD; Forms and challenges of collaboration and; Knowledge-sharing and learning processes. While all guides were based on these core questions, they were tailored slightly to different stakeholder groups. For SMEs, the focus was placed on how they are preparing to comply with upcoming regulations. For nonprofits, which are not directly subject to regulatory compliance, the questions instead explored how they support and guide businesses in meeting these requirements.

Table 1: Respondents

Respondent	Type of stakeholder	Country	Work role	Duration of the interview
R1	Company	Denmark	Chief Product Officer	55 min
R2			Head of Compliance	
R3	Company	Sweden	Human Rights and Social Impact Specialist	58 min
R4	Company	Sweden	Chief Sustainability Officer	30 min
R5	Consulting Firm	Sweden	Associate - Assurance & Sustainability Services	36 min
R6	NGO	Sweden	Product Manager	27 min
R7	Company	Sweden	Chief Commercial Officer	54 min
R8	Company	Sweden	Sustainability Specialist	39 min
R9	Nonprofit organization	Denmark	Community Engagement Lead	52 min
R10	Innovation Hub	Sweden	Senior Policy Analyst and Advisor	47 min
R11	Company	Norway	Sustainability Manager	65 min
				463 min (7 h 43 min)

Data analysis

Thematic analysis, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), was employed to identify patterns and themes within the data. The process began with repeated readings of the transcripts to gain a comprehensive understanding of the material. Meaningful units were then inductively coded. These codes were organized into potential themes (sub-themes), which were subsequently refined to ensure internal coherence and relevance to the research questions. During this stage, the validity of each theme in relation to the entire data set was considered, along with whether the proposed themes reflected the

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overarching meanings present in the data. The final stage involved defining and naming three main themes, which were then interpreted in relation to the theoretical framework. An abductive approach (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012) guided the analysis, allowing for an iterative movement between empirical data and theory. For instance, the concept of boundary objects proved useful in interpreting participants' descriptions of tools such as supplier manuals, certifications, and seminars that facilitated cross-organisational learning. Figure 2 illustrates an example of the analytical process, showing how the themes were systematically developed through the coding of interview transcripts. Figure 3 shows the three main themes and their corresponding sub-themes that emerged from the final stage of the analysis.

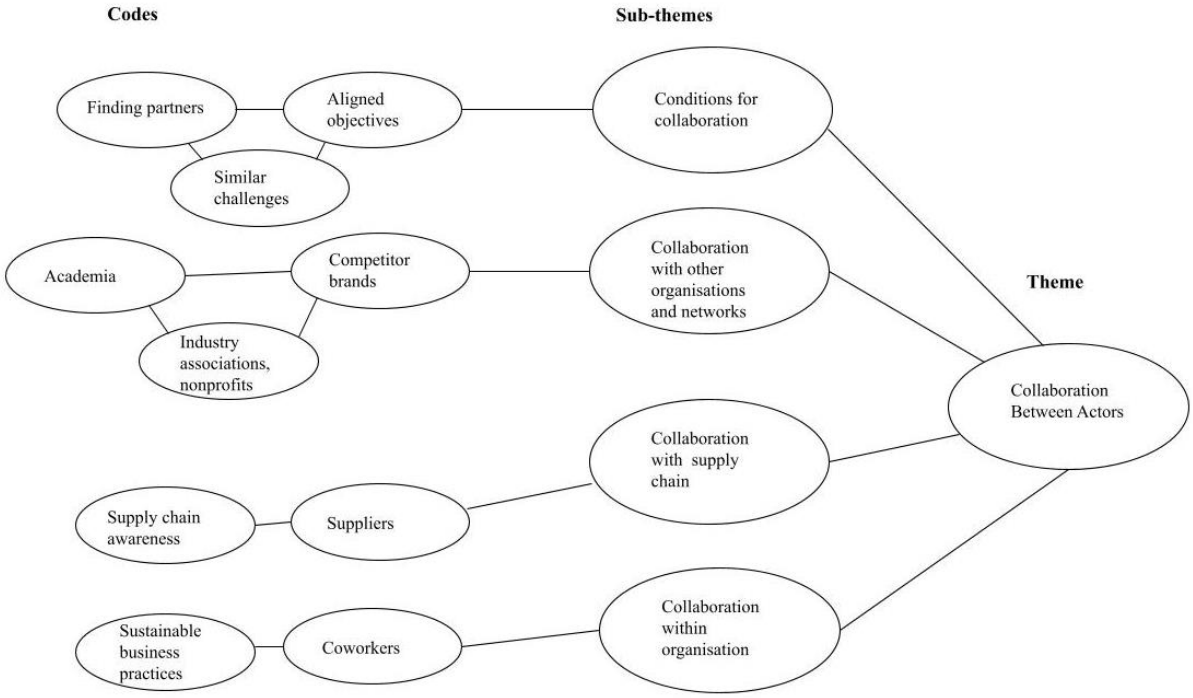

Figure 2: Example of the coding and analysis process leading to the development of a theme
Source: Authors' own elaboration based on empirical data

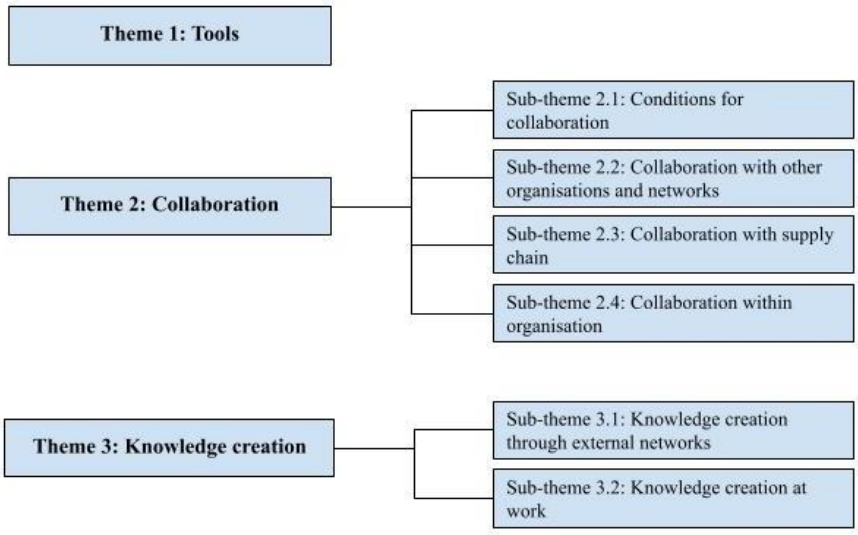

Figure 3: The three themes and their related sub-themes that emerged from the analysis
Source: Authors' own elaboration based on thematic analysis

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To ensure validity and credibility of the thematic analysis, this study followed established qualitative research standards, using the trustworthiness criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability (Korstjens & Moser, 2017). Credibility was enhanced through persistent observation strategy, where the researchers carefully examined the characteristics of the data during the development of codes, concepts and the core category, involving repeated reading, ongoing analysis and theoretical reflection. Transferability was ensured by providing detailed contextual information about the participants, along with a comprehensive description of the data collection and analysis processes. Such transparency allows readers to determine the relevance and applicability of the findings to other contexts (Korstjens & Moser, 2017). Dependability was addressed through maintaining a clear audit trail that documented all stages of data collection and analysis, enabling transparency and allowing for external scrutiny of the research process. Confirmability was ensured through reflexive practices such as memo writing, researcher discussions, and continuous reflection on personal assumptions and potential biases. This enabled ground interpretations in the data rather than in the researchers' personal preferences or viewpoints (Korstjens & Moser, 2017). In line with Braun and Clarke (2019), reflexivity was viewed as a key element of qualitative quality, requiring researchers to actively acknowledge and examine own assumptions then critically examine whether those assumptions are valid for any particular project. Involving all researchers in data collection and analysis further reduced the risk of individual bias, contributing to a more balanced and objective interpretation of the data.

Findings

The analysis revealed three interrelated themes that illustrate how Nordic SMEs in the textile industry engage with social sustainability in the context of emerging regulatory frameworks: *Methodological tools and frameworks in strengthening social sustainability*; *Collaborative efforts between different actors*, and; *Knowledge sharing and creation through collaboration*. These themes reflect how organisations navigate social sustainable development through work-integrated learning.

Theme 1: Methodological tools and frameworks in strengthening social sustainability

This theme illustrates three key tools used by the organizations where the respondents work to address social sustainability in their supply chains: legislation, certifications, and methodological resources obtained through memberships in networks and associations. These tools function both as entry points and as ongoing frameworks for conducting human rights due diligence and ensuring responsible sourcing.

Participants highlighted that the CSDDD offers an important legal foundation for strengthening human rights and responsible sourcing within companies. They noted that having a legislative framework ensures that these practices are no longer optional but mandatory: "There will be a legal framework for companies to actually integrate human rights and responsible sourcing practices. I mean, they [companies] have to do it, they can't choose to do it." (R6). They also emphasized the importance of a clear legal framework, particularly in the context of complex and geographically distant supply chains: "The legislative framework is super important when we're talking about so detailed and far away supply chains." (R8)

The respondents described certifications such as GOTS and Bluesign as valuable tools in their social sustainability effort. They emphasized that these certifications offer structured frameworks, guidelines, and systems that align closely with the requirements of the directive, making them a natural starting point for companies aiming to strengthen their due diligence efforts: "We're also going for what we call GOTS certification, that has all the requirements with due diligence. […] GOTS is famously known right now for their due diligence work." (R2)

Several respondents emphasized the importance of the methodologies offered by platforms such as the Fair Wear Foundation, particularly in the context of addressing the requirements of the CSDDD and ensuring socially responsible practices throughout the supply chain. These platforms have updated their frameworks to align with the directive, providing members with structured tools such as guidelines, reporting templates, and questionnaires: "They [Fair Wear Foundation] also have this framework and methodology for members to follow to be a fair and ethical brand. What they did two years ago was to change their methodology to follow CSDDD […] so they adopted the guidelines or the framework of CSDDD". (R3)

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Theme 2: Collaborative efforts between different actors

This theme illustrates the different ways the organizations collaborate to support their sustainability work throughout the supply chain. Participants described how they work closely with other companies and competitors, industry associations, suppliers, and universities to learn from each other, as well within their organization to address challenges in the industry, and build long-lasting relationships.

The respondents stated that collaboration with other brands is seen as essential for driving sustainable change. They noted that collaboration with competitors is becoming more common in this context, and that sharing information with other brands is increasingly valued: “So that [collaboration with competitors] is done very frequently. I think that when I started working with this, it was not as common that you're sharing information and sharing knowledge between brands. But now it feels like very much common practice. It's because, especially with sustainability, everyone wants the same thing, and if another company can do it in a similar way, it's just good in a way.” (R8)

One key enabling factor for collaboration with other companies mentioned by respondents was shared conditions and alignment between organizations. Participants noted that collaboration was more likely when the involved parties faced similar challenges and operated under comparable circumstances. Alignment in context, both in terms of objectives and challenges, was seen as particularly valuable, as it enabled organizations to pursue shared goals, exchange best practices, and strengthen their collaborative relationships: “I would say Scandinavian outdoor group helps us a lot because there, they (members) are in the same field as us, they have the same issues, the same challenges as we have.” (R1)

While there was a clear willingness to collaborate, it was also raised that finding a suitable partner within the same sector can be challenging. Although the idea of working together with other companies was appealing, opportunities to do so were sometimes limited by the absence of relevant actors in the same industry: “So, we would love to do it [collaborate], but there just isn't yet a company that is really right for you.” (R7)

Several respondents noted that being part of different networks was valuable. These networks were described as platforms that foster openness, exchange knowledge and collaboration across companies on a range of topics. Participating in such networks was seen as beneficial for staying connected with others in the industry: “Both in Scandinavia, but also now to outdoor sustainability groups that we are quite open and we collaborate a lot on different things […] So that's a good thing to be part of different networks.” (R11)

Several respondents also emphasized the importance of collaboration with academic institutions, viewing it as a relevant factor in driving sustainability efforts forward: “We want to share everything we know, we want to share the data we have on our suppliers, on our climate, on our product because, and then academia are really good collaborators in processing this data and creating new projects and driving the sustainability work forward. So, I think that it gains actually a lot of value collaborating with other people outside organizations.” (R3). Respondents also described the mutual value of these collaborations: “I've had some presentations for different, both high schools, but also universities […] I think they represent a really important stakeholder in driving an organization forward as well in what questions do they ask, what do they want to know more about, and everything. This gives a lot of value.” (R3)

Respondents further emphasized the value of cultivating long-term partnerships with suppliers. These enduring relationships were seen as foundational to building mutual trust, facilitating open communication, and driving continuous improvement in sustainable practices: “So we have the same suppliers, many of them we work with for a very long time, that also helps us to maintain the that relationship and also build on that and that becomes very much like a key thing when you try to get data from suppliers, for example on the climate data or any social data for that matter […] So we try to very much work like that, trying to build those relationships and work closely with them”. (R4).

Additionally, several respondents described structured onboarding processes as essential for aligning expectations with new suppliers from the start. These processes helped ensure shared values, clarify social and environmental standards, and establish a foundation for long-term collaboration. Formal agreements and early site visits were also common features: “We have a whole process of onboarding suppliers. First of all, we talk to the suppliers and see if we are aligned, goal wise and also social […] And then we have developed a huge, huge supplier manual with all the needs and demands that we require from a supplier and then they will read it through and they will sign it. And that's kind of a baseline we work from. And then we will go and visit the suppliers”. (R1)

Furthermore, respondents emphasized the importance of factory visits as part of their monitoring process. These

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visits provide an opportunity to directly assess the working conditions and well-being of the workers, offering insights that might not be otherwise visible through documentation alone: “The first impression is really, really important. Like when you're going to a factory, if people are looking away, if it’s dirty, you see a fire extinguisher not there. You know, you get a very good or bad first impression […] it's not really mentioned in all documents you know. (R11)

One respondent in particular focused on removing power imbalances with their suppliers, working towards mutual business relationships in which both parties are dependent on each other: “Of course there will always be this power imbalance of course with the buying company and the producing company, but on the other hand, we're trying also see them as a partnership more or less because we are dependent on them and they are dependent on us as well.” (R4)

The respondents also described how sustainability work is supported by internal collaboration within their organization: “We've been very connected and close with working with product development.” (R8). Furthermore, team members often work side by side, making communication direct and decisions highly collaborative: “We sit there all together because it is every little detail of our production that we need to focus on and take decisions about. So, it's impossible not to be very, very close related.” (R1). Some respondents noted that sustainability is not the responsibility of one individual or department but is integrated into the daily tasks of everyone in the organization. It is viewed as a shared responsibility that aligns with the company’s overall strategy and values: “Everyone is also expected to have something that focuses on some of the areas that fall into our sustainability strategy. So it's sort of part of the day job really [...] it is part of the overall company strategy, the brand value, so everyone works in some way with sustainability.” (R7). One participant even emphasized how sustainability is so central to their operations that each employee, regardless of role, can be seen as a sustainability manager: “Of course, it's involved in everything we do, so I usually say that everyone who works in [company] is a sustainability manager in some kind.” (R11)

Theme 3: Knowledge sharing and creation through collaboration

Knowledge creation to ensure social sustainability practices emerged as a third theme. Participants shared that limited knowledge and ongoing uncertainty surrounding the legislation made preparation towards the CSDDD difficult. To navigate these challenges, they emphasised the importance of both internal and external learning opportunities, such as trainings, webinars, and workshops, hosted within their organisations and by external networks or associations.

Respondents pointed out that they do not always have all the necessary knowledge about upcoming legislation within their own companies, but they believe there is a lot of useful knowledge available outside their organisations: “But yeah, getting the knowledge that other people have, because I'm sure there is a lot of knowledge everywhere, but just we don't have everything within internally in our company.” (R2)

To address this, respondents emphasised the crucial role of collaboration in fostering knowledge creation, highlighting the importance of learning in this process. It was also seen as an important way to stay informed and up to date: “So collaboration, I would say is a really important purpose and also to the learning experience.” (R4)

“That's also the way we keep, you know, keep updated, of course, to listen to others. […] And to participate in other conferences, like we have the collaboration with the UN Global Compact, but there are the different organisations, networks or agencies working with similar areas and to be in dialogue, to collaborate, to do talks or just to attend different types of other events and conferences, in order to learn again and get updated.” (R9)

Some participants shared that their organisations actively contribute to knowledge-sharing by hosting their own trainings and webinars focused on sustainability topics and upcoming legislation requirements: “We host different B Head sessions. That's experts sharing knowledge on the policies on legislations on different relevant topics that's relevant for the B corps.” (R9)

“We do provide, like it depends with who we are partnering with, and so we have like webinars and the training sessions, but it can be adjusted with our like a stakeholders together […] we have also really good public speakers who go to this like a bigger events Europe wide.” (R10)

In terms of upcoming legislation, several respondents expressed that the uncertain situation surrounding CSDDD, especially with the ongoing discussions with Omnibus package, makes it difficult to know in which direction the legislation is turning: “And now they make this Omnibus thing, that they will reopen it up again. Like postpone it, but also not just postpone it, but also try to change quite a lot of stuff there […] So I would say it just, it doesn't look good, like it is

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uncertain." (R10)

"But again, not much is settled within the EU, so it is hard to say you can prepare for this because we don't exactly know what to prepare for." (R2)

In addition, participants shared that limited internal resources pose significant challenges when addressing the requirements of the CSDDD. These constraints, especially in terms of time and staff capacity, were mentioned. Respondents expressed concerns about the administrative burden, noting that much of the work centres around paperwork, documentation and reporting requirements, all of which are resource consuming: "I think the challenges for our company as a small/medium sized company, I would say it's the administrative work of creating this. It's very much administrative and I think also it's very much documents and papers." (R3)

Several participants emphasised that knowledge is actively developed within the workplace through internal workshops, seminars, and regular meetings. For example, one interviewee described how they gain valuable insights from senior colleagues who engage directly with legal frameworks: "My boss is […] part of that team who forms all these directives and so they have like very much knowledge in these areas. And from that, we all, me and my colleagues, learn very much from them […] like we are in school, so we have seminars where we get information about it and workshops and things like that." (R5)

Another respondent discussed how internal meetings are used strategically as knowledge-sharing platforms to keep all staff informed about upcoming legislation and the necessary preparations: "So we have monthly meetings, the whole company where I provide any updates, going through all the legislation coming up, so they have like a status report of what is coming up and what they need to prepare for." (R2)

Respondents also highlighted how the diverse academic backgrounds within their teams enrich the learning environment and lead to more holistic approaches to sustainability: "I think it's beneficial because we have both knowledge in very much different aspects and topics and areas, and also that we have different like views of sustainability. […] when you have like different educational backgrounds, you get a bigger picture of sustainability […] we can like share different views on it and together we have a big knowledge and different views, how to both view sustainability and how to adopt it." (R5)

Discussion

As small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in the Nordic textile industry face increasing demands to address social sustainability across complex supply chains, collaboration and learning emerge as critical strategies for navigating these challenges. This paper has explored how such practices unfold in everyday work and how they contribute to building capacity for social sustainability. By applying a theoretical lens of work-integrated learning (WIL), understood as a situated, relational, and practice-based learning process (Björck & Willermark, 2024; Vallo Hult et al., 2024; Sunnemark et al., 2024), the study contributes a conceptual framework that explains how collaboration functions as a mechanism for knowledge creation in the context of social sustainability. In the following discussion, the two research questions are addressed by connecting empirical findings to this framework, with particular attention to how boundary objects and boundary crossing enable learning across organizational and sectoral boundaries (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011; Gellerstedt et al., 2015; Miles et al., 2000).

Collaboration as a strategy for addressing social sustainability (RQ1)

The findings demonstrate that SMEs in the Nordic textile industry engage in multifaceted collaborations to address the challenges of social sustainability in complex supply chains. Internally, sustainability is increasingly embedded across departments and roles, moving beyond the responsibility of individual specialists to become a shared organizational concern (Henriksson & Grunewald, 2020; Sunnemark et al., 2024). This internal integration fosters situated learning, where knowledge is developed through everyday work and cross-functional interaction (Björck & Willermark, 2024; Vallo Hult et al., 2024). Externally, SMEs collaborate with a wide range of actors including suppliers, competitors, NGOs, academic institutions, and industry associations to access knowledge, align practices, and build capacity. These collaborations are often facilitated by shared tools and frameworks, such as certifications (e.g., GOTS), supplier manuals, and legal

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guidelines, which function as boundary objects that support communication and coordination across diverse organizational and cultural contexts (Gellerstedt et al., 2015; Star & Griesemer, 1989).

However, collaboration is not without its challenges. SMEs often struggle to find suitable partners within their niche sectors, which limits opportunities for meaningful exchange and joint initiatives (Ethical Trade Sweden, 2025). Even when collaboration is desired, differences in organizational size, resources, or strategic priorities can hinder alignment and trust-building. The administrative burden associated with compliance, particularly in relation to the CSDDD, further complicates collaborative efforts, as SMEs frequently lack the internal capacity to manage extensive reporting and due diligence requirements (Smit et al., 2020a; Setyaningsih et al., 2024). Moreover, power asymmetries in supplier relationships persist, making it difficult to establish truly reciprocal partnerships. While some SMEs actively work to reduce these imbalances and foster long-term relationships based on mutual dependence and trust (Blomqvist & Levy, 2006), the structural realities of global supply chains often reinforce hierarchical dynamics. Despite these constraints, the findings of this study suggest that collaboration remains a vital strategy for SMEs to navigate regulatory demands, share responsibility, and collectively advance social sustainability goals.

Work-integrated learning as a lens for understanding social sustainability (RQ2)

Applying a Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) perspective provides a deeper understanding of how SMEs in the Nordic textile industry engage with social sustainability as a dynamic and relational learning process. Rather than viewing sustainability as a static compliance task, WIL emphasizes how knowledge is created and shared through collaboration across organizational and sectoral boundaries (Björck & Willermark, 2024; Vallo Hult et al., 2024; Sunnemark et al., 2024). The empirical findings illustrate how SMEs participate in boundary-crossing learning by engaging with external networks, industry platforms, and academic institutions. These interactions enable the coordination of diverse perspectives and the co-creation of knowledge, particularly in response to the evolving requirements of the CSDDD (European Commission, 2024; Dempere et al., 2024). Boundary object, such as certifications, supplier manuals, and legal frameworks, play a central role in this process by translating abstract sustainability principles into concrete, actionable practices (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011; Gellerstedt et al., 2015; Star & Griesemer, 1989).

However, the capacity to engage in WIL is contingent on the availability of time, trust, and territory (Miles et al., 2000). Time is required for reflection, dialogue, and relationship-building, yet is often scarce in resource-constrained SMEs. Trust is essential for open communication and the sharing of sensitive information, particularly in supply chains where visibility is limited beyond first-tier suppliers (Blomqvist & Levy, 2006). Territory, understood as a sense of ownership and recognition, is reflected in how sustainability is embedded in employees' everyday work and in how SMEs position themselves within collaborative networks (Henriksson & Grunewald, 2020; Espínola et al., 2025). When these preconditions are met, learning becomes a transformative process that enables SMEs to move beyond compliance and develop context-sensitive approaches to social sustainability.

The model of Work-Integrated Learning for Social Sustainability proposed in this paper captures this iterative and relational process. It highlights how collaboration, boundary crossing, and the use of boundary objects interact to support knowledge creation. This perspective aligns with calls to reconceptualize social sustainability not as a checklist of compliance tasks, but as a continuous learning journey shaped by engagement, reflection, and shared responsibility (Marshall et al., 2015; Shaw et al., 2024; De Neve, 2014). In this way, WIL offers a valuable framework for understanding how SMEs can build the capacity needed to navigate complex supply chains and contribute to more socially sustainable business practices.

While the empirical focus in this paper is on Nordic SMEs in the textile industry, the theoretical framework contributes insights for other industries and international contexts. The study highlights how collaboration, boundary-crossing learning, and the use of boundary objects can support capacity-building and compliance in resource-constrained settings, challenges that are common across sectors facing increasing sustainability demands.

Conclusion

This study sets out to explore how small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in the Nordic textile industry engage in

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collaboration and learning to address social sustainability in complex supply chains. By applying a Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) perspective, the study contributes both empirically and theoretically to the understanding of how knowledge is created and shared across organizational and sectoral boundaries in response to emerging regulatory frameworks.

In response to RQ1, the findings show that SMEs collaborate with a range of internal and external actors including suppliers, competitors, NGOs, academic institutions, and industry associations to navigate the demands of social sustainability. These collaborations are supported by shared tools and frameworks that function as boundary objects, enabling coordination, mutual understanding, and alignment across diverse contexts. Despite facing challenges such as limited resources, administrative burdens, and power asymmetries, SMEs demonstrate a strong commitment to collaboration as a strategy for building capacity and meeting regulatory expectations.

Addressing RQ2, the paper offers a theoretical contribution by proposing a model of Work-Integrated Learning for Social Sustainability. This framework conceptualizes collaboration as a dynamic and iterative learning process, where actors engage across boundaries and around shared artefacts to co-create knowledge. The model highlights how time, trust, and territory function as critical preconditions for collaboration, while boundary crossing and the use of boundary objects enable learning and knowledge creation. In doing so, the study advances the understanding of social sustainability not as a static compliance task, but as a situated and relational practice shaped by continuous learning and engagement.

Limitations and further research

This paper is limited by its focus on Nordic SMEs in the textile industry, which means the findings reflect a specific regulatory and cultural context. While this provides rich, situated insights, it does not capture variations that may exist in other sectors or regions. Additionally, the dynamic nature of social sustainability and evolving legislation such as the CSDDD may influence practices over time, which the cross-sectional design of this paper cannot fully address. Future research could examine similar processes in other industries or geographic contexts to explore how collaboration and work-integrated learning unfold under different conditions. Longitudinal studies would also be valuable to understand how SMEs adapt their strategies as regulatory frameworks and sustainability expectations continue to develop.

Declaration of interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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