# FARM-TO-FORK: EXPLORING SUSTAINABILITY IN ETHNIC FOOD SYSTEMS - A CRITICAL CASE OF BANGLADESHI CURRY HOUSES IN BIRMINGHAM, UNITED KINGDOM

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Doctor of Philosophy

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## THESIS SUMMARY

Despite growing recognition of the food sector's critical role in sustainability transformation, mainstream frameworks systematically exclude marginalised ethnic food enterprises from research attention and policy support. This exclusion is particularly acute for ethnic minority food businesses—vital yet overlooked components of the UK's £55 billion food economy. Bangladeshi-owned curry houses, representing over 85% of the UK's 'Indian restaurants' and generating over £4.2 billion annually, face an existential crisis due to cascading structural pressures. This thesis addresses critical gaps: sustainable entrepreneurship literature's focus on well-resourced enterprises, food systems perspectives' neglect of culturally specific enterprises, and policy frameworks poorly adapted to informal, culturally embedded businesses. Through an embedded multi-stakeholder case study of 15 Bangladeshi curry houses in Birmingham (65 interviews spanning operators and food system stakeholders, focus groups, observation, secondary sources), this research investigates how sustainability is understood and practised within resource-constrained contexts. Employing a cross-domain theoretical framework grounded in stakeholder theory and institutional theory, the study integrates sustainable entrepreneurship, ethnic minority entrepreneurship, and food systems perspectives—often siloed domains.

The findings reveal 'survivalist sustainability'—distinctive, place-based environmental practices driven by necessity, frugality, constraints and cultural wisdom rather than strategic choice or resource abundance. This challenges dominant paradigms that position sustainability as a luxury for well-resourced actors, demonstrating instead how constraint drives environmental innovation. Curry house operators develop sophisticated waste minimisation, energy efficiency, and circular resource practices as survival strategies, embedded within webs of kinship labour, informal networks, and cultural obligations, revealing how sustainability is enacted at the margins of formal food governance.

The thesis makes four key contributions: theoretically, it develops an integrated framework of survivalist sustainability that challenges normative models of sustainability; empirically, it provides a novel comprehensive analysis sustainability in curry houses, documenting vernacular environmental practices and their typology; practically, it identifies pathways for enabling sustainability transitions in resource-constrained ethnic minority enterprises; and for policy, it maps structural 'chokepoints' and offers culturally responsive recommendations. This research reveals how marginalised entrepreneurs already practice sophisticated environmental strategies that merit recognition and theoretical integration, demonstrating that meaningful sustainability transformation requires engaging diverse entrepreneurial realities beyond mainstream frameworks.

**Keywords:** Sustainable entrepreneurship, curry houses, food systems sustainability, survivalist sustainability, vernacular practices, cultural embeddedness, informal economies, just transition.

# DEDICATION

To God Almighty, the ultimate source of all wisdom and knowledge, and in loving memory of my late parents.

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Above all, I thank God Almighty, whose grace has carried me through this PhD journey.

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# Beyond Just A PhD

My PhD has been far more than the production of a thesis. It has been a launchpad for collaborative, impact-driven research. Along this journey, I have secured grant funding, forged international partnerships, delivered teaching excellence, and created real-world impact.

**Grant-Funded & Collaborative Research**

- Served as Senior Research Assistant on our awarded £50 UKRI scoping grant on 'Changing Agri-Chicken for Net Zero' (University of Southampton, Aston University and three other UK universities, and industry partners): coordinated stakeholder workshops, managed large qualitative data, and co-authored policy informing reports. Our recommendations generated a mega (£1.5m) UKRI/DEFRA funded project, 'TRiSOME-Chicken' currently implemented by the University of Southampton.
- Pubilic Engagement: Developed and presented a poster at the Agri-food for Net Zero (AFN+ Network) Big Tent Event 2025 in Manchester, translating academic findings for public audiences.
- Contributed to the European Union–funded MILE project at CREME: designed cross-cultural monitoring surveys, including Russian translation, advancing applied social research methodologies.

**Teaching & Mentoring Excellence**

- Delivered teaching support across undergraduate courses in business economics, business analytics, entrepreneurship, and management.
- Enhanced pedagogical expertise and mentoring through comprehensive exam administration, invigilation, marking and academic assessments.

**Dissemination & Stakeholder Engagement**

- Presented my research at conferences in the UK and internationally (Finland, Estonia, Netherlands), building credibility and international networks.
- Supported the organisation of academic and industry workshops, seminars, and events, developing advanced project management and stakeholder engagement capabilities.

This PhD journey has forged research expertise, transferable competencies, and professional networks that position me as a collaborative bridge between academia, policy, and practice.

**Research Publications**

- *Ram M., McCarthy I., Jones T., & Mafulul D. (in press). Agency through Informality: How Bangladeshi Restaurant Owners Navigate Structural Constraints in Times of Crisis. Work, Employment and Society.*
- *Mmadubuko M., Gyan-Amponsah P., Mafulul D., & Haj Mohammadi B. (in press). Navigating Small and Medium Enterprises Internationalisation in an Emerging Economy. The International Journal of Entrepreneurship and Innovation. 14657503251379284.*
- *Roe E., Maye D., Lambton S., Mafulul D., Helwegen M., Green S., & Hasnain S. (2024). Changing Agri-Chicken for Net Zero: Findings from an Industry Workshop. University of Southampton.*
- *Roe E., Maye D., Lambton S., Mafulul D., Helwegen M., Green S., & Hasnain S. (2024). Changing Agri-Chicken for Net Zero: Report on Participatory Workshop Methodology and Detailed Findings. University of Southampton.*

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## Glossary of Key Concepts

*This glossary provides working definitions for key concepts used throughout this thesis. Terms are defined within the specific context of this research on sustainability practices among Bangladeshi curry houses and ethnic micro-enterprises.*

| Term | Definition |
|---|---|
| **Cascading Effects** | The way constraints or changes at one level ripple through and create impacts across multiple other levels or dimensions of a system. |
| **Chokepoints** | Systemic bottlenecks where multiple sustainability pathways become simultaneously blocked, creating cascading effects that prevent system-wide change. Strategic intervention points where removing constraints can unlock transformation across multiple dimensions. |
| **Constraint Convergence Model** | Analytical framework mapping how theoretical tensions crystallise into concrete chokepoints that block multiple sustainability pathways simultaneously. |
| **Contextual Pragmatism** | The capacity of marginalised entrepreneurs to navigate competing demands while sustaining viable enterprise models through creative, context-specific solutions. |
| **Context-Sensitive Analysis** | Research approaches that recognise how local conditions, cultural factors, and specific circumstances shape the operation of broader systems and processes. |
| **Culturally Responsive Sustainability** | Environmental action that builds upon existing cultural practices and knowledge systems rather than imposing external sustainability models. |
| **Curry Houses** | Bangladeshi-owned restaurants specialising in South Asian cuisine, typically family-run micro-enterprises operating within ethnic food systems and serving both ethnic and mainstream UK markets. These establishments represent a significant sector within British ethnic entrepreneurship and form the empirical focus of this research. |
| **Economic-Environmental Tension** | The perceived conflict between financial survival and environmental responsibility, particularly acute for resource-constrained businesses. |
| **Equity-Oriented Sustainability** | A vision of environmental action that prioritises justice, recognition, and structural equality alongside ecological outcomes. |
| **Ethnic Food Economy** | The network of businesses, suppliers, and cultural practices surrounding cuisine from specific ethnic communities, often serving both ethnic and mainstream markets. |
| **Ethnic Food Systems** | Complex networks encompassing the production, distribution, preparation, and consumption of culturally specific foods within ethnic communities, characterised by distinct supply chains, cultural practices, regulatory |

| Term | Definition |
|---|---|
| | contexts, and stakeholder relationships that differ from mainstream food systems. |
| **Ethnic Micro-Enterprises** | Small-scale businesses operated by ethnic minority entrepreneurs, typically characterised by family involvement, cultural specificity, and informal business practices. |
| **Financial Exclusion** | Systematic barriers preventing ethnic micro-enterprises from accessing mainstream financial services, grants, and support programmes. |
| **Food Systems Approach** | Analytical framework examining food production, distribution, and consumption as interconnected systems with complex stakeholder relationships and feedback loops. |
| **Formal-Informal Systems** | The gap between official regulations, policies, and support systems versus the unofficial networks and practices that marginalised businesses rely upon. |
| **Grounded Theory** | Research methodology that develops theory from systematic analysis of empirical data rather than testing pre-existing theories. |
| **Informal Networks** | Trust-based relationships and systems of exchange that operate outside formal institutional structures, particularly important for marginalised business communities. |
| **Innovation-Tradition Tension** | The conflict between adopting new practices (including sustainability measures) and preserving cultural traditions and established ways of operating. |
| **Leverage Points** | Strategic sites within complex systems where targeted intervention can catalyse transformation across multiple dimensions simultaneously. |
| **Stakeholder Narratives** | The lived experiences, perspectives, and accounts of different actors within the curry house ecosystem, including operators, suppliers, customers, and policy actors, etc that provide grounded evidence for understanding sustainabilty practices. |
| **Modifiable Conditions** | Constraints or barriers that can be changed through targeted intervention, as opposed to fixed structural features. This concept emphasises that chokepoints, while systematic, are not permanent and can be addressed through appropriate action. |
| **Multi-Stakeholder Analysis** | Research approach that examines different perspectives, interests, and power relationships among various actors within a system or industry. |
| **Policy-Practice Disconnect** | Misalignment between policy intentions and the operational realities of target businesses, often resulting from lack of contextual understanding. |
| **Pluralised Pathways** | Multiple, diverse routes to sustainability that recognise different cultural contexts, economic realities, and operational constraints rather than |

| Term | Definition |
|---|---|
| | assuming universal solutions. This concept challenges one-size-fits-all approaches to environmental action. |
| **Power Asymmetries** | Unequal distribution of influence, resources, or decision-making power among different stakeholders in a system. |
| **Reflexive Thematic Analysis** | Qualitative analysis method that identifies, analyses, and reports patterns (themes) within data while acknowledging the researcher's role in interpretation. |
| **Regulatory Asymmetries** | Unequal impacts of regulations on different types of businesses, where compliance costs and requirements disproportionately burden smaller enterprises. |
| **Stakeholder Theory** | Framework examining how businesses interact with and are influenced by various groups (customers, suppliers, regulators, communities) who affect or are affected by business operations. |
| **Structural Marginalisation** | Systematic exclusion from mainstream economic opportunities, support systems, and decision-making processes due to ethnic, cultural, or economic factors. |
| **Survivalist Sustainability** | Environmental practices that emerge from economic necessity rather than ideological commitment -Vernacular, cost-saving survival strategies that happen to be environmentally beneficial, representing a form of sustainability grounded in lived realities and resource constraints rather than abstract principles. |
| **Sustainable Entrepreneurship** | Business practices that create economic value while contributing to environmental and social sustainability goals. |
| **System-Wide Transformation** | Fundamental changes that affect multiple components and relationships within a complex system rather than isolated improvements. |
| **Systemic Barriers** | Structural constraints embedded within systems that prevent change, as opposed to individual or isolated obstacles. |
| **Triangulation** | Using multiple data sources, methods, or perspectives to validate findings and enhance research credibility. |
| **Vernacular Innovation** | Locally developed, culturally embedded innovations that emerge from community knowledge and practices rather than formal research and development processes. Often informal, adaptive solutions that address specific contextual challenges using available resources and cultural understanding. |

## Summary of Abbrviations

| | |
|---|---|
| ATs | Adaptive Traditions |
| BCA | Bangladeshi Caterers Association |
| CBR | Community-based Resilience |
| CF | Culturrally-informed Frugality |
| CREME | Centre for Ethnic Minority Entrepreneurship |
| EMBs | Ethnic Minority Businesses |
| EME | Ethnic Minority Entreprenuership |
| EMMBs | Ethnic Minority Micro-Businesses |
| FAO | Food and Agriculture Ornaisation of the United Nations |
| HLPE | High Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition |
| HLS | Hybrid Legitimacy Systems |
| IDRC | International Development Research Centre |
| IPCC | Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change |
| IPES-Food | International Panel of Experts on Sustainable Food Systems |
| ONS | Office for National Statistics |
| PGS | Parrarel Governance Systems |
| RTA | Reflexive Thamtic Analysis |
| SDGs | Sustainability Development Goals of the United Nations |
| SFS | Sustainable Food Systems |

# Chapter One: Introduction

## 1.1 Background to the study

The food sector has emerged as a critical domain in the global sustainability agenda due to its substantial environmental footprint, socio-economic influence, and cultural embeddedness (Prasanna et al., 2024). Food systems account for approximately one-third of global greenhouse gas emissions (GHG), while global food waste reached 1.05 billion metric tons in 2022, representing both challenges and opportunities (FAO, 2022; Willett et al., 2019). The urgency of this challenge is reflected in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 2 (*zero hunger*), SDG 12 (*responsible consumption and production*), and SDG 13 (*climate action*), which collectively foreground the imperative to transform food systems toward sustainability, justice, and resilience (UN, 2024). Within this landscape, the hospitality and food service industry occupy a uniquely influential position. Its proximity to consumers, operational flexibility, and high visibility enable it to influence both upstream supply chains and downstream consumption behaviours (Samkange et al., 2021; Raju et al., 2025; Tabert et al., 2025).

The UK context exemplifies these global tensions with particular acuity. The Waste and Resources Action Programme (WRAP[1]) estimates a 14% decrease in GHG emissions from the UK's food and drink consumption between 2015 and 2021, yet total food waste amounted to approximately 9.5 million tonnes in 2021, representing a 5.6% increase compared to 2018 (DEFRA, 2023). The hospitality sector alone generates approximately 200,000 tonnes of food waste annually, translating to economic losses of £682 million (Jeswani et al., 2021). These figures illuminate the sector's paradoxical position as both a significant contributor to environmental degradation and a crucial leverage point for systemic transformation (Khatter, 2023).

Recent scholarship demonstrates growing traction for sustainability interventions, especially in areas of food waste reduction; repurposing, recycling, supply chain optimisation, consumer education, particularly in corporate hotel and restaurant contexts where operational efficiency increasingly aligns with environmental objectives (Lynch, 2024; Rodrigues & Dedat, 2025; Rai et al., 2025). Consumer demand reinforces this trend, with 47% of diners now prioritising eco-friendly options when selecting restaurants (Mintel, 2024). This shift is especially pronounced among younger generations, who are driving sustainability-conscious choices in the foodservice sector. Yet this apparent progress conceals a profound exclusion. These

[1] *Tracking UK food system greenhouse gas emissions: 2023 update*. Waste and Resources Action Programme. Retrieved from https://www.wrap.ngo/resources/report/tracking-uk-food-system-greenhouse-gas-emissions-2023-update

interventions remain concentrated within large corporate chains and luxury hospitality settings, systematically marginalising small-scale, ethnically-owned food businesses from both research attention and policy frameworks (Raju et al., 2025; Ram et al., 2017; Ram & Jones, 2008). This exclusion is compounded by the increasing formalisation of sustainability through eco-labels, carbon audits, and procurement protocols; mechanisms that, while promoting accountability, risk marginalising micro-enterprises lacking the technical, financial, or bureaucratic capacity for compliance (George et al., 2021; Kimmitt & Muñoz, 2018).

The theoretical implications of this exclusion are significant. Institutional structures presume a universal model of the 'rational,' well-resourced entrepreneur (Hjorth & Reay, 2022); a presumption that is both theoretically impoverished and practically exclusionary when applied to culturally diverse, informally structured food enterprises and marginalised context (Zhao & Li, 2019). Food systems transformation approaches offer a more holistic and inclusive analytical framework, positioning food not merely as commodity but as a nexus of ecological, economic, and cultural processes (FAO, 2024; IPES-Food, 2021). Within this paradigm, sustainability encompasses relational, place-based, and experiential knowledge embedded in everyday food practices, particularly relevant for ethnic food businesses where sustainability often manifests through culturally rooted practices: frugality, waste minimisation, batch cooking, and trust-based procurement (Lynch, 2024). However, such frameworks remain under-theorised in marginalised cultural contexts.

Scholars increasingly challenge the assumption that formal innovation represents the sole pathway to sustainable development, advocating instead for pluralised understandings that recognise the legitimacy of informal, adaptive, and vernacular practices within marginalised sectors (Mincyte, 2012; Loring, 2023; IDRC, 2024; Raju et al., 2025). Community-led sourcing, intergenerational knowledge transmission, and culturally-driven operational adjustments may not register within standardised sustainability audits yet contribute meaningfully to resource efficiency and system resilience.

This perspective necessitates interrogating not only how sustainability is implemented but who defines it. Institutional and policy frameworks must evolve toward greater inclusivity, recognising that sustainable practice in a corporate hotel kitchen differs fundamentally from that in a family-run ethnic restaurant (curry house) operating under economic, regulatory, and cultural constraints. The literature thus calls for sustainability frameworks that are context-sensitive, culturally responsive, and reflexive in engaging with the lived realities of diverse food actors (HLPE, 2020; Lynch, 2024). It is therefore against this backdrop of both promise and exclusion that this study is undertaken.

### 1.2 Setting the scene: Contextualisation and problematisation of the thesis

In an era defined by climate emergency declarations, economic volatility, and urgent calls for just transitions, sustainability has crystallised as both moral imperative and contested terrain. Despite mounting environmental pressures and policy commitments, dominant sustainability discourses remain anchored in formal, scalable, and predominantly technologically-driven solutions (Bækgaard et al., 2024). These mainstream frameworks systematically overlook how sustainability is navigated by economic actors operating at the intersection of institutional, cultural, and resource margins; particularly ethnic minority entrepreneurs who constitute vital yet under-recognised components of the UK's food economy.

The stakes of this oversight are substantial. The UK food system accounts for around one-third of national greenhouse gas emissions (WRAP, 2021), while the restaurant and hospitality sector, valued at approximately £55 billion and employing over 3.2 million people, represents a critical nexus for sustainability transformation (UKHospitality, 2024). Embedded within this ecosystem are Bangladeshi-owned curry houses; enterprises that occupy a unique and paradoxical position in Britain's culinary landscape.

The scale and significance of this sector challenge its marginalisation. There are estimated 12,000 curry houses in the United Kingdom, employing 100,000 people with annual combined sales of approximately £4.2 billion (The Financial Times, 2016; FSB, 2020). Interestingly, over 85% of these so-called ‘Indian restaurants’ are Bangladeshi owned (Murray, 2023). These figures represent more than economic statistics; they embody vital economic lifelines for ethnic minority communities, cultural bridges in multicultural Britain, and adaptive entrepreneurial responses to structural marginalisation (Ram et al., 2017; Khandaker, 2016).

Yet despite this substantial economic footprint, curry houses remain conspicuously absent from mainstream sustainability policy frameworks, sustainable entrepreneurship scholarship, and innovation ecosystems. This invisibility becomes particularly troubling when situated against mounting existential pressures facing the sector. The curry house, once a celebrated symbol of multicultural Britain and immigrant entrepreneurship (Jones et al., 2012; Ram et al., 2017), confronts an alarming decline. On Brick Lane alone, the number of curry restaurants dropped from 35 in 2014 to just 20 by 2019 (Ahmed, 2020), while broader predictions suggest that about 50% of curry houses may vanish from UK high streets within a decade due to structural challenges [2].

[2] Telegraph Reporters. (2017, February 22). *Britain’s curry houses disappearing – 50 per cent to close within 10 years*. The Telegraph. https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/02/22/britains-curry-houses-feeling-heat-owners-arent-innovative-enough/

This decline reflects cascading, intersecting challenges: post-Brexit labour shortages, inflation-driven cost increases, evolving consumer preferences toward experiential dining, digitalisation demands, and increasingly stringent environmental regulations (Ram et al., 2017; Smallbone et al., 2003; Farm-to-Fork Conference, 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic intensified these pressures dramatically. Seven in eight restaurants experienced sales decline, with approximately 86% losing up to 75% of revenue, and more than 42% losing between a quarter and half their revenue (Roskams, 2022; ONS, 2021). Current industry data reveals that staff turnover has reached 38% while operators grapple with persistent labour shortages, inflationary pressures, digitalisation demands, and emerging environmental regulations (Restaurant Management, 2025).

These sector-specific challenges intersect with deeper structural inequalities characterising ethnic minority entrepreneurship in the UK. Only 49% of Black business owners and 53% of business owners from Asian and Other Ethnic Minority backgrounds achieve their non-financial goals, compared to 70% of White counterparts (British Business Bank, 2020). Black business owners experience significantly worse economic outcomes, with median turnover of £25,000 compared to £35,000 for White business owners (Social Market Foundation, 2021). These disparities illuminate how structural marginalisation compounds sector-specific vulnerabilities, creating conditions of heightened precarity for ethnic minority food enterprises.

Yet within these constraints lies a story of remarkable adaptation and resilience. Curry house operators have historically demonstrated extraordinary adaptive capacity and innovation (Basu et al., 2024; Ram et al., 2007). From pioneering early food delivery systems to developing culturally responsive supply chains, these enterprises have long practised forms of resource optimisation, waste minimisation, and community-embedded business models that align with sustainability principles, albeit outside formal recognition or policy support frameworks (Ahmed, 2020; Jones et al., 2012).

This thesis argues that such practices represent a distinctive form of *'survivalist sustainability'*; environmental and social practices born not from external compliance regimes, resource abundance or growth-oriented business models, but from resource constraints, necessity, frugality, and culturally embedded relationality. This concept challenges dominant sustainability paradigms by demonstrating how environmental practice emerges from constraint rather than abundance, from cultural wisdom rather than technological innovation, and from survival rather than strategic choice.

The research is initially triggered by this broad fundamental question that expose the limitations of mainstream sustainability discourse: What does sustainability look like from the vantage point of those systematically excluded from mainstream models of innovation, policy

engagement, and institutional support? Or how do marginalised food entrepreneurs develop and implement environmental practices within contexts simultaneously shaped by economic constraint, cultural obligations, and institutional misrecognition? The study explores this critical blind spot by specifically investigating how Bangladeshi-owned curry houses, often informal, resource-constrained, and culturally embedded enterprises engage with sustainability challenges and opportunities.

Through addressing these questions, this study challenges sustainability scholarship to become more inclusive, contextually sensitive, and theoretically sophisticated in its engagement with diverse entrepreneurial realities. Rather than treating sustainability as a fixed template to be adopted or rejected, this thesis interrogates how it is understood, negotiated, contested, and improvised by ethnic minority entrepreneurs under conditions of structural precarity and cultural complexity.

### 1.3 Research rationale and justification

The rationale for this study emerges from four critical gaps in existing scholarship and policy discourse that remain disconnected and overlooked. First, sustainable entrepreneurship literature remains dominated by studies of formal, well-resourced enterprises operating in stable institutional environments (Dean & McMullen, 2007; Shepherd & Patzelt, 2011). This focus obscures how sustainability is negotiated under conditions of resource constraint, institutional exclusion, cultural embeddedness, and structural precarity; conditions that characterise many ethnic minority enterprises (Kimmitt & Muñoz, 2018; Vershinina et al., 2018).

Second, food systems sustainability research has largely overlooked small-scale, culturally specific food enterprises in favour of industrial agriculture, supply chain optimisation, and technological innovation (Ericksen, 2008; Moragues-Faus, 2020). This omission is problematic given that ethnic minority food enterprises often maintain closer connections to traditional ecological knowledge, shorter supply chains, and community-embedded distribution networks that embody alternative sustainability pathways (Ram & Jones, 2008).

Third, ethnic minority entrepreneurship (EME) scholarship has insufficiently engaged with environmental and sustainability dimensions, focusing instead on economic integration, cultural maintenance, and structural barriers (Jones et al., 2014; Vershinina et al., 2018). This gap is increasingly untenable as climate change and sustainability regulations create new forms of challenge and opportunity for EMEs, particularly in sectors like food and hospitality where environmental impacts are significant and increasingly regulated.

Fourth, policy frameworks for supporting small business sustainability remain poorly adapted to the realities of ethnic minority enterprises, which often operate through informal networks, rely on kinship labour, and navigate complex cultural and linguistic barriers to accessing mainstream support services (Ram et al., 2013). Ethnic minority businesses were found to be more innovative than non-ethnic minority businesses and more likely to export (FSB, 2024), suggesting untapped potential for sustainability innovation that remains systemically underexplored and under-supported.

Therefore, his research integrates insights from these critical domains that are traditionally disconnected: sustainable entrepreneurship, ethnic minority entrepreneurship, food systems scholarship and policy. This cross-domain integration is essential because sustainability in ethnic food businesses cannot be understood through any single theoretical lens or domain—it emerges at the intersection of stakeholder dynamics, institutional constraints, entrepreneurial adaptation, and food system complexities. By bridging these domains, the thesis develops an integrated, multi-dimensional framework of survivalist sustainability in ethnic food systems, contributing to theoretical advancement across all domains while remaining grounded in the lived realities of marginalized food entrepreneurs

### 1.4 Research aim and questions

This study addresses these gaps through an in-depth examination of how sustainability is understood, practised, and constrained within Bangladeshi curry house businesses in Birmingham, West Midlands, UK. It critically explores the structural conditions, cultural logics, and stakeholder relationships that shape these dynamics. This aim recognises that sustainability cannot be understood as a neutral technical challenge but must be examined as a socially embedded, culturally specific, and politically contested process that unfolds differently across entrepreneurial contexts (Chatzichristos & Nagopoulos, 2020). Birmingham provides an ideal research context given its status as a major centre of South Asian settlement, its concentration of curry house establishments, and its position as a key site for ethnic minority entrepreneurship in the UK (Ram & Jones, 2008).

This aim is operationalised through three interconnected and mutually reinforcing research questions that collectively enabled a systematic understanding of sustainability from the margins:

***RQ1:*** *How do Bangladeshi curry house operators understand and practise sustainability within their multi-dimensional constraints?*

This question explores the lived experiences, meanings, everyday practices, and cultural logics through which curry house operators engage with environmental, social, and economic

sustainability challenges. And how these are shaped by complex interactions of curry food system actors and stakeholders. It seeks to understand sustainability not as a predetermined template but as an emergent, contextual, and culturally mediated set of practices, moving beyond binary narratives of adoption or resistance to examine the complex negotiations that characterise real-world environmental practice.

***RQ2:*** *What structural barriers and enablers shape sustainability transitions, and what pathways might leverage existing innovations?*

This question identifies structural, economic, cultural, institutional and relational factors (chokepoints) that constrain or enable sustainability transitions, while exploring potential interventions, policy, and support mechanisms that could unlock pathways for enhanced environmental outcomes without undermining cultural authenticity or economic viability.

***RQ3:*** *How do different stakeholders within the curry food system perceive and influence sustainability practices in Bangladeshi curry houses?*

This question explicitly captures the multi-stakeholder nature of sustainability in the curry food system. The question recognizes that operators do not make sustainability decisions in isolation but within a network of stakeholders who shape their understanding, constrain their choices, and enable their innovations. Therefore, the inclusion of RQ3 ensures that the systemic and relational dimensions of sustainability are foregrounded in the analysis.

Together, these questions address both the empirical reality of sustainability in marginalised food economies and the theoretical challenge of developing more inclusive, contextually sensitive approaches to environmental governance and entrepreneurial support.

## 1.5 Theoretical positioning

To address these questions effectively, this thesis employs a cross-domain theoretical framework that integrates insights from sustainable entrepreneurship, ethnic minority entrepreneurship, and food systems scholarship—through the analytical lenses of stakeholder theory (Freeman, 1984) and institutional theory (Scott, 2001), guided by the food systems approach (Ericksen,2008). This integration provides a comprehensive framework for understanding sustainability in marginalised entrepreneurial contexts.

### 1.5.1 Cross-domain theoretical integration

The theoretical architecture of this thesis is deliberately cross-domain, responding to the reality that sustainability in ethnic minority food businesses exists at the nexus of multiple, yet often disconnected literatures. Sustainable entrepreneurship provides the foundational domain for

understanding how environmental and social value creation intersects with entrepreneurial activity (Dean & McMullen, 2007; Shepherd & Patzelt, 2011).

Ethnic minority entrepreneurship illuminates how racialised and immigrant entrepreneurs navigate structural marginalisation through informal practices, kinship networks, and cultural capital mobilisation (Ram et al., 2007; Vershinina et al., 2018). This domain is crucial for understanding how sustainability practices become embedded within broader strategies of economic survival and cultural maintenance, revealing how entrepreneurial strategies are shaped by experiences of exclusion, discrimination, and institutional misfit, leading to alternative business models. This thesis bridges these domains by employing stakeholder theory, institutional theory, and guided by the food systems approach as analytical lenses.

Stakeholder theory offers a lens for reframing who counts as a stakeholder in marginalised food economies, with particular attention to invisible actors such as youth, kinship labour, cultural communities, and transnational networks (Freeman, 1984; Carrette & Miall, 2017). This theoretical perspective is essential for understanding how curry houses navigate competing demands from diverse actors; suppliers, customers, regulators, farmers and other critical stakeholders whose expectations shape sustainability priorities, practices and entrepreneurial decision-making.

Food systems approach positions curry houses as embedded nodes within complex food systems, shaped by interactions between supply chains, policy regimes, consumer expectations, and cultural foodways (Ericksen, 2008; Moragues-Faus, 2020). This perspective enables analysis of how local and culturally embedded sustainability practices are constrained and enabled by broader structural forces while contributing to wider food system transformations.

Institutional theory provides analytical tools for unpacking how legitimacy, compliance, and innovation play out in contexts where regulatory systems are poorly adapted to small, ethnic food enterprises (Scott, 2001; Pache & Santos, 2010). This theoretical lens is particularly valuable for understanding how curry house operators navigate multiple, sometimes conflicting institutional logics; economic, regulatory, and cultural, while developing practices that may be environmentally beneficial but institutionally invisible or invalid.

Together, these frameworks enable systematic examination of both the relational dynamics (stakeholder theory), formal governance and institutions (Institutional theory) and the systemic interdependencies (food systems approach) that shape sustainability practices. By integrating these theoretical resources across three research domains, the thesis develops a framework of survivalist sustainability—a conceptual contribution that advances understanding in sustainable entrepreneurship (by incorporating constraint and marginalisation), ethnic minority

entrepreneurship (by foregrounding environmental dimensions), and food systems scholarship (by illuminating practices at the margins of formal governance).

This cross-domain integration is not merely additive but generative, producing insights that no single domain or theory could yield independently. It is methodologically significant as it shapes data collection, analytical strategies, and interpretation as discussed in chapter three. The rationale for this cross-domain approach is elaborated in following subsection.

### 1.5.2 Rationale for cross-domain theoretical integration

The complexity of sustainability practices within ethnic minority food enterprises defies explanation through any single domain or theoretical lens. Stakeholder theory expands understanding of relational obligations but requires contextual application to marginalised communities (Javaid, 2019; Romero & Valdez, 2016). Institutional theory explains legitimacy challenges but cannot fully capture informal innovations operating outside formal recognition. Food systems perspectives provide systemic analysis but may overlook granular enterprise practices.

While sustainable entrepreneurship scholarship has largely examined environmental practices in mainstream enterprises (Cohen & Winn, 2007; Shepherd & Patzelt, 2011, 2018), it has largely overlooked ethnic minority contexts. Conversely, ethnic minority entrepreneurship research has explored survival strategies and opportunity structures (Ram et al., 2008; Vershinina et al., 2018) but rarely engages with environmental sustainability. Food systems scholarship addresses sustainability comprehensively (Ericksen, 2008; Hinrichs, 2014) but often neglects the micro-level and cultural practices of marginalized food businesses.

This cross-domain integration addresses what Romero and Valdez (2016) identify as the limitations in traditional single-focused approaches to minority entrepreneurship, recognising that curry house operators simultaneously navigate multiple, overlapping systems of constraint and opportunity. The integration reveals different but interconnected facets: sustainable entrepreneurship illuminates environmental motivations and practices; ethnic minority entrepreneurship exposes structural barriers and cultural resources; food systems scholarship situates local practices within broader socio-ecological networks; institutional theory unpacks legitimacy negotiations; and stakeholder theory maps relational obligations across cultural and economic domains.

Together, these theoretical lenses support a pluralised and contextually grounded understanding of sustainability, while enabling theoretical contribution to mainstream entrepreneurship and sustainability scholarship through the development of more integrated conceptual frameworks.

## 1.6 Methodological approach

Considering the nature of the research aims and questions, this study employs an exploratory qualitative case study research design, grounded in an interpretivist epistemological framework. The methodology combines in-depth semi-structured interviews (multi-stakeholders), focus group discussions, participant observation within restaurant settings, and visual mapping exercises to capture the relational dimensions of sustainability practice. In all, one focus group was conducted with 8 Bangladeshi caterers, and 65 interviews were conducted across the various stakeholders and actors. These were augmented by credible industry reports.

The research design centres participant knowledge and experiences while maintaining analytical rigour. Data collection occurred across multiple curry house sites in Birmingham between 2024 and 2025, with purposive sampling ensuring diversity across business size, generational ownership, and geographical location. Analysis employed reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022) enriched by visual mapping techniques and relational stakeholder analysis to surface both explicit sustainability practices and tacit forms of environmental and social engagement. This methodological approach recognises that sustainability practices are embedded within webs of meaning, relationship, and cultural logic requiring interpretive rather than purely descriptive analysis. The reflexive dimension acknowledges the researcher's positioning within and relationship to the Bangladeshi culinary community, using this positionality as both a source of insight and an object of critical reflection.

The study embeds a multi-stakeholder approach that incorporates perspectives from curry house owners and operators, farmers, suppliers, policy makers, NGO representatives, innovation experts and consumers, enabling triangulation while revealing the complex stakeholder negotiations that shape sustainability practice. This approach enables rich accounts of how sustainability is practiced on the ground, situated within lived experience, cultural meaning, and institutional entanglement, while supporting the development of ‘survivalist sustainability in ethnic food systems’ as novel analytical construct emerging from the data rather than being imposed upon it.

### 1.6.1 Rationale for integrating multi-stakeholder perspectives

While RQ1 and RQ2 center on curry house operators as the primary unit of analysis, RQ3 explicitly captures the multi-stakeholder nature of sustainability in food systems. This integrated approach recognizes that sustainability practices do not emerge in isolation but are shaped through complex interactions among diverse actors across the food system (Freeman, 1984; Ericksen, 2008). As Stakeholder Theory posits, organizations operate within networks

of stakeholders who possess varying degrees of power, legitimacy, and urgency in influencing organizational practices (Mitchell et al., 1997). Similarly, the food systems approach emphasizes that sustainability outcomes are produced through activities and interactions spanning production, distribution, and consumption (Ericksen, 2008). Therefore, understanding how operators practise sustainability (RQ1) and what barriers and enablers they face (RQ2) necessitates examining how stakeholders across the curry food system perceive, value, and influence these practices (RQ3). Details on how this multi-stakeholder approach is operationalised in this thesis is provided in section **3.4.8** of chapter three.

## 1.7 Contribution and significance of the study

This thesis makes significant contributions that advance both scholarly understanding and practical support at the intersection of sustainability, entrepreneurship, and marginalized ethnic food systems. These contributions span three interconnected domains: conceptual innovations that advance theoretical understanding, empirical insights that reveal previously invisible practices, and practical implications (discussed in detail in chapter **6** and **7**):

*1. Conceptual and theoretical contributions*

The thesis's primary theoretical contribution is the development of an integrated, multi-dimensional framework of survivalist sustainability in ethnic food systems—a conceptual advancement that bridges disconnected literatures and challenges dominant assumptions in mainstream sustainability scholarship: that resource abundance enables environmental innovation while constraint inhibits it. Evidence from curry houses reveals the inverse: resource constraints actually drive environmental innovation, pushing entrepreneurs to develop sophisticated waste minimisation, energy efficiency, and circular resource practices as survival imperatives rather than strategic choices (Kimmitt & Muñoz, 2018). This insight disrupts dominant narratives positioning environmental sustainability as a luxury for formalist, growth-centric, and well-resourced, actors. Instead, it reveals how sustainability emerges from necessity, relationality, and cultural embeddedness rather than external compliance or opportunity exploitation.

Theoretically, this framework advances theory in each domain while generating new understanding that transcends any single domain's or theoretical lens's explanatory capacity. The framework explains how environmental practices emerge from the dynamic interaction of multiple dimensions rather than operating through single theoretical explanations, requiring approaches that can accommodate the complex realities of marginalised food entrepreneurs.

Specifically, the integrated framework fundamentally challenges innovation-centric models dominating sustainable entrepreneurship by demonstrating how constraint-driven adaptation

produces environmental outcomes through necessity rather than choice. Particularly, it interrogates assumptions around opportunity recognition, resource mobilisation, and growth orientation that poorly capture necessity-driven, survival-oriented enterprises (Kimmitt & Muñoz, 2018; Shepherd & Patzelt, 2018; Cohen & Winn, 2007; Dean & McMullen, 2007). It enriches ethnic minority entrepreneurship by transcending culturalist-structuralist binaries, revealing survivalist agency that emerges precisely because of—not despite—structural exclusion (Ram et al., 2008, 2017; Sepulveda et al., 2016).

The framework transforms food systems approach by repositioning ethnic micro-enterprises from peripheral actors requiring intervention to integral nodes whose vernacular sustainability contributes to system resilience through mechanisms invisible to formal governance (Brunori et al., 2020). It expands stakeholder theory beyond conventional business boundaries to include invisible, future-oriented, and culturally-legitimated actors whose influence operates through moral rather than economic criteria (Freeman et al., 2010; Mitchell et al., 1997).

The conceptual framework shifts analytical focus in institutional theory from intentionality to effect, from formal compliance to informal ingenuity, and from technocratic metrics to socio-economic embeddedness. This reframing contributes to emerging scholarship challenging universalist approaches to sustainable entrepreneurship (Muñoz & Cohen, 2018; Spence, 2016) while advancing understanding of how environmental practice emerges differently across cultural and structural contexts. Crucially, the thesis pluralises sustainability discourses by foregrounding vernacular practices, cultural legitimacy, and informal economies as valid forms of environmental engagement, demonstrating the theoretical value of contextual, culturally embedded analysis.

*2. Empirical contribution*

The study generates in-depth, field-based account of sustainability practices within the UK curry house sector, documenting everyday adaptations, aspirations, and constraints in an overlooked yet economically significant entrepreneurial field. It develops a four-part typology of sustainability practices: Resource efficiency, Cultural preservation,

Waste minimisation, and informality, providing a practical framework for understanding environmental practice in similar marginalised contexts.

*3. Policy and practice contribution*

By mapping structural barriers as systemic chokepoints that constrain sustainability transitions within ethnic minority food enterprises, the study provides empirically grounded and actionable recommendations for more inclusive, culturally responsive sustainability policy frameworks that recognise and support vernacular forms of environmental practice.

The significance of these contributions extends beyond academic knowledge to practical policy and societal relevance. Progress on sustainability remains slow and uneven in the UK agri-food sector amid significant challenges, highlighting the need for more inclusive approaches that engage diverse entrepreneurial actors (DEFRA, 2025). Therefore, understanding how marginalised food entrepreneurs already practice forms of sustainability will enable policy makers and practitioners to develop more effective, culturally responsive, and equitable interventions for just transition. The next subsection provides a brief overview of the research context, providing theoretical justification as to why it matters.

### 1.8 Research context: Understanding the curry house economy

Curry houses are a cornerstone of the UK's food and hospitality sector, embodying a rich history and making a significant economic impact (Razzak et al., 2022). These businesses, predominantly owned and operated by British ethnic minorities of South Asian descent, have played a crucial role in shaping the UK's culinary landscape and cultural identity.

*Composition and ownership patterns*

Most curry houses in the UK are small, family-run businesses. A significant proportion is owned by British Bangladeshis (Alexander et al., 2020). This dominance is attributed to the large wave of Bangladeshi immigration during the 1970s and 1980s, primarily from the Sylhet region (Warsi, 2015). The sector is characterised by its reliance on traditional recipes and cooking methods, although there is a growing trend towards modernising and innovating the menu to cater to changing consumer preferences (Ahmed, 2020).

These entrepreneurs have developed a robust network of businesses that support each other through shared knowledge, resources, and cultural ties. In addition to Bangladeshi ownership, the sector also includes a diverse range of other South Asian communities, including Indians, Pakistanis, and more recently, Sri Lankans and Nepalese. Each of these groups brings their own regional specialties and business practices to the industry, enriching the UK's culinary diversity. The curry house sector is characterised by a high level of family involvement, with many businesses being passed down through generations (Kaur, 2014). They are recognised as ethnic minority micro-businesses, with 1-9 employees typically family members and local community members, fostering tight-knit economic networks (Ram et al., 2001).

*Figure 2: A typical curry house setting*


**Source:** Website

*Economic contribution and significance*

The economic contribution of curry houses to the UK economy is substantial. The sector is estimated to be worth over £4.2 billion annually, employing around 100,000 people across the UK (The Financial Times, 2016), many of whom are from ethnic minority backgrounds, thus playing a crucial role in the social and economic integration of these communities (Ahmed, 2020). These businesses support the economy through job creation, tax contributions, and the stimulation of related industries such as food supply, logistics, and restaurant equipment supply (Razzak et al., 2022). The success of curry houses has also led to the popularisation of South Asian spices and ingredients in mainstream supermarkets, further boosting their economic impact.

*Historical evolution and cultural significance*

The history of curry houses in the UK can be traced back to the early 19th century when Indian dishes began appearing on the menus of coffee houses and upscale restaurants in major port cities like London and Liverpool. The first known Indian restaurant in the UK, the Hindoostane Coffee House, opened in London by Sake Dean Mahomed in 1810 (Kumar, 2020), catering primarily to colonial officials and returning soldiers from British India (Khan, 2018; Wilson, 2017).

However, it was not until the mid-20th century (post-World War II), with the arrival of a significant number of immigrants from South Asia, particularly from Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan, that curry houses began to proliferate. These immigrants brought their culinary

traditions, which evolved into what is now popularly known as British curry (Buettner, 2018). The post-war labour shortages in Britain led to the recruitment of workers from Commonwealth countries, many of whom brought their culinary traditions with them. By the 1970s and 1980s, curry houses had become a beloved part of British culture, symbolising the country's growing multiculturalism.

Curry houses carved a unique niche in the UK's culinary landscape by offering a distinct blend of traditional South Asian dishes tailored to British tastes, which has endeared them to a wide customer base. This adaptation led to the creation of popular dishes like Chicken Tikka Masala, which some consider a British national dish. The dish was famously dubbed a "true British national dish" by then Foreign Secretary Robin Cook in 2001, highlighting its deep integration into British society (Wilson, 2017). These establishments not only serve as dining venues but also as cultural hubs for the South Asian community, preserving and promoting cultural heritage. They not only provide a taste of home for the South Asian community but also serve as cultural ambassadors, introducing diverse culinary traditions to the British public (Buettner, 2018).

*Contemporary challenges and sector dynamics*

Despite their historical success and economic significance, curry houses face several contemporary challenges such as rising costs, stringent immigration policies, and competition from other cuisines and big retail supermarkets (Migration Advisory Committee, 2018). One major issue is the recruitment and retention of skilled chefs. Changes to immigration laws, particularly the tightening of visa regulations, have restricted the influx of chefs from South Asia, leading to a significant skills shortage (Institute of Employment Studies, 2018). This shortage has been exacerbated by the fact that many young British Asians are pursuing careers outside the restaurant industry, seeking opportunities in more diverse and often higher-paying fields (Alexander et al., 2020).

Additionally, curry houses are facing rising costs of ingredients and operation. The prices of essential spices and fresh produce have increased due to global supply chain issues and inflation. Coupled with increasing competition from other cuisines and dining options, these financial pressures have put many establishments at risk (Razzak et al., 2022), with many of them closing. A recent report indicates that curry houses have been over-stretched beyond their limit, with curry houses closing down on an almost weekly basis[3]. A representative of the Bangladeshi Caterers Association expressed (as reported in the Currylife Magazine,2024):

[3] Curry Life Magazine. (2022). *Curry houses closing down on an almost weekly basis*. Curry Life. https://currylifemagazine.com/subscribe/

> *"We have faced a challenge like never before and we now need to see support to help us not just survive but thrive. We are seeing restaurants around the country closing week in, week out. We can't afford to lose the Great British curry. We need to see action now."*[4]

*Figure 3: Depicting the future prediction of curry houses*


The COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbated these issues, as lockdowns and social distancing measures severely impacted the hospitality sector, leading to a reduction in revenue and the closure of many establishments (British Restaurant Association, 2020). Many curry houses saw a dramatic drop in foot traffic and had to pivot quickly to takeaway and delivery services. This adaptation has been a critical revenue stream in recent years, helping some businesses stay afloat. However, the pandemic also highlighted the need for innovative solutions like digital transformation, with many curry houses investing in online ordering systems and digital marketing to reach customers (Korede et al., 2023; The Financial Times, 2022). Amidst these challenges, there are also opportunities for growth and adaptation. There is an increasing demand for healthier, sustainable, and more diverse menu options, and many curry houses are leveraging technology to offer delivery and online services.

[4] Curry Life. (2024, December 16). *Curry houses' future uncertain amid rising costs*. https://www.currylife.uk/curry-houses-future-uncertain-amid-rising-costs/

## 1.8 Structure of the thesis

The thesis is organised into seven chapters that collectively build the empirical, theoretical, and policy contributions outlined above:

**Chapter 2: Literature Review** synthesises and critically evaluates existing literature across the five domains, identifying conceptual gaps, empirical limitations, and opportunities for theoretical contribution that justify and frame the current study, establishing the theoretical foundation while demonstrating the need for pluralised and more inclusive approaches to sustainability scholarship.

**Chapter 3: Methodology** outlines the research design, data collection methods, analytical frameworks, and ethical considerations, providing detailed justification for methodological choices while reflecting on the challenges and opportunities of researching within ethnic minority entrepreneurial contexts.

**Chapter 4: Understanding sustainability** presents stakeholders' analysis and core findings organised through key thematic tensions that characterise how sustainability is understood, practised, negotiated and contested within the curry house sector, drawing on rich empirical material to illustrate both explicit practices and tacit forms of environmental engagement, addressing the first research question.

**Chapter 5: Chokepoints and Pathways** identifies and interrogates systemic bottlenecks that hinder sustainability transitions in the curry house sector, while exploring potential pathways for enhancing environmental practices in culturally appropriate and economically viable ways, addressing the second research question.

**Chapter 6: Theoretical Contributions** synthesises the study's contributions to sustainable entrepreneurship, institutional theory, stakeholder theory, food systems research, and ethnic minority enterprise scholarship, advancing novel integrated theoretical constructs and frameworks that capture the distinctive features of sustainability in marginalised contexts while developing the concept of survivalist sustainability.

**Chapter 7: Conclusion** synthesises thesis findings, reflects critically on contributions, implications for practice and policy across stakeholders' group, and limitations. The chapter proposes concrete pathways for future research and actionable recommendations for more inclusive sustainability transitions in marginalized contexts.

Through this structure, the thesis builds a comprehensive, rigorous, and policy-relevant account of sustainability at the margins, demonstrating both the theoretical significance and practical importance of centering marginalised voices within sustainability scholarship and policy discourse.

# Chapter Two: Literature Review

## 2.1 Introduction

This chapter critically reviews the scholarly literature underpinning this study. The aim here is not only to survey relevant academic debates but to frame the conceptual terrain in which the research is situated.

### 2.1.1 Cross-domain review approach

As an exploratory study, this research initially began with sensitization of concepts accross three domains that help framed the empirical instruments: food systems approach (to understand sustainability governance), sustainable entrepreneurship (to understand motivation for environmental engagements) and stakeholder theory (to understand relational dynamics in ethnic food economies), with ethnic minority entrepreneurship serving as the essential background context given that curry houses are predominantly owned by migrant ethnic minorities. However, consistent with exploratory research methodology that remains open to emerging theoretical insights (Reiter, 2017), the inductive empirical investigation revealed practices and dynamics that spanned across institutional domains, necessitating their inclusion to provide adequate integrated theoretical grounding for the analysis (Okoli,2023). This theoretical expansion characterises exploratory research that seeks to understand complex phenomena in under-researched contexts (Reiter, 2017). It reflects what is described as mystery- driven research, where empirical findings challenge initial theoretical assumptions (Bright et al., 2024).

Reflexivity proved crucial throughout this process, enabling critical examination of researcher assumptions and theoretical preconceptions (Olmos-Vega et al., 2023). Through continuous reflexive analysis, it became evident that curry house sustainability practices could not be adequately explained through initial frameworks alone, necessitating expansion to additional theoretical perspectives. This reflexive approach ensures the multidisciplinary framework emerged from empirical necessity rather than theoretical preferences (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

The literature review is therefore cross-domain, organised around interconnected scholarship domains that emerged as essential through the research process. These frameworks offer complementary and integrated, yet often contradictory perspectives on how sustainability is imagined, enacted, and evaluated within contemporary food economies. They also provide critical entry points for interrogating the structural, cultural, and epistemic exclusions faced by ethnic micro-enterprises seeking to engage with sustainability agendas.

Across these bodies of literature, several key gaps emerge that the empirical findings directly address. First, dominant discourses on sustainable development in food systems tend to

privilege formal, measurable, and often technologically driven forms of innovation, thereby marginalising informal, culturally embedded practices (Ingram, 2011; Sage, 2014; Moragues-Faus, 2020, 2021). Second, while ethnic minority entrepreneurship is well-documented in relation to issues of informality, labour precarity, and market segmentation (Ram & Jones, 2008; Kloosterman, 2010), its intersection with sustainability remains underexplored (Ram et al, 2017).

Third, sustainable entrepreneurship often assumes proactive, opportunity-driven actors with access to resources and institutional legitimacy (Shepherd & Patzelt, 2018, 2011), overlooking how sustainability may emerge under conditions of constraint, necessity, obligation, and precarity (Muñoz et al., 2025; Kimmitt & Muñoz, 2018). Fourth, institutional theory has largely focused on how firms conform to formal regulatory frameworks, neglecting the legitimacy struggles and informal adaptations of marginalised enterprises (Korede et al.,2021; Webb et al., 2013). Fifth, stakeholder theory often emphasises rational negotiation among clearly defined stakeholder groups, paying insufficient attention to 'unnegotiable' culturally embedded expectations, symbolic economies, and the moral dimensions of stakeholder legitimacy (Freeman, 2010).

The review thus performs a dual function: to identify the dominant assumptions and normative frameworks that shape current understandings of sustainability in entrepreneurship and food systems, and to reveal their limitations when applied to the lived realities of ethnic micro food enterprises such as Bangladeshi curry houses. In doing so, the chapter establishes the theoretical architecture that guides the study's design, data interpretation, and contribution to knowledge. Essentially, the chapter lays the groundwork for the conceptual innovation advanced by this thesis: survivalist sustainability in ethnic food systems, an integrated framework that emerged through empirical analysis to address these limitations across all domains.

This chapter proceeds as follows:

• Section 2.2 explores food systems approach and sustainability governance - establishing how dominant frameworks privilege formal, measurable approaches while excluding informal practices.

• Section 2.3 examines ethnic minority entrepreneurship and cultural embeddedness - providing the foundational context for understanding how cultural and structural factors shape business practices.

• Section 2.4 interrogates sustainable entrepreneurship in marginal contexts - revealed as crucial for understanding how environmental practices emerge under conditions of constraint rather than opportunity.

• Section 2.5 draws on institutional theory to examine sustainability exclusion - explaining why formal governance systematically excludes ethnic businesses and how they navigate these exclusions.

• Section 2.6 critiques stakeholder theory through the lens of cultural expectations and moral legitimacy - understanding the complex relational dynamics and cultural expectations that shape sustainability decisions.

• Section 2.7 synthesises these insights to identify how empirical findings led to the development of survivalist sustainability as a multidimensional framework; and

• Section 2.8 concludes by connecting these theoretical contributions to the study's methodological approach outlined in the following chapter.

By weaving together these diverse bodies of literature, the chapter offers a nuanced theoretical lens through which to analyse how sustainability is negotiated, practiced, and contested within informal and marginalised food economies. Each section foregrounds key themes and theoretical frameworks while identifying specific knowledge gaps that form the conceptual basis for the study's research questions, methodological design, and analytical focus.

## 2.2 Food systems and sustainability governance

The concept of sustainable development has long been central to global policy agendas and academic inquiry, yet its practical application within food systems remains contested and uneven (Constance & Hatanaka, 2028; DesJardins, 2016). The Brundtland Report (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987) offered a widely cited definition of development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. However, its translation into sectoral domains like food, particularly among culturally diverse and economically marginal actors, remains ambiguous and often exclusionary.

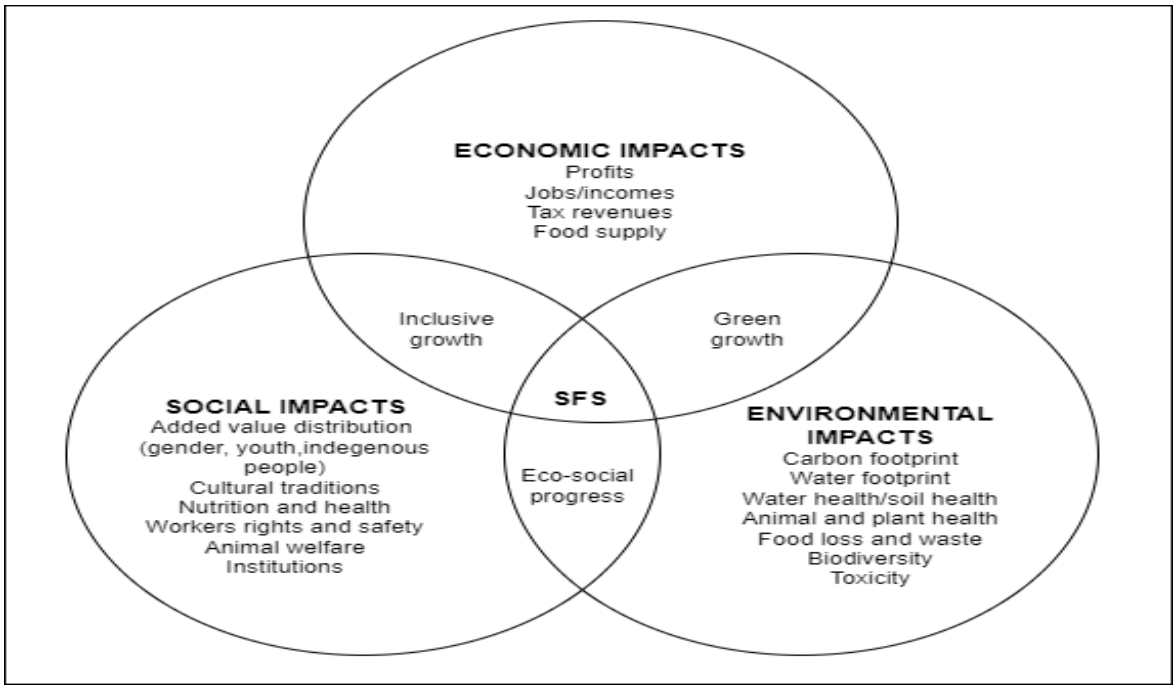
### 2.2.1 Contemporary sustainability frameworks in food systems

The sustainability of food systems has become a global priority, particularly in light of pressing challenges related to climate change, biodiversity loss, food insecurity, and social inequality

(IPCC, 2022; FAO, 2021). Consequently, sustainable food systems are now understood to be essential to meeting the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 2 (Zero hunger), SDG 12 (Responsible consumption and production), and SDG 13 (Climate action). Recent work by the FAO (2022) emphasises that sustainability in food systems must encompass environmental stewardship, social justice, and economic viability simultaneously.

Accordingly, a sustainable food system is defined as one that delivers food security and nutrition for all in such a way that the economic, social, and environmental bases to generate food security for future generations are not compromised (FAO, 2022). It encompasses a range of practices, policies, and technologies that aim to reduce the negative impact of food production and distribution across the triple-bottom-line of people, profit, and planet (FAO, 2014; Elkington, 2018).

*Figure 1: Sustainable food systems framework*




**Source:** Adopted from FAO (2014, 2018)

Based on this framework, achieving sustainability requires food system development to simultaneously generate positive outcomes across economic, social, and environmental domains (FAO, 2014, 2024). Economically, sustainability requires that all food system actors and support services operate in a financially viable manner, delivering value through wages, profits, taxes, and enhanced food availability. Social sustainability demands equitable distribution of economic value, especially among marginalised groups differentiated by gender, age, or ethnicity. Moreover, food systems must support broader socio-cultural goals, including nutritional health, cultural traditions, fair labor practices, and animal welfare.

Environmentally, a sustainable food system minimises or reverses ecological harm by promoting resource conservation and regeneration, addressing biodiversity, soil and water health, emissions, food waste, and chemical use (IPCC, 2022; FAO, 2021).

Despite these comprehensive frameworks, most sustainability metrics and interventions used in both academic and policy spheres focus predominantly on ecological performance indicators such as carbon footprints, food miles, and organic certification, often to the exclusion of cultural, social, or informal dimensions (Moragues-Faus et al., 2020; Garnett, 2014). This ecological reductionism often sidelines the cultural, social, and informal dimensions of food sustainability, despite their centrality to how food systems actually function, particularly within minority, diasporic, and small-scale food economies.

Relatedly, dominant policy and academic discourses tend to privilege large-scale, standardised solutions such as vertical farming, precision agriculture, or formal certification systems (Constance, 2018). While these approaches offer technological innovation, they risk reinforcing systems of inequality by marginalising small-scale and informal actors who operate outside of formal governance structures (Lang et al., 2009; Constance et al.,2018). As Marsden (2015) argues, food sustainability agendas are frequently shaped by ecological modernisation logics - those that seek to green the existing food system without challenging its underlying power dynamics.

This critique is particularly pertinent in multi-ethnic urban food contexts, where alternative food practices may not align with dominant sustainability narratives. For instance, practices such as sourcing imported spices or cooking with traditional methods, common in South Asian food cultures, are often scrutinised through a reductive environmental lens, neglecting their social, symbolic, and cultural significance (Sage, 2014). Recent scholarship demonstrate how mainstream sustainability discourse reinforces epistemic hierarchies where certain forms of knowledge and practice are legitimised while others are rendered invisible (Fritz & Meinherz, 2020), highlighing the need for disruptive approaches.

### 2.2.2 Food systems approach: A comprehensive framework

Food systems approach provides a broader framework for understanding these tensions (FAO, 2014; Ericksen, 2008). A food system is more than a chain of production and consumption; it encompasses a complex web of interconnected practices, actors, institutions, infrastructures, values and ecologies involved in the cultivation, processing, distribution, preparation, and disposal of food (Ericksen, 2008; Ingram, 2011). Within this perspective, food is not merely a commodity but is embedded in broader social relationships, cultural identities,

labour systems, and political dynamics. As such, transitioning toward sustainable food systems requires not only technological innovation, but also social, cultural, and institutional transformation (Moragues-Faus, 2021; Lang et al., 2009).

Recent contributions call for a food systems transformation that is inclusive, reflexive, and justice-oriented (IPES-Food, 2016; HLPE, 2020). Such approaches argue that food sustainability must move beyond carbon metrics and technocratic indicators to include equity, local knowledge, and resilience. Scholars like Moragues-Faus (2021) and Anderson et al. (2019) advocate for civic food networks - bottom-up models that recognise the epistemic legitimacy of diverse knowledge, including those held by informal, migrant, and ethnic communities, as well as promote participatory governance in food system transitions.

However, despite these calls, institutional mechanisms of sustainability continue to favour actors who possess the resources, bureaucratic fluency, and visibility needed to engage with formalised sustainability tools, including certifications, audits, and reporting schemes. This often leaves out micro-enterprises and ethnic food businesses, such as the curry houses, whose embedded practices of frugality, low-waste cooking, portion control, and localised sourcing deliver sustainability outcomes without formal recognition (Sonnino et al., 2014). This disconnect echoes Agyeman et al.'s (2019) concept of ‘just sustainability’, which asserts that environmental sustainability must be pursued in tandem with social equity and cultural recognition. In this light, the absence of ethnic food providers from sustainability policymaking represents not a benign oversight but a form of structural exclusion.

Similarly, some scholars advocate for food justice, which centres marginalised communities as active agents of change and emphasises the intersection of food, race, class, and power (Galt et al., 2016). From this perspective, the sustainability of ethnic food enterprises such as the curry houses cannot be assessed purely through metrics like energy use or packaging, but must consider how they serve cultural functions, build social cohesion, and preserve culinary knowledge across generations.

Moreover, food systems approach foregrounds the importance of place-based transitions, which consider the ecological, institutional, and cultural specificities of local food environments (Constance et al., 2018; Sonnino et al., 2016). This is particularly relevant to this study, as curry houses are embedded within urban immigrant neighbourhoods shaped by histories of migration, exclusion, and entrepreneurial adaptation (Kloosterman & Rath, 2018; Ram et al., 2008). Their sustainability practices are not isolated technical adjustments, but deeply tied to place, identity, culture and intergenerational strategies for survival and community reproduction.

### 2.2.3 The cultural politics of food sustainability

The literature increasingly recognises that food is more than a material good; it is a site of cultural meaning, memory, and identity (Chapell & Wittman, 2020; Carolan, 2017; Ray, 2016). Yet sustainability agendas often universalise ecological goals while ignoring how food practices are culturally situated. It is argued here, that when sustainability is imposed as a set of externally defined criteria - often technocratic or standardised - it risks eroding these embedded cultural meanings, especially in ethnic food systems. For instance, food systems interventions that promote 'meat reduction', 'carbon neutrality', or 'local sourcing' may clash with symbolic and social value of culturally specific dishes and imported ingredients within diasporic communities (Biltekoff, 2015). These tensions underscore the cultural politics of sustainability, where what counts as 'sustainable' is often defined through a Eurocentric, middle-class, technocratic lens (Hammond, 2025; Meires & Rippl, 2019). Such blind spots in mainstream sustainability discourse reinforce epistemic hierarchies where certain forms of knowledge and practice are recognised and legitimised while others are rendered invisible.

Ethnic food businesses such as curry houses often engage in what has been described as "vernacular sustainability" (Loring, 2023) - practices that are tacit, inherited, frugal, and resource-efficient, yet not codified in policy language. These modes of adaptation are contextually embedded, informed by intergenerational knowledge, and economically pragmatic. Nevertheless, they are rarely acknowledged by dominant evaluative frameworks, which continue to prioritise formal metrics and technological solutions (IDRC, 2024). Ilieva (2016) notes that informal food cultures are frequently excluded from governance narratives shaped by concerns about hygiene, risk, and standardisation.

The most recent FAO report provides a robust framework for transforming agrifood systems through integrated, cross-sectoral action (FAO, 2025). This comprehensive approach emphasises scalability and systemic integration as key drivers of sustainable transformation. However, the framework exhibits significant limitations when applied to culturally embedded food systems, particularly those driven by ethnic minority food enterprises operating within unique socio-cultural, historical, and economic contexts that are not fully addressed in the report's systems-level recommendations. First, *cultural specificity*: the report emphasises scalability and systemic integration but does not sufficiently explore how cultural food practices and traditional knowledge systems can be preserved and leveraged within transformation strategies. Second, *equity and inclusion*: while it mentions inclusivity, it does not provide targeted strategies for supporting marginalised food entrepreneurs who often face structural barriers in mainstream food systems. Third, *policy blind spots*: there is limited guidance on

how national or local policies can be adapted to protect and promote culturally distinct food enterprises, which are vital for community identity and food sovereignty.

This analysis suggests urgent needs for: embedding cultural dimensions by integrating cultural sustainability as a core pillar of agri-food transformation; inclusive policy design through developing community-informed policies that support ethnic food enterprises through capacity building, funding, and market access; and localised systems thinking by encouraging bottom-up approaches that allow ethnic minority communities to co-design food system interventions.

### 2.2.4 Knowledge gaps and implications

This mismatch between epistemologies of governance and everyday food realities presents a critical gap in current sustainability literature and policy frameworks. While there is growing recognition of the value of informal and culturally embedded practices in advancing food resilience and justice (IDRC, 2024; Battersby & Watson, 2018), there remains limited understanding of how to support such practices without formalising them out of existence. Curry houses, like other marginalised food enterprises, thus occupy a paradoxical space; they contribute to sustainability through cultural adaptation and embeddedness but remain marginal to its governance.

This study responds to these critical gaps by examining how Bangladeshi curry houses in the UK engage with, understand, and adapt to dominant sustainability frameworks. It critically interrogates the assumption that sustainability must be externally defined, measurable, and certified, and instead explores how it is enacted through culturally grounded, economically constrained, and informally institutionalised practices. The study highlights and questions the epistemic authority embedded in dominant discourses and calls for a pluralised understanding of sustainable food systems - one that values survivalist adaptation, cultural resilience, and the moral economies of ethnic and immigrant communities. Practically, it demands that support systems; whether policy instruments, training schemes, or financing tools, be recalibrated to recognise and enable vernacular sustainability; informal, adaptive, and culturally embedded practices that sustain both businesses and communities.

*Having established how dominant food systems governance excludes informal practices, the following section examines how ethnic minority entrepreneurs operate within different logics that mainstream frameworks fail to recognise.*

## 2.3 Ethnic minority entrepreneurship and cultural embeddedness

Ethnic minority entrepreneurship has long been recognised as a key site of socio-economic participation, identity negotiation, and cultural continuity, particularly within urban food landscapes (Ram et al., 2017; Jones et al., 2014). Traditionally framed through the lens of

economic integration and opportunity, it has often centred on the ways in which migrants and minority groups establish businesses in response to labour market exclusion (Barrett & Vershinina, 2017; Ram & Jones, 2008). Food enterprises, especially restaurants and takeaways are among the most prominent vehicles through which migrant communities assert economic agency while preserving cultural heritage (Kloosterman & Rath, 2018).

However, dominant narratives of entrepreneurship often under-theorise the structural, cultural, and spatial conditions under which ethnic businesses operate, leading to both empirical blind spots and conceptual distortions (Ram et al.,2017). Rather than simply focusing on deficits or deviations from mainstream entrepreneurial models, significant literature positions ethnic businesses as embedded in unique socio-cultural ecosystems, shaped by histories of migration, racialised labour markets, and collective resource mobilisation (Kloosterman, 2010; Ram et al., 2008; Barrett & Vershinina, 2017).

### 2.3.1 Beyond deficit models: Understanding mixed embeddedness

Building upon foundational work from the forgoing, recent scholarship has extended the framework of ethnic entrepreneurship to acknowledge the multiple embeddedness of entrepreneurs in a variety of social, spatial and institutional contexts at multiple levels (Brieger & Gielnik, 2021; Alshareef, 2022; Yamamura, 2024). In the UK, ethnic food businesses continue to serve as a key pathway into entrepreneurial self-employment for South Asian communities, particularly within the restaurant and catering sector, reflecting both cultural embeddedness and accessibility in competitive urban markets (Alexander et al., 2022). However, this entrepreneurial landscape is shaped not merely by opportunity but by constraint. A growing body of work critiques the 'ethnic enclave' model for overly romanticising ethnic entrepreneurship as a pathway to upward mobility. Instead, scholars emphasise the significance of structural disadvantage, discrimination, and institutional exclusion (Ram et al., 2017). Entrepreneurship in these contexts is often driven by necessity rather than opportunity, shaped by low entry barriers, social networks, and embedded family obligations (Jones et al., 2014).

These dynamics produce what Kloosterman et al. (1999) term the ‘mixed embeddedness’ of ethnic entrepreneurs - meaning their actions are simultaneously shaped by local opportunity structures and broader socio-political constraints. These frameworks foreground the dynamic interplay between agency and constraint, acknowledging how ethnic entrepreneurs mobilise cultural and social capital within stratified opportunity structures. Yet, they still often focus on economic opportunity structures, leaving insufficient space to account for how sustainability, identity, and cultural politics intersect with entrepreneurial practice in ethnic contexts.

Within this framework, ethnic food businesses are deeply embedded in informal economies. Many rely on family labour, operate without formalised contracts, and adopt practices such as informal hiring, cash-based operations, and oral knowledge transmission that deviate from mainstream business models (Williams & Round, 2019). While often construed as inefficient or unregulated in regulatory and policy discourses, these informalities, often driven by necessity and resource constraints, can be seen as rational adaptations. For example, reliance on informal sourcing networks or verbal agreements reflects relational trust and cultural capital, not necessarily resistance to formalisation (Ram et al.,2017). Recent scholarships argue that informality in ethnic food economies also reflects adaptive strategies, cultural norms, and systemic exclusions from mainstream financial and regulatory infrastructures (Khana, 2021; Boanada-Fuchs & Boanada Fuchs, 2021).

Moreover, the informality of ethnic entrepreneurship challenges dominant policy and academic narratives that equate business success with formalisation, growth, and innovation. As Ram and Jones (2008) argue, policy frameworks often fail to account for alternative forms of business rationality rooted in community care, cultural continuity, and resilience under constraint. These informal systems may be less legible to regulatory regimes but are no less vital in sustaining marginalised urban economies.

### *2.3.2 Reframing the research gaps and the aim of this study*

While ethnic entrepreneurship literature has grown significantly, recent empirical work suggests that ethnic minority–owned SMEs remain under examined in terms of how they interpret, engage with, or resist dominant sustainability frameworks—particularly in their complex interactions between cultural imperatives, institutional constraints, and environmental practices (Islam et al., 2025). Also, while literature has increasingly acknowledged the role of constraint, precarity, and informality in shaping entrepreneurship, mainstream policy and frameworks often lag behind. Specifically, within the context of food sustainability agendas, ethnic minority food businesses remain largely peripheral. Their labour-intensive, small-scale, and culturally specific operations often do not align with dominant models of green innovation or environmental assessment (Moragues-Faus et al., 2020). This neglect reproduces a bias in sustainability research that assumes a universal entrepreneurial subject; growth-oriented, innovation- driven, and culturally neutral, while marginalising survivalist and culturally embedded business logics.

Crucially, there remains a major gap in understanding how these enterprises navigate pressures for ecological compliance, cultural preservation, and economic survival simultaneously. More importantly, there is little insight into how their informal, adaptive, and

culturally embedded practices might offer alternative models of sustainability. This study intervenes in this space by demonstrating.

• *How Bangladeshi curry house operators understand and practise sustainability within their multi-dimensional constraints.*

• *What structural barriers and enablers shape sustainability transitions, and what pathways might leverage existing innovations.*

• *How different stakeholders within the curry food system perceive and influence sustainability practices in Bangladeshi curry houses.*

UK's curry houses offer a compelling site to interrogate these issues. As hybrid spaces of commerce and culture, they reflect the negotiation of multiple pressures: economic survival, cultural preservation, complex stakeholder ecosystem, and emerging sustainability norms. Their practices such as minimising waste through frugal methods, maintaining low-carbon supply chains via batch cooking, and fostering intergenerational knowledge transfer often align with sustainability goals, albeit outside formal recognition frameworks. Yet, these businesses remain largely invisible and under-recognised in sustainability policy and innovation narratives, which continue to favour large, technologically equipped, and certification-capable actors (Ilieva, 2016). This selective visibility highlights a crucial axis of inequality and reinforces a paradox: while curry houses are integral to the UK's culinary and economic landscape, they remain largely absent from formal governance frameworks around sustainability, training, and support (Ram et al., 2017, 2013).

### 2.3.3 Sustainability in Bangladeshi catering sector

There has been a considerable amount of academic research into ethnic minority micro-businesses in the UK’s food-catering and hospitality sector. Many of these studies have majorly focused on employment, labour market experiences of workers, increasing productivity, working life and performance, employment pathways to business, recruitment practises, harsh working conditions, colonial history, and innovation (Ram et al.,2021; Ram et al., 2001; Salway, 2008; Twomey, 2001; Razzak et al.,2022; Bloch, 2015; Pallat, 2014; Ram et al.,2000; Korede et al.,2023).While these studies have provided valuable insights into the social sustainability challenges and concerns in the food and hospitality sector, there has been insufficient focus on how these businesses understand and practice sustainability, particularly in Bangladeshi catering businesses, as most studies integrate this group with Pakistanis and other ethnic minority groups (Salway, 2008), despite their distinctive peculiarities (Alexander et al., 2020).

Although there is surprisingly little data to support or refute these ideas, it appears that a lack of effective social networks and racial prejudice are likely additional variables contributing to Bangladeshis' disadvantage (Salway, 2018). There is also no denying that diversity exists, with Indians and Chinese typically outperforming other racial and ethnic groupings, with Bangladeshi caterers' standing being particularly alarming (Alexander et al., 2020). These provide a clear picture of how challenging adopting sustainable practises and earning a sustainable livelihood can be in the sector, hence the justification for being the focus of this study.

This section foregrounds the necessity of a more pluralistic and inclusive understanding of entrepreneurship, one that recognises the moral economies, cultural rationalities, and adaptive capacities of ethnic minority enterprises. It calls for a shift away from normative models of innovation and towards more expansive definitions of business success and sustainability that reflect the realities of informal and culturally embedded economies.

*Building on this understanding of ethnic entrepreneurship's cultural embeddedness and structural constraints, the following section examines sustainable entrepreneurship to understand how environmental practices emerge in marginal contexts such as the curry house.*

### 2.4 Sustainable entrepreneurship in marginal contexts

Entrepreneurship has been increasingly positioned as a critical mechanism for delivering sustainability transitions, particularly in contexts where market innovations align with environmental and social goals (Shepherd & Patzelt, 2011; Cohen & Winn, 2007). The concept of sustainable entrepreneurship emerged to describe actors who pursue environmental and social value creation alongside profit, often framed as "triple bottom line" or "win-win" ventures (Dean & McMullen, 2007; Elkington, 2018). Sustainable entrepreneurship has become an influential paradigm in the last two decades, with proliferation in scholarship and academic institutions (Muñoz & Cohen, 2018). However, such narratives are largely shaped by studies in well-capitalised, innovation-driven environments, and assume a level of strategic foresight, autonomy, and market opportunity that may not exist in more precarious or marginal enterprises (Abbas & Bulut, 2024; Belz & Binder, 2017).

The foundational premise of agency-driven sustainability becomes problematic when applied to low-resource environments characterised by structural precarity, regulatory exclusion, or socio-cultural marginalisation such as ethnic micro-businesses (Fritz & Meinherz, 2020; Dean & McMullen, 2007). In such marginalised contexts, entrepreneurial activity is often reactive rather than visionary; driven not by perceived market opportunities but by necessity, constraint,

and survival (Muñoz et al., 2025). Therefore, sustainability is not a strategic choice, but a precarious balancing act shaped by survival imperatives, community obligations, and structural exclusions.

This critique has spurred the emergence of alternative theoretical frameworks, including frugal innovation (Hossain et al., 2016; Radjou & Prabhu, 2015), necessity entrepreneurship (Block et al., 2015), and bricolage entrepreneurship (Baker & Nelson, 2015). More recently, survivalist entrepreneurship (Muñoz et al., 2025; Weiss et al., 2024) and incidental sustainability (Lewison et al., 2019). For instance, Shahid et al. (2023) argue that sustainable solutions frequently emerge from conditions of scarcity, as entrepreneurs devise novel ways to conserve resources, repurpose materials, and optimise energy use, not out of environmental ideology, but necessity. In this sense, frugality becomes a form of innovation, one that aligns sustainability goals with economic resilience (Shahid et al., 2023; Pansera & Sarkar, 2016). This resonates strongly with practices observed in Bangladeshi curry houses in this study, where sustainability is embedded in cultural practices (Brownell et al., 2025), such as batch cooking, portion control, reuse of materials, and minimal food waste - practices that are often invisible to external sustainability frameworks.

Similarly, Muñoz et al. (2025) theorise survivalist entrepreneurship as a logic of action shaped by marginalisation, wherein entrepreneurs enact creative solutions under constraint, guided by moral obligations, community needs, and an ethic of resilience. This moves beyond the binary of opportunity versus necessity and emphasises agency under constraint, an essential framing for interpreting adaptations not as failures to modernise, but as culturally grounded sustainability work.

These perspectives reject the notion that sustainability is always driven by normative commitment or growth ambition. Instead, they foreground the adaptive and resourceful practices employed by entrepreneurs to maintain viability amid conditions of uncertainty, marginality, and exclusion. In such contexts, sustainable innovation often manifests not in high-tech solutions or formal certifications, but in tacit routines, informal waste reduction, and cultural norms of thrift and stewardship. These entrepreneurs often innovate by recombining existing resources rather than inventing entirely new solutions, and their sustainability strategies are more likely to emerge from lived experience than from strategic foresight (Korede et al., 2023, 2021).

This is particularly relevant in the case of migrant and ethnic minority entrepreneurs, who frequently operate within informal economies and rely on relational, cultural, and tacit forms of knowledge. For instance, Kimmitt and Muñoz (2018) argue that sustainable entrepreneurship in resource-poor settings should not be judged by its alignment with formal innovation metrics,

but by its capacity to meet basic needs, maintain dignity, and foster community resilience. They introduce the concept of resigned agency, where entrepreneurs act within narrow margins of manoeuvrability, adapting sustainability logics to fit the constraints of their lived realities.

However, despite this emerging body of literature, many sustainability assessment frameworks and innovation policies continue to privilege codified, auditable, and standardised forms of sustainability, often tied to Western-centric notions of innovation, metrics, knowledge, and planning (Farahdel et al.,2024; Turner et al.,2024; West et al., 2024). This institutional bias marginalises forms of sustainable practice that are informal, culturally specific, or driven by survival logic rather than technological advancement. Curry houses rarely feature in sustainability programmes or policy narratives, not because they are disengaged from sustainability, but because their practices do not conform to dominant templates. They represent what scholars describe as 'embedded entrepreneurs' - actors who operate within dense cultural and relational networks that shape their practices, constraints, and priorities (Razzak et al., 2023; Korede et al., 2021). Sustainability, in this view, is not an exogenous agenda imposed upon the firm, but an endogenous ethic emerging from the lived experience of running a small, culturally significant, labour-intensive business.

Moreover, scholars such as Rosca et al. (2018) have called attention to the invisibility of informal sustainability where adaptations in marginalised enterprises go unrecognised due to their lack of alignment with formal sustainability indicators or codified policy frameworks. This raises critical questions about who defines sustainable entrepreneurship, and under what epistemic frameworks. This perspective calls for a rethinking of entrepreneurial agency. Rather than assuming that all entrepreneurs are equally positioned to pursue sustainability as a growth opportunity, it is crucial to understand how agency is structured by institutional exclusion, racialised market expectations, and cultural accountability (Brownell et al., 2025; Muñoz & Cohen, 2017).

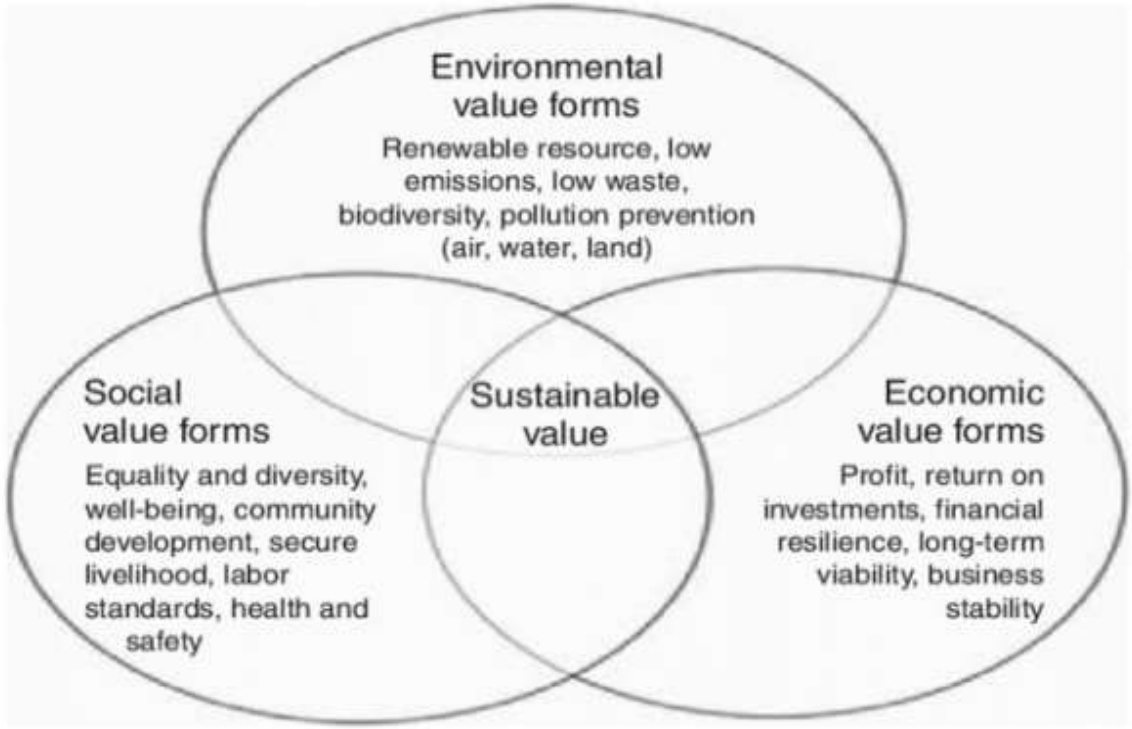
This study contributes to these debates by applying and extending these alternative theories to the context of ethnic micro-enterprises in the UK food sector. Specifically, it argues that sustainability in marginal contexts is not absent but differently configured; emerging from cultural resilience, financial pragmatism, and intergenerational knowledge, rather than techno-managerial innovation or policy compliance.

### 2.4.1 Sustainable business models and ethnic food businesses

Sustainable entrepreneurs dismantle existing unsustainable market structures, production techniques, and consumption patterns, replacing them with alternatives that integrate social, environmental, and economic values (Vallaster et al., 2019; Evans et al. 2017). Critically, these

models emerge not merely from adopting green technologies, but from innovative designs that re-envision stakeholder relationships and exchanges (Lüdeke- Freund, 2020). Digital landscapes enable consumers to transition from passive buyers to active co-creators through social media feedback channels, allowing businesses to refine models based on customer and stakeholder data (Kapitan & Silvera, 2016).

*Figure 2: Depicting a sustainable value integration (business model)*




**Source:** Adopted from (Evans et al.,2017).

In ethnic food businesses such as curry food houses, customers extend beyond traditional purchasing to active engagement in sustainability processes, fostering responsive business environments that adapt to market and environmental changes (Rosario et al., 2022). Sustainable business models in ethnic minority businesses require holistic approaches incorporating social impact, community engagement, cultural and financial adaptability, necessitating emphasis on relationships and stakeholder engagements pivotal in culturally diverse communities (Aagaard, 2019; Evans et al., 2017).

However, the curry food sector exhibits fundamental structural weaknesses: heavy reliance on imported ingredients, unstable supply chains, high price volatility, traditional cooking practices, limited innovation, fragmented supplier relationships, uncoordinated practices, weak networking, and insufficient financial incentives (Razzak et al., 2022; Salway, 2008; Farm-to-Fork Conference, 2022). Context-specific policy interventions remain inadequate,

threatening sustainable operations. Business practices are constrained by religio-cultural factors discouraging women's participation (Ram et al., 2000), distinctive norms and customs (Wright and Pollert, 2006), reflecting unique contextual influences in the Bangladeshi catering sector (Alexander et al., 2020; Razzak et al., 2022). Brexit and COVID-19 have disproportionately affected the sector, exacerbating operational sustainability challenges and threatening sustainable livelihoods, underscoring the need for tailored food systems solutions that ar values-based (Jackson et al.,2024).

### *2.4.2 Research gaps and alternative models*

Despite the growing interest in alternative models of entrepreneurship, the existing literature continues to under-theorise how sustainability adaptations unfold under structural precarity and cultural obligation. Most studies continue to privilege scalable, techno-centric models of innovation, often sidelining micro-entrepreneurs whose sustainability practices are deeply informal, culturally embedded, and driven by the logic of survival (Spence et al., 2011; Littlewood & Holt, 2018). This study responds to this gap by examining how sustainability is practised, reinterpreted, and reconfigured by marginalised entrepreneurs not as a luxury or add-on, but as an existential condition of doing business. It thus reframes sustainability not as a function of surplus (i.e., what entrepreneurs do when they have extra resources), but of scarcity, and reveals how this perspective offers unique insights into the plural forms of sustainable entrepreneurship.

The study expands the conceptual boundaries of sustainable entrepreneurship and challenges dominant models that obscure the agency, creativity, and value embedded in informally sustained livelihoods. Crucially, the study contributes significantly to bridging sustainable entrepreneurship with insights from informal economies, ethnic entrepreneurship, and food systems thinking. It proposes a re-theorisation of entrepreneurial sustainability that includes adaptive, non-linear, and culturally situated practices, rather than privileging only formal, scalable innovations.

*Having examined how sustainable entrepreneurship inadequately captures constraint-driven environmental practices, the following section explores how institutional theory explains the systematic exclusion of marginalised enterprises from formal sustainability governance.*

## 2.5 Institutional theory and sustainability exclusion

Institutional theory offers a powerful lens through which to understand how organisations, especially those operating in peripheral or marginal contexts, respond to external pressures for legitimacy, structure, and conformity (Scott, 2014). Originally developed to explain the isomorphic pressures within large bureaucratic systems, institutional theory has evolved to

consider the dynamics of adaptation, resistance, and innovation in micro-enterprises and informal economies (Suddaby et al., 2017). In the context of this study, institutional theory is central to unpacking how curry houses - often small, family-run, and culturally distinct - navigate expectations for sustainability while embedded in systems that seldom recognise their realities.

At its core, institutional theory posits that organisational behaviour is shaped by three pillars: regulative (laws and policies), normative (social values and expectations), and cognitive (taken-for-granted assumptions and schemas) (Scott, 2014). Organisations gain legitimacy by aligning with dominant institutional logics - rules and norms that define what is considered rational, appropriate, or desirable in a given context (Lounsbury & Wang, 2024). However, in diverse food environments such as ethnic food sectors, there is often a misalignment between dominant institutional logics and localised ways of doing business.

Sustainability governance, as currently constructed, often assumes formalisation, transparency, and compliance as the hallmarks of responsible business. This is visible in instruments such as environmental audits, eco-labelling, and procurement certification, all of which presuppose access to resources, bureaucratic literacy, and technological infrastructure (George et al., 2021). Such assumptions create institutional bias; a systemic preference for businesses that are already formal, large-scale, and legible to regulatory systems. For informal, small ethnic food businesses such as the curry houses, this institutional landscape poses disproportionate challenges.

Despite engaging in informal frugal, waste-minimising, and community-embedded practices, their efforts often remain invisible or illegible to policy and sustainability evaluators because they do not conform to the formal templates of green entrepreneurship (Timmermans et al., 2021). This visibility gap is not a reflection of organisational failure, but of institutional blind spots and exclusion.

### 2.5.1 Epistemic exclusion and institutional complexity

Importantly, institutional exclusion is not merely procedural, it is epistemic. It signals whose knowledge counts and whose practices are rendered visible. As Ray (2016) argue, food practices are not only functional but symbolic, interwoven with identity, community, and memory. Therefore, when sustainability institutions ignore these dimensions, they risk perpetuating sustainability imperialism, a model that imposes externally defined solutions while erasing alternative ways of knowing and doing.

Moreover, curry houses are frequently subject to what Greenwood et al. (2011) describe as institutional complexity - a situation in which actors must navigate multiple, sometimes

conflicting institutional logics. On one hand, they face regulatory and market pressure to adopt formal sustainability practices (e.g., eco-packaging, local sourcing); on the other, they must remain culturally authentic and economically viable within their own moral economies. The pressure to conform to externally imposed sustainability norms can alienate these businesses or force them into symbolic compliance, adopting superficial practices for legitimacy rather than genuine transformation (Ray, 2016).

Furthermore, these informal ethnic food businesses operate in what some scholars call institutional voids - spaces where the rules of the game are ambiguous, inaccessible, or biased (Sutter et al., 2019; McCarthy & Puffer, 2016). These voids can inhibit access to resources, exclude participation in formal governance, and impose unsustainable burdens of compliance. Yet, paradoxically, they also foster institutional bricolage: creative, adaptive, and hybrid practices that draw on cultural norms, community trust, and informal resource flows to sustain operations and navigate change (Sutter et al., 2019).

### 2.5.2 Innovation from the margins and institutional work

Therefore, this study applies institutional theory not simply to critique policy misalignment, but to expose the ontological mismatch between formal sustainability governance and informal, culturally situated practices. It advocates for more inclusive institutional frameworks; ones that recognise legitimacy not only through certification but through adaptive intelligence, community trust, and practice-based impact. Crucially, institutional theory must be reoriented or expanded to recognise not only resistance to institutional pressures but also innovation from the margins. As recent scholarship emphasizes, marginalized actors are not passive recipients of institutional change but actively engage in institutional work: reinterpreting, reframing, and selectively engaging with dominant logics to craft their own forms of legitimacy (Maier & Simsa, 2021; Zilber, 2024). Curry houses, for example, adopt incremental adaptations of regulatory compulsion, but through informal negotiation with customer expectations, family norms, and economic pragmatism.

This perspective draws on institutional work's purposive action of individuals and organisations aimed at creating, maintaining, and disrupting institutions (Maier & Simsa, 2021). In the context of curry houses, institutional work manifests through various practices: maintaining cultural authenticity while adapting to health regulations, creating informal networks for knowledge sharing about sustainable practices, and disrupting assumptions about what constitutes legitimate environmental action. Stephan et al., (2025)'s work on social entrepreneurship in institutional voids provides valuable insights into how marginalised actors create institutional arrangements that enable collective action and social value creation. Their work demonstrates how entrepreneurs in resource-constrained environments develop

alternative governance mechanisms that are more responsive to local needs and contexts than formal institutions.

### 2.5.3 Legitimacy struggles and vernacular sustainability

The institutional challenges facing curry houses also relate to broader questions of legitimacy in sustainability governance. Scholars continue to recognise distinct forms of legitimacy; pragmatic, moral, and cognitive—yet newer research highlights their different roles. Alexiou and Wiggins (2019) developed a validated scale demonstrating how organizations may simultaneously appeal to stakeholders' pragmatic self-interest, moral norms, or cognitive expectations, emphasizing that small, culturally embedded enterprises can employ different legitimacy strategies depending on their audience and context.

This creates legitimacy conflicts where practices that are morally and pragmatically legitimate within ethnic food communities may lack cognitive legitimacy within formal sustainability frameworks. For instance, the practice of serving generous portions as an expression of hospitality and cultural generosity may conflict with waste reduction imperatives, despite being deeply meaningful within South Asian cultural contexts. Gehman and Grimes (2017)'s work on vernacular legitimacy provides important insights into how legitimacy operates in informal and marginalised contexts. They argue that vernacular legitimacy emerges from local cultural practices and community relationships rather than formal institutional recognition. This concept is particularly relevant to understanding how curry houses maintain legitimacy within their communities while potentially lacking recognition within formal sustainability governance systems.

### 2.5.4 Towards inclusive institutional frameworks

Finally, institutional theory invites a reassessment of governance itself. Governance structures that seek to promote sustainability must shift from enforcing conformity to facilitating dialogue, trust, and recognition of informal legitimacy. As this thesis argues, recognition is not merely symbolic; it is a precondition for meaningful participation in sustainability transitions. When curry houses are seen, heard, and engaged as legitimate sustainability actors, rather than as policy blind spots, they become powerful contributors to food system transformation.

This requires institutional entrepreneurship, the activities of actors who have an interest in particular institutional arrangements and who leverage resources to create new institutions or transform existing ones (Jackwerth Rice et al., 2023). However, unlike traditional conceptions that focus on well-resourced actors, this study examines how marginalised entrepreneurs engage in institutional work with limited resources but rich cultural and social capital. The institutional analysis also highlights the importance of institutional logics, the socially

constructed, historical patterns of cultural symbols and material practices that provide building blocks for individual and organisational action (Lounsbury & Wang, 2024). In curry house contexts, multiple institutional logics coexist; market logics emphasising efficiency and profit, family logics prioritising kinship obligations and cultural continuity, and emerging sustainability logics demanding environmental responsibility.

*Having examined how institutional exclusions marginalise ethnic food enterprises, the following section explores how stakeholder theory must be reconceptualised to understand the complex relational dynamics within marginalised food systems.*

### 2.6 Stakeholder theory and legitimacy in marginalised food systems

Stakeholder theory, as originally articulated by Freeman (1984), posits that businesses exist within a web of relationships and obligations not only to shareholders but to a broader group of actors including employees, customers, suppliers, communities, and regulators. It has since evolved into a normative framework asserting that firms should actively consider the interests and well-being of all stakeholders affected by their operations (Ziegler, 2025; Harrison & Wicks, 2013). This conceptual expansion has made stakeholder theory foundational to sustainability discourse.

However, in its traditional foundation, it often overlooks the lived realities and socio-cultural constraints of marginalised enterprises, particularly those embedded in ethnic and informal food economies. In mainstream sustainability and CSR literature, stakeholders are typically portrayed as rational actors whose interests can be balanced or negotiated through deliberative processes, reporting mechanisms, or inclusive governance (Freeman et al., 2010). Contrastingly, in the informal and ethnic food economies, such as the curry houses, stakeholder dynamics are far more complex, deeply relational, and culturally embedded. Here, legitimacy is not simply a function of environmental performance or economic efficiency, but a multifaceted construct grounded in moral responsibility, cultural continuity, and social embeddedness (Dey & Maier, 2016).

Additionally, conventional stakeholder theory tends to emphasise formal legitimacy - compliance with external standards such as environmental audits, certifications, or sustainability labels (Alexiou & Wiggins, 2019). However, for small ethnic food businesses, legitimacy often stems from what Gehman and Grimes (2017) describe as vernacular legitimacy; a localized form grounded in trust, reputation, culinary heritage, and intergenerational transmission. This legitimacy is negotiated within specific moral economies that are not captured by universal metrics. In curry houses, for instance, stakeholder expectations around generous portions, traditional preparation techniques, and sensory

authenticity may contradict mainstream sustainability goals like meat reduction or energy-efficient cooking methods. These contradictions often result in cultural resistance, not from ignorance or defiance, but from a commitment to honouring stakeholder trust and preserving diasporic culinary identity (Pinto, 2025).

Moreover, dominant interpretations of stakeholder theory under-represent several critical actors within ethnic food ecosystems. Among these are the future workforce, frequently disengaged due to the low status of hospitality work, the extended kinship networks that supply essential informal labour, and wider ethnic communities whose moral expectations shape what is considered legitimate or authentic. This omission stems from a narrow conceptualisation of stakeholders, privileging formal institutions and ignoring the informal, affective, and moral relationships central to marginalised economies. Applying Mitchell et al.'s (1997) salience model reveals that power, legitimacy, and urgency operate through distinct channels in ethnic business contexts. For instance, the influence of a community elder or religious figure may carry more stakeholder weight than that of regulators in shaping business practices.

Resistance to sustainability interventions, therefore, must be understood through the lens of adaptive co-production. Changes in portion size, cooking methods, or menu composition are not always imposed from above; they often emerge from culturally embedded negotiations with stakeholders. These dynamics echo recent calls for stakeholder accountability frameworks that more fully integrate cultural values and emotional labour. For example, Ziegler (2025) argues that stakeholder debates in ethical business contexts are shaped by identity-constituting values and deep-seated moral intuitions, which underscore the need to account for culturally rooted norms and the emotional investments of marginalized actors within accountability processes.

Furthermore, in these settings, honour, hospitality, intergenerational obligation, and moral duty may take precedence over technical efficiency or carbon audits, requiring a translation of sustainability into culturally legible terms. Therefore, this study challenges stakeholder theory to move beyond assumptions of rationality, uniform value systems, and formal governance.In curry house ecosystems, commercial, cultural, and ecological rationalities intertwine. Sustainability is not just a business imperative, but a socially negotiated practice grounded in frugality, respect for tradition, and moral economy. Instead of framing these as barriers to change, they should be seen as the foundation for a more context-sensitive, inclusive approach.

### 2.6.4 Towards a revised model of stakeholder in marginalised food systems

A revised model of stakeholder engagement for marginalised food systems thus requires a dialogic rather than instrumental approach centred on ongoing, mutual negotiation and the co-

production of meaning and value (Kaptein, 2017). This involves recognising cultural-symbolic logics, legitimising alternative sustainability knowledge systems, and broadening definitions of success and compliance. As Cabral et al. (2025) argue, just transitions in food systems must begin from the margins, amplifying the voices and lived expertise of marginalized food-system actors whose adaptive ingenuity has often been overlooked in dominant paradigms.

In summary, this study advocates for a more culturally situated, inclusive, and adaptive stakeholder theory, one that recognises informal actors, honours cultural legitimacy, and reframes sustainability as a co-produced, relational process embedded in the lived experiences of marginalised food businesses. Such reorientation is essential for advancing equity, resilience, and meaningful participation in sustainability governance. The empirical findings from this study reveal how stakeholder expectations in curry house contexts often operate through non-negotiable cultural imperatives that must be understood as legitimate forms of accountability rather than barriers to sustainability.

*Having reviewed the various theoretical domains interconnectedly, the following section synthesises these insights to show how empirical findings led to the development of survivalist sustainability as an integrated framework addressing identified gaps.*

## 2.7 Theoretical synthesis and integration: Towards survivalist sustainability in ethnic food systems

Drawing together the key theoretical threads explored throughout this chapter, this section synthesises insights from the five theoretical domains to identify the gaps that empirical analysis revealed as inadequately addressed by existing frameworks. While each theoretical strand as critically reviewed, offers valuable insights, the empirical findings from this study revealed that they are insufficiently equipped individually to explain how sustainability is enacted within marginalised, resource-constrained, and culturally distinct entrepreneurial contexts such as the UK's curry houses.

### 2.7.1 Fractured assumptions across theoretical domains and frameworks

A critical synthesis reveals multiple limitations and blind spots across the reviewed literature that the empirical investigation brought into sharp focus:

First, food systems approach, while providing systems-level analysis of sustainability governance, marginalises ethnic minority food businesses and assumes alignment between cultural foodways and ecological goals. The privileging of ecological modernisation logics creates visibility gaps wherein sustainability contributions of ethnic food enterprises remain under- recognised. Second, ethnic minority entrepreneurship literature, though sophisticated in analysing structural constraints and cultural adaptation, has insufficiently engaged with

sustainability questions. The focus on opportunity-constraint binaries obscures potential environmental contributions and innovative adaptive strategies.

Third, sustainable entrepreneurship assumes resource-rich, opportunity-driven actors as default change agents, inadequately capturing constrained agency in marginal contexts. Concepts like frugal innovation remain under-theorised in relation to cultural obligation and survival imperatives. Fourth, institutional theory focuses on formal standards and compliance mechanisms, failing to recognise informal, culturally specific sustainability practices, thus reinforcing exclusion through epistemic bias. Lastly, stakeholder theory emphasises rational negotiation among clearly defined groups, overlooking culturally embedded, non-negotiable expectations and moral economies that shape sustainability decisions in ethnic contexts.

### 2.7.2 Empirically derived reframing: Towards survivalist sustainability

The empirical findings from this study revealed practices and dynamics that spanned across these five theoretical domains, challenging their individual assumptions and necessitating integrated analysis. The curry house economy is shaped by structural constraints, informal institutional logics, and deep cultural commitments; elements that are typically under-theorised in these dominant frameworks. Interrogating their sustainability practices demands a reconfiguration of sustainability frameworks themselves towards what food systems scholars describe as pluralised, culturally situated sustainability (Moragues-Faus et al., 2020). Key theoretical gaps and reframing that emerged empirically are presented in Table 1 below:

*Table 1: Summary of key theoretical gaps addressed in this thesis and reframing*

| Theoretical domain | Mainstream assumptions | Critique from literature | Empirical challenge | Reframing in this study |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Food Systems approach | Sustainability through formal governance and certification | Marginalises informal, culturally embedded practices (Moragues-Faus, 2020) | Vernacular practices deliver environmental outcomes without recognition | *Informal pathways* as legitimate sustainability practice |
| | Food system transitions occur through top-down governance | Fails to reflect plural knowledge systems and community-led adaptation (Hammond & Dubé, 2021) | Modes of adaptation are informed by intergenerational knowldge | Food sustainability as *co-produced through embedded practice* |
| Ethnic Minority Entrepreneurship | Cultural inertia resists sustainability adoption | Misreads embedded cultural logics as resistance (Brownell et al., 2025; Ram et al., 2017) | Cultural values drive resource efficiency and environmental practices | *Cultural authenticity* as driver and domain of sustainable value |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Sustainable Entrepreneurship | Opportunity-driven, growth-oriented innovation | Ignores survivalist logics and cultural obligation (Munoz et al, 2025; Kimmitt & Munoz, 2018; George et al., 2021) | Necessity and constraint catalyse sustainability adaptation | *Survivalist logic* as sustainability pathway |
| Institutional Theory | Legitimacy through formal compliance and institutional alignment | Formalisation bias erases informal, adaptive practices (Stephan et al.,2025) | Alternative legitimacy structures enable environmental action | Informal, tacit, and frugal practices as legitimate *vernacular sustainability and institutional innovation* |
| Stakeholder Theory | Rational, negotiable stakeholder interests | Overlooks power asymmetries and moral economies, and excludes community-embedded forms of legitimacy (Ziegler, 2025; Cabral et al.,2025) | Cultural expectations operate as non-negotiable sustainability imperatives | Stakeholders as *culturally embedded agents* within moral economies |

In response to this review and empirically revealed gaps, this thesis developed an integrated conceptual framework of survivalist sustainability in ethnic food systems. This framework emerged through inductive analysis as necessary to capture the intricate and multidimensional nature of sustainability practices in marginalised food contexts that cannot be adequately understood through any single theoretical lens. The framework captures how sustainability practices develop within marginalised food enterprises through adaptive, tacit, and relationally embedded processes that are shaped by structural constraints, cultural obligations, institutional exclusions, stakeholder expectations, and survival imperatives simultaneously. Detailed theoretical development, including core propositions and mechanisms, is presented in Chapter 6 following empirical analysis.

In doing so, this study contributes to a growing body of work that calls for pluralising sustainability, not just in its goals but in its epistemologies, metrics, and legitimacy structures (Guibrunet et al., 2024; Gilgan et.,2025; Mansur et al.,2025). As such, survivalist sustainability is not framed as a deficit but as an alternative logic of sustainability, one that is frugal, constrained-driven, culturally rooted, relationally maintained, and systemically overlooked. It offers a critical lens for rethinking what counts as sustainable practice, who defines it, under

what conditions, and how change should be evaluated. The following section discusses how the survivalist sustainability differs from related approaches.

### 2.7.3 Distinguishing survivalist sustainability from related conceptual approaches

To clarify the distinctiveness of survivalist sustainability, it is essential to differentiate it from four related but fundamentally different approaches that dominate current sustainability scholarship. First, resilience approaches in sustainability literature emphasise adaptive capacity and system recovery from shocks (Sgarbi & Nadeau, 2023). While resilience frameworks acknowledge adaptation under stress, they typically assume sufficient resources for strategic planning and focus on returning to equilibrium states (Brand & Jax, 2017; Davoudi et al., 2022). In contrast, survivalist sustainability emerges from chronic resource scarcity where adaptation is continuous, immediate, and oriented toward maintaining operations rather than recovering from discrete disruptions. Where resilience implies bouncing back, survivalist sustainability involves persistent reconfiguration under permanent constraint.

Second, survival entrepreneurship in EME literature focuses on necessity-driven venture creation under extreme poverty conditions (Kimmitt & Munoz, 2018; Munoz et al., 2020; George et al., 2021). However, this literature predominantly examines individual survival strategies rather than sustainability outcomes and often frames constraint as a barrier to overcome rather than a catalyst for alternative sustainability logics (Bruton et al., 2013; Si et al., 2021). Survivalist sustainability, by contrast, recognises how survival imperatives can generate environmentally beneficial practices that are culturally embedded and relationally maintained, transforming constraint from obstacle to pathway.

Third, frugal innovation scholarship explores resource-constrained innovation that delivers social value through doing more with less (Radjou & Prabhu, 2015; Shahid et al., 2023). While frugal innovation shares survivalist sustainability's emphasis on constraint- driven adaptation, it remains primarily focused on technological solutions and market expansion rather than the cultural, relational, and moral dimensions that characterise ethnic food enterprises (Weyrauch & Herstatt, 2017; Pisoni et al., 2018). Survivalist sustainability encompasses frugal practices but extends beyond efficiency gains to include cultural preservation, community obligation, and embedded environmental stewardship that operates outside formal recognition systems.

Fourth, incidental sustainability, environmental benefits emerging as unintended by-products of economically motivated practices represents a fundamentally different logic from survivalist sustainability. Extensive research documents how resource-rich organizations achieve environmental gains through cost-reduction strategies: energy efficiency investments, waste minimization, and resource optimization driven primarily by profit maximization rather than environmental commitment (Lewison et al., 2019; Ketchen et al., 2018). These "spillover

effects" assume: (1) discretionary capital for efficiency investments, (2) strategic planning horizons accommodating upfront costs, (3) formal measurement systems, and (4) institutional recognition of such efforts (Fenichel & Kotchen, 2018). Critically, incidental sustainability remains contingent when economic incentives misalign with environmental outcomes, environmental practices dissipate.

Survivalist sustainability fundamentally diverges. Rather than fortuitous by-products of strategic optimization in resource-rich contexts, it emerges from compelled adaptation under chronic constraint where environmental practices are integral to survival, not incidental to profit. Ethnic food enterprises develop environmental stewardship through culturally embedded, relationally maintained practices born of necessity: utilizing food waste via traditional preservation methods, sourcing locally from financial constraint rather than sustainability strategy, minimizing resources through inherited frugal techniques. Where incidental sustainability depends on capital deployment, survivalist sustainability operates within structural resource scarcity where environmental practices emerge from capital's absence. Moreover, survivalist sustainability is culturally obligated and community-accountable rather than profit-contingent, operating within moral economies where environmental stewardship simultaneously serves economic survival, cultural preservation, community responsibility, and livelihood maintenance—not as separable outcomes but as inseparable imperatives.

These distinctions position survivalist sustainability as a culturally rooted, relationally embedded, and constraint-catalysed form of environmental practice that challenges dominant assumptions about resources, agency, and legitimacy in sustainability scholarship.

*This synthesis of theoretical gaps and empirically-derived solution provides the foundation for the methodological approach outlined in the following chapter which detailed the methods and process through which such empirical solutions emerged. The following section concludes this chapter and introduces the next chapter.*

## 2.8 Chapter conclusion

This chapter has provided a comprehensive critical review of literature across interconnected theoretical domains to establish the conceptual architecture for understanding sustainability practices within marginalised food enterprises. The review reveals that sustainability in ethnic food contexts cannot be adequately understood through any single theoretical lens or domain, necessitating a cross-domain integration.

The systematic analysis demonstrates that dominant approaches to food systems sustainability, while increasingly sophisticated in their recognition of social and cultural

dimensions, continue to privilege formal, measurable, and technologically-driven approaches that systematically marginalise informal practices central to ethnic food economies. The ecological reductionism embedded in most policy frameworks reinforces epistemic hierarchies that legitimise certain forms of knowledge while rendering others invisible. Similarly, ethnic entrepreneurship literature, though highly developed in its analysis of structural constraints, mixed embeddedness, and cultural adaptation, has insufficiently engaged with sustainability questions. The tendency to frame ethnic enterprises through deficit models or cultural explanations obscures their potential contributions to environmental sustainability and their innovative adaptive strategies under constraint.

Institutional theory provides powerful analytical tools for understanding legitimacy struggles and governance exclusions but often overlooks the epistemic dimensions of marginalisation. The focus on formal institutional arrangements and isomorphic pressures fails to capture the complex dynamics through which marginalised enterprises create alternative forms of legitimacy and engage in institutional work from positions of limited formal power.

In response to these identified gaps revealed through empirical investigation, this chapter introduced the conceptual framework of survivalist sustainability in ethnic food systems. This integrated framework represents a significant theoretical innovation that emerged from the research findings to address limitations across all domains simultaneously. The framework captures how environmental practices in marginalised food contexts operate through multidimensional logics involving structural precarity, cultural embeddedness, necessity-driven innovation, vernacular legitimacy, and moral economy relations. It reorients attention from formalised models and top-down interventions toward every day, adaptive practices shaped by cultural legitimacy, economic constraint, and community responsibility.

### *2.8.1 Recapping the research questions and empirical implication*

The study's research questions as emerged directly from the gaps identified in the literature review are:

• *How do Bangladeshi curry house operators understand and practice sustainability within their multi-dimensional constraints?*

• *What structural barriers and enablers shape sustainability transitions, and what pathways might leverage existing innovations?*

• *How do different stakeholders within the curry food system perceive and influence sustainability practices in Bangladeshi curry houses?*

These questions foreground the need for methodological approaches that are attuned to context, lived experience, and informal forms of knowledge production. Accordingly, the next

chapter (chapter three) outlines the interpretivist and relativist methodological stance underpinning this research. It details the qualitative strategies employed to access rich, situated insights, including participatory methods (focus group), semi-structured interviews, and stakeholder dialogues, alongside reflexive and ethical considerations. This methodological approach was designed not only to explore what sustainability means in these settings, but how it is enacted, negotiated, and made meaningful in practice through lived experiences; as well as the challenges and potential pathways to enhanced sustainability.

The methodological approach reflects the study's commitment to justice-oriented research that positions participants as knowledge co-creators rather than research subjects, while maintaining the analytical rigor necessary for significant theoretical contribution.

# Chapter Three: Research Methodology

## 3.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the methodological framework that guided this study, which explores the sustainability practices of ethnic minority micro-businesses, known as 'Curry Houses', that operate within UK's intricate food system. The study specifically examined the Bangladeshi curry houses in Birmingham, West Midland as a critical case. Grounded in an interpretivist paradigm and relativist ontology, the study adopts an exploratory qualitative case study approach, involving multiple sources of data (focus group, semi-structured interviews, observations, and document reviews) to capture complexity, context, and meaning embedded in participants' narratives.

Specifically, the chapter provides a detailed account of my methodological and philosophical considerations, offering a clear rationale for the chosen approach and its contribution to sustainable food systems and ethnic minority entrepreneurship scholarship. It critically examines the research strategy and design as well as its limitations, data collection methods, sampling strategy, and analytical techniques, offering a detailed assessment of their relevance, appropriateness and effectiveness. Furthermore, the researcher's reflexivity, and the measures taken to ensure trustworthiness of the findings are discussed. The chapter concludes with an evaluation of ethical considerations and measures taken to uphold integrity throughout the research process. Overall, this chapter presents an in-depth, reflexive account of my methodological 'journey', from planning and designing to execution, analysis, and writing-up this doctoral thesis.

## 3.2 Method Selection

When considering the selection of methodology for the study design, it was critical to decide the methods that were appropriate for my research questions, aims and objectives (Zilber & Meyer, 2022). The lens through which the researcher perceives the world, as well as the philosophical element of that worldview, are also critical factors that influence this process (Bryman, 2016). This element impacts the decision-making process in terms of how knowledge and beliefs influence the researcher's choice of research methodologies that provide the 'best fit' for addressing the research questions (Howard-Grenville et al., 2021; Gehman et al., 2018). The next sections cover philosophical considerations about knowledge creation and the role of the researcher's views in methodological decisions made in connection to the study design to seek that knowledge.

### 3.2.1 Philosophical considerations

The perception of social reality (ontology) and the criteria for acceptable knowledge (epistemology) are fundamental philosophical assumptions that shape research decisions

(Bryman, 2016). As a result, reflecting on such assumptions gives valuable insight and awareness into the guiding philosophical underpinning for research initiatives and the whole research communities (Saunders et al.,2023; Rashid et al. 2019). In choosing a comprehensive philosophical stance, two prominent epistemological methods to knowledge acquisition are identified: positivism and interpretivism (Bryman, 2016). The nature of the research topic, the researcher's knowledge and views, and the philosophical presumptions surrounding the research strategy all play a role in selecting the most appropriate method of inquiry (Gehman et al., 2018). These crucially shaped my choice of ontology and epistemology, as discussed hereunder, with focus on how they align.

*3.2.1.1 Relativist ontology*

Based on the qualitative and explorative nature of this study, as well as the research aims and questions as highlighted in the previous chapter, it is ontologically anchored on a relativist perspective; disbelieving in the existence of objective world or truth and believing that everything we know (reality) is relatively and intersubjectively constructed through meanings and understandings created socially and experientially (Berger & Luckmann, 2016; Rashid et al, 2019). Accordingly, relativist ontology holds that interpretations and meanings are extracted from the research participants' perspective in each context which result in contextualism epistemology (Pretorius, 2024). Therefore, our perception about the world and the truth come from the mind and are but constructions of our thinking, and as human beings, we are in constant construction of reality of the world we live in (Bryman, 2016; Howard-Grenville et al., 2021).

Importantly, a relativist ontology supports the coexistence of multiple, context-specific realities, which is crucial when the purpose of the research is to understand lived experiences, subjective perspectives, or nuanced phenomena (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011: Pretorius, 2024). This ontological stance empowers the interpretivist researcher to explore rich, in-depth insights, free from the constraints of universal or objective truths (Saunders et al.,2023). In this study, my aim was not to uncover one objective truth, but rather to understand how various stakeholders construct meaning within their social and cultural realities. This makes relativist ontology the most suitable in this study. Other reasons are briefly discussed here as justification:

a) Subjective realities: Relativism holds that multiple realities exist, shaped by personal, social, cultural, and historical contexts (Pretorius, 2024). My interpretivist approach aims to uncover these subjective narratives, acknowledging that each participant's reality is valid and contextually bound.

b) Context-specific knowledge: A relativist stance legitimizes pluralistic knowledge;

what's true for corporate restaurants might not be true for small curry houses owner. This suits my study's emphasis on individual voices and context-specific meaning-making (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011).

c) Emphasis on interpretation over generalization: This study aimed at interpreting richly layered stories, rather than generalizing across a population. Relativism supports that truth is relative to perspective, allowing for deep insight into diverse lived experiences (Pretorius, 2024).

When compared with other closely related ontologies such as constructivism and constructionism, relativism is considered most philosophically coherent with the interpretivist epistemology as summarised in Table 2 below.

*Table 2: Relativism in comparison with related ontologies*

| Ontology | Alignment | Justification |
|---|---|---|
| Relativism | Strong | Recognizes subjective, context-specific realities, perfect for interpretivist and lived experience research (Pretorius, 2024; Schwandt, 2000) |
| Constructivism | Partial | Acknowledges personal meaning-making, but lacks the socio-cultural contextual richness that relativism brings (Schwandt, 1994; Saunders et al.,2023). |
| Constructionism | Weak | Focuses on collective, discursive meaning, better for cultural text/discourse analysis (Berger & Luckmann, 2016). |

While social constructionism is sometimes aligned with interpretivist traditions, it emphasizes the collective generation of meaning through language, discourse, and social interaction (Berger & Luckmann, 2016). In contrast, relativism allows for greater emphasis on personal, individualized realities, which is often more appropriate in qualitative, interpretive inquiry, particularly studies focusing on individual meaning-making rather than societal structures (Yin, 2018). Therefore, relativist ontology posits that reality is multiple, subjective, and dependent on human perception and context. This view resonates profoundly with interpretivist epistemology, which holds that knowledge is co-constructed through the meanings individuals assign to their experiences (Pretorius, 2024).

#### *3.2.1.2 Interpretivist epistemology*

Interpretivist paradigm believes that meanings and interpretations are constructed by humans

as a result of their engagement and interaction with the world (Cresswell & Poth, 2016). In contrast to positivists philosophical belief on single reality and objective knowledge, the interpretivists' epistemological standpoint is that of subjective epistemology and multiple realities; interested in subjective meanings and experiences of individuals or relativist realities in research (Hammersley, 2016). Interpretivists lay emphasis on social context and human complexities about meanings, and understanding of a social phenomenon (Bryman, 2016). This allows for multiple views about the research problem, allowing the researcher to view the world from the standpoint of the participants (Cresswell & Poth, 2016).

Therefore, my aim of taking an interpretivists standpoint is to gain deep understanding about the social phenomenon being investigated (sustainable practices in curry houses) and recognise the relevance of the participant's subjectivity as part of the process (Bryman, 2016). This essentially conveys the participants' own words, reflecting their beliefs and experiences (Hammersley, 2016; Rashid et al, 2019), and not based on reason and logic which constitutes rationalism, a positivists perspective (Bryman, 2016). Additionally, the interpretivist paradigm asserts that researchers' values are intrinsic to every stage of the research process, and through discussion, truth is negotiated (Hammersley, 2016). Thus, I admit that I bring my own values into this study and that these influence the choices I make about it (Olmos-Vega et al, 2023).

*3.2.1.3 Advantages of interpretivist paradigm*

First, instead of attempting to generalise the basis of knowledge to the entire population, researchers who adopt an interpretivism approach tend to develop a deeper grasp of the phenomenon and its complexity in its specific context (Creswell, 2017). In a similar vein, Hammersley (2016: p.25) highlights that Interpretivist researchers should try to understand "the diverse ways of seeing and experiencing the world through different contexts and cultures" and try to avoid bias in studying the events and people with their own interpretations because multiple interpretations develop in human relationships.

Secondly, interpretivist scholars can not only describe things, people, or events but also fully comprehend them in their social context due to the wide range of perspectives they use to examine phenomena (Bryman, 2016). Additionally, researchers can carry out these kinds of research in a natural setting by using key methodologies like grounded-theory, ethnography, case studies, or life histories to gain insider knowledge of the research objects (Yin, 2018). This will enable them to provide more accurate information about the research.

Thirdly, interpretivist researchers can examine an interviewee's thoughts, values, prejudices, perceptions, attitudes, sentiments, and perspectives by using a major strategy of interactive interviewing, which "allows researchers to investigate and prompt things that we cannot observe" (Wellington & Szczerbinski, 2007: p.14.). As a result, the useful information gathered

will give researchers better insights for eventual action.

*3.2.1.4 Limitations of interpretivist paradigm*

Despite the above-mentioned significant merits, the interpretivist paradigm has been criticized for several drawbacks.

a) That interpretivism tends to focus on gaining deeper understanding and knowledge of phenomena within their complex contexts rather than extrapolating their findings to other people and other contexts (Bryman, 2016). As a result, they frequently neglect to use scientific methods to confirm the validity and applicability of their findings.

b) Interpretivism tends to have a subjective rather than an objective ontological perspective (Braun & Clark, 2019). The results of research are therefore unquestionably influenced by the researcher's interpretation, personal beliefs, cognitive processes, and cultural preferences, all of which may lead to bias (Hammersley, 2016).

In concluding this section, it is worth mentioning that interpretivist paradigm is widely used in qualitative research (Bryman, 2016). It is essentially based on the idea that methods used to understand knowledge in human and social sciences cannot be the same as those used in physical sciences because humans interpret their world and then act on that interpretation, whereas the world does not (Hammersley, 2016). As a result, interpretivists embrace a relativist ontology in which a single phenomenon might have various interpretations rather than a truth that can be determined through a measurement procedure (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Interpretivism seeks to understand how individuals construct meaning within their social worlds. Thus, the relativist belief that 'truths' vary across contexts and individuals provides a strong ontological foundation. Unlike positivism, which aims for objective truths, interpretivism acknowledges the legitimacy of diverse realities, aligning seamlessly with relativist assumptions (Bryman, 2016). This underscores its appropriateness for this study.

### 3.2.2 Research logic consideration

Induction and deduction are two fundamental research logics in social science (Creswell & Poth, 2018). According to Bryman (2016), researchers with a realist ontological stance typically adopt a deductive approach, which begins with theory and focuses on testing arguments. In contrast, those with a relativist perspective start with subjective accounts of lived experiences, using an inductive approach to develop theory (Hammersley, 2016). Consequently, my research predominantly takes an inductive qualitative approach to theory development. The choice of this method was informed by my philosophical standpoint and research aim which focuses on exploring cases/context and not variables, and seeks to explore, describe, understand, build or develop theory rather than testing hypothesis (Howard-Grenville et al., 2021), as distinguished from quantitative method. Importantly, an interpretivist approach follows an inductive process, where theories and abstractions emerge empirically

from interview themes, in contrast to the hypothesis-driven nature of quantitative research (Creswell & Poth, 2018). However, deductive approaches were also used in this study for preliminary sensitization with concepts that frame data collection and weaving between theory and data in the analysis.

### 3.2.3 Inquiry techniques considerations

Researchers typically choose between quantitative and qualitative methods when conducting a study, with selection influenced by the researcher's philosophical stance and motivation (Wutich et al.,2024). Quantitative methods align with positivist research, while qualitative methods correspond with interpretivist research. Unlike positivism, which prioritizes reliability and generalizability, interpretivism focuses on credibility, confirmability, transferability, and dependability (Denzin, 2008). For this study, a qualitative approach was considered most appropriate for exploring sustainability practices in ethnic minority businesses, as it captures individuals' backgrounds, beliefs, values, cultures, contexts and lived experiences—elements that would be lost in quantitative methods (Zilber & Meyer, 2022). Standardization and coding in quantitative approaches risk imposing the researcher's perspective, potentially stripping away meaningful insights from participants (Cresswell, 2016).

Several additional factors drove the decision to adopt a qualitative approach. First, the research problem required in-depth exploration of sustainability in a complex and constrained context, necessitating understanding of participants' perspectives and experiences (Zilber & Meyer, 2022). Second, since sustainability is contentious, contextual, and shaped by interactions of diverse supply chain actors and stakeholders (Mangla et al., 2018), qualitative methods were well-suited for capturing individual emotions, relationships, and learning processes (Zilber & Meyer, 2022). This approach allowed participants to express their experiences in their own words, enabling richer understanding of the phenomenon (Pretorius, 2024). Moreover, the study aimed to uncover nuances underpinning sustainability practices, aligning more with theory generation than hypothesis testing (Maudsley, 2011). Informants were engaged in their natural settings to identify patterns through discussions, observation, documentation, and interpretation of empirical data.

## 3.3 Research design considerations

Building upon the qualitative inquiry approach, this section examines the specific research design adopted for this study. Various qualitative research designs exist in social science and business research: case study, grounded theory, ethnography, phenomenology, action research, and historical research (Asenahabi, 2019). To effectively answer the research questions from an interpretivist perspective, a case study design was selected (Yin, 2018) to collect empirical evidence, focusing on Bangladeshi curry houses in Birmingham, West

Midlands as a critical case.

A case study design explores a particular phenomenon within a given context using various data sources and multiple lenses to understand different facets of the phenomenon (Yin, 2018). Yin (2003b) defines it as an empirical inquiry examining a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, particularly when boundaries between them are unclear. It involves in-depth analysis of a given subject; whether person, household, industry, group, organization, nationality, culture, or event, exploring all peculiarities and complexities for deeper understanding (Yin, 2018; Asenahabi, 2019).

The aim is to provide analysis that illuminates theoretical concerns through understanding of processes and context (Gehman et al.,2017; Casell & Symon, 2004). Case study research relies on multiple evidence sources and benefits from prior theoretical propositions to guide data collection and analysis (Yin, 2014). While often linked to contemporary phenomena (Yin, 2018), their applicability to historical research is also recognized (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This flexibility allows incorporation of both qualitative and quantitative data (Yin, 2011), providing rich information. Qualitative case studies typically address ‘how do?’ rather than ‘how should?’ questions (Yin, 2018), focusing on real-life phenomena and enabling examination of individuals' behaviors, actions, and interactions in depth (Zilber & Meyer, 2022).

### 3.3.1 Rationale for adopting a case study design

The decision to adopt a case study strategy was influenced by five key factors:

(a) *Alignment with case study criteria:* Yin (2003b) outlined three conditions for appropriate case study use: (1) research questions framed as "how" and "why," (2) limited researcher control over behavioral events, and (3) focus on contemporary phenomena within real-life contexts. This study meets all three conditions. It explores how ethnic minority food businesses adopt sustainable practices to cope and survive amidst constraints, why they adapt, how to improve their sustainability, and what supports are needed; questions favoring an exploratory approach that case studies handle well. The researcher had no control over EMB behaviors and remained external to the case, fulfilling the second condition. The study focused on current, real-world sustainability challenges facing EMBs, satisfying the third condition.

(b) *Appropriateness to small business research:* Perren and Ram (2004) highlighted growing acceptance of case study research in small business studies, with Chetty (1996) emphasizing that case studies can uncover insights that large-scale surveys might overlook, particularly relevant given limited literature on how EMBs perceive and practice sustainability in constrained contexts.

Numerous scholarly works have adopted case study designs to investigate ethnic minority entrepreneurship dynamics. Beckinsale and Ram (2006) conducted a multiple-case study

involving six ethnic minority businesses in the UK examining ICT support services delivery and impact. Phizacklea & Ram (1996) used comparative case studies focusing on ten ethnic minority firms in Lyon (France) and ten in Birmingham (UK), exploring business growth trajectories and employment practices. Ram and Jones (2008) adopted a qualitative single-case study exploring the intersection of race, business strategy, and state policy in a family-owned South Asian firm. Sepulveda, Syrett, and Lyon (2016) investigated four case studies of migrant entrepreneurs across different UK cities. Smallbone et al. (2015) examined twenty ethnic minority firms in a multi-case study assessing access to finance differences across communities. Altinay and Altinay (2008) utilized three Turkish-owned hospitality businesses in a case study format understanding the role of family and culture in strategic decision-making. More recently, Korede et al. (2023) adopted a multiple case study involving fifteen ethnic minority restaurants in the West Midlands, UK exploring their experiences and innovation during COVID-19.

These studies validate the richness of case study methods in exploring lived entrepreneurial realities and experiences of EMBs, demonstrating the methodological flexibility needed to capture multi-layered challenges ethnic minority entrepreneurs face.

(c) *Flexibility in research techniques:* Case studies allow multiple methods for data collection and analysis, including semi-structured interviews, surveys, and document reviews (Yin, 2018), enabling comprehensive examination of EMB sustainability strategies.

(d) *Philosophical compatibility:* Saunders et al (2023) positioned case study research along a continuum of epistemological and ontological spectrums between realism/positivism and idealism/interpretivism, confirming its suitability for this research's interpretivist orientation. While case studies can be conducted from a positivist perspective, they are more commonly associated with interpretivism, realism, and pragmatism (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

(e) *Suitability over alternative strategies:* Experimental research was deemed unsuitable as the researcher had no control over the phenomenon being investigated. Experimental studies typically manipulate independent variables to observe effects on dependent variables (Saunders et al.,2018), which was not feasible here. Case studies are preferred over experimental methods due to their thorough nature, in-depth data production, multiple sources, and rich context (Creswell & Poth, 2018). They produce holistic, multifaceted insight into complex situations in real-life contexts (Yin 2018), with contextuality being extremely important since investigating specific occurrences in isolation from context is nearly impossible (Zilber & Meyer, 2022; Merriam, 1998).

The survey strategy, often linked to deductive approaches and positivist stances (Saunders et al., 2023), was inappropriate as this research followed an interpretivist and inductive approach. Case studies capture a wide range of opinions versus the individualistic view gained by survey responses, allowing deeper, detailed insight with minimum bias (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Ethnography, requiring researcher immersion in the group under study was not fully applicable since the researcher remained external to the EMBs. Grounded theory, which aims to generate theory from data (Corbin & Strauss, 1990), was considered but deemed less suitable as a stand-alone since the study focused on applying existing theory to EMBs in real-life contexts. However the study involved some ethnography and grounded theory approaches due to the complexity and under-theorisation in this context (Gehman et al., 2018).

### 3.3.2 Defining the case study adopted and justification

This study employed an exploratory multiple-case study design (Yin, 2018), involving 15 Bangladeshi curry houses and several stakeholders in Birmingham. The goal was to identify and synthesize shared meanings, common frames, themes, and patterns on sustainable practices across cases rather than to compare them for differences. The study employs what Yin (2018) terms 'literal replication logic' - expecting similar sustainability patterns across curry houses due to shared cultural, structural, and market conditions. The multi-stakeholder design captures the embedded networks through which sustainability practices emerge and are constrained, aligning with stakeholder theory's emphasis on relational dynamics (Freeman, 1984; Yin, 2018).

Theoretically informed by both the stakeholders' theory (Freeman, 1984) and the food system approach (Ericksen, 2008), the study involved a rich network of supply chain actors and stakeholders who serve as 'embedded sub-units', informants or influencers (Yin, 2018; Freeman, 1984). This was particularly important in understanding the business operations, sustainability strategies, and stakeholder interactions of the curry houses more deeply. This structure fits what Yin (2018) calls an 'embedded multiple-case study'. Importantly, the embedded case study structure addresses all three research questions: RQ1 and RQ2 focus on operators' experiences and structural conditions, while RQ3 explicitly examines how stakeholders across the food system perceive and influence these practices, enabling comprehensive systemic analysis.

In qualitative research, particularly when using multiple-case designs, the objective can often be thematic convergence rather than variance. As Yin (2018) emphasizes, multiple-case studies are appropriate not only for contrasting cases, but also for deriving replication logic, where similar patterns across cases offer stronger support for theoretical insights than isolated findings. This orientation favors analytical generalization over statistical generalization, which is particularly suitable for research concerned with understanding complex, socially embedded practices such as sustainability in ethnic food systems.

The theoretical replication logic employed in this study operates on the premise that Bangladeshi curry houses share fundamental structural conditions; including cultural heritage,

operational constraints, market positioning, and regulatory environments that shape their sustainability responses in predictable ways (Ram et al., 2001, 2022; Salway, 2008; Alexander et al.,2020; Razzak et al., 2022). This shared context creates conditions where similar sustainability patterns emerge across cases, strengthening theoretical insights through convergent evidence rather than case-by-case differentiation. The multi-stakeholder approach captures the relational complexity that stakeholder theory demands by examining how sustainability practices are co-constructed through interactions between curry house owners, suppliers, customers, community members, and regulatory bodies.

This method reflects pattern-matching, a strategy in case study analysis where empirical patterns are compared against theoretical expectations (Yin, 2018). Theoretical expectations are informed by Stakeholder Theory and the Food Systems Approach, seeking to discover how these manifest similarly across curry houses. This reflects a theory-building orientation, where thematic saturation is prioritized over formal cross-case differentiation (Saunders et al., 2023).

Therefore, while comparative case studies aim to highlight differences, this study's emphasis on finding common sustainability practices and shared stakeholder narratives positions it within a replication logic framework (Yin, 2018). This was particularly appropriate as the cases were expected to show similar results due to their shared conditions (as reviewed in the next section-3.3.3). In qualitative case studies, the purpose often lies not in comparison but in the synthesis of patterns, meanings, and practices across diverse yet contextually related settings (Wutich et al., 2024; Yin, 2018).

Several additional justifications support this approach:

(I) Analytical vs statistical generalization: In qualitative research, especially case study methodology, the aim is not to generalize to populations (statistical generalization), but to theories (analytical generalization) (Gehman et al., 2018; Yin, 2018). This study sought to generate theoretical insights on sustainability practices, not to quantify their prevalence, but to understand their forms, drivers, and meanings across similar contexts. Identifying recurring frames and themes enables theoretical replication and strengthens explanatory depth (Yin, 2018).

(II) Purpose-driven case selection: While some multiple-case studies emphasize contrasts to build theory through difference (Saunders et al., 2023; Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007), this study pursued replication logic, where similar phenomena are expected across cases. The sample cases exhibit shared cultural and operational characteristics, justifying the intent to identify convergent practices and shared sustainability logics (Yin, 2018).

(III) Depth over differentiation: A comparative framework might prioritize "how curry house A differs from B," but this study foregrounds shared meanings, practices, and system-level linkages informed by Stakeholder Theory (Freeman, 1984) and the Food Systems Approach (Ericksen, 2008). This orientation is better suited for identifying leverage points, community-led solutions, and collaborative insights.

(IV) Pattern matching and validity through thematic saturation: By examining multiple cases for recurring themes, this study enhances construct validity and robustness through data triangulation, combining interviews, focus groups, observation, and stakeholder perspectives. This is methodologically coherent with naturalistic inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), where saturation, rather than representativeness, signals analytical completeness.

(V) Stakeholder coherence and framing: The theoretical lenses emphasize co-constructed value (Stakeholder Theory) and systemic interdependencies (Food Systems Approach). These were best illuminated through shared framing analysis across curry houses, revealing how sustainability is conceptualized, adapted, and institutionalized—something comparison alone cannot capture.

By focusing on pattern recognition and thematic emergence, this study aligns with Stakeholder Theory (Freeman, 1984) and the Food Systems Approach (Ericksen, 2008), both of which encourage understanding complex interrelations and systemic responses rather than linear cause-effect relationships. This made the choice of focusing on common frames not only justified but methodologically advantageous, especially in sustainability research where contextual depth, multi-actor engagement, and practical knowledge generation are valued.

### 3.3.3 The Bangladeshi curry house sector: A critical case in context

Bangladeshi curry houses have played a pivotal role in shaping the UK's curry industry, historically owning and operating most establishments branded as "Indian" restaurants (Alexander et al., 2020; Razzak et al., 2022). By 2002, they owned approximately 84.7% of all curry houses in the UK (Gillan, 2017), a figure that remains consistent today, with 8 out of 10 curry houses still under Bangladeshi ownership[5].

This dominance marks the sector as a crucial contributor to Britain's socio-cultural and economic landscape (Khandaker, 2016a, b), and more broadly reflects the rise of ethnic minority businesses in UK's food and hospitality (Ram & Jones, 2008). However, the contemporary sector faces profound sustainability challenges, including labour shortages, declining profitability, changing consumer preferences, and weakened social networks

[5] BBC News. (2019, October 13). *From korma to coconuts – the evolution of Indian cuisine in the UK*. https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/stories-49993929

(Razzak et al., 2022; Alexander et al., 2020). Alarmingly, 2–3 curry houses close weekly due to these pressures (Wilson, 2017).

Most studies often integrate this group with other ethnic minority groups, such as Indians, Pakistanis and Chinese (Salway, 2008), despite their distinctive peculiarities, dominance and experience in the industry, as well as contrastingly different immigration trajectory (Alexander et al., 2020: Razzak et al., 2022). Additionally, their business practices are profoundly influenced by ‘’religio-cultural’’ factors that discourage women participation in business (Ram et al.,2000), distinctive norms, customs, behaviors and beliefs (Wright and Pollert,2006), reflecting the uniqueness of contextual influences in the Bangladeshi catering sector which requires attention about its distinctiveness (Alexander et al.,2020; Razzak et al.,2022).

The sector’s growing precarity has drawn attention from scholars, policymakers, and conferences such as Farm-to-Fork Conference 2022[6], highlighting the urgent need for sustainable interventions (Ram et al., 2000, 2021). Compounding this are poor working conditions (Razzak et al., 2022), mental health stress, and racialised market disadvantages (Salway, 2008). While ethnic diversity exists in the sector, Indian and Chinese businesses often outperform others, with the position of Bangladeshi caterers being particularly precarious (Salway, 2008). A Bangladeshi curry house owner who took part in the Farm-to-Fork conference describes the Bangladeshi catering sector as currently in “Dark place” and narrates: *"The sector's in a spiral effect and it's going down"* [7]

Thus, Bangladeshi curry house owners are not only strategically significant as a historically embedded ethnic business community, but also analytically critical for understanding the intersection of sustainability, marginalisation, livelihoods, structural constraints and food system transformation. Their selection as the core case in this study enables a rich, grounded exploration of sustainable practices in a sector both vulnerable and vital to UK foodscape.

### 3.3.4 The study area and context: Birmingham, West Midlands

The West Midlands is recognized as the home of curry and has about 60-70% of total curry houses in the UK, with Birmingham specifically identified as the birthplace of curry food[7]. Thus, Birmingham, the United Kingdom’s second-largest city, provides a uniquely rich context for examining sustainability practices among Bangladeshi curry houses. With a population of

[6] McCarthy, I. (2023). *Farm to Fork Food Resilience Conference – Rising to the Challenge: Supporting Bangladeshi Caterers in Times of Crisis* [Blog post]. Centre for Research in Ethnic Minority Entrepreneurship (CREME). https://sway.office.com/cUpPLj9RuoaAwAag?ref=Link

[7] BBC News. (2022, September 8). *Curry houses in dark place without help: Birmingham owner*. https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-birmingham-62824523.amp

over 1.1 million, it is one of the most ethnically and culturally diverse urban centres in the UK[8]. According to the 2021 Census, approximately 42.1% of Birmingham's population identifies as non-White, with 13.4% identifying as Pakistani and 3.5% as Bangladeshi (ONS, 2022). This makes Birmingham home to one of the largest Bangladeshi communities outside London, many of whom have established roots in the city's vibrant catering and hospitality sector.

Birmingham has long been recognised for its pivotal role in the development of the British Asian curry industry, which contributes over £4.2 billion annually to the UK economy (The Financial Times, 2016). The city is often regarded as a culinary hub for South Asian cuisine, boasting a significant concentration of Bangladeshi-owned curry houses, particularly in areas like Sparkbrook, Small Heath, and Lozells, where these businesses form an essential part of the local economy and cultural landscape (Alexander, 2020). Birmingham curry houses have existed since at least 1945, when Abdul Aziz, one of the first Bangladeshi immigrants to settle in the city, began serving curry and rice to policemen, lawyers, and barristers from a café on Steelhouse Lane (The Good Food Guide, 2022**).** In the 1990s, efforts were made to tap into the tourism appeal of South Asian cuisine by promoting Birmingham's "Balti Quarter," leveraging the presence of established ethnic enclaves (Ram et al., 2000).

This city presents an ideal case study site for several reasons. Firstly, Birmingham exemplifies the intersection of migration, food, and urban identity, making it a critical space for understanding how ethnic minority entrepreneurs navigate challenges of sustainability, supply chain resilience, and regulatory change. Secondly, as a city with high rates of deprivation and economic inequality, with 40% of its neighbourhoods among the 10% most deprived in England (Nobel et al., 2019), Birmingham offers a compelling setting to explore how small ethnic minority businesses adapt to socio-economic constraints while striving for sustainable business practices.

Furthermore, Birmingham's commitment to sustainability, demonstrated through its Food Strategy (Birmingham City Council, 2022) and participation in the Sustainable Food Places network, offers a policy backdrop that makes it timely and relevant to study how Bangladeshi food entrepreneurs are (or are not) integrated into broader environmental and social sustainability agendas. In sum, Birmingham serves as a microcosm of the challenges and opportunities facing Bangladeshi caterers in the UK. Its demographic makeup, historical ties to the curry industry, socio-economic conditions, and evolving food policy landscape make it an ideal and richly layered study site for exploring the role of sustainability within ethnic

[8] Office for National Statistics. (2023, January 19). *How life has changed in Birmingham: Census 2021*. https://www.ons.gov.uk/visualisations/censusareachanges/E08000025/

minority food microbusinesses.

*Figure 3: Depicting the interactive map of Birmingham curry houses*


**Source:** Warner (2016)[9]

A compelling excerpt from a report published by The Good Food Guide (2022) reads.

> *"Birmingham owes a huge debt of gratitude to the Bangladeshi Brummies. The community has been the backbone of our restaurant scene for generations. Bringing flavours from the subcontinent, spices and influences from Pakistan, Nepal, India and Sri Lanka, these restaurants have been generally referred to as 'Indian' for decades, an oversimplification to appease those who didn't know any better. They have weathered the storms of the last seventy odd years with grace, passing mantles along lineages, ensuring the city is still among the best to go for a curry in the UK".*[10]

### 3.3.5 Generalizability, Replicability and Reliability in Case Study: A Limitation?

Despite numerous advantages, case study design faces criticisms including concerns about rigor, bias, generalization, replicability, time consumption, and researcher subjectivity

[9] Warner, G. (2016). *The UK's king of curries has been revealed*. Sunderland Echo. https://www.sunderlandecho.com/news/the-uks-king-of-curries-has-been-revealed-355455

[10] The Good Food Guide. (2022, August 10). *A brief history of the Birmingham balti, and where to find it*. https://www.thegoodfoodguide.co.uk/editorial/features/a-brief-history-of-the-birmingham-balti-and-where-to-find-it

(Bryman, 2016). However, generalizability, replicability and reliability; major criteria for assessing research studies are more applicable to quantitative case study designs and less applicable to qualitative case study designs (Yin, 2018).

The overarching intention for qualitative research is interpreting particular events or phenomena within given contexts rather than generalizing findings (Merriam, 2002). Social phenomena studied in qualitative research are dynamic and non-replicable as the real world changes over time (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), with each interpretation being unique, making replication impossible (Cresswell & Poth, 2018). This unique attribute renders debates about replicability, generalizability, and reliability irrelevant for qualitative case study designs. Therefore, emphasis is placed on enhancing authenticity or internal validity as the main concern, as Merriam (2002, p.21) asserts: "how conforming are the findings with reality?"

To address these concerns, Lincoln and Guba (1985) assert that qualitative empirical interpretations can best be enhanced by dependability, credibility, conformability, and transferability. Furthermore, reliability in qualitative research is defined by Merriam (2002) as consistency and dependability, indicating that findings make sense when they are dependable and consistent. These were addressed and managed in this study through proper planning, purposive and informed-participant selection, multiple data sources, respondent validation, transparency, and reflexivity throughout the research (Olmos-Vega et al., 2023) [Please see section **3.8** for details of how these are being addressed in this study].

*The next section discusses the empirical data collection techniques involved in this case study approach.*

### 3.4 Methods of data collection

Interpretive approaches largely rely on naturalistic methods which include interviews, observation and analysis of existing texts (Bryman, 2016). These methods foster effective dialogue between researchers and participants, enabling the collaborative construction of a shared and meaningful understanding of reality (Yin, 2018). Accordingly, the case study approach utilizes multiple methods of empirical data collection to address the research questions comprehensively (Cresswell & Poth, 2018). In this study, semi- structured interviews, focus group, participant observations, and documents review were employed. This approach of integrating diverse data sources in case study enables triangulation, and enhance the study's rigor, breadth, complexity, richness, and depth (Yin, 2018; Saunders et al., 2023). In this study, primary methods of data collection included semi-structured interviews and focus group, augmented by participant observations, and documents, including industry reports, and relevant web-sites publications. In all, 1 focus group was conducted with eight Bangladeshi curry house owners, and a total of 65 semi-structured interviews (online and off- line) were conducted using a purposive sampling technique (see **section. 3.4.3**), cutting across the

various supply chain actors and stakeholders. Unlike quantitative researchers who tend to work with fewer variables and many cases, qualitative researchers on the other hand, depend on few cases and many variables (Creswell, 1998).

*Table 3: Summary of data collection methods used in this study*

| Empirical method | Description | Types of data | Data collected/ analysed |
|---|---|---|---|
| *Interviews* | Conducted semi-structured interviews (both online and offline) | Primary | 41 formal interviews<br>24 Informal Interviews |
| *Focus group* | A group discussion with 8 Bangladeshi caterers | Primary | 1 focus group |
| *Participant observation* | Observations during field visits | Primary | 18:55 hours of observations during 8 field visits |
| *Documents* | Published industry reports and policy documents accessed via websites. | Secondary | Curry-live, Bangladeshi circle, BBC-Bame, Curry Awards. |

### 3.4.1 Defining boundaries and mapping-out participants

Following the interpretive approach and the inductive research logic adopted in this study, the empirical material focused on the experiences of key curry food supply chain actors and stakeholders who influence and are influenced by business operations and sustainable practices of curry houses. The accounts and experiences of these actors and stakeholders were considered, with literature being used iteratively to interpret the collected data. Specifically, curry house owners (caterers), farmers, suppliers, policymakers, NGOs, innovation/research experts, caterers' association and consumers provided the empirical material, and defined the boundary of this study.

*Table 4: Defining the boundaries of critical curry food actors and stakeholders mapped out in this study*

| Actor/Stakeholder Group | Brief description of role and sustainability influence | Interconnections with other Stakeholders/constrains |
|---|---|---|
| Suppliers/Importers | Control bulk ingredient pricing and prefer imported over local produce | Influence farmers (by dictating demand), and caterers (who depend on their pricing) |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Farmers | Primary producers of curry food ingredients, but have limited power due to supplier control and cost challenges | Need policy change and incentives to compete favourably with imported goods |
| Consumers | Expect cheap, high-quality and authentic curry foods, creating pressure on caterers to reduce costs. Value affordability over sustainability | Affect policy makers (consumer-driven food policies), and caterers profitability. |
| Ngos & Researchers | Influence public awareness, and advocate for policy reform, and sustainable innovation | Affect caterers, consumers, and suppliers by advocating ethical food chains |
| Policy Makers | Create food system policies but often favor large businesses over small or micro ethnic food enterprises like curry houses. | Work with NGOs and suppliers to formulate food regulations |
| Caterers Association | Coordinate activities of caterers and represent their interest in discourse | Affected by policies and consumers demand for cheap curries. |
| | | |

Informed and guided by both the stakeholder theory and food system framework, this approach was considered appropriate to appreciate the complexity and characteristics of each actor interconnected both vertically; farmers, wholesalers, processors, suppliers, retailers and laterally; support organizations and stakeholders (Mangla et al 2018) along the supply chain. As argued by Hussain and Kumar (2019), building sustainability into the food supply chains requires a holistic approach that considers all aspects of the supply chain, from farm-to-fork. Relatedly, Bhat (2021) argued that where sustainability in food supply chain is of grave concern, exploring every aspect along the supply chain is pertinent. Also, there has been a strong call for exploring beyond individualistic insights of entrepreneurs, to diverse stakeholders' perspectives in the field of sustainable entrepreneurship (Munos & Cohen, 2018), and migrant entrepreneurship (Hadri et al., 2023; Alka et al., 2025). This approach methodological approach is therefore a response to such calls.

*Figure 4: Depicting the Curry food system stakeholders*


### 3.4.2 The research participants engaged in this study

The various actors and stakeholders in the curry food industry that were mapped out and engaged in this study are summarized in the table 5 below.

*Table 5: Summary of participants*

| **Participants** | **Description** | **No.** |
|---|---|---|
| Bangladeshi curry houses | Key participants | 15 |
| Farmers | Actor | 7 |
| Suppliers/importers | ,, | 4 |
| Consumers | ,, | 27 |
| Caterers' Association (Bangladeshi Caterers Association) | Stakeholder | 2 |
| Policy makers | ,, | 3 |
| Food research/innovation experts | ,, | 3 |
| NGOs | ,, | 4 |
| **Total** | | **65** |

*Table 6: Profile of key interview participants (Case samples of Bangladeshi Curry houses)*

| Pseudonym/Code | Location of Business | Years in Industry | Gender | Generation |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Ahmeer/BCH-1 | Sutton Coldfield | 32 | M | Second |
| Rahman/BCH-2 | Yardley, Birmingham | 25 | M | Second |
| Abiduh/BCH-3 | Stratford Road, Birmingham | 22 | M | First |
| Bhadi/BCH-4 | Stirchley | 15 | M | First |
| Rasheed/BCH-5 | Smethwick | 10 | M | First |
| Rasheek/BCH-6 | Small Heath | 30 | M | Second |
| Mohammad/BCH-7 | Cape Hill | 14 | M | First |
| Raju/BCH-8 | Moseley | 12 | M | Second |
| Sajeed/BCH-9 | Sparkhill | 20 | M | Second |
| Maliki/BCH-10 | Lozells | 11 | M | Second |
| Ahmad/BCH-11 | Smethwick | 23 | M | Second |
| Khaleed/BCH-12 | Spark Hill | 26 | M | First |
| Salim/BCH-13 | Sparkbrook | 13 | M | First |
| Ali/BCH-14 | Handsworth, Birmingham | 27 | M | First |
| Abukar/BCH-15 | Acocks green | 16 | M | First |

*Source:* Field work

*Table 7: Profile of other interview actors and stakeholders*

| Category of Actor/Stakeholder | Pseudonym/Code | Years of Experience | Gender |
|---|---|---|---|
| Farmers | Rose/CF-1 | 12 | Female |
| | Lynda/CF-2 | 16 | Female |
| | Tom/CF-3 | 7 | Male |
| | Paul/CF-4 | 6 | Female |
| | Flora/CF-5 | 6 | - |
| | Nick/CF-6 | 8 | - |
| | Steve/CF-7 | 5 | Male |
| Suppliers/Importers | Hazeem/CS-1 | 12 | Male |
| | Aziz/CS-2 | 8 | Male |
| | Raman/CS-3 | 7 | Male |
| | Tina/CS-4 | 10 | - |
| Policy makers | Lizy/PM-1 | 7 | Female |
| | Jane/PM-2 | 6 | Female |
| | Rachel/PM-3 | 8 | Female |
| NGOs | Angela/CN-1 | 11 | Female |
| | Jenie/CN-2 | 7 | Female |
| | Matt/CN-3 | 8 | Male |
| | Sarah/CN-4 | 6 | Female |
| Research/Innovation expert | *Pat/RI-1* | *6* | Female |
| | *Mercy/RI-2* | *5* | Female |
| | *Mike/RI-3* | *5* | Male |
| Caterers Association | Rashiq/BCA-1 | 21 | Male |
| | Naseer/BCA-2 | 15 | Male |

*Source:* Field work

*Table 8: Profile of consumers participants (loyal/regular customers)*

| Pseudonym/Code | Dining frequency/week | Gender |
|---|---|---|
| Jon/CC-1 | *3* | M |
| Dom/CC-2 | 2 | - |
| Kashim /CC-3 | *3* | M |
| Betty/CC-4 | 2 | F |
| Dora/CC-5 | *4* | F |
| Deema/CC-6 | *3* | F |
| Ayeesha/CC-7 | 2 | F |
| Mansir/CC-8 | *3* | M |
| Tim/CC-9 | *4* | M |
| Husein/CC-10 | 2 | F |
| Rosa/CC-11 | 2 | M |
| Hashim/CC-12 | *4* | - |
| Karen/CC-13 | *3* | - |
| Teena/CC-14 | 2 | M |
| Ali/CC-15 | 2 | F |
| Sadiq/CC-16 | *3* | F |
| Rob/CC-17 | *3* | - |
| Gary/CC-18 | *3* | F |
| Grant/CC-19 | *3* | M |
| Thom/CC-20 | 2 | M |
| Rachel/CC-21 | *3* | M |
| Vash/CC-22 | *3* | M |
| Vick/CC-23 | *3* | M |
| Helen/CC-24 | 2 | - |
| Sam /CC-25 | *3* | M |
| Raheem/CC-26 | *3* | F |
| Robin/CC-27 | 3 | F |
| **Total** | **27** | |

*Source:* Field Work

### 3.4.3 Sampling technique and strategy

Participants were drawn through a purposive sampling technique (Yin,2014), which entails 'identifying and selecting individuals or groups who possess substantial knowledge and experience related to the phenomenon under study' (Etikan et al., 2016). They cut across the various curry food supply chain actors and stakeholders as shown in Tables (**6,7 & 8**).

This multi-stakeholder sampling strategy directly reflects the three research questions. While curry house operators constitute the primary participants for addressing RQ1 and RQ2, the inclusion of suppliers, farmers, consumers, policy makers, NGOs, BCA representatives, and innovation experts enables systematic investigation of RQ3. This approach operationalizes both Stakeholder Theory (Freeman, 1984) and the Food Systems Approach (Ericksen, 2008) by ensuring that diverse actors across the food system—each with distinct roles, perspectives, and influence mechanisms are represented in the data. The sampling strategy thus ensures that sustainability practices are examined not only from operators' lived experiences but also from the perspectives of those who shape the context within which operators make decisions. Crucially, the use of purposeful sampling ensured that participants with diverse and rich experiences about the phenomenon under investigation were recruited (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

As a non-probabilistic method, the purposeful sampling technique is considered suitable for this research as it helps to identify and select information-rich cases in a most effective way, using limited resources as posited in Patton (2015). It does not only ensure the selection of respondents that are well informed, knowledgeable and experienced in the phenomenon under study (Creswell & Poth, 2018), but also guarantees the willingness and availability to share these experiences and opinions in expressive, reflective, and articulate manner (Bernard, 2017). Contrastingly, while probabilistic techniques such as random sampling affords every member an equal chance to be selected, it can lead to poor targeting, shallow information, and lack of response (Patton, 2015). Hence, considered unsuitable for this study.

### 3.4.4 Recruitment of participants

The participants were recruited purposively, guided by the following selection criteria.

- Should be 18 years and above, male, females or any other gender.
- Should possess over 5 years of experience and expertise in the agri-food food industry/academia/policy.
- They should be willing to share their expertise knowledge, beliefs, and practices voluntarily.
- Working or operating with the Birmingham, West Midlands region.

Specifically, for the consumers, they should be loyal customers or regular curry dinners (eating out in a curry house at least 2-3 times or more in a week). This criterion was helped defined by the curry house operators. For the curry house operators, only those with more than ten (10) years of experience were targeted and selected. They are believed to have rich lived experience for deeper insights. For the remaining participants, the above listed selection

criteria were applied based on their various roles and sustainability influences and interconnections with the curry houses as mapped out earlier in **Table 4** of **section 3.4.1** of this chapter. The focus group conducted helped in mapping out these participants.

Methodologically, all the participants were approached and treated as empowered experts in the various roles they play as critical actors and stakeholders in the curry food industry, in terms of the knowledge, beliefs and practices they shared about sustainable practices in the industry.

The participants were recruited through various methods as described below:

1. My research Centre supported me in recruiting the key participants (Bangladeshi caterers) as they have been part of previous projects at the Centre. Recruitment was also facilitated through a network of Bangladeshi restaurant owners based in the Midlands, based on the researchers' existing informal connections. Some of the other participants such as the suppliers and consumers were recruited through referral and snowballing, using contacts known to those key participants (the Bangladeshi caterers).
2. Face-to-Face contact: I attended relevant sector events, workshops, and conferences where I got connected with farmers, NGOs, the private sector, and government representatives. This has provided me with great opportunity to establish professional relationships and networks in the Birmingham food space where my participants will be recruited from.
3. I also searched on relevant websites such as www.currylive.uk and other professional media platforms like LinkedIn to get the contact details of potential participants.

### 3.4.5 The recruitment process

Participants were recruited as individual persons and business owners rather than through formal organisations. For the Bangladeshi caterers, the primary focus of this study; recruitment was facilitated through multiple channels. An initial advertisement was shared via the Bangladeshi Caterers Association, with support from its leadership, who are long-standing practitioner partners of my research centre. Additional outreach was conducted through direct emails to caterers I had met and developed personal relationships with during earlier engagements and events at the research centre.

These individuals hold strong influence and wide-reaching networks within the Bangladeshi catering community, enabling effective distribution of the study invitation. I also had face-to-face interactions with several caterers during events, where I informally discussed the study. Their expressed interest led to further contact and eventual participation. This personalised

approach fostered trust and openness, which was crucial to participant engagement.

For other participants such as the farmers, suppliers, policy makers, third sector, researchers/innovation experts and NGOs representatives, I recruited them through initial face-to-face contact, accompanied by emails and phone calls. I attended relevant conferences, workshops, and seminars such as: the knowledge exchange workshop (*part of Productivity-from-Below project in my research centre*) with the Bangladeshi caterers in 2023; the Birmingham food system strategy conference and workshops 2023, 2024 ; the Real Oxford Food and Farming Conference 2024; the Oxford Farming Conference 2025, The Game 2024 (*organized by the Birmingham Food Council*), the Agri-food for Net-zero Big-Tent and Crucible events 2023, 2024, 2025 (*organized by AFN Network+ and funded by UKRI*), where I established initial contact and discussed my research project with relevant actors and stakeholders, which they expressed interest in participating.

These professional and personal relationships I initiated and developed at these conferences, workshops and events significantly helped me in the recruitment, as we got connected on LinkedIn and exchanged contact cards containing personal emails and phone contacts. As a result, I sent my advertisement letter electronically through their emails and follow up with phone calls or personal messages via LinkedIn. I also leveraged on these relationships established with initial participants to facilitate the recruitment of additional participants, including their professional colleagues and partners.

Some consumers were recruited through the support and connections of participating caterers; with whom I had already built strong relationships. During field visits to the curry houses, I had the opportunity to engage directly with consumers, discussing the research informally. The caterers played a key role in introducing me to their regular customers, many of whom were open and enthusiastic about sharing their views. Additional consumer participants were recruited through everyday social interactions. Informal conversations often began while dining at restaurants or attending food-related events, where I would ask questions such as whether they enjoyed curries and how often they ate them. This organic, conversational approach helped build rapport and encouraged genuine, voluntary participation.

### 3.4.6 Conducting the Focus Group

A focus group discussion is a technique of data collection where discussions about the research topic are carried out in a group under the facilitation of the researcher or a trained moderator (Stewart & Shamdasani, 2014). This was considered an appropriate technique to collect preliminary data from curry caterers, as it allows for capturing collective view of people on the research topic (Barbour, 2018). Additionally, both interactions and dialogues that occur

during the sessions are taken into account in the data collection and analysis (Sim & Waterfield, 2019), while capturing how meaning is negotiated and co- produced within the context of the group (Barbour, 2018). According to (Barbour, 2018) , a focus group typically involves a group of 6 to 10 participants and serves as a means for the researcher to build rapport and secure the cooperation of participants, thereby fostering trust in the data collection and analysis process.

In this study, a focus group was opportunistically conducted with eight (8) Bangladeshi caterers during a celebratory and partnership event organised by my research centre. This approach significantly saved time and resources that would otherwise have been required to arrange a separate focus group. Prior to the event, I had reached out to a few of the participants, who expressed interest in taking part; however, coordinating a suitable time for the session proved challenging. When the event was announced, I saw an opportunity and we were purposefully seated at the same round table. I briefly introduced myself and my research, and they all agreed to participate in the discussion. The questions bordered around general industry concerns and perception about sustainability; how they collectively envision overcoming challenges in adopting sustainability measures; potential benefits of collaboration; and the role of regulatory environment (see **Appendix 1**).

The conversation provided an initial collective insight into sustainability-related challenges within the industry, how the participants were coping or adapting, and their broader concerns for the future. The discussion, which lasted approximately 30 minutes during the networking session, offered a valuable preliminary understanding of sustainability both from individual and shared perspectives. These insights were instrumental in mapping out key stakeholders to be involved and shaping the themes and direction of the subsequent one-to-one interview questions. It was particularly important to see how they co-construct stories and frames as they respond collectively to the questions. Only notes were taken during the focus group, as recording was not feasible due to background noise from other guests, which would have interfered with audio quality. Nonetheless, the session contributed significantly to shaping a deeper understanding of sustainability within the context, framing collective views, facilitating knowledge sharing, and highlighting potential dominant discourses.

Additionally, insights gained from this session significantly informed the direction of the research and supported the refinement of research questions. The discussion surfaced general sustainability-related challenges encountered by participants and offered early theoretical perspectives. The process also drew on the principles of theoretical sampling to guide the evolution of inquiry (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). This was particularly valuable during the early phase of the research. Thus, the insights gathered offered an overview of prevailing industry trends and how these have evolved over time. Particularly, the focus group played a foundational role in shaping the theoretical direction of this study and informed the subsequent

in-depth interviews. As noted by Sim and Waterfield (2019), focus groups can assist participants in recalling past experiences and events that might not surface in individual interviews, as well as help to establish context and clarity that can enrich later one-on-one discussions.

Focus groups have been employed in numerous ethnic minority studies (e.g., Beckinsale & Ram, 2006; Allinson et al. 2004) and are commonly associated with qualitative methodologies due to their ability to generate rich, in-depth data through group interaction. Beckinsale and Ram (2006) conducted focus group research to examine the delivery of ICT support to ethnic minority businesses, highlighting the importance of culturally appropriate engagement strategies. Similarly, Allinson et al. (2004) carried out focus group to investigate the adoption of ICT among ethnic minority businesses, providing insights into the unique challenges faced by these enterprises. Fadahunsi, Smallbone, and Supri (2016) utilized focus groups in their study of ethnic minority enterprises in North London, emphasizing the role of networking in business development. These studies demonstrate the effective use of focus groups in understanding the experiences and challenges of ethnic minority entrepreneurs, hence considered appropriate as a complimentary method of data collection in this study.

A notable limitation of focus group is that some participants may feel less comfortable sharing personal views or experiences in a group setting compared to individual interviews (Sim & Waterfield, 2019). As a result, following the group discussion, I engaged with each participant individually to collect their contact details for follow-up interviews. However, participants were informed about the content and composition of the focus group, they were also asked to maintain the confidentiality of discussions, as outlined in the consent form which they signed. Nonetheless, it was made clear that complete confidentiality cannot be guaranteed in a group setting.

Also, focus group can be ‘noisy’ as opinions are shared and challenged (Sim & Waterfield, 2019) and involves personal and confidentially issues. This can be addressed by selecting a controllable group-size, establishing ground rules, maintaining anonymity of participants and strict adherence to ethical guidelines (Barbour, 2018). In this study, the size of the focus group was determined by opportunity, with a total of eight participants taking part. As highlighted in the literature, focus groups comprising between six and ten individuals are more likely to foster engaged and opinion-rich discussions (Sim & Waterfield, 2019). Larger groups, on the other hand, can be challenging to facilitate and often demand additional resources and support (Barbour, 2018).

### 3.4.7 Conducting the Interviews

Yin (2018) identifies interviews as a key method of data collection in qualitative research. It is a purposeful conversation where the interviewer poses structured or semi-structured

questions, and the respondent provides answers (Howard-Grenville et al.,2021). Semi-structured interviews provide a flexible approach to collecting qualitative data (Lune & Berg, 2017).

In this phase, I developed eight (8) slightly different semi-structured interview schedules each for the Bangladeshi caterers (the key participants), and other supply chain actors and stakeholders (see **Appendices 2-10**). The rationale was for each participants' categories to share expertise, vast experiences and perspectives as key informants, based on their distinctive roles, influence and positionality in the curry food supply chain. The interviews were conducted both face-to-face and virtually, based on the availability and convenience of the participants. Online interviews were conducted via Microsoft Teams, recorded and transcribed. Face-to-face interviews were conducted at convenient locations considered, safe and recorded on encrypted audio device, while field notes were also taken. I ensure to record my reflections on each session immediately after completing each interview.

Unlike structured interviews that relies on fixed and standardized questions, thereby reducing context effects, qualitative semi-structured interviews enable focused yet flexible exploration, allowing for deeper understanding of participants' contexts, meanings, and experiences (Howard-Grenville et al.,2021). Alongside their methodological suitability, semi-structured interviews offered additional benefits in this study. Their structured format enabled cross-sample comparisons, helping to maintain internal consistency in the data collected. These comparisons also allowed the researcher to generate new perspectives and interpretations. At the same time, the flexible nature of the interviews encouraged participants to expand on their responses, leading to unplanned but valuable areas of inquiry.

Interview questions were informed by existing literature across sustainable food supply chains, sustainability and ethnic minority businesses/entrepreneurship, and further refined based on insights from the focus group. This approach ensured alignment with the research questions while still encouraging rich, descriptive and explorative responses (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

For my key participants, there were 25 questions (see **Appendix 2** for detailed interview schedule) which covered a range of relevant themes. The first set of questions related to self-introduction and a brief overview of their business operations, years in the industry and supply chain dynamics. This served as an icebreaker for relatable and effective engagement. Examples of the interview questions included: "Can you give me an overview of your business and how your supply chain works in terms of sourcing cooking ingredients?", "When you hear the word 'sustainability', what comes to mind for you in terms of how you run your business operations", "How do you manage food waste in your operations?", "Can you describe how your business is affected or influenced by environmental, social, cultural and economic factors?" and "how does your interaction with other stakeholders (e.g. consumers, suppliers, etc.) influence the sustainability decisions you make?" These open-ended questions enabled

participants to explore their contexts, perceptions, feelings, interactions, and relationships related to specific events or situations, in line with the research questions, aims, and objectives. This was crucial to ensure participants provided their own responses without influence, bias, or guidance from the researcher (Lune & Berg, 2017).

The interviews were designed to last approximately 40–50 minutes to minimise disruption while allowing for sufficient data collection. This duration also helped avoid burdening participants. However, on average, 80% of the interviews lasted around 60 minutes, with only a few being shorter. All interviews offered in-depth and personal insights. All interviews were recorded with participants' consent and transcribed verbatim. Detailed notes were taken during each interview as a backup in case of technical issues and were supported by observation notes. Personal identifying information was removed during transcription. A few bio-demographic questions were asked at the start of each interview to better understand their business dynamics and reconfirm participants' eligibility for the study.

The data collected at this stage added a deeper layer of understanding regarding the sustainability issues and challenges within the industry and supply chain, drawing on the individual perspectives of the participants. This data further developed the initial insights and findings from the focus group discussion. The semi-structured interviews allowed for comparisons between participants while also providing flexibility to explore interesting topics through probing (Saunders et al.,2023). This approach ensured that the structure and meaning of the data remained manageable, even with the large volume of information accessible (Wutich et al., 2024).

As the researcher progresses through a series of case studies, the template is continuously refined and enriched. However, saturation eventually occurs, where additional data collection yields diminishing returns (Howard-Grenville et al.,2021). In this study, by the 15th interview of key respondents, recurring themes and messages were evident, and it was concluded that further interviews, despite efforts to schedule with difficult-to-reach respondents, would not significantly enhance the already clear understanding of experiences and opinions on sustainable practices gathered from the initial interviews (Wutich et al., 2024).

While most interviews were formal, some were conducted informally, especially with some of the farmers, consumers, and NGOs participants. These informal interviews occurred opportunistically at conferences and events due to the strong networking, personal and professional relationships the researcher had established with the participants. These informal discussions yielded valuable data, which were recorded through diary entries and notes, then stored in the database to maintain their timeliness and relevance for reflection and cross-analysis (Cresswell & Poth, 2018). The researcher made it clear to participants that the insights gathered from the discussions would inform the study, while also assuring them that their anonymity and confidentiality would be strictly maintained in accordance with ethical

guidelines.

The principles of key informant interviews were strictly adhered to ensure in-depth data is generated from participants who possess requisite depth of knowledge, experience, and first-hand information about the research topic (Yin, 2018). In this study, the actors and stakeholders sampled and interviewed were considered knowledgeable about the prevailing issues and challenges within the industry. This method was appropriate for exploring the nature of these problems and potential solutions, and for probing into the beliefs and motivations of the informants. However, it presents both advantages and disadvantages as summarized in Table 9 below.

*Table 9: Highlighting the advantages and disadvantages of Key Informant Interviews (KIIs)*

| Advantages | Disadvantages |
|---|---|
| Detailed and rich data is generated | Difficulty in selecting the ‘’right’’ key informant due to diverse viewpoints and background |
| Questions are clarified and rapport is established | Challenging to schedule interviews with busy and hard to reach respondents. |
| Relationships with stakeholders are built and strengthened | Difficulty to generalize results unless having many KIIs |
| Increased interest, awareness, and enthusiasm about the issue | |
| Contact is maintained to clarify issues when needed | |

**Source:** Patton (2015)

To address the limitations associated with KIIs in this research, participants were carefully mapped out and contacted early. Additionally, a good number of interviews were conducted alongside the focus group to provide a broader representation of the population.

### 3.4.8 Interview question design and stakeholder integration strategy

#### *3.4.8.1 Rationale for differentiated interview schedules*

The design of interview questions for this study was guided by the multi-stakeholder nature of sustainability in the curry food system, as conceptualized through Stakeholder Theory (Freeman, 1984) and the Food Systems Approach (Ericksen, 2008). The study's three research questions necessitated a differentiated interview approach: RQ1 examines how curry house operators understand and practise sustainability within their multi-dimensional constraints; RQ2 investigates structural barriers and enablers shaping sustainability transitions and innovation pathways; and RQ3 explores how different stakeholders within the curry food system perceive and influence sustainability practices in Bangladeshi curry houses.

While all stakeholder groups contributed to answering the research questions, each occupied distinct positions within the curry food ecosystem and therefore required tailored interview schedules that reflected their specific roles, influences, constraints, and knowledge domains (Yin, 2018).

The differentiated approach recognizes that sustainability practices in ethnic minority food businesses emerge through complex interactions across the food system rather than through isolated operator decisions (Mangla et al., 2018). As Freeman (1984) argues, stakeholders possess different forms of knowledge, power, and influence that shape organizational practices. Therefore, interview questions were designed to capture each stakeholder group's unique perspective while maintaining conceptual coherence around the core themes of sustainability understanding, practices, barriers, enablers, stakeholder influence, and innovation pathways (Patton, 2015). This design ensures that RQ1 and RQ2 are addressed primarily through operator-centered data contextualized by system-level insights, while RQ3 explicitly captures the multi-stakeholder perceptions and influence mechanisms that shape the sustainability landscape.

*3.4.8.2 Stakeholder-specific interview design*

*Curry House Operators (Primary Stakeholders):* Interview questions for curry house operators, the central actors in this study—were designed to directly address both research questions. Questions explored their understanding of sustainability across environmental, economic, and social dimensions; their actual practices and decision-making processes; the constraints they navigate; and their interactions with various stakeholders in the food system (RQ1). Additional questions examined structural barriers such as financial constraints, regulatory challenges, and market pressures, as well as enablers including community networks, supplier relationships, and existing innovations (RQ2). Operators were also asked about their perceptions of how different stakeholders influence their sustainability decisions and what support they receive or need from the broader food system (RQ3). The operator interviews were the most comprehensive, averaging 60-90 minutes, as they provided the foundation for understanding sustainability practices within their lived experiences and multi-dimensional constraints.

*Suppliers and Farmers (Upstream Stakeholders):* Interview questions for suppliers and farmers focused on their role in enabling or constraining sustainability practices through sourcing decisions, product availability, pricing structures, and supply chain relationships. Questions explored their own sustainability practices, their understanding of curry house requirements and constraints, and opportunities for collaborative sustainability initiatives (Ericksen, 2008). Critically for RQ3, questions examined how suppliers perceive their influence on curry house sustainability practices, what barriers prevent them from providing more sustainable options, and what would enable stronger sustainability partnerships. This

perspective was crucial for understanding structural barriers related to supply chain sustainability (RQ2) and identifying how upstream stakeholders shape operator practices (RQ3).

*Consumers (Demand-Side Stakeholders):* Consumer interview questions examined their perceptions of sustainability in curry houses, purchasing behaviors, willingness to support sustainable practices, and expectations regarding environmental and social responsibility. This perspective illuminated how consumer demand influences operator sustainability decisions and revealed potential market-based enablers or barriers (Spaargaren et al., 2013). For RQ3, consumer interviews provided essential data on how demand-side stakeholders perceive curry house sustainability efforts, what influences their patronage decisions, and how their preferences create pressures or opportunities for operators. Consumer insights helped explain why operators prioritize certain sustainability practices over others, directly informing RQ1's focus on how operators navigate stakeholder interactions.

*Policy Makers and Regulators (Institutional Stakeholders):* Interview questions for policy makers explored regulatory frameworks, policy intentions versus implementation realities, support mechanisms for ethnic minority businesses, and awareness of specific challenges facing curry houses. This perspective was essential for identifying structural barriers embedded in institutional arrangements and potential policy pathways for enabling sustainability transitions (RQ2). For RQ3, questions examined how policy makers perceive their role and influence in shaping curry house sustainability, what they understand about the sector's specific challenges, and what policy levers could better support sustainability transitions. Questions also probed policy makers' perceptions of the sustainability practices and needs of ethnic minority food businesses.

*NGOs and Association Representatives (Intermediary Stakeholders):* Interviews with NGO representatives and Bangladesh Caterers Association (BCA) members focused on their intermediary role connecting operators with resources, advocacy efforts, community perspectives, and observations of sustainability challenges and innovations across multiple curry houses. Their systemic view provided valuable cross-case insights and helped identify emerging practices and collective action opportunities (RQ2). For RQ3, questions explored how these intermediaries perceive their influence on sustainability practices, what advocacy strategies they employ, how they mobilize community support, and what systemic changes they believe would most effectively enable sustainability transitions. Their unique position bridging operators and external institutions provided crucial insights into influence mechanisms and collaborative potential.

*Research and Innovation Experts (Knowledge Stakeholders):* Interview questions for researchers and innovation experts explored technical knowledge about sustainability innovations, feasibility assessments for ethnic food businesses, awareness of sector-specific

constraints, and potential solutions. This perspective provided evidence-based insights into innovation pathways and helped evaluate the practicality of various sustainability approaches within the curry house context (RQ2). For RQ3, questions examined how these experts perceive their role in influencing sustainability practices, what knowledge transfer mechanisms exist or are needed, and how their technical expertise could be better leveraged to support curry house sustainability. Their perspective illuminated the gap between available sustainability knowledge and its practical application in constrained business contexts.

*3.4.8.3 Maintaining conceptual coherence across stakeholder groups*

Despite tailored questions, conceptual coherence was maintained through several design principles that ensured all three research questions could be addressed systematically. First, all interview schedules were structured around core thematic areas derived from the research questions: sustainability understanding and practices (RQ1), constraints and enablers (RQ2), stakeholder perceptions and influence (RQ3), and innovation pathways (RQ2). This ensured that different stakeholders addressed the same conceptual domains from their respective positions (Stake, 2006).

Second, certain questions were deliberately parallel across stakeholder groups to enable direct comparison and triangulation. For example, all groups were asked about their understanding of sustainability in the context of curry houses, their perceptions of key challenges, their views on potential solutions, and their assessment of how different actors influence sustainability outcomes. This parallelism facilitated triangulation by allowing the researcher to compare how different stakeholders perceived the same phenomena (Flick, 2018), which was particularly important for addressing RQ3's focus on stakeholder perceptions and influence.

Third, all interview schedules incorporated questions about stakeholder relationships and interactions, ensuring that the systemic nature of sustainability could be captured from multiple vantage points. This approach aligns with the Food Systems Approach's emphasis on understanding linkages and interdependencies across food system actors (Ericksen, 2008) and was essential for answering RQ3 comprehensively. By asking each stakeholder about their interactions with others in the system, a network of relationships, influence pathways, and collaborative potentials could be mapped.

*3.4.8.4 Analytical strategy for integrating multi-stakeholder responses*

The integration of responses across stakeholder groups followed a systematic analytical strategy designed to construct a holistic understanding of sustainability in the curry food system. This strategy employed what Yin (2018) describes as "pattern-matching" and what Stake (2006) terms "cross-case synthesis," adapted here for cross-stakeholder synthesis.

*Phase 1: Within-Group Analysis:* Interview transcripts from each stakeholder group were initially analyzed separately using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019). This within-group

analysis identified themes, patterns, and insights specific to each stakeholder type, preserving their unique perspectives and knowledge domains. For RQ3, this phase was particularly important as it captured the distinct ways different stakeholders perceived and described their influence on sustainability practices.

*Phase 2: Cross-referencing and triangulation:* Following within-group analysis, findings were systematically cross-referenced across stakeholder groups to achieve triangulation (Denzin, 1978). For instance, when curry house operators described supplier-related constraints (RQ1, RQ2), these accounts were triangulated with supplier perspectives on the same relationships (RQ3). Similarly, operator claims about consumer preferences were validated or challenged by actual consumer interview data. This cross-referencing enhanced the credibility and validity of findings by identifying convergences, divergences, and complementarities across perspectives (Patton, 2015). For RQ3 specifically, this phase revealed how different stakeholders perceived the same sustainability issues differently, exposing the contested and socially constructed nature of sustainability in this context.

*Phase 3: Systemic Integration:* The third phase involved integrating insights across all stakeholder groups to construct a systemic understanding of sustainability in the curry food system. This integration was guided by the Food Systems Approach framework, mapping how activities, outcomes, and sustainability practices emerged through interactions among system actors (Ericksen, 2008). Stakeholder Theory informed analysis of power dynamics, competing interests, and value co-creation across the network (Freeman, 1984). This phase was crucial for RQ3 as it revealed the complex web of influence mechanisms, relational dynamics, and collaborative potential across the food system.

*Phase 4: Research Question Mapping:* Finally, integrated findings were systematically mapped back to the three research questions. For RQ1, insights from all stakeholders contributed to understanding how curry house operators navigate sustainability within multi-dimensional constraints, with operator data as the primary source and other stakeholder data providing contextual validation. For RQ2, the multi-stakeholder data revealed structural barriers and enablers from multiple system levels, identifying innovation pathways grounded in diverse perspectives. For RQ3, cross-stakeholder analysis illuminated perceptions, influence mechanisms, and relational dynamics, showing how sustainability practices are shaped by interactions across the food system.

This analytical strategy enabled what Flick (2018) describes as ‘comprehensive understanding’ where the phenomenon is examined from multiple angles, and what Stake (2006) calls ‘thick description’ where contextual complexity is preserved rather than reduced. Importantly, the three research questions were not analyzed in isolation but rather as interconnected dimensions of a single phenomenon: operator practices (RQ1) are shaped by structural conditions (RQ2), which are in turn influenced by stakeholder actions and

perceptions (RQ3).

*3.4.8.5 Triangulation through multi-stakeholder perspectives*

Triangulation was achieved through three complementary approaches (Flick, 2018), each contributing to answering the research questions:

*Data Source Triangulation:* Multiple stakeholder groups provided different data sources on the same phenomena, enabling cross-validation of findings. For example, sustainability practices described by operators (RQ1) could be corroborated or contextualized by supplier accounts, consumer perceptions, and policy maker observations. This was particularly valuable for RQ3, as it allowed the researcher to compare how operators perceived stakeholder influence with how stakeholders themselves described their influence.

*Perspective Triangulation:* Different stakeholders brought different interpretive lenses to sustainability, revealing how the same practices were understood differently across the system. This enriched analysis by exposing the socially constructed and contested nature of sustainability in curry houses (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). For RQ3, perspective triangulation was essential as it captured the diversity of stakeholder perceptions and revealed areas of alignment and conflict across the food system.

*Theory Triangulation:* The combination of Stakeholder Theory and Food Systems Approach provided complementary analytical frameworks. Stakeholder Theory illuminated power relations and value negotiations (central to RQ3), while Food Systems Approach revealed systemic interdependencies and outcome pathways (central to RQ2). Multi-stakeholder data enabled both frameworks to be applied comprehensively, supporting integrated analysis across all three research questions. Importantly, triangulation was not used to seek singular "truth" but rather to construct what Lincoln and Guba (1985) describe as "trustworthy" interpretations that acknowledge multiple realities while identifying robust patterns across perspectives. This was particularly important for RQ3, where the goal was to capture the diversity of stakeholder perceptions rather than reduce them to a single consensus view.

**Mapping Interview Questions to Research Questions**

*Table 10: Demonstrating how specific interview themes across stakeholder groups collectively address the research questions*

| Research Question | Interview Themes | Stakeholder Groups Contributing | Integration Logic |
|---|---|---|---|
| **RQ1:** How do Bangladeshi curry house operators understand and practice sustainability within their multi-dimensional constraints? | | | |
| Understanding of sustainability | • What sustainability | **Primary:** Operators | Operators provide first-person understanding; |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | means in curry house context<br>• Environmental, economic, social dimensions<br>• Cultural considerations | **Supporting:** All other groups | other stakeholders reveal how operator understanding is shaped by external perceptions and pressures (links to RQ3) |
| Current practices | • Waste management approaches<br>• Sourcing decisions<br>• Energy use<br>• Community engagement | **Primary:** Operators<br>**Supporting:** Suppliers, Consumers, NGOs | Operators describe practices; suppliers and consumers validate/contextualize; NGOs provide cross-case patterns |
| Multi-dimensional constraints | • Financial limitations<br>• Time and labor constraints<br>• Knowledge gaps<br>• Infrastructure limitations; markets, policy misalignment | **Primary:** Operators<br>**Supporting:** Suppliers, Policy Makers, Innovation Experts | Operators articulate experienced constraints; other stakeholders confirm, explain structural origins (links to RQ2), or suggest solutions |
| Decision-making processes | • How sustainability priorities are set<br>• Trade-offs and compromises<br>• Role of cultural values | **Primary:** Operators<br>**Supporting:** BCA, NGOs | Operators explain their decision-making; intermediaries provide comparative insights across multiple businesses |
| **RQ2:** What structural barriers and enablers shape sustainability transitions, and what pathways might leverage existing innovations? | | | |
| Structural barriers | • Policy and regulatory barriers<br>• Market and economic barriers<br>• Supply chain barriers | **Primary:** Operators, Policy Makers<br>**Supporting:** All other groups | Each stakeholder identifies barriers from their system position; integration reveals multi-level structural challenges |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | • Knowledge and capacity barriers | | |
| Enablers and support systems | • Community networks<br>• Cultural values<br>• Existing innovations<br>• Support mechanisms<br>• Market opportunities | **Primary:** Operators, NGOs, BCA<br>**Supporting:** Consumers, Policy Makers | Diverse stakeholders identify different enablers; integration reveals comprehensive support ecosystem |
| Innovation pathways | • Existing adaptive practices<br>• Potential solutions<br>• Collaborative opportunities<br>• Scalability and replicability | **Primary:** Operators, Innovation Experts<br>**Supporting:** Suppliers, NGOs, Policy Makers | Operators share grassroots innovations; experts assess feasibility; policy makers consider enabling conditions; integration identifies viable pathways |
| Transition dynamics | • Change processes and trajectories<br>• Success factors and challenges<br>• Lessons learned | **Primary:** Operators, NGOs<br>**Supporting:** Innovation Experts, Policy Makers | Operators describe lived transition experiences; external stakeholders provide analytical and comparative perspectives |
| **RQ3:** How do different stakeholders within the curry food system perceive and influence sustainability practices in Bangladeshi curry houses? | | | |
| Stakeholder perceptions | • Understanding of curry house sustainability<br>• Expectations and priorities<br>• Awareness of challenges | All stakeholder groups | Each stakeholder articulates their perceptions, revealing convergences and divergences in how sustainability is understood across the system |
| Influence mechanisms | • Supply chain influence (suppliers)<br>• Market | All stakeholder groups | Each stakeholder describes how they influence or could influence curry house |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | demand influence (consumers)<br>• Regulatory influence (policy makers)<br>• Support influence (NGOs, BCA)<br>• Knowledge influence (experts) | | practices, revealing power dynamics and leverage points |
| Stakeholder relationships | • Nature of interactions with operators<br>• Quality of relationships<br>• Communication patterns<br>• Trust and reciprocity | **Primary:** All stakeholder groups | Multiple perspectives on the same relationships enable triangulation and reveal relational dynamics shaping sustainability |
| Collaborative potential | • Willingness to support sustainability<br>• Barriers to collaboration<br>• Opportunities for partnerships | **Primary:** All stakeholder groups | Stakeholders articulate their capacity and willingness to collaborate, informing practical recommendations for systemic change |
| Value alignment and conflicts | • Shared vs. competing priorities<br>• Trade-offs across stakeholder interests<br>• Areas of tension | **Primary:** All stakeholder groups | Cross-stakeholder comparison reveals where values align or conflict, explaining why certain sustainability practices are prioritized or neglected |

This mapping demonstrates that while operators provide the core data for understanding sustainability practices (RQ1), other stakeholders illuminate the systemic context, validate operator accounts, reveal structural forces, and identify broader patterns (RQ2). For RQ3, all stakeholder groups contribute equally as the research question explicitly seeks to capture their

diverse perceptions and influence mechanisms. The multi-stakeholder approach was essential because structural barriers and enablers exist at multiple system levels; individual, organizational, market, institutional, and cultural—and can only be comprehensively understood through diverse perspectives (Geels, 2020, 2011).

*Table 11: Contribution of each stakeholder group to research questions*

| **For RQ1 (Operator understanding and practice):** | |
|---|---|
| **Stakeholder** | ***Contribution*** |
| Operators | Direct accounts of understanding and practices (primary data source) |
| Suppliers/farmers | Contextualizing operator practices within supply chain realities and constraints |
| Consumers | Revealing demand-side influences on operator practices prioritization |
| Policy Makers | Explaining regulatory influences on operator decision-making |
| NGOs/BCA | Providing comparative perspective across multiple operators and identifying patterns |
| Innovation Experts | Assessing technical sophistication and feasibility of operator practices |
| **For RQ2: Exploring barriers, enablers, and innovation pathways:** | |
| Operators | Identifying experienced barriers and existing innovations (primary data source) |
| Suppliers/farmers | Revealing supply chain-level barriers and collaborative opportunities |
| Consumers | Indicating market-based enablers or barriers through stated preferences and behaviors |

| | |
|---|---|
| Policy Makers | Identifying institutional barriers and potential policy enabling mechanisms |
| NGOs/BCA | Highlighting systemic barriers, advocacy efforts, and collective action opportunities |
| Innovation Experts | Assessing technical feasibility, scalability, and transferability of innovations |
| **For RQ3 (Stakeholder perceptions and influence):** | |
| **All Stakeholder Groups:** Each group provides unique and equally important perspective on: | □ How they understand sustainability in the curry house context<br>□ What they expect or require from curry houses regarding sustainability<br>□ How they currently influence or could influence curry house practices<br>□ What barriers prevent them from supporting sustainability more effectively<br>□ What collaborative opportunities exist across the food system<br>□ How their values and priorities align or conflict with operator priorities |

This differentiated yet integrated approach ensures that research questions are answered comprehensively through multiple, complementary evidence sources rather than through a single, potentially limited perspective (Stake, 2006; Yin, 2018).The three research questions are thus complementary: RQ1 focuses on the "what" and "how" of operator practices, RQ2 examines the "why" through structural analysis, and RQ3 illuminates the "who" and "how" of stakeholder influence—together providing systemic understanding of sustainability in the curry food system.

### 3.4.9 Participant observation

While engaging with the research respondents, especially the caterers during field visits and interviews, I constantly observe the proceedings of engagements and their day-to-day business operations. According to Creswell (2002), a participant observation consists in the role played by the researchers as they partake in activities within the setting under

observation. To effectively manage this observation, a checklist proposed in Merriam (1998) which includes, physical setting, participant's activities, interactions, conversation, behaviour, and subtle factors was maintained and recorded in my field notes.

Much of the data gathered through participant observation comes from interviews conducted in the field. Participant observation is a specific approach to acquiring knowledge, which relies on direct interaction between the researcher and the social subjects of interest (Cassell et al.,2020). Cassell & Symon (2016) highlight the experiential core of participant observation, suggesting that all individuals, consciously or unconsciously, observe as participants during social interactions. Hammersley & Atkinson (2019) view participant observation as a "mode of being-in-the-world" (1994: p249).

As the researcher, it was crucial to reflect on interviews, observations, and discussions with participants to ensure the collection and analysis of effective data. Observational data was captured through detailed field notes, which were taken on-site to record significant details at the time of the event. My observations during visits to curry houses allowed me to understand nuances and practices I wouldn't have understood through interviews or focus group. For instance, I observed informal credit, trust-based arrangements, waste and energy saving practices to triangulate the insights from the interviews.

### 3.4.10 Documents review

In addition to interview and focus group data, this study incorporated a documentary review of publicly available sources to triangulate findings and provide broader contextual insight into the Bangladeshi curry industry in the UK. This method allowed for the inclusion of non-reactive data, offering institutional, cultural, and economic perspectives that enriched the primary data (Lune & Berg, 2017). Key documents were retrieved from industry-specific websites and organisational publications that represent the interests, challenges, and contributions of Bangladeshi restaurateurs. These included:

*Table 12: Document review sources*

| Document | Website | Description |
|---|---|---|
| CurryLife Magazine | www.currylife.uk | A leading industry platform that provides news, commentary, and professional recognition through its annual Curry Life Awards. It offers insights into trends, policy responses, and the socio-cultural positioning of Bangladeshi restaurants in the UK |
| The British Curry Awards | www.britishcurryaward.co.uk | An established institution celebrating excellence in the curry industry. Its published reports, speeches, and press releases provided valuable material on sector |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | | achievements and challenges, particularly regarding labour shortages and generational shifts |
| The Bangladesh Caterers Association (BCA) | www.bangladeshcircle.com | A dedicated platform representing over 12,000 Bangladeshi-owned restaurants in the UK. It offers cultural and economic perspectives on business practices, lobbying efforts, and policy engagement relevant to the community. |
| BBC BAME Business Features | https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/topics/cq23pdgvyd1t/bame | Provides broader socio-economic narratives relevant to Bangladeshi business owners, including issues of identity, entrepreneurship, and migration |

*Source: Researcher's compilation*

These sources served not only as secondary data but also as cultural texts, reflecting the public discourse, aspirations, and evolving identity of the Bangladeshi curry industry in Britain. The documents were analysed thematically to identify recurring narratives and institutional framings that complemented or contrasted with the interview data. This approach supported data triangulation and enhanced the credibility and contextual depth of the research findings (Patton, 2015).

### 3.5. Data handling

All data collected during the study were managed in line with Aston University's ethical and data protection policies to ensure participant anonymity and confidentiality. The audio recordings from interviews were anonymously transcribed and coded, and uploaded to a secured platform (Aston BOX). Interviews conducted via Microsoft Teams were recorded and transcribed concurrently during the interviews while other interviews conducted during field visits were later transcribed by the researcher to get a 'feel' of the interviews. All the recordings were manually transferred by dragging the document from my "transcripts" folder to a save OneDrive folder in my Aston BOX account. All field notes and reflexive notes were kept securely at the researchers' home, and later scanned and uploaded to Aston Box, and the paper copy to be destroyed. To maintain confidentiality and anonymity of the interviewees, no other individuals were given access to the recordings, notes and the transcripts.

Digital consent forms were stored separately from participant data to maintain confidentiality, and each participant was assigned a unique identifier code. These codes were used in place of personal identifiers across all documents and were themselves password protected. Although NVivo was not used for analysis, it served as a secure digital repository to store and organise the data. The NVivo database was protected with a strong, unique password, and access was restricted to the researcher. All devices used during the study were password protected and securely stored, while computers used to access data were safeguarded with

antivirus software, firewalls, and auto-lock features after periods of inactivity. Participants were fully informed of these data management procedures during the consent process, reinforcing the study's commitment to ethical and secure research practice.

## 3.6 Managing subjectivity and positionality through reflexivity

Hammersley (2016) identifies reflexivity as a vital component of qualitative research, enabling researchers to critically examine how their positionality and involvement influence both the research process and its outcomes. Relatedly, Braun and Clark (2019) posit that the researcher's experiences, personal viewpoints, values, and beliefs are also part of the research processes, and as such they should be acknowledged and discussed. This is called reflexivity (Berger, 2015). Thus, being an ethnic minority from a former British colony and conducting research on ethnic minority groups also of British colonial history, there are high chances of sub-conscious biasness (Hammersley, 2016). Therefore, one of the most effective approaches to exploring such subjective preconceptions and positionality is by constantly engaging in reflexivity as argued in Swaminathan & Mulvihill (2018).

Consequently, throughout this study, I kept in place a Reflexivity Log to systematically record my comments, thoughts, feelings, decisions, and reflections, as well as the participants' comments during interviews, while continually editing my subjective statements (Berger, 2015). The following subsections critically examine how my African heritage and postcolonial positioning shaped every aspect of the research process; from initial participant interactions to final analytical insights, demonstrating that reflexivity is not merely an abstract methodological consideration but a lived, dynamic process that fundamentally influences knowledge production in cross-cultural research contexts.

### 3.6.1 Cultural positioning and its impact on participant disclosure

My cultural positioning as an African researcher with shared British colonial history significantly influenced what participants were willing to share during interviews. This positioning created what Yip (2024) describe as 'insider-outsider' dynamics, where shared experiences of colonial legacy, migration, and minority status in the UK fostered initial rapport, while cultural differences required careful navigation. Several participants expressed comfort in discussing sensitive topics around financial constraints, discrimination, and community pressures, with one participant noting "you understand what it's like being from our kind of background in this country," referring to the shared experience of navigating British society as postcolonial minorities.

The shared colonial history created what Leong et al., (2021) term 'conceptual equivalence' around experiences of structural marginalisation, enabling participants to reference systemic barriers without extensive explanation. However, this positioning also shaped participant

responses in potentially limiting ways. Some participants may have assumed I already understood certain cultural practices and therefore provided less detailed explanations about specifically Bangladeshi business traditions or religious considerations. Additionally, there were instances where participants seemed to present their practices in ways they thought would align with broader minority solidarity, potentially obscuring important cultural specificities (Perez et al.,2022).

### 3.6.2 Cultural knowledge enhancing analytical insight

My African background, while different from participants' South Asian heritage, provided valuable analytical perspectives through what Wesp et al. (2018) describes as ‘cross-cultural competence’ developed through shared minority experiences in postcolonial Britain. My understanding of how colonial legacies shape contemporary business practices enabled me to recognize patterns in participants' narratives about navigating British regulatory systems and market structures that might not be immediately apparent to researchers without postcolonial experience (Nkomo & Hoobler, 2014).

For instance, when participants discussed strategies for dealing with licensing authorities or building relationships with British suppliers and farmers, my familiarity with the subtle dynamics of minority-majority business interactions allowed me to probe deeper into the adaptive strategies they employed. This cross-cultural insight helped illuminate how participants leveraged community networks and cultural capital in ways that extended beyond their immediate ethnic community to include broader minority business networks (Ram et al., 2017; Cunningham & McGuire, 2019).

My position as an African researcher also provided analytical distance that proved beneficial. Unlike researchers from within the Bangladeshi community who might take certain cultural practices for granted, I needed to ask clarifying questions about religious considerations, family hierarchies, and community expectations. This necessary inquiry often led participants to provide richer explanations that revealed the complexity of their decision-making processes, particularly around sustainability practices that intersected cultural and religious values. Additionally, my experience navigating British academic institutions as an African provided insight into how participants balanced authenticity with adaptation; a dynamic clearly visible in how they approached sustainability initiatives. This understanding helped me interpret the tensions participants expressed between maintaining cultural identity and meeting British business expectations (Yip, 2024).

### 3.6.3 Acknowledging potential cultural blind spots

While my African background and shared colonial experience provided analytical advantages, it also created potential blind spots that required constant vigilance. As Perez et al. (2022)

argue, researchers from different minority backgrounds may assume universal minority experiences when significant cultural variations exist. My position as an outsider to Bangladeshi culture meant I might have missed subtle cultural nuances specific to Bangladeshi business practices, religious observances, or community hierarchies that could significantly influence sustainability decision-making (Yip, 2024). Additionally, my academic positioning may have created what is described as epistemic privilege, where participants might have felt their experiential knowledge was less valuable compared to academic theories (Olmos-Vega et al.,2023). Some participants might have downplayed indigenous or culturally-specific sustainability practices, viewing them as informal or less legitimate when compared to Western sustainability frameworks I represented as an academic researcher.

There was also the risk of what Smith (2021) calls colonial gaze, inadvertently shaping my analytical lens. Despite shared colonial history, my African perspective might have led me to interpret participants' strategies through frameworks that didn't fully account for specifically South Asian responses to marginalization and adaptation in the British context. This could have resulted in missing important dimensions of how Bangladeshi entrepreneurs specifically navigate the intersection of cultural preservation and business adaptation.

Furthermore, language barriers occasionally emerged despite conducting interviews in English. Participants sometimes used Bengali terms or concepts that required translation, and my lack of Bengali language skills meant I was dependent on participants' own translations, potentially losing nuanced meanings that could have enriched the analysis (Yunus et al.,2022).

### 3.6.4 Prolonged engagement addressing initial presentation biases

My early meeting with some of the Bangladeshi entrepreneurs during events organised at my research Centre, coupled with the extended fieldwork period of over six months allowed for the development of deeper relationships that gradually moved beyond what Ragon and Reyes (2023) describes as frontstage presentations to more authentic backstage realities. Early interviews often featured participants presenting idealized versions of their sustainability practices, emphasizing formal initiatives while downplaying informal or culturally-specific approaches they might have considered less aligned with Western sustainability paradigms (Berger, 2015).

Through prolonged engagement, including multiple interviews and informal conversations, participants became more comfortable sharing the complexities of their operations. This process reflects what can be described as relationship building in cross-cultural research contexts (Perez et al.,2022). For example, initial interviews focused on official recycling programs and energy-saving equipment, but later conversations revealed sophisticated

informal waste- sharing networks between restaurants and community-based sourcing practices that represented significant but previously unacknowledged sustainability strategies.

The extended timeframe also allowed me to observe contextual variations in business operations and sustainability practices, providing a more comprehensive understanding than single-point-in-time data collection would have achieved (Ragon & Reyes, 2023). Participants gradually shared more complex narratives about the tensions between sustainability aspirations and survival necessities, moving beyond initial presentations of harmonious alignment between values and practices.

This prolonged engagement was crucial in building what Perez et al. (2022) describe as research relationships that transcended initial cultural positioning. Over time, participants moved from seeing me primarily through the lens of shared minority status to recognizing my role as a researcher genuinely interested in understanding their specific experiences. This shift enabled more nuanced discussions about sensitive topics including financial constraints, discrimination experiences, and community/cultural conflicts that significantly influenced their sustainability decision-making but which they were initially reluctant to discuss (Ragon & Reyes, 2023).

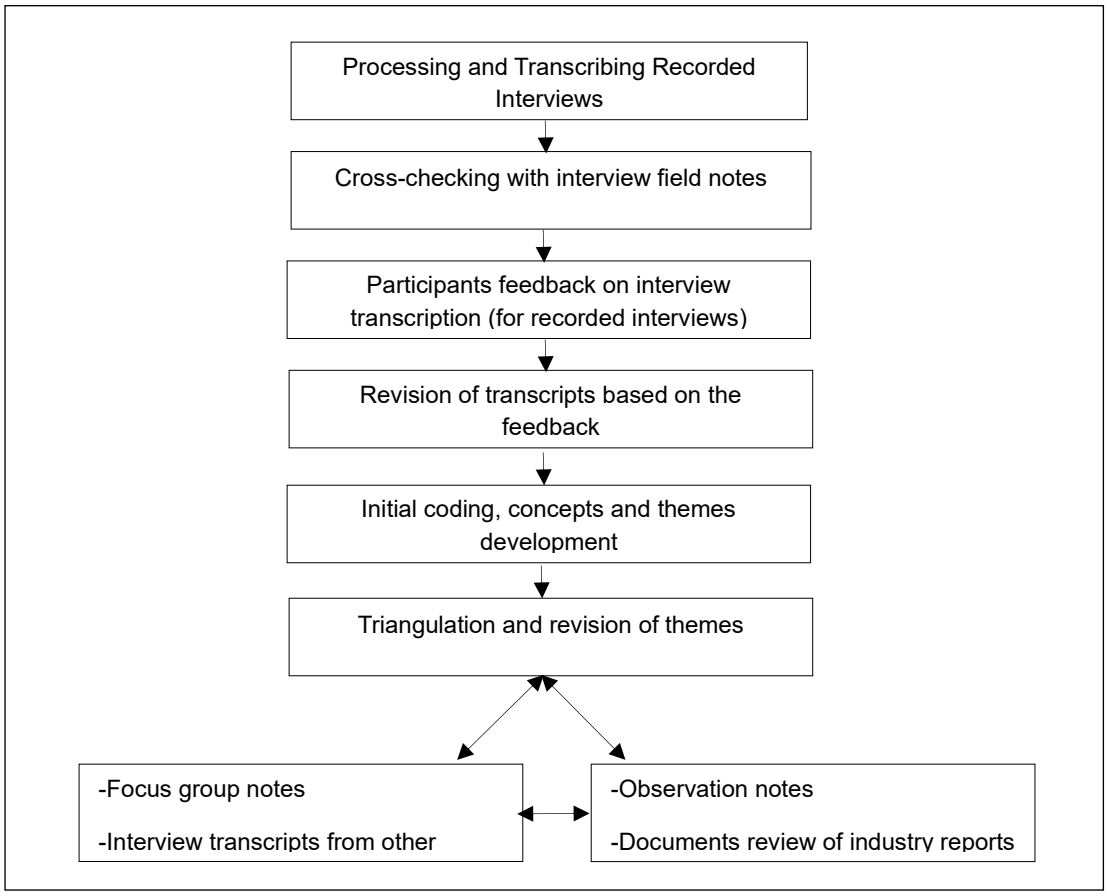
### 3.7. Process of empirical material interpretation

Thematic coding remains one of the most widely accepted and applied methods for analysing qualitative empirical data, with textual materials serving as the primary basis for analysis. In this study, the interpretive process commenced with the transcription of interview audio recordings from my key participants. Transcriptions were conducted concurrently with data collection, allowing the interview guide to be iteratively refined based on emerging insights. During the transcription process, non-verbal cues such as pauses, hesitations, and emotional expressions were noted where relevant, to maintain the context and tone of participants' accounts. Each transcription was meticulously cross-referenced with field notes taken during the interviews to ensure no details were omitted, enhancing the reliability of the data. This process was grounded in the principles of cooperative research (Olmos-Vega et al.,2023), involving systematic validation steps, from transcription accuracy to interpretive discussions, resulting in the development of the final analytical framework.

Importantly, participants were invited to review and confirm the accuracy of their transcribed contributions and interpretations, reinforcing the collaborative nature of the research. Such interactions played a vital role in stimulating idea development and testing conceptual clarity. This iterative feedback mechanism, also contributed to the robustness of the study's findings. Following participant validation, the data were coded, and emergent concepts were organized into thematic categories. These were subsequently triangulated with interview transcripts from

other stakeholders, observational field notes and document review to enhance interpretive depth and analytical rigor. Figure 6 provides an overview of the empirical material interpretation process followed in this case studies.

*Figure 5: Process of empirical material interpretation*




### 3.8 Ensuring validity, reliability, and consistency

Within the context of interpretivist qualitative research, traditional concepts of validity and reliability are reconceptualised to reflect trustworthiness, credibility, and coherence (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Rather than seeking objective replicability, this study aimed to produce context-rich, authentic insights that remain faithful to participants' lived experiences. As such, a series of robust strategies were employed to enhance the credibility, dependability, and confirmability of the research process and findings.

Credibility, akin to internal validity was strengthened through prolonged engagement with participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018) or the long-term observation (Ragon & Reyes, 2023), iterative questioning during interviews, and member validation where participants were given the opportunity to clarify or expand on their responses (Lune & Berg, 2017). Also, the researcher ensured consistent contact with the participants. This helped ensure that the data collected authentically represented their perspectives.

Dependability, reflecting reliability in qualitative research, was addressed by maintaining a detailed audit trail that documented every stage of the research process, from participant selection and interview scheduling to transcription, coding, and theme development (as detailed in previous sections). This process transparency allows others to trace and understand the rationale behind methodological decisions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Consistency was ensured using a structured but flexible interview guide, which enabled the researcher to explore emergent themes while maintaining comparability across cases. Drawing on insights from both restaurant owners and critical food supply chain stakeholders, as well as other sources of data helped corroborate findings and reduce potential researcher bias (Yin, 2018). This constitutes a methodological triangulation which is an integral part of the case study design (Saunder et al.,2018).

Furthermore, in line with interpretivist principles, reflexivity was also embedded throughout the study. The researcher maintained a reflective log to critically consider how positionality and assumptions may have influenced data interpretation (Braun & Clark, 2022). This reflexive approach enhanced transparency and integrity in meaning-making. Taken together, these strategies ensured that the study's findings are not only methodologically sound but also ethically and philosophically consistent with its interpretivist orientation. The following section discusses how the data collected were analysed.

### 3.9 Data Analysis

Data were organized into 'a case study database'(Yin, 2011) in Microsoft excel and analyzed manually using Reflexive Thematic Analysis based on Braun and Clark (2019, 2021). Reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) is an easily accessible and theoretically flexible interpretative approach to qualitative data analysis that facilitates the identification and analysis of patterns or themes in a given data set (Braun and Clarke, 2022). RTA sits among several varied approaches to conducting thematic analysis and has often been confused with other approaches to thematic analysis (Braun and Clark, 2019; Byrne, 2021), resulting in incompatibilities (Braun and Clarke, 2019; Terry et al. 2017). To resolve this confusion, Braun and Clarke have demarcated the position of RTA among the other forms of thematic analysis (TA) by differentiating between three principal approaches to TA: (1) coding reliability TA; (2) codebook approaches to TA, and (3) the reflexive approach to TA (Braun and Clarke 2019).

*Coding reliability approaches* emphasize accuracy and consistency in coding, often using structured codebooks and seeking inter-coder agreement, typically measured with Cohen's Kappa (Braun & Clarke, 2016). In this approach, themes are usually developed early, either hypothesised from theory before data collection or after initial data familiarisation (Terry et al., 2017). Themes are viewed as 'domain summaries' or descriptive accounts of participant responses and are often treated as residing objectively within the data (Braun et al., 2019).

*Codebook approaches*, such as framework analysis (Smith & Firth, 2011) and template analysis (King & Brooks, 2017), represent a middle ground between coding reliability and reflexive approaches. While they also use structured codebooks and share the view of themes as domain summaries, they lean more towards a qualitative philosophy, acknowledging the interpretive nature of coding and moving away from strict positivist reliability (Braun et al., 2019).

*The reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) approach* which is being adopted in this study underscores the researcher's active and interpretive role in knowledge production (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Rather than seeking objectivity, RTA treats codes as a reflection of the researcher's interpretation of patterns in the data, shaped by the dataset, theoretical assumptions, and the researcher's analytical skillset (Byrne, 2021). Consequently, it is neither expected nor necessary for different researchers to generate identical codes or themes, as researcher brings a unique perspective, hence reproducibility of codes and themes is neither expected nor required (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Therefore, when multiple researchers or coders are involved, collaboration should enrich interpretations rather than enforce agreement (Byrne, 2021; Saunders et al., 2023).

Unlike coding reliability approaches (e.g., Boyatzis, 1998), which aim for measurement accuracy and inter-coder consensus, RTA discourages such positivist notions. Instead, it promotes reflective engagement with the data and the analytic process (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Also, themes in RTA are not pre-determined, pre-defined or drawn from a fixed codebook, as is common in coding reliability or codebook approaches (e.g, framework analysis by Smith & Firth, 2011; template analysis by King & Brooks, 2017). Rather, they evolve organically through deep engagement with the data and are structured around a 'central organising concept', identified through ongoing engagement with the data (Braun & Clarke, 2019). This dynamic and iterative process allows new meanings to surface as familiarity with the data grows.

While RTA was initially presented as compatible with a range of epistemological positions, recent works position it firmly within qualitative paradigms such as interpretivism (Braun & Clarke, 2021). In contrast to other forms of qualitative analysis such as content analysis or early thematic approaches (Boyatzis, 1998), RTA avoids positivist assumptions and values reflexivity, subjectivity, and creativity as integral and essential strengths in interpretive process in qualitative research, rather than as threats to research rigour (Braun & Clark, 2021).

### 3.9.1 RTA in this study

Situated within an interpretivist and relativist paradigms, participants were asked about their views, perceptions and experiences related to sustainability and how it can be improved. While

I used a flexible interview protocol to ensure all dimensions of questions were explored, conversations often followed what participants found meaningful, moving fluidly and naturally between topics. At the same time, the reflexive influence of my role as researcher, and how my interpretations shaped the inquiry, was actively acknowledged. Therefore, RTA was considered well-suited for its alignment with these theoretical and paradigmatic foundations, offering an approach that values subjectivity, embraces reflexivity, and supports rich, meaningful interpretations of qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2019, Byrne, 2021).

The following section outlines the theoretical assumptions underpinning RTA as used in this study. While this is not a requirement unique to RTA, articulating these assumptions is essential before applying any form of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The six-step process of conducting RTA will then be presented, as applied in this study.

### 3.9.2 Underlying theoretical assumptions

Braun and Clarke (2019) have outlined several theoretical assumptions for conducting RTA or any thematic analysis. These assumptions are framed as continua: i) *essentialist versus constructionist epistemologies*, ii) *experiential versus critical data orientations*, iii) *inductive versus deductive analyses*, and iv) *semantic versus latent coding*. The goal is for the researcher to not only position their analysis within these continua but also to justify why this positioning is appropriate for addressing the research question(s).

*(I) Essentialist versus constructionist epistemologies*

Ontological and epistemological considerations are typically defined at the start of a study but may resurface during data analysis, especially in qualitative research. Addressing this continuum helps clarify how the researcher conceptualizes the data and guides the reader in interpreting the findings (Braun & Clarke, 2019). In essentialism, researchers view language as a direct reflection of experience, assuming meanings are unambiguous and largely unexamined (Widdicombe & Woofitt, 1995). This limits the interpretive potential of thematic analysis (Braun et al., 2016).

In contrast, approaches like constructionist sees language as integral to the social creation of meaning and experience (Burr, 1995; Schwandt, 1994). This perspective influences thematic analysis by emphasizing the meaningfulness, not just recurrence, of themes. While recurring elements are important, not everything repeated in the data is inherently meaningful for the analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Furthermore, respondents may express varying levels of conviction, aiding in identifying the significance of themes. Meaningfulness, from a constructionist epistemology, is considered in two ways: first, from the researcher's need to identify relevant themes, and second, from the respondent's emphasis on the importance of

the issues (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Thus, while recurrence is important, meaning and significance guide the coding process. In line with RTA's qualitative philosophy, meaning and experience are seen as socially constructed through subjective and inter-subjective processes (Braun & Clarke, 2021), which aligns with the interpretivist paradigm adopted in this study.

*(II) Experiential versus critical data orientations*

An experiential orientation to data analysis focuses on how participants experience a phenomenon, emphasizing the meaning they attach to it and its significance. This approach relies on understanding thoughts, feelings, and experiences as subjective and inter-subjective reflections of internal personal states. The researcher respects and prioritizes the meanings and importance ascribed by the participants (Braun & Clarke, 2019). On the other hand, a critical orientation examines how language shapes, rather than merely reflects, personal states, interrogating the social construction of meaning (Terry et al., 2017). This approach explores how wider social contexts influence meaning systems, focusing on how social reality is constituted.

In this study, an experiential orientation was adopted to reflect the meaning and significance participants ascribed to their experiences. This approach was most suitable as the research aimed to explore the subjective and contextualised "meanings made" by the participants, rather than examining the broader social construction of the research topic.

*(III) Inductive versus deductive analyses*

A researcher using a deductive or theory-driven approach applies pre-existing theoretical frameworks or codebooks to guide the coding process, often resulting in an analyst-driven analysis (Byrne, 2021). In contrast, a data-driven or inductive approach involves coding the data without a predefined framework, focusing on the meanings conveyed by participants (Braun & Clarke, 2022). While deductive analysis can offer detailed insights into specific aspects through a theoretical lens, it often provides a less comprehensive view of the overall dataset. Deductive approaches are typically linked to positivist or essentialist epistemologies, whereas inductive approaches align more with interpretivist epistemologies (Saunders et al.,2018).

In practice, analysis rarely adheres strictly to one approach, often blending both inductive and deductive methods. Braun and Clarke (2019) note that even a predominantly deductive or inductive approach will still involve elements of the opposite to some degree. The predominant approach, either theory-driven or data-driven reflects the researcher’s orientation toward either prioritizing theory-based meaning or respondent-based meaning. For this study, an inductive approach was primarily adopted, with open-coding to focus on participant meanings.

However, deductive elements were incorporated to ensure that the coding was relevant to the research questions, ensuring the data-based themes addressed the study's objectives (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

*(IV) Semantic versus latent coding*

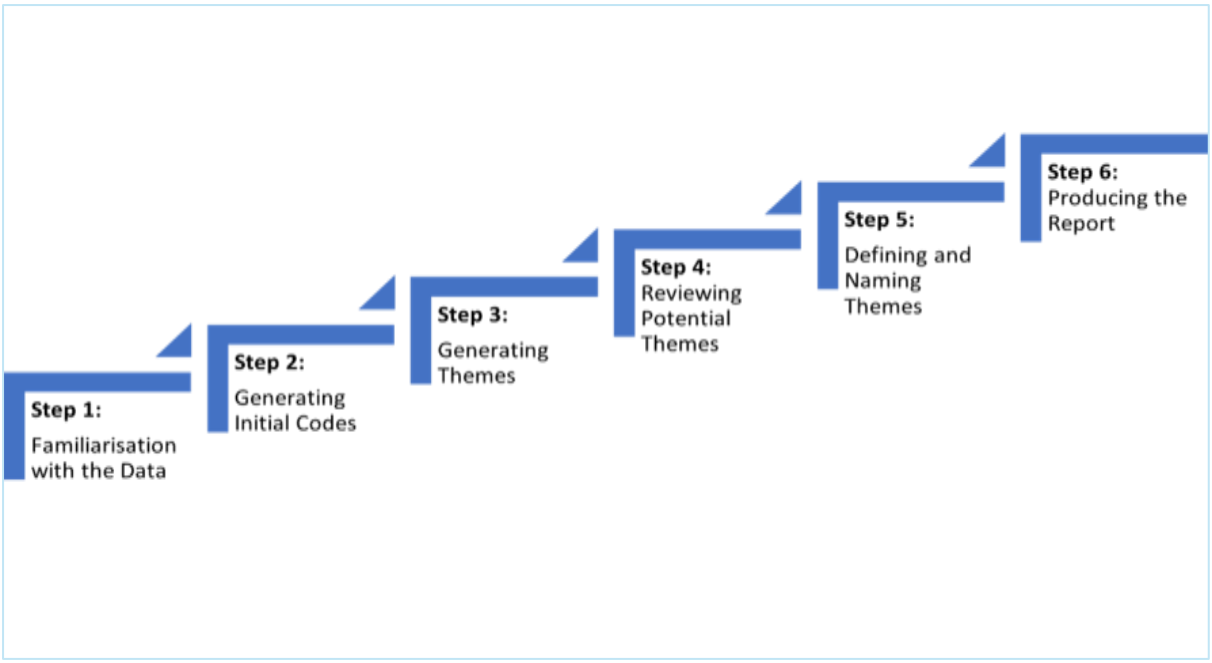
Semantic coding focuses on the explicit meanings expressed by respondents, offering a descriptive analysis of the data. It aims to reflect the content communicated directly by participants. In contrast, latent coding goes deeper, seeking to uncover hidden meanings, assumptions, or ideologies that shape the surface-level content. This approach is more interpretive, requiring the researcher to actively engage in identifying these underlying themes (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

In this study, both semantic and latent coding were used. No preference was given to one over the other; instead, each was employed when meaningful information was identified at either the surface or deeper levels. This approach reflects the interpretive epistemological stance, where both the participant's communicated meaning and the researcher's interpretation of that meaning are considered (Patton, 1990).

### 3.9.3 Walking through the six steps of RTA as adopted in this study

Braun and Clarke (2022) propose a six-phase process for conducting RTA, designed to guide researchers in identifying and analyzing key aspects of their data. While the phases are logically organized, the process is not strictly linear; instead, it is recursive and iterative. Researchers often move back and forth between phases, refining their interpretations as they progress (Saunders et al.,2018). This flexibility allows for evolving insights and further iterations, ensuring that the analysis remains responsive to the data and research questions. Thus, the six-step process (as outlined in Figure 7) were given as guidelines rather than rigid rules, adaptable to the specific needs of every study (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

*Figure 6: Depicting the six-step process of Reflexive Thematic Analysis*




***Source:*** *Adopted from (Braun & Clarke, 2022).*

**Step 1: Familiarisation with the data**

The first phase of reflexive thematic analysis involves a deep and immersive process of familiarisation, where the researcher becomes intimately acquainted with the content, depth, and complexities of the dataset (Braun and Clarke, 2022). This stage is not simply about reading and re-reading, but active and reflexive engagement; paying attention to patterns of meaning, tone, contradictions, silences, and the emotional force of what participants say (Braun & Clarke, 2022). This process allows the researcher to become deeply familiar with the data, to identify relevant information connected to the research question. It is through this immersion that the researcher notices potential seeds of meaning that may later develop into codes and themes (Braun & Clarke, 2019). One effective strategy is through manual transcription, which provides a deeper immersion in the data (Byrne,2021)

In this study, familiarisation took on both a contextual and interpretive function. I engaged repeatedly with the 15 transcripts from curry house owners, as well as many other transcripts from stakeholders across the curry food system. Most of the interviews conducted during fieldwork were audio recorded and subsequently transcribed manually, while other transcriptions done via Microsoft teams were also edited and cleaned, allowing me to immerse deeply into the data. This repeated immersion allowed me to not only comprehend the explicit content of the interviews but to attune myself to the deeper cultural, economic, and structural dimensions shaping how sustainability is understood and practiced within these spaces. It was essential for identifying emerging patterns and nuances in participants' narratives (Bird, 2005). During the transcription process, it was ensured that non-verbal cues such as pauses,

hesitations, inflections, and emotional expressions were noted where relevant, to maintain the context and tone of participants' accounts (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

While this phase can be time-consuming and requires a lot of patience from researchers (Byrne, 2021), it was critical to consider the entire dataset equally, resisting the temptation to selectively focus on certain parts of the data or skip this step altogether. In this study, familiarisation process was particularly critical given the intersectional realities faced by ethnic food entrepreneurs, whose experiences of sustainability are deeply entangled with issues of economic survival, cultural expectations, institutional exclusion, and informal resourcefulness. For example, early readings of the data revealed recurring narratives where sustainability was equated with business continuity:

> "*Sustainability for us means staying open, paying bills, and making sure the customers come back*" *(Caterer, Rahman/BCH-2)*.

This insight emerged not from isolated quotes but from a patterned emotional texture across multiple interviews, pointing to a deeply held perception of sustainability as an economic contingency rather than an environmental or social ambition. Such insights required reflexive attunement, not just descriptive notetaking. As suggested by Braun and Clarke (2021), reflexive thematic analysis acknowledges the researcher's subjectivity as a resource and not a threat, allowing for richer, situated interpretations of complex social phenomena.

Moreover, this stage revealed important silences and absences in the data. For instance, while sustainability was mentioned often, few participants discussed formal sustainability certifications, carbon metrics, or global climate frameworks. Instead, their talk centred on everyday adaptive strategies; like reducing food waste, sourcing ingredients through community ties, or modifying portion sizes based on customer behaviour. This absence of institutional sustainability language reflected not ignorance but rather a disconnection from dominant sustainability discourses, which became a key interpretive lens in later analysis.

I also kept detailed reflexive notes throughout this process, as recommended by Braun and Clarke (2022), documenting not only emerging patterns but also my emotional and intellectual responses to the data. These notes helped surface early analytical questions such as:

- What does sustainability really mean to ethnic micro-entrepreneurs?
- How do cultural values and community expectations shape or constrain sustainability decisions?
- What forms of invisible sustainability exist in these food networks, and why are they often overlooked by policy and academia?

Through this extended period of reading, re-reading, reflexivity, and re-immersing myself in the dataset, I developed a deeply situated understanding of the data landscape. This familiarisation process laid the solid foundation for subsequent stages of coding and theme development that captured the nuanced, multifaceted, and power-laden realities of sustainability within ethnic food supply chains.

**Step 2: Generating initial codes**

Following the in-depth familiarisation with the data, the next phase of reflexive thematic analysis involves the systematic generation of initial codes, the basic elements of meaning that later inform theme development (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Codes are not merely derived from the data alone but are constructed through the researcher's interpretive engagement with the material. They serve as analytic building blocks, capturing features of the data that are relevant to the research questions and theoretical orientation of the study (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Thus, the coding process involves systematically creating succinct, descriptive labels for relevant pieces of data, which will eventually form themes (Braun & Clarke, 2020). Therefore, codes should be concise yet detailed enough to explain the underlying commonality among related data items (Braun et al., 2016).

In this study, coding was conducted manually and iteratively across the full set of transcripts, including interviews with curry house owners, and other stakeholders. Given the reflexive nature of this approach, I did not apply a rigid coding frame; instead, I allowed the codes to emerge organically, guided by the research aims and the initial conceptual frameworks underpinning the study; particularly the stakeholder theory and the food systems approach. Coding was both semantic and latent. That is, I coded not only for what participants explicitly said (e.g., *"we use portion control to cut waste"*) but also for underlying patterns of meaning, such as how repeated expressions of "cost pressure" or "survival" reflected deeper economic vulnerabilities embedded in sustainability talk. This dual approach ensured that I captured both surface-level practices and deeper discursive constructions of sustainability.

*Table 13: Examples of initial codes generated*

| |
|---|
| -Sustainability as business survival |
| -Reducing waste through portion control |
| -Daily fresh sourcing as waste strategy |
| -Unaffordability of eco-packaging |
| -Regulations favour large businesses |
| -Excluded from government support |

-Consumer expectations of cheap pricing
-Lack of access to sustainability knowledge
-Using informal suppliers for affordability
-Technology resistance among older owners
-Aspirations to grow but limited by staffing
-Cultural authenticity vs. market expectations

These codes were applied to relevant data extracts across interviews using constant comparison (Corbin & Strauss, 2008), ensuring consistency and flexibility. As Braun and Clarke (2021, 2022) advice, I did not seek to reduce the data to a rigid coding matrix but engaged in recursive cycles of reading, re-coding, and memoing to surface patterns that resonated across multiple stakeholders.

Importantly, coding was not about quantifying frequency but identifying analytic significance. For instance, even though only a few caterers mentioned “using community contacts to access imported spices,” this code gained analytic weight because it illuminated the role of informal supply networks, a recurrent yet under-theorized phenomenon in sustainable entrepreneurship literature. Similarly, the code “resistance to technology” carried latent meaning about intergenerational divides and traditional influences, which became foundational in theorising contested pathways to innovation in ethnic food enterprises.

During this phase, I also made reflexive memos capturing the analytical moves I was making; why a particular phrase was coded, how it related to my theoretical lens, or how my positionality influenced interpretation. This aligns with Braun and Clarke’s (2019) emphasis on active, situated researcher reflexivity, which is central to the trustworthiness of reflexive thematic analysis.

Ultimately, the coding process enabled the identification of analytically rich data extracts that reflected the interplay between sustainability practices, economic realities, institutional constraints, and cultural identity in the curry food ecosystem. These codes served as the scaffolding for the later development of sub-themes and themes that captured the power dynamics, adaptive strategies, and systemic exclusions shaping sustainability in this context.

**Step 3: Generating Themes**

The third phase of reflexive thematic analysis involves the movement from codes to candidate themes, a process that is inherently interpretive, iterative, and creative to identify patterns of shared meaning across the data (Braun and Clarke’s, 2019). The goal is not merely to aggregate similar codes, but to actively construct potential themes that reflected deeper, latent

ideas relevant to the lived realities of participants. Rather than treating themes as "emerging" from the data alone, Braun and Clarke (2022) advocate for their active construction by the researcher, guided by analytic judgment, theoretical orientation, and engagement with the research questions. Themes are not merely summaries of codes but are meaning-based patterns that offer explanatory power, capturing something important about how participants make sense of the phenomenon under study (Braun and Clarke's, 2019).

In this study, the initial codes were grouped based on shared meanings and patterned relationships across stakeholder narratives. The goal was to develop candidate themes that would not only organise the data meaningfully but also facilitate theoretical insight into the systemic, cultural, and institutional conditions that shape sustainability practices in this sector.

***The thematic construction process***

I engaged in a flexible process of sorting, clustering, and interrogating codes to examine which ones were conceptually aligned. Drawing on theoretical frameworks such as Stakeholder Theory, Institutional Theory, and the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework, I asked analytical questions like:

- What assumptions about sustainability underpin these codes?
- What systemic forces are reflected in stakeholder accounts?
- How do these codes reveal tensions between practice and policy?

This process led to the identification of intermediate groupings (sub-themes), which acted as conceptual bridges between granular codes and broader analytic themes. For example, codes such as *"fresh sourcing as waste reduction," "portion control," and "daily shopping"* were grouped under the sub-theme 'Resource Efficiency as a Survival Strategy', which in turn was housed within a broader theme on 'Sustainability as an Economic Contingency'. Therefore, Themes were not simply chosen based on frequency, but on their theoretical significance and ability to tell a meaningful story about the data (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

*Table 14: Examples of constructed initial themes and sub-themes*

| Indicative Codes | Sub-Themes | Initial Theme |
|---|---|---|
| Sustainability as business survival, Cost constraints, Waste minimisation via portion control | - Business Continuity as Sustainability<br>- Resource Efficiency as Survival | **Sustainability as an Economic Contingency** |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Consumer preference for local ingredients, Supplier access issues, Storage limitations | - Aspirations for Freshness and Authenticity<br>- Logistical and Structural Constraints | **The Paradox of Local Sourcing** |
| Competition laws, Exclusion from grants, Marginalisation of small ethnic businesses | - Regulatory Disadvantage<br>- Policy Support for the Powerful | **Institutional Exclusion and Policy Blind Spots** |
| Low consumer price expectations, Limited supplier flexibility, Wholesale dependency | - Price Sensitivity and Consumer Demand<br>- Supplier Dominance in the Chain | **Market-Driven Sustainability Dilemmas** |
| Informal supplier arrangements, Trust-based credit, Tailored ingredient access | - Community-Based Sourcing<br>- Cultural Knowledge as Resource | **Informal Networks and Adaptive Innovation** |
| Automation for chapati making, Digital ordering systems, Lack of tech training | - Emerging Use of Digital Tools<br>- Resistance and Exclusion from Tech Networks | **Technological Adaptation and Innovation Divide** |
| Labor scarcity, Informal hiring, Transition to online and takeaway services | - Staff Shortages and Retention Issues<br>- Takeaway and Delivery as Expansion Models | **Growth Aspirations Amidst Workforce Precarity** |

***Source:*** Field data

These themes were not final but functioned as analytical scaffolds, structures that helped make sense of the multiple stakeholder narratives, while remaining open to reworking as deeper interpretive insights emerged. At this point in the analysis, the aim was not perfection but possibility, to allow thematic ideas to develop organically before being fully reviewed and refined. Braun and Clarke (2021) describe this stage as “messy, fluid, and creative”, a process I found particularly true in a study where voices were diverse, perspectives were situated, and sustainability meant very different things to different actors. For instance, a curry house owner equated sustainability with *“keeping the business afloat”*, while a policy expert spoke of “circular food systems and carbon reduction”. Rather than treating these as contradictions, the theme-building process sought to hold this plurality in tension, using thematic structure to explore points of alignment, divergence, and exclusion.

Throughout this phase, interview data were constantly cross-referenced with field notes to retain contextual richness and prevent decontextualization of meaning (Nowell et al., 2017). The use of thematic maps and memo writing facilitated visual thinking and reflexive engagement with how candidate themes connected to one another and to the core research questions. By the end of this phase, a clear thematic architecture was taking shape, one that

offered a compelling, multi-voiced narrative about the systemic, institutional, and cultural forces that shape how sustainability is perceived, practiced, and constrained in ethnic food networks.

This thematic development phase was therefore not a mechanical act of categorisation, but an active, interpretive process, rooted in both methodological rigour and empathetic engagement with participants' lived experiences. It enabled the shaping of themes that are not only grounded in the data, but deeply reflective of the social and cultural realities shaping the lives of Bangladeshi curry house owners in the UK today.

**Step 4: Reviewing Potential Themes**

Once candidate themes have been constructed, the next phase in reflexive thematic analysis involves their critical review and development. Braun and Clarke (2022) emphasise that this step is not about validation in the traditional sense, but about deepening analytic coherence, sharpening focus, and ensuring internal consistency and distinction between themes. Themes should be sufficiently distinct yet collectively tell a compelling, holistic story about the data in relation to the research questions and theoretical orientation.

For this study, the initial candidate themes such as '*Sustainability as an Economic Contingency'*, '*Institutional Exclusion'*, and '*Technological Adaptation Divide'* were subjected to multiple rounds of interpretive and conceptual scrutiny. This iterative process involved reviewing all data extracts coded under each theme, checking for internal coherence, analytic clarity, and thematic integrity (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The following strategies were helpful during this phase.

**4.1 Reviewing for internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity**

Each theme was reviewed to ensure it had a clear internal narrative; that is, that all data extracts grouped under a theme were meaningfully related and told a consistent story. For example, in the theme '*Market-Driven Sustainability Dilemmas'*, data extracts from caterers, suppliers, and consumers coherently reflected the pressure of price competition, customer expectations of low-cost meals, and the reluctance of mainstream suppliers to offer flexible terms.

At the same time, I evaluated each theme for external heterogeneity, ensuring that it did not overlap conceptually with others. For instance, while *Institutional Exclusion* and *Market Hegemony* both reflect power imbalances, they were refined to reflect distinct mechanisms: the former focuses on policy and governance-level marginalisation, while the latter captures supply chain dynamics and consumer-market pressures.

### 4.2 Reworking and refining themes

During this phase, some themes were collapsed, renamed, or split to better reflect the complexity and nuance of the data:

- The initial theme '*Informal Networks and Adaptive Innovation'* was expanded into two distinct but related themes:

  **Informal Economies as Sustainability Enablers*

  **Cultural Embeddedness and Community-Centric Innovation*

This change reflected a more nuanced insight: that informal networks were not only practical solutions, but also culturally embedded strategies grounded in community trust and heritage knowledge. These practices were often invisible to formal sustainability narratives, yet central to how curry houses operate sustainably within their constraints.

Similarly, the theme '*Technological Adaptation and Innovation Divide*' was refined to:

- *Digital Transformation as a Fractured Pathway to Sustainability*

This captured both the uneven nature of technological uptake between younger vs. older entrepreneurs (most especially between first and second generation), and the structural exclusion from food innovation ecosystems that cater to larger, formalised businesses.

### 4.3 Deepening theoretical resonance

As Braun and Clarke (2022) advise, reviewing themes is not only about refining structure but also about connecting thematic patterns with broader conceptual frameworks. I revisited the theoretical lenses underpinning the study. Initially, my theoretical lenses were two (stakeholder and food system). However, the exploratory nature of this study has led to findings, spreading out across other theories such as sustainable entrepreneurship, institutional theory, and ethnic minority entrepreneurship to ensure that each theme aligned meaningfully with these concepts. The reflexive nature of this study enabled me to revisit my literature review chapter repeatedly to ensure coherence. For instance:

- *Regulatory Asymmetries and Institutional Marginalisation* speaks directly to Institutional Theory, highlighting how curry houses are structurally disadvantaged in sustainability governance.
- *Sustainability as an Economic Contingency* reflects Sustainable livelihoods framework principles, showing how survival and resilience shape sustainability practices in resource-constrained entrepreneurial settings.

This review process allowed for deeper reflexive interpretation, drawing attention not only to what was said in the data but also to what these patterns reveal about power, agency, and exclusion in the broader system of food entrepreneurship. As a result the themes were revised along five key theoretical tensions to adequately capture the complexity of sustainability in this context, and avoid unnecessary repetition across themes.

The final revised themes after review are:

1. Economic survival versus sustainability adaptations
2. Cultural preservation versus sustainable innovation
3. Market pressures versus sustainability aspirations
4. Structural exclusion versus informal resilience
5. Scaling ambitions amidst workforce precarity

Crucially, this phase also involved returning to the research questions and theoretical framework, ensuring that each theme meaningfully contributed to the study's broader aim. The iterative and reflexive nature of this review process aligned with the study's interpretivist positioning, where meaning is not fixed but co-constructed and contextually shaped (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Nowell et al., 2017).

As Braun and Clarke (2019) emphasise, this step is not about seeking perfection or rigid categorisation, but about refining themes to be both analytically strong and representative of participants' realities. Through repeated engagement with the data and deep reflexive consideration, the themes that emerged were theoretically grounded, empirically rich, and internally coherent, forming the foundation for narrative construction and final definition and naming in the next phase.

**Step 5: Defining and Naming Themes**

In this fifth step of reflexive thematic analysis, the goal is to move from a descriptive understanding of themes to a clear, analytical definition of their essence, refining their scope, boundaries, and internal logic (Braun & Clarke, 2022). This stage is critical for producing a coherent, compelling narrative that captures the central meanings of each theme in relation to the research question. It also involves the creative and conceptual task of naming each theme in a way that reflects its core contribution while engaging readers (Braun & Clarke, 2019.

In this study, themes were defined not only in terms of the frequency of codes, but their theoretical richness, interpretive depth, and ability to illuminate systemic patterns in how sustainability is understood and practiced in curry houses. Therefore, each theme was refined

to ensure conceptual clarity and analytical depth. This involved returning to the coded data within each theme to identify the central organising concept, that is, the key idea that gave coherence to the cluster of coded segments (Braun & Clarke, 2019). At this point, themes were not treated as fixed categories but as active interpretations of meaning, shaped by the participants' experiences and the researcher's reflexive engagement with the data (Braun and Clarke, 2022). For instance, the theme initially labelled as 'Sustainability as an Economic Contingency' was reconceptualised and renamed as "Economic survival and sustainability adaptations" to interpret deeper tensions beyond the surface.

Below are the finalized themes, each with a definition that reflects their conceptual scope and empirical significance, as presented in Table 13 below.

*Table 15: Presenting themes and definition*

| Theme | Definition | Core insight |
|---|---|---|
| 1. Economic survival and sustainability adaptations | This theme captures how curry house owners interpret sustainability as inseparable from their economic survival. Rather than engaging with sustainability in normative or environmental terms, participants frame it as a matter of continuity, affordability, and customer retention. Strategies such as portion control, food waste reduction, and sourcing efficiency are enacted not as green practices but as economic necessities. | Sustainability is pursued through frugality and resourcefulness, not compliance or corporate ideals |
| 2. Cultural preservation and sustainable innovation | This theme highlights the tension between the perceived cultural values of local ingredients (in terms of quality, ethics, and consumer preference) and the logistical, climatic, and cost-based challenges of accessing mainstream sustainability innovations. Despite aspirations for local sourcing, curry houses are often forced to rely on imported ingredients and cash-and-carry models due to lack of supply infrastructure, price pressures, and low consumer willingness to pay more. | Cultural embeddedness shapes sustainability in enabling rather than resisting ways, and provides alternative pathways. |
| 3. Market pressures and sustainability aspirations | This theme uncovers how market dynamics, especially consumer price expectations and supplier dominance constrain sustainability choices. Ethnic food businesses feel compelled to offer low prices to retain customers, while their supplier options are shaped by large distributors that resist changes toward more sustainable sourcing or packaging. | Curry houses navigate sustainability within a market system that rewards price over principles. |
| 4. Structural exclusion and informal resilience | This theme explores how curry houses are excluded from sustainability policymaking and governance frameworks. The theme recognises the strategic importance of informal networks, such as community-based suppliers, cultural knowledge, and trust-based | Curry houses experience sustainability policy not as support but as exclusion. |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | credit systems. These informal economies offer flexibility and resilience, allowing businesses to manage costs, adapt quickly, and access culturally specific ingredients outside formal channels. | Informality is not a barrier, but a survival-driven mode of sustainability |
| 5.Scaling ambitions amidst workforce precarity | This theme captures the tension between growth aspirations and labor constraints. While many curry houses aim to expand through takeaway, digital platforms, or franchising, they are constrained by chronic staffing shortages, limited skills availability, and over-reliance on informal labor. | Expansion is desired but hindered by systemic workforce fragility and institutional neglect. |

Throughout this phase, the reflexive stance of the researcher remained central. Naming choices were informed not only by the content of the data but also by cultural sensitivity, conceptual clarity, and relevance to the wider socio-economic and identity-based concerns that framed participants' narratives. This step ensured that each theme stood as a robust analytical construct, anchored in the data, contextually grounded, and conceptually precise (Braun and Clarke, 2019).

**Step 6: Producing the Report**

The final step of reflexive thematic analysis involves constructing a compelling and coherent analytical narrative that brings the themes to life and persuasively answers the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2022). This stage is not merely about presenting themes descriptively but weaving a theoretically grounded, conceptually rich, and reflexively interpreted account of the data (Braun and Clarke,2019). The report should tell a meaningful story that links the analytic claims to the data and broader theoretical discourses.

In this study, the process of writing the report was guided by the central research aim: "To explore how sustainability practices can be improved in ethnic minority micro-businesses (curry houses) through a food systems stakeholder lens". The write-up did not follow a rigid "theme-by-theme" layout, but a theoretically coherent, stakeholder-integrated structure that enabled cross-cutting insights. Each theme was discussed using illustrative quotes, analytic interpretation, and theoretical integration, with a focus on revealing the power asymmetries, informal adaptations, cultural meanings, and institutional exclusions shaping sustainability in this sector.

As Braun and Clarke (2019) emphasise, a strong thematic report not only illustrates themes but offers interpretation, explaining why particular patterns matter, how they relate to broader socio-cultural discourses, and what they reveal about the phenomenon under study. To ensure

transparency and trustworthiness, quotes were contextualised rather than fragmented, allowing readers to trace the analytic reasoning from raw data to thematic insight (Nowell et al., 2017). Also, reflexive commentary was interwoven throughout the reporting to acknowledge the researcher's interpretive role and positionality within the analytic process (Finlay, 2002).

The key strategies I employed in writing the report as recommended by Braun and Clarke (2019), include.

(a). Telling a reflexive, multi-vocal story

The final report carefully balanced the voices of multiple actors and stakeholders involved in the study. Rather than privileging one perspective, the write-up highlighted how stakeholders interact and contradict one another, offering insight into the systemic complexity of sustainability in the curry food system. For instance, while policymakers discussed sustainability in terms of '*carbon metrics'*, caterers framed it as '*waste avoidance*' and '*economic survival*'.

(b). Integrating themes with theoretical insights

Themes were not presented as descriptive categories but as analytical containers through which theoretical arguments were developed. For example:

- The theme "Economic survival and sustainability adaptatios" was linked to the sustainability frameworks across the five theoretical domains, showing how curry house entrepreneurs prioritise day-to-day survival over abstract sustainability goals.

(c). Using data extracts purposefully.

Verbatim quotes were used not for decoration but to ground and animate key arguments. Each quote was carefully chosen to exemplify a pattern, challenge a normative assumption, or reveal a contradiction. For instance, a caterer's statement: "*We shop twice a day because that's how we manage waste…. there's no big fridge here*"*-(Raju-BCC8)* was used to challenge dominant narratives that equate sustainability with high-tech infrastructure, highlighting instead the resourcefulness of frugal, informal practices.

(d). Crafting a coherent analytical flow

The thematic narrative also drew connections between themes, rather than treating them as isolated units.

The thematic tension structure unfolded in a narrative arc that reflected the systemic flow of the curry food supply chain:

1. Economic logics shaping sustainability
2. Cultural embeddedness shape sustainability outcomes
3. Market and consumer-driven sustainability dilemmas
4. Institutional governance and policy gaps drive informal practices and cultural knowledge.
5. Growth aspirations and labor dynamics

This structure allowed the report to unfold both vertically (within themes) and horizontally (across stakeholders), revealing the interconnected, dynamic nature of sustainability in ethnic food systems.

(e). Reflexivity in Writing

Throughout the write-up, reflexivity was maintained regarding my positionality as a researcher, including awareness of cultural proximity, assumptions about sustainability, and the representational challenges of interpreting marginalised voices. As Braun and Clarke (2022) note, thematic analysis is never neutral, it is an interpretive and iterative act, and this was embraced to deepen analytical depth and transparency.

(f). Writing as Analysis

Step 6 was not simply a reporting phase but a continuation of analysis, a space where the data, themes, and theories came together to produce new understandings. The final narrative presents a multi-layered account of sustainability that is:

- Grounded in real stakeholder experiences,
- Attuned to socio-economic and institutional realities, and
- Theoretically generative for ethnic minority entrepreneurship, sustainable entrepreneurship and food systems research.

This final step solidifies the thematic framework as both a methodological tool and a theoretical contribution, demonstrating how ethnic micro-businesses engage in sustainability not through dominant models of compliance and innovation, but through adaptive, community-driven, and culturally embedded practices shaped by structural constraints and agency.

Ultimately, the reporting phase aimed not only to present what participants said but to explore what their stories meant, offering analytical insights that remain grounded in the data yet sensitive to context, culture, and subjectivity (Braun & Clarke, 2013, 2019). The outcome is a thematically rich, theoretically informed account that speaks to the broader social, cultural,

and generational dynamics shaping the Bangladeshi curry industry in Britain.

### 3.10 Ethical considerations

This study was conducted in strict accordance with the ethical guidelines set forth by Aston University and the university's Research Data Management Policy (2023). Every stage of the research process was guided by a commitment to uphold the highest ethical standards, ensuring the dignity, autonomy, and well-being of all participants. Central to this ethical framework were four principal considerations: safeguarding participants from harm, ensuring fully informed consent, treating all individuals with respect and courtesy, and accurately and transparently representing participants' narratives and insights (Cresswell, 2016).

Firstly, to mitigate any potential risk or harm to individuals involved in the study, confidentiality and anonymity were unconditionally guaranteed. These ethical safeguards extended to all transcripts, documents, and any resulting publications. Participants were explicitly informed that their involvement was entirely voluntary, and that no data collected would be linked to their personal identities. Pseudonyms and coded identifiers were used for both individual participants and the businesses they represented. Importantly, while individual voices were valued, the analytical focus of this study rested not on isolated responses, but on identifying patterns, shared themes, and cross-case consistencies that shed light on the collective experience of Bangladeshi curry house stakeholders.

Secondly, informed consent was foundational to the research process. Participants were provided with a detailed Participant Information Sheet (PIS), which outlined the scope of the study, inclusion and exclusion criteria, and ethical assurances. Contact details for the researcher were shared to enable questions, concerns, or withdrawal at any stage. Prior to each interview (as detailed earlier in this chapter), participants were thoroughly briefed on the study's objectives, their expected contributions, and how their data would be used. Verbal consent was reaffirmed before the commencement of every interview, reinforcing their right to freely choose whether to participate.

Thirdly, a deliberate effort was made throughout the project to engage all participants with the utmost respect and professionalism. The research interactions were framed by courtesy, punctuality, and responsiveness. The language employed in all written and verbal communications, including interview schedules and consent materials, was intentionally inclusive, non-judgmental, and culturally sensitive. The researcher remained attentive to participants' time and accessibility needs, ensuring that engagement was ethical not only in principle but in practice.

Finally, and critically, this study committed to presenting truthful, transparent, and accurate

representations of the data collected. Every effort was made to conduct data analysis in line with best qualitative research practices, ensuring validity and reliability while staying true to the interpretive nature of the inquiry. There was no deception at any point in the research process. Participants were kept fully informed of the aims, processes, and implications of the study, and gave their consent freely, without coercion. The philosophical and methodological commitments underpinning this research reflect an interpretivist stance; one that privileges the participants' own words and lived experiences. The researcher has remained transparent and reflexive throughout, ensuring that the voices of participants are interpreted faithfully and with integrity. A detailed account of the data collection and analytical procedures can be found in the earlier sections of this chapter

### 3.11 Chapter conclusion

This chapter has outlined the methodological framework underpinning this research, which adopts an interpretivist paradigm to explore the lived experiences of Bangladeshi curry house owners in Birmingham. Grounded in a relativist ontology and qualitative case study design, the research employed semi-structured interviews with 15 restaurant owners and key food supply chain stakeholders to elicit rich, in-depth, contextually grounded narratives. The rationale for methodological choices, including sampling strategies, data collection techniques, and thematic analysis has been thoroughly discussed, alongside a transparent account of ethical considerations and researcher reflexivity. In sum, this chapter has provided an overview of the researcher's methodological journey, outlining how key decisions and reflections shaped the study's design and execution.

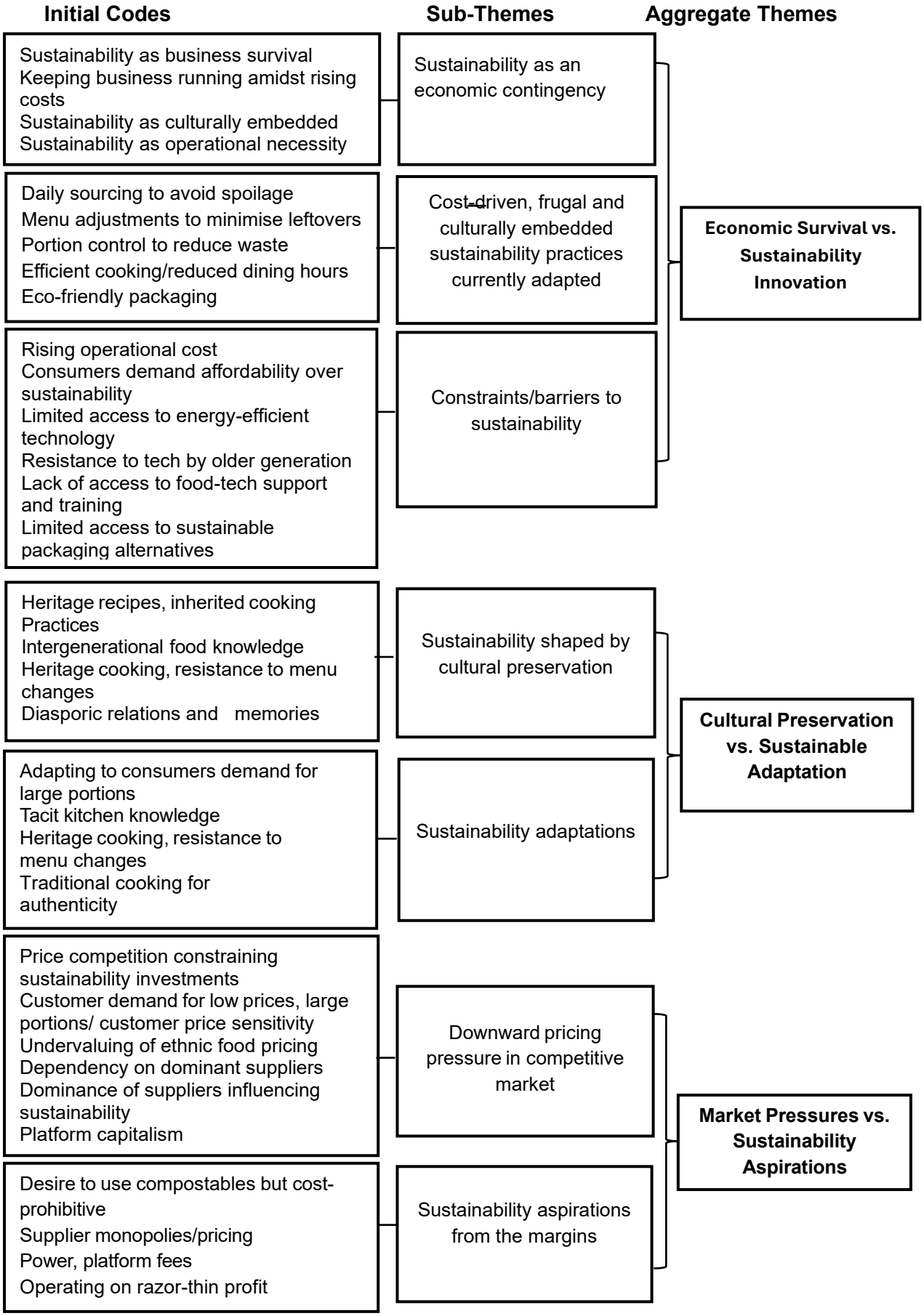
The next chapter presents the empirical findings derived from these interviews, highlighting the key themes and patterns that emerged from participants' experiences and perspectives. These findings were triangulated with supplementary sources to enhance analytical robustness and ensure a more comprehensive interpretation of the data.

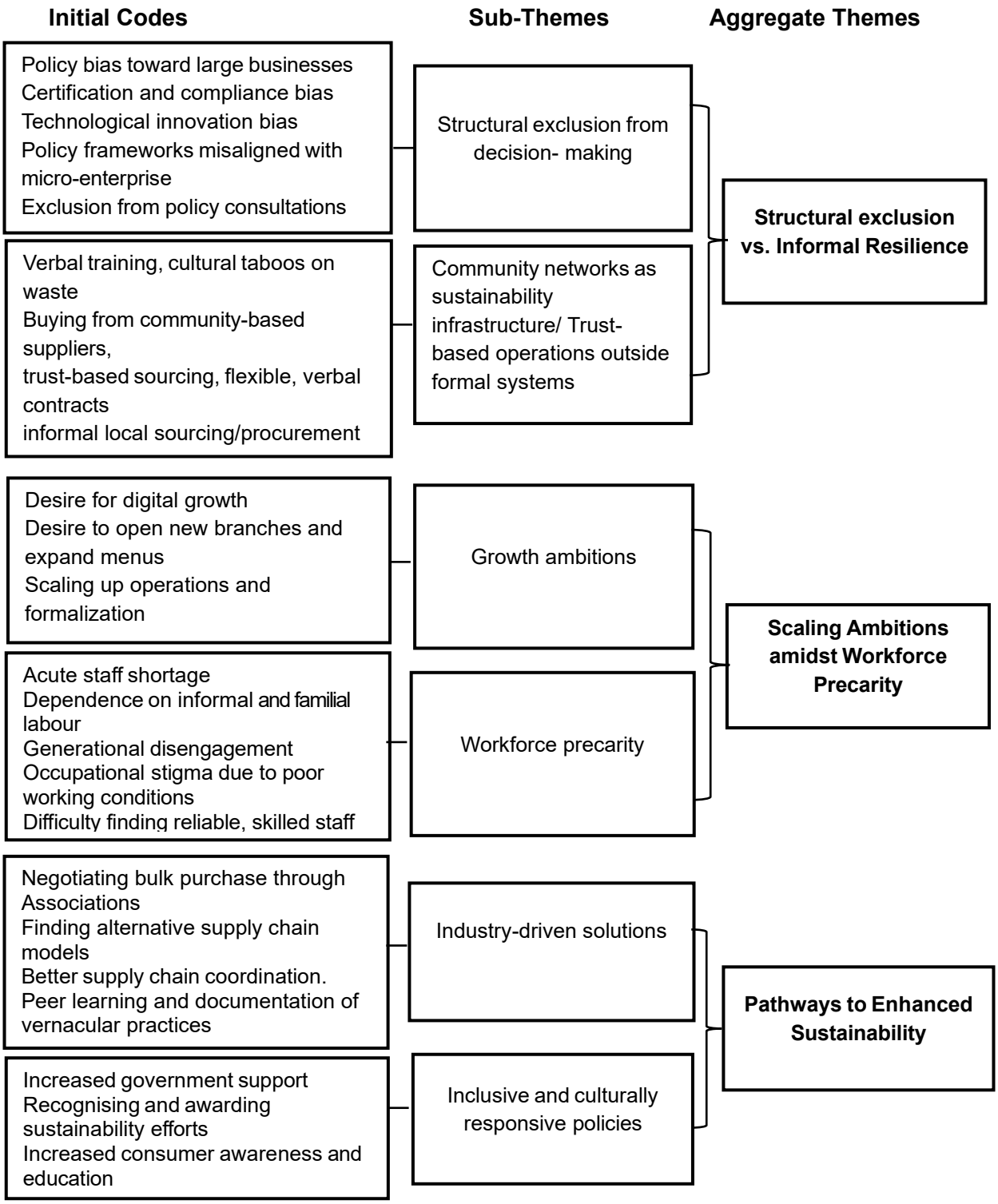
*Table 16: Data Structure*

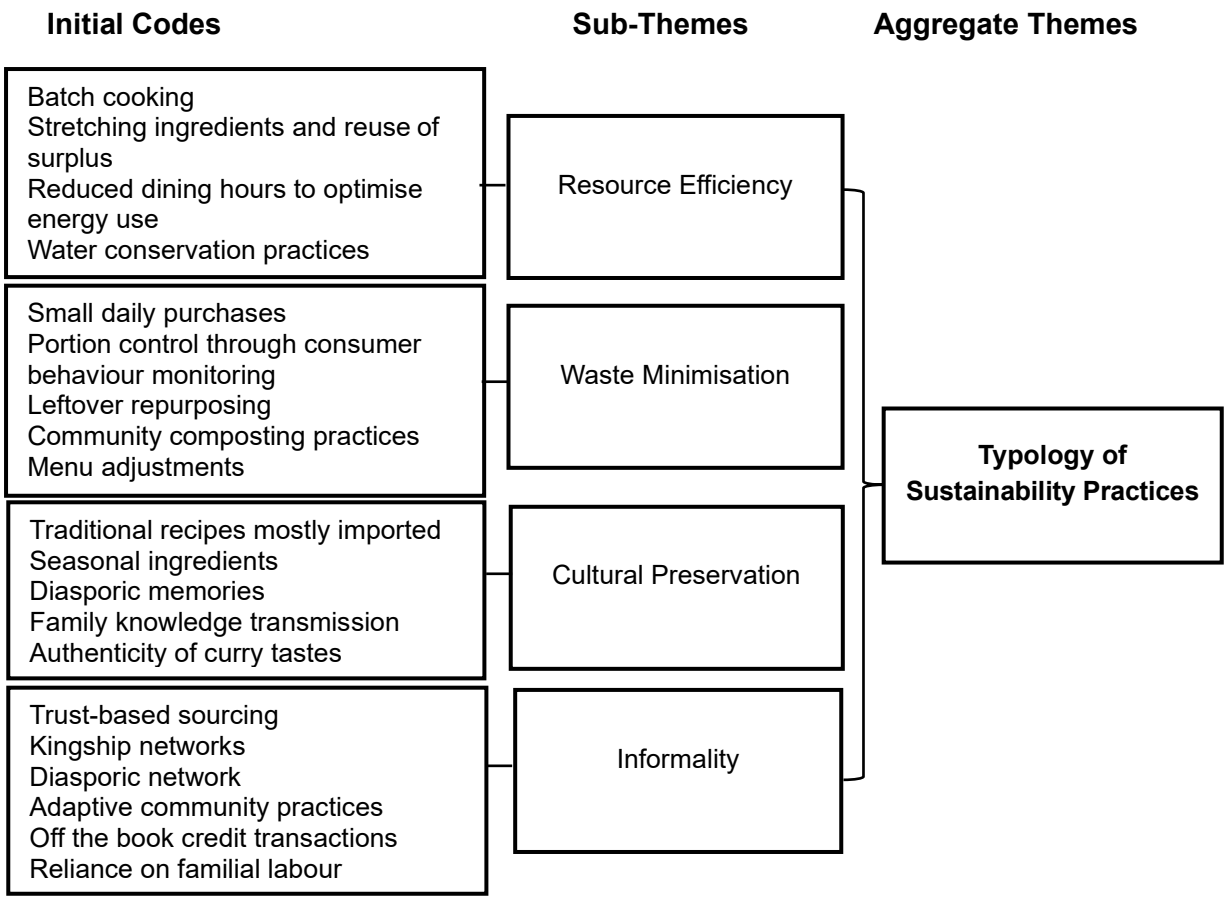
| Initial Codes | Sub-Themes | Aggregate Themes/ Theoretical Tensions |
|---|---|---|
| --Sustainability as operational necessity<br>-Survival and keeping businesses running<br>-Portion control, small-batch cooking, energy frugality<br>-Minimal leftovers, waste reuse<br>- Menu simplification, reduced variety, pricing flexibility<br>-Daily shopping due to lack of storage<br>- Local sourcing ambitions | -Cost-driven environmental sustainability practices<br>- Frugality as environmental adaptation<br>- Ad hoc innovation born out of economic constraint<br>-Localised, context-bound sustainability ambitions<br>-Barriers to formal eco-innovation | Economic Survival vs. Sustainability Innovation |
| -Heritage recipes, inherited cooking Practices<br>-Intergenerational food knowledge<br>-Heritage recipes, resistance to menu changes<br>-Adapting to consumers demand for large portions | -Cultural preservation through cuisine<br>- Intergenerational identity transmission<br>- Traditional foodways vs modern sustainability<br>-Diasporic relations | Cultural Preservation vs. Sustainable Adaptation |
| - Customer demand for low prices, large portions/ customer price sensitivity<br>- Desire to use compostables but cost-prohibitive<br>-Supplier monopolies/pricing Power, platform fees | - Consumer-driven pricing dilemmas<br>-Eco-packaging vs affordability paradox<br>-Downward pricing pressure in competitive martket | Market Pressures vs. Sustainability Aspirations |
| - Verbal training, cultural taboos on waste<br>-Digital tools inaccessible or Irrelevant<br>-Policy bias toward large businesses | - Tacit kitchen knowledge as environmental practice<br>-Digital exclusion as a systemic barrier<br>- Policy frameworks misaligned with micro-enterprise | Formal Sustainability Governance vs. Informal Resilience |
| -Community-based suppliers, trust-based sourcing, flexible, verbal contracts.<br>- No access to sustainability funding, informal procurement<br>-Exclusion from policy consultations | - Community networks as sustainability infrastructure/ Trust-based operations outside formal systems<br>-Exclusion from formal support and system<br>-Structural exclusion from decision-making | Institutional Marginalisation vs. Informal Resilience |
| - Desire for digital growth, but staff shortages, dependence on informal labour<br>- Generational disengagement, occupational stigma | -Scaling desires hindered by labour fragility<br>- Youth disinterest, undermining continuity | Scaling Ambitions amidst Workforce Precarity |
| -Improving work conditions can make the industry more attractive<br>-Recognising and awarding sustainability efforts<br>-Bulk purchase through association<br>-Cultural sensitive policy reforms<br>-Better supply chain coordination, and increased government support.<br>-Increased consumer awareness and education | -Inclusive and culturally responsive policies<br>-Better supply chain coordination and cooperative purchase<br>-Consumer education and labour policy reforms | Pathways to Enhanced Sustainability |

*Source:* Field data

**Figure x:** The Reflexive Thematic Framework




Initial Codes
Sub-Themes
Aggregate Themes
Policy bias toward large businesses
Certification and compliance bias
Technological innovation bias
Policy frameworks misaligned with micro-enterprise
Exclusion from policy consultations
Structural exclusion from decision- making
Verbal training, cultural taboos on waste
Buying from community-based suppliers,
trust-based sourcing, flexible, verbal contracts
informal local sourcing/procurement
Community networks as sustainability infrastructure/ Trust-based operations outside formal systems
Structural exclusion vs. Informal Resilience
Desire for digital growth
Desire to open new branches and expand menus
Scaling up operations and formalization
Growth ambitions
Acute staff shortage
Dependence on informal and familial labour
Generational disengagement
Occupational stigma due to poor working conditions
Difficulty finding reliable, skilled staff
Workforce precarity
Scaling Ambitions amidst Workforce Precarity
Negotiating bulk purchase through Associations
Finding alternative supply chain models
Better supply chain coordination.
Peer learning and documentation of vernacular practices
Industry-driven solutions
Increased government support
Recognising and awarding sustainability efforts
Increased consumer awareness and education
Inclusive and culturally responsive policies
Pathways to Enhanced Sustainability


Initial Codes
Sub-Themes
Aggregate Themes
Batch cooking
Stretching ingredients and reuse of surplus
Reduced dining hours to optimise energy use
Water conservation practices
Resource Efficiency
Small daily purchases
Portion control through consumer behaviour monitoring
Leftover repurposing
Community composting practices
Menu adjustments
Waste Minimisation
Traditional recipes mostly imported
Seasonal ingredients
Diasporic memories
Family knowledge transmission
Authenticity of curry tastes
Cultural Preservation
Trust-based sourcing
Kingship networks
Diasporic network
Adaptive community practices
Off the book credit transactions
Reliance on familial labour
Informality
Typology of Sustainability Practices

## Chapter Four:

*Understanding Sustainability in Bangladeshi Curry Houses: Multi-Stakeholder Perceptions and Operator Practices*

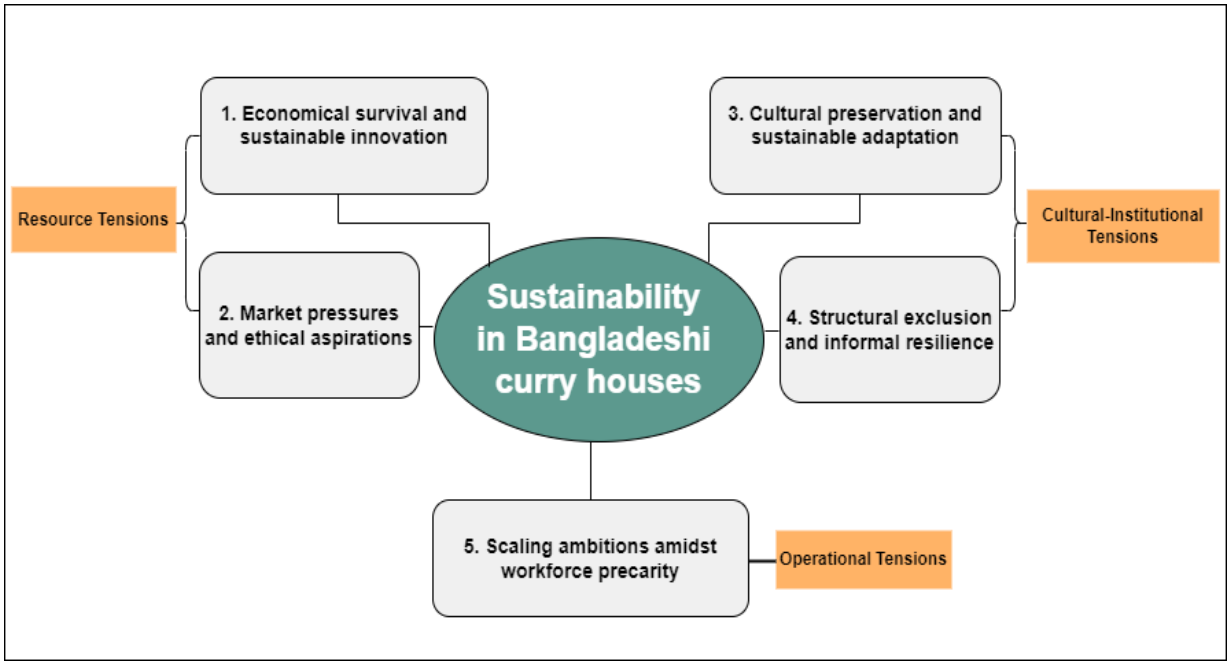
### 4.1 Introduction

This chapter addresses RQ1 and RQ3 through an integrated, cross-domain theoretical analysis: exploring how Bangladeshi curry house operators understand and practise sustainability (RQ1) within a complex ecosystem of stakeholder perceptions, interactions, and power dynamics (RQ3). Understanding operator practices requires first mapping the stakeholder landscape within which they navigate—revealing that sustainability emerges not from isolated decisions but through negotiations among competing demands, limited resources, cultural values, and informal adaptations that shape daily operations and survival imperatives.

The findings reveal 'survivalist sustainability'; a distinctive, place-based mode of environmental engagement driven by constraints, necessity, pragmatism, and cultural responsibility rather than formal metrics or external standards.

The analysis employs a thematic tensions framework (Figure 9), surfacing five interrelated tensions grouped into three meta-tensions: resource tensions, cultural-institutional tensions, and operational tensions. This framework illuminates how sustainability is understood and enacted at the margins of formal food systems governance, revealing practices that are situated, adaptive, and culturally embedded rather than universally prescribed.

*Figure 7: Thematic tensions framework*



The framework reveals three critical insights: constraints generate rather than limit innovation; informal networks create more effective governance than formal systems; cultural preservation becomes environmental strategy. Each theme is grounded in rich empirical data from interviews, focus groups, field observations, and industry reports—capturing diverse stakeholder voices across the curry house ecosystem.

The following section (4.2) systematically analyses the curry house as an embedded, dynamic micro-node within a wider food system, and examines how stakeholder perceptions, dynamics and interactions shape sustainability within this context (Section 4.3). The chapter then proceeds to explore how operators understand and enact sustainability within this stakeholder ecosystem and multi-dimensional constraints, using the tensions framework to reveal informal, relational, and adaptive strategies (Section 4.4).

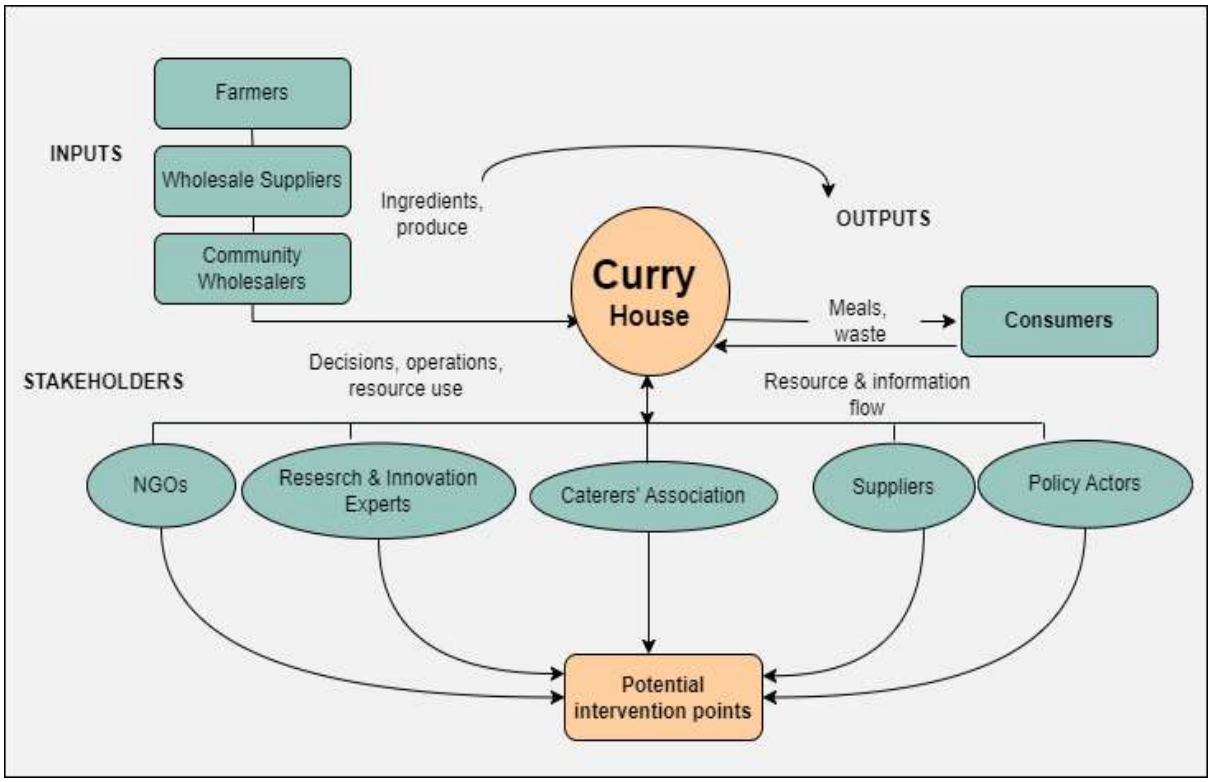
Together, these analyses demonstrate how survivalist sustainability emerges through the intersection of stakeholder influences and operator agency under constraint, offering a nuanced account of place-based sustainability that challenges dominant assumptions across food systems, sustainable entrepreneurship, stakeholder engagement, and institutional domains.

### 4.3 The curry house as a micro-node within socio-ecological food system

Drawing on food systems perspective, the curry house sector emerges not merely as a commercial chain but as a socio-cultural ecosystem, shaped by migration, resource flows, regulatory regimes, and shifting consumer demands. These enterprises function as micro-nodes within an interdependent socio-ecological system (Ostrom 2009), where cultural identity, economic precarity, and institutional oversight intersect. This system is sustained by dynamic flows of ingredients from global and local suppliers, shifting policy landscapes, information shaped by digital tools and market trends, and people; including family labour, consumers, and intermediaries whose interactions underpin the everyday operations of these micro-enterprises. The stakeholder theory complements this systems perspective by highlighting the diverse and often conflicting interests, constraints, and power asymmetries among the actors who shape and are shaped by this micro food economy.

The visual model (**Figure 10**) below illustrates this embedded socio-ecological and market system. It highlights the complex web of inputs, outputs, structure of the supply chain, decision making processes, resource use, stakeholder interactions/power dynamics, feedback loops, and potential intervention points that define this micro food economy. It also exposes disjointed linkages, particularly between producers and micro-enterprises and highlights the sector’s dependency on intermediaries.

*Figure 8: Visualising the curry house as a micro-node within a socio-ecological system*




This diagram visualises the curry house as an embedded micro food economy, subject to pressures and flows from all directions; economic, cultural, operational, and regulatory. Conceptualising the system in this way will enable stakeholders and researchers to better understand and identify where collaborative action is needed to achieve feasible and equitable sustainability transitions. The next sub-sections analyse the various components of this embedded system.

### 4.3.1 Components of the system

*1. Inputs*

The system begins with ‘Farmers’, ‘Wholesale Suppliers’, and ‘Community Wholesalers’, who provide the foundational ingredients, including fresh vegetables, spices, meats, and packaging. Specifically, farmers produce raw agricultural goods; wholesale suppliers import, aggregate and distribute these goods at scale; community wholesalers, often smaller, culturally embedded suppliers bridge formal markets and ethnic businesses. Together, these actors facilitate the production and supply of ingredients and produce, the essential raw materials that curry houses transform into meals.

*2. The Curry house as a central node*

At the core of the system is the Curry House, conceptualised as a micro-node where various flows converge. It functions as both a production and relational hub. Positioned centrally, it

integrates inputs and transforms them into meals and waste. It is also where decisions on sourcing, menu composition, portion sizing, cooking methods, and waste handling are made. Such decisions and operations are informed by resource availability, market conditions, and stakeholder relationships. This site reflects the daily balancing act between economic survival and sustainable aspirations.

*3. Outputs*

From the curry house, the system generates meals and waste, which are directed toward the consumer and the environment respectively. Here, consumption patterns (portion expectations, packaging preferences, taste, and affordability), and waste generation shape operational decisions of curry houses. Consumers also play a feedback role by sending indirect market signals that shape demand, upstream sourcing, pricing strategies, and sustainability perceptions.

*4. Stakeholder influence layer*

Beneath the curry house are key stakeholders that influence or are influenced by the system. They interact and influence decision-making through formal (e.g., policy, training, advocacy, grants) and informal (e.g., peer learning, ethnic media) channels. Each plays a distinct role as presented in table 15 below:

*Table 17: Stakeholders' role/influence in sustainability*

| Stakeholder | Role/Influence |
|---|---|
| *NGOs* | Often concerned with labour rights, environmental justice, and community welfare. |
| *Caterers' Associations* | Represent collective interests, support policy engagement, and provide peer networks. |
| *Suppliers* | Not only deliver inputs but also shape pricing, quality, and sourcing possibilities. |
| *Policy Makers* | Design and enforce regulations, which may or may not accommodate informal or culturally specific practices. |
| *Research & Innovation Experts* | Generate knowledge, provide data, and propose sustainable practices or technologies. |

These stakeholders contribute to resource and information flows that affect curry house decisions, operational strategies, and sustainability potentials.

*5. Potential Intervention Points*

At the base of the stakeholder network is a crucial feedback zone marked "potential intervention points". These represent leverage areas where strategic action can enable, scale and enhance sustainability. For instance, building procurement consortia through ethnic restaurant associations to negotiate better terms; fostering supplier collaboration to diversifying and localising sourcing; supporting local growing of culturally specific ingredients through urban farming, etc are potential leverage points identified in this study. These are analysed further in **section 5.2** in the next chapter. The following section analyses the key systemic features shaping daily operations of curry houses.

### 4.3.2 Key systemic features

The curry food system is also marked by:

(a) Feedback loops between curry houses, consumers, and other stakeholders.

(b) Asymmetrical power dynamics: Power imbalances exist throughout the system, with curry house squeezed between dominant suppliers, price-sensitive consumers and policy institutions. Stakeholders noted the lack of voice and representation of micro-businesses like curry house in sustainability policy.

> *"Grants and policy incentives are structured for big players…we don't even get a seat at the table."(Focus Group Participant)*

(c) Disjointed linkages, especially between farmers and curry houses, often mediated by intermediaries. This farmer expressed.

> *"…ethnic food businesses often go to cash-and-carry rather than directly sourcing from us." (Tom-CF3)*

(d) Informal practices (e.g., family labour, verbal agreements, flexible credit) as essential mechanisms of resilience and adaptation. Importantly, informality functions as a strategic response to structural exclusion. Community-based suppliers offer credit, trust-based transactions, and emergency supplies, creating a parallel system of resilience, as this curry house operator noted.

> *"With wholesalers, everything is strict. But with our community suppliers, we can pay later if business is slow." (Rahman-BCH2)*

### 4.3.3 Supply chain structure and resource flows

Curry houses rely on a mix of imported and locally sourced ingredients, navigating fragmented supply chains dominated by large wholesalers, ethnic food importers, and informal community networks. Notably, the supply chain operates in a dynamic ecosystem with informal linkages. These include informal credit systems between businesses, trust-based sourcing practices

within diaspora networks, and off-book service arrangements that reduce operational costs. This curry house operator narrated.

> *"We get our special spices from a contact in the community. It's cheaper, and we don't have to deal with unnecessary paperwork or delays." (Khaleed-BCH12)*

Due to limited storage and infrastructure, daily sourcing is a common strategy, as expressed by this operator:

> *"We shop daily in local supermarkets to ensure freshness... but that increases our workload." (Abiduh-BCH3)*

Understanding this supply chain helps identify where sustainability can be introduced, enhanced, or incentivized, such as fostering direct farmer partnerships, encouraging packaging reform, or developing sector-specific waste solutions.

### 4.3.4 Decision-making logic

Business decisions are shaped by the need for economic survival rather than environmental ideals. Resource allocation prioritises affordability, customer satisfaction, and operational continuity over long-term ecological goals.

> *"If the rent, staff, and bills aren't sorted, there's nothing left for green packaging or energy-efficient ovens." (Ahmeer-BCH1)*

This system framing sets the stage for understanding the interplay between diverse actors, practices, and constraints that shape sustainability in the curry house sector. The following section analyses the stakeholders' relationships, power dynamics and perceptions in shaping sustainability.

## 4.4 Stakeholder relationships and power dynamics in the curry house sustainability ecosystem

A comparative and systematic analysis of stakeholder relationships and power dynamics reveals not just contrasting individual interests but also systemic tensions, power asymmetries and collaborative gaps across the curry food system. The stakeholder matrix presented below (Table 16), provides a systematic analysis of stakeholder relationships, influence and power dynamics, revealing not just individual sustainability interests but also systemic constraints, tensions and collaborative gaps across the curry food system.

*Table 18: Stakeholders matrix and power dynamics*

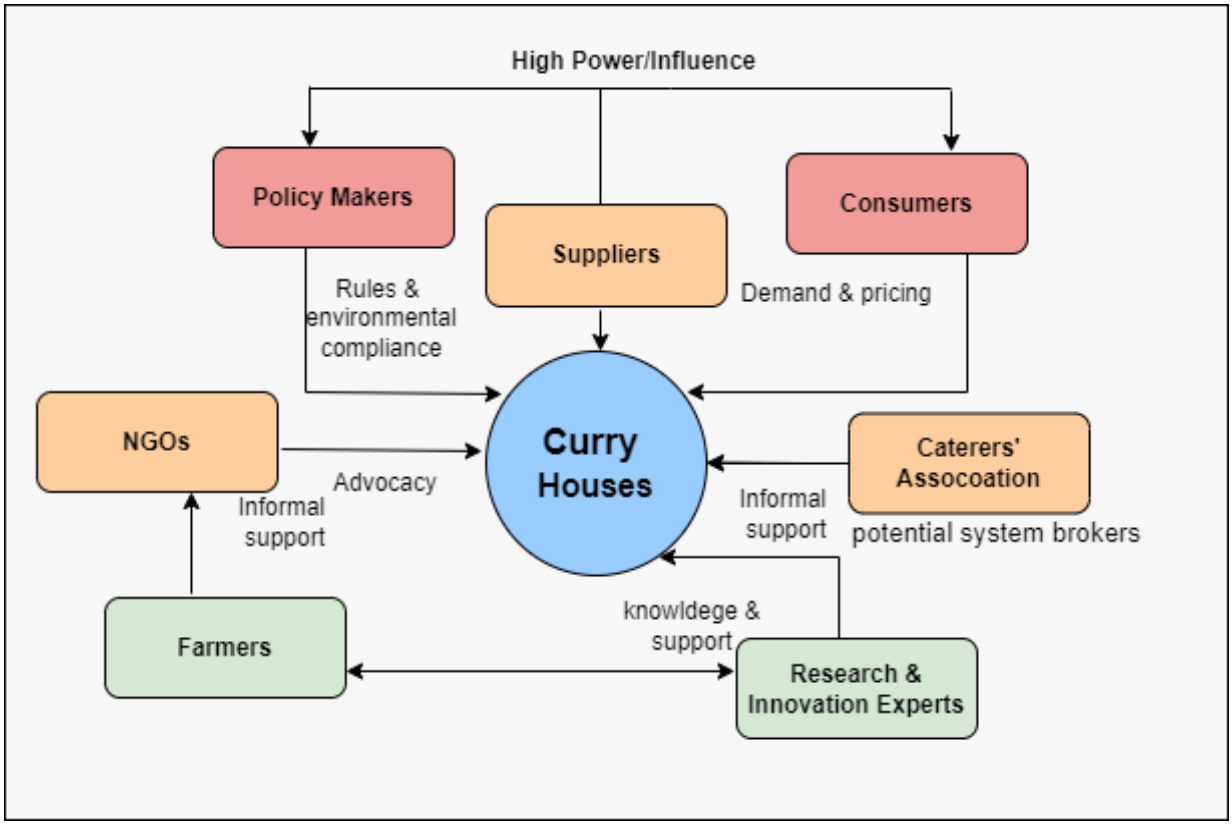
| Stakeholder group | Sustainability focus | Key constraints | Influence level / Power dynamics |
|---|---|---|---|

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Curry house operators | Operational survival, waste minimisation, customer satisfaction | Cost pressures, labour shortages, regulatory burden | Moderate influence: central actors but structurally constrained by suppliers and platforms |
| Consumers | Convenience, price, ethical awareness | Low awareness of sustainable sourcing, value for money focus | High influence; shape demand and pricing expectations |
| Suppliers/ wholesalers | Efficient logistics, regulatory compliance, low-cost provision | Market monopolisation, pressure from large buyers | Moderate to high influence; gatekeepers of sustainable ingredients and packaging |
| Farmers | Agroecological sustainability, market access | Access to ethnic food businesses, price instability | Low influence; depend on intermediaries and retailer demand |
| Caterers' Associations | Advocacy, policy translation, member education | Limited funding, variable engagement from members | Moderate influence: potential system brokers if empowered |
| Policy Makers | Environmental compliance, standardisation, health and safety | Limited engagement with informal and micro-enterprises | High formal power; low relational legitimacy among micro-actors |
| NGOs | Equity, food justice, inclusive sustainability | Lack of visibility among target micro-businesses | Moderate influence; indirect shapers through campaigns and funding |
| Research & Innovation Experts | Evidence-based policy, inclusive digital tools | Translation gap between innovation and practice | Moderate influence; bridge between formal systems and practice |

*Source:* Field work

The stakeholders' map highlighting the relational flow of influences and power dynamics of this relationship is depicted in Figure 11 below**.** It shows how power asymmetries limit the ability of smaller stakeholders like curry houses to participate in formal sustainability discourse. This asymmetry necessitates inclusive stakeholder engagement frameworks that acknowledge informal actors.

*Figure 9: Stakeholders map: Depicting relational flow and power dynamics*




At its core, the curry house is positioned as the primary operational node, interacting with various stakeholders through multi-directional flows of power, constraint, and influence. Despite being key implementers, whose practices define day-to-day sustainability, their influence is constrained by economic fragility, labour instability, consumer expectations and regulatory limitations. As one curry house operator explained:

> *"We try to reduce waste and reuse ingredients where we can, but if we can't pay rent, what's the point?" (Mohammed-BCH7)*

Consumers wield high influence through purchasing choices and pricing pressures, although many are unaware of how these behaviours affect sustainability. One consumer commented:

> *"I wouldn't pay more for eco-packaging, even if it's better for the environment. It's already expensive." (Karen-CC13)*

Suppliers and wholesalers act as logistical intermediaries who can either facilitate or hinder sustainable transitions depending on the accessibility and cost of goods they offer. One wholesale supplier noted:

> *"We can offer biodegradable options, but most restaurants won't pay the extra unless customers demand it." (Raman-CS3)*

Farmers face market exclusion and are largely disconnected from the curry house value chain, despite their alignment with sustainability goals. A farmer reported:

> *"We grow organic vegetables, but it's hard to get through to these businesses. They stick with what they know and where it's cheapest." (Flora-CF5)*

Other farmers voiced concern over pricing pressure and fragmented communication with urban ethnic food outlets. One vegetable famer noted:

> *"We grow climate-smart vegetables, but access to ethnic food businesses is limited, they often go to cash-and-carry rather than direct sourcing from us." (Farmer 3)*

Caterers' Associations are critical potential brokers that could translate policy into practice and amplify small voices, but they remain under-resourced and inconsistently engaged. caterers' association representative explained:

> *"We push for simple changes like portion control and efficient oil use, but many owners are just too stretched to respond." (Rashiq-BCA2)*

Additionally, they act as crucial intermediaries, advocating for policy attention and helping curry house owners navigate regulation. As one representative explained:

> *"We're trying to educate owners on how small changes like switching oil suppliers or reducing menu options can improve sustainability without hurting business." (Naseer-BCA2)*

Policy makers hold formal authority but exert it through top-down mechanisms that often misfit micro-business realities. One policy actor admitted:

> *"We design policy with standard compliance in mind, but it doesn't translate well to small, informal food businesses." (Lizy-PM1)*

Research and Innovation Experts promote innovative and inclusive sustainability tools, but such tools are either too expensive for curry houses or irrelevant to their contextual realities. This research and innovation expert stressed.

> *"Our job is to make sustainability measurable but accessible... You can't drop a carbon tracker app on a business that's still working off a notepad." (Pat-RI1)*

NGOs offer frameworks, tools, and advocacy, yet they frequently struggle to penetrate informal systems or demonstrate practical relevance. An NGO participant shared:

> *"We've developed toolkits for micro-restaurants, but the uptake is limited unless we work directly with associations or community groups." (Jenie-CN2)*

Together, these relationships form a dynamic but imbalanced system. To drive sustainability transitions, the ecosystem must reconfigure these relationships to elevate marginal voices, redistribute influence, and embed collaborative governance mechanisms. This also underscores the need for a networked approach to sustainability, one that connects on-the-ground realities with policy and innovation frameworks. The next section analyses how these relational interactions and power dynamics shape stakeholders' perspectives on sustainability.

### 4.4.1 Stakeholder perspectives on sustainability

This section presents a comparative analysis of stakeholder perspectives on sustainability across the curry house food system. It highlights how differing goals and power asymmetries across stakeholders dilute sustainability outcomes as presented in Table 17 below. The analysis reveals overlapping priorities, conflicting expectations, and systemic misalignments.

*Table 19: Analysis of stakeholders' perspectives on sustainability*:

| Stakeholder group | Sustainability view | Primary concern | Constraints | Illustrative quotes |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Curry houses operators | Survivalist and cost-driven | Keeping business running amid rising costs | Price-sensitive consumers; lack of support | *"Sustainability is about keeping our business running amid rising cost, while supporting our community." (Bhadi-BCH4)* |
| Farmers | Environmental responsibility | Reducing emissions and increasing soil health | Climate risks; infrastructure | *"...developing sustainability as an overall aim in our business is really about environmental responsibility, reducing greenhouse emissions, and striving to hit the net zero target, yeah, and that's our focus" (Paul-CF4).* |
| Suppliers | Profit-driven, audit-compliant | Meeting global standards | Volatility in sourcing, logistics | *"Sustainability is a top agenda in our business, and we look at three things; profit, people and planet…So all our suppliers from abroad have to comply with strict ethical and food safety standards, which includes rigorous supplier assessment and sustainability audits" (Hazeem-CS*1). |
| Consumers | Low awareness, but care about traceability and waste | Affordability and taste | Limited sourcing transparency | *"I care about food quality, but sustainability isn't a top priority. price and taste come first…yeah, would love to know where the food is sourced "(Rachel-CC21)* |
| Policy Makers | Formal compliance and carbon targets | Inclusive policy design | Difficulty engaging small ethnic businesses | *"It's often hard to reach ethnic food businesses and engage them in policy designs." (Jane-PM2)* |
| NGOs | Social equity and food justice | Promoting inclusive food systems | Structural exclusion | *"We push for inclusive food systems that offer everyone access to nutritious, healthier and affordable food." (NGO Representative1)* |

*Source: Field work*

This analysis reveals a (dis)conflicting perspectives of sustainability by stakeholders. Policy actors emphasise regulatory compliance and difficulty to engage micro-entrepreneurs like curry house, while curry house entrepreneurs emphasise economic survival, and consumers value tastes, convenience and affordability over sustainability.

These perspectives underscore the disjointed and often conflicting drivers of sustainability in the curry house ecosystem. Key areas of misalignment and convergence are identified and summarized in table 18 below.

Table 20: Misalignments and points of convergence

| | |
|---|---|
| **Shared concerns** | Nearly all actors expressed concern over rising costs, climate impacts, and sustainability as a goal. |
| **Conflicting priorities** | Where curry houses focus on affordability and survival, policy makers emphasise compliance, and consumers seek taste and price. |
| **Invisible stakeholders** | Informal importers and verbal-contract labourers like family and community members remain critical but unrecognised actors in sustainability governance. |
| **Policy disconnects** | Curry houses are rarely consulted during policy development, leading to mismatched expectations.<br>*"Nobody consults us when they make new food regulations. We just get told to comply."* (Abiduh-BCH3) |

The stakeholder analysis pushes the epistemic bounderies in sustainability frameworks and reveals that sustainability is not a neutral or universally defined concept. It is interpreted through the specific interests, capacities, and positionalities of each actor. These misalignments call for co-created frameworks of sustainability grounded in mutual understanding.

*Haven analysed the intricate stakeholders' perspectives and power dynamics, the following section turns to the key thematic tensions that characterize the complex negotiations and compromises, multi-dimensional constraints and systematic interactions, that shape how operators understand and enact sustainability strategies and practices within the curry house ecosystem.*

### 4.4 Operators understanding and practices of sustainability

**1. Resource Tensions**

### 4.4.1 Economic survival and sustainability adaptations

This finding reveals a significant tension between economic survival and environmental adaptation. Most curry house operators consistently framed sustainability not as a proactive commitment, but as a 'pragmatic mode of survival'. In this context, sustainability becomes a by-product of coping with economic pressures rather than a deliberate ecological agenda: Most curry house operators framed sustainability as economic survival, as reflected by these entrepreneurs:

*Table 21: Understanding sustainability from the margins*

| Insight | Illustrative quotes |
|---|---|
| Understanding of sustainability | *"I am 32 years in this business, and sustainability means that I might still be running my restaurant 5 years down the line, 10 years down the line. I have have to sustaine what I'am doing right now for another 5 to 10 years… with the rising cost of ingredients, utilities and labour market challenges. Yeah! The costing is the big issue since COVID." (Ahmeer-BCH1)* |
| | *"…Sustainability means continuing, keeping our business running. I want to keep it running…and packaging is a big concern" (Bhadi-BCH4)* |
| | *"For me and my small restaurant, sustainability is about adopting to changes in consumers' demand and technology…Things are constantly changing you know" (Khaleed-BCH12)* |

These views are not isolated, as reports from *Curry Life Magazine* (2023) also highlights that:

> *"Curry houses are grappling with soaring energy bills, staffing shortages, and declining post-Covid footfall*, *thereby prioritizing business continuity over sustainability investment"* (Curry Life Magazine, 2023, p.2)[11].

Relatedly, one restaurateur captured this sentiment succinctly at the Curry Awards 2023:

> *"We are merely surviving but not thriving."*(Bangladeshi curry house owner)[12]

[11] Curry Life Magazine. (2023). *Curry houses are grappling with soaring energy bills, staffing shortages, and declining post-Covid footfall* (p. 2). https://currylifemagazine.com/subscribe/

[12]Curry Life Magazine. (2023). *British Curry Awards 2023: Industry voices and reflections* (p. 2). https://www.britishcurryaward.co.uk

Despite these challenges, and the absence of formal sustainability planning, curry house operators frequently described a range of pragmatic, low-cost, and operationally embedded practices that yield positive environmental effects. These are summarised in table 20 below:

*Table 22: Pragmatic sustainability practices (survivalist mode)*

| Practices | Illustrative quotes |
|---|---|
| Daily procurement to ensure freshness and reduce spoilage | *"Due to limited space to hold stock, we shop daily in local supermarkets to ensure freshness, but that increases our workload…The upside to that is that our customers actually notice how everything tastes so fresh" (Ahmeer-BCH1)* |
| Waste reduction through portion control and menu design | *"Thankfully, at our place, our chefs are quite good, and we've got our portion control quite right. So almost 99% of our plates go back clean. So, there's very, very minimal waste in our space" (Abiduh-BCH3)*<br><br>*"We make smaller, more frequent orders to avoid spoilage…. And we design the menu with the chefs to ensure all ingredients are fully utilized" (Sajeed-BCH9)*<br><br>*"Yeah, ah! we constantly monitor and reduce portion sizes based on consumer behaviour…So, we watch the leftovers on the plates. If portions are too big, we reduce portion sizes if needed" (Rahman-BCH2)* |
| Energy efficiency strategies | .<br>*"Yeah! since Brexit and COVID, we've got to operate shorter business hours to save on gas and electricity" (Abukar-BCH15)*<br><br>*"We are a small team, and our staff are trained to monitor energy usage. so, it is easy to oversee energy efficiency…unlike larger restaurants where signs and reminders are used for reducing electricity and water waste" (Raju-BCH8)* |

These practices are adaptive and represent more than what some food system theorists termed vernacular sustainability, and reflect a distinct frugal innovation logic: cost-minimisation through resource optimisation and constraints, which unintentionally produces environmental benefits. They exemplify how frugality converges with environmental outcomes in constraint-context. Such frugality is well expressed by this curry house operator.

> *"We don't use plastic bags because paper ones are cheaper if you buy them in bulk. It wasn't to save the planet…but it helps, I suppose." (Ahmad-BCH11)*

#### 4.4.1.1 Embedded cultural innovation and economic optimisation

This economic orientation is deeply cultural and contrasts sharply with frugal innovation frameworks in sustainability that prioritise technological innovation, scalability, and formal compliance. Instead, the curry house sector exemplifies a grounded, context-sensitive approach where sustainability is a by-product of adaptive resource management under constraints. This also challenges the triple bottom line assumption that sustainability must balance people, planet, and profit simultaneously. In this context, profit (or at least economic

survival) becomes the enabling condition for any meaningful engagement with environmental and social concerns.

This has led to the emergence of what this study conceptualises as 'survivalist sustainability'; a model that encapsulates how environmentally beneficial practices are adopted not out of ideological alignment with sustainability agendas, but as by-products of economic constraints and necessity. This form of sustainability is both reactive and pragmatic. It reflects a context where conventional investments in green technology or eco-certification are unaffordable, yet the outcomes; reduced waste, lower energy consumption, and local daily sourcing are environmentally aligned. Another curry house operator noted:

> *“We don’t waste, not because of climate talk, but because throwing food is throwing money.” (Ali-BCH14)*

This finding reflects a broader theme of ‘resource efficiency through necessity,’ as also observed in my personal field notes where daily visits to local ethnic grocery stores and cash-and-carrys were common, demonstrating the importance of informal, localised procurement as a buffer against rising costs of ingredients. This resonates with a *BBC-BAME* investigation which noted.

> “*In many BAME-owned restaurants, sustainability is practised informally through frugality, waste-avoidance, and tight inventory control, often without formal recognition”* (BBC-BAME, 2023, para. 5)[13].

Furthermore, this tension challenge dominant narrative that equate sustainability with high-tech infrastructure, highlighting instead the resourcefulness of frugal, informal practices. The model of survival-as-sustainability challenges normative assumptions embedded in sustainable entrepreneurship, which tends to frame sustainability as a deliberate, opportunity-driven, resource-rich and values-based innovation pathway. Instead, curry houses operate within what can be called a constraint-innovation paradigm, where sustainability is emergent, situational, and rooted in scarcity, not surplus.

> *"We don’t have the storage space for bulk orders from big suppliers, which might be cheaper… With our local suppliers, we get just what we need for the day, no waste." (Bhadi-BCH4)*

Food systems approach provides a broader systems-based perspective here: the material realities of food work in ethnic micro-enterprises; labour shortages, inflationary pressures, and

[13] BBC Report (2023, para. 5) notes that sustainability in BAME-owned restaurants is often practiced informally through frugality and waste-avoidance. https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-london-64496310.amp

volatile supply chains fundamentally shape what kind of sustainability is possible. Curry house owners are not just economic agents but situated actors within a wider web of constraints, making decisions that are simultaneously cultural, economic, and ecological. These constraints, however, generate rather than limit innovation.

> *"We're not ignoring the environment. It's just that if the rent, staff, and bills aren't sorted, there's nothing left for expensive green packaging or energy-efficient ovens. So, we innovate to adapt where we can" (Rahman-BC2,).*

Similarly, stakeholder theory often assumes that businesses respond to environmental demands from well-positioned, vocal stakeholders such as regulators, investors, or activist consumers. However, curry houses respond instead to micro-stakeholders: local communities, informal networks, and cost-sensitive clientele. Their accountability is relational, not institutional. Sustainability emerges here as pragmatic responsiveness to constraints, not formal compliance. As this participant noted:

> *"The reality is, we don't have the resources for expensive sustainability investments or technology, so we make do with what we have; small local suppliers, community networks, and reducing waste where we can." (Rasheed-BCH5)*

This insight essentially revealed that constriants generate rather than limit innovation, and informal networks function as effective governance alternative than formal systems, challenging dominant sustainability governce frameworks.

Therefore, rather than dismissing these vernacular practices as accidental or insufficient, this study argues that they constitute a legitimate form of ecological engagement, one deserving of visibility and support. What emerges is a form of "sustainability from below": adaptive, informal, and embedded in lived economic precarity. This finding aligns with growing scholarship that calls for pluralising sustainability to include everyday practices of resilience in the informal and ethnic enterprise sectors.

### 4.4.2 Market pressures and sustainability aspirations

This tension illustrates how curry house operators often experience sustainability not as a proactive business opportunity but as a competing priority under intense market strain. The desire to adopt sustainable packaging, ethical sourcing, or environmentally friendly practices is frequently undermined by consumers price sensitivity, platformisation, and supply chain power asymmetries.

A consistent theme across interviews and focus group discussions was the difficulty of aligning sustainability efforts with the price expectations of customers: This curry house operator explained.

> *"The thing is, customers want eco boxes, but they don't want to pay 50p more. If I raise the price, they'll go down the road where it's cheaper."* (Naseer-BCA2)

These insights reveal a structural market contradiction: although public discourse promotes ethical consumption and sustainability, consumer behaviour in practice, especially in value-oriented food sectors does not always support these ideals. This mismatch intensifies pressures on curry houses, which must simultaneously meet sustainability ideals and remain price competitive.

Here, sustainable entrepreneurship proves inadequate when it assumes that sustainability transitions can be led by small businesses through internal motivation alone. In low-margin sectors like the Bangladeshi curry house, where survival often trumps strategy, aspirational narratives of 'green growth' obscure the lived reality of constrained choice. This curry house operator expressed.

> *"Ingredients costs have gone up by 50%, but we've only raised prices by 10% to stay competitive and survive." (Bhadi-BCH4)*

This situation complicates stakeholder theory, which often assumes that firms can negotiate shared value among diverse stakeholders with conflicting logics. In these cases, consumers as stakeholders exert pressure for "green" or ethical sourcing but are unwilling to absorb even marginal costs. This consumer sternly expressed.

> *"I usually spend around £15-£20 for a curry, sides, and a drink, but I wouldn't pay extra for locally sourced ingredients." (Tom-CC20)*

This insight reveals that the price at which curry consumers are willing to spend is not adequate enough to cover operational cost and sustain the curry houses, as expressed by this participant at the *Farm-to-fork Resilience conference (as reported by BBC):*

> *"If you charge accordingly, a curry, even in Birmingham where curries are cheaper than most places in the country, would have charged at about £25-30, which is not sustainable" (Ahmed, participant at the farm-to-fork Resilience conference, 2022)*[7]

Supprisingly, many other consumers signalled a desire for sustainability but are unwilling to bear the associated costs. This consumer noted.

> *"If the lamb was sourced locally, it would feel better, but I don't know if I'd be willing to pay extra for it.* (Dom-CC2)

These insights reveal a stark disjunction between ethical aspiration and market behavior, directly challenging assumptions in market-led sustainability frameworks that presume ethical demand will naturally incentivise sustainable business transformation. In practice, consumer decisions in price-sensitive markets are often governed by affordability and value perceptions, not sustainability. Many curry house operators reported that even when they attempted to introduce sustainable innovations, their impact was limited by broader market forces:

> *"We've tried offering vegetarian specials with local veg, but people still go for the chicken tikka." (Mohammad-BCH7)*

These micro-level tension reflect meso-level market logics: ethnic restaurants must respond to demand within an entrenched price-value structure that rarely rewards ethical differentiation. This economic vulnerability is compounded by minimal bargaining power, with suppliers and wholesalers making any capital investment toward sustainability a financial risk.

> *"Our supplier controls everything… If we refuse, they know there are other restaurants waiting to buy."* (Rasheed-BCH5)

Relatedly, powerful upstream intermediaries or platforms extract value without contributing to sustainability transitions, as expressed by this curry house operator.

> *"…They take 30%. So, I can't afford organic chicken or biodegradable bags when Just Eat already eats my profit." (Naseer-BCA2)*

This reflects a form of platform capitalism, in which intermediaries extract margins and compress entrepreneurial agency. The finding challenges current debates about platformisation in hospitality and food systems, revealing how algorithmic visibility, commission fees, and delivery economics reinforce a 'race to the bottom' that makes sustainability innovation increasingly untenable for small ethnic food businesses.

Moreover, stakeholder theory is challenged in this context because curry house operators often lack the structural visibility needed to influence upstream suppliers or downstream consumers. Their sustainability aspirations are often overlooked in a system that prioritises the voices of large food corporations, and eco-branded chains.

> *"The big supermarkets now offer ready-to-cook curry dishes at significantly lower prices, attracting customers at the end of the day...even though it doesn't really taste as fresh and authentic as our curries" (Raju-BCH8).*

In turn, food systems perspective deepens this analysis by situating curry houses within broader food market hierarchies. The dominance of large food retailers, supply chain consolidation, and consumer dependence on cheap, fast-food options shape an ecosystem that disincentivises sustainable transformation for small players. Policy actors also acknowledged this market misalignment:

> *"We push small businesses to be sustainable, but the market doesn't reward them for it. That's the real paradox." (Lizy-PM1)*

This tension is not rooted in apathy or resistance but in a structural squeeze between ethical ambition and market realism. Curry house operators frequently articulate sustainability as desirable, but only if it does not threaten business survival. The danger lies in conflating

aspiration with capacity, and in designing interventions that demand more from small businesses than the market will support.

By theorising this disjuncture, this study advocates for reframing sustainability policy and support systems not around idealised business transformation, but around what some food system scholars call ‘just transitions’; where the economic, cultural, and systemic constraints of marginal actors are foregrounded in sustainability design.

**2. Cultural-Institutional Tensions**

### 4.4.3 Cultural preservation and sustainable innovation

This tension captures the delicate balancing act faced by curry house operators between preserving culinary heritage, a central pillar of cultural identity, and adapting to emerging sustainability norms and expectations. Cultural preservation is not treated as a secondary concern but becomes the primary interpretive lens through which sustainability is understood. Entrepreneurs frequently conceptualise sustainability not in terms of environmental stewardship or technological adoption, but rather as the ability to uphold traditions, support families, and transmit diasporic identity across generations. Rashiq, a curry operator and a representative of the Caterers’ Association eloquently shared:

> *“For us, sustainability is about feeding the community, and you know..., keeping that connection to our roots…And you know, our business is not just about making profit; It supports 20-30 family members and we want to keep people employed ” (Rashiq-BCA1).*

This framing situates sustainability within a moral and relational economy, where continuity, care, and cultural rootedness are seen as vital components of business practice. This insight is affirmed in Bangladesh Circle, which describes curry houses as; *“diasporic institutions of cultural memory and identity transmission”* (Bangladesh Circle, 2022, para. 3)[14].

However, the emergence of formal sustainability paradigms such as local sourcing, reduced meat consumption, digital innovation or energy-efficient methods often pose direct challenges to these cultural logics. For curry house operators, such changes can risk undermining what customers value most: authenticity. As one consumer explained:

[14] Bangladesh Circle (2022, para. 3) describes curry houses as diasporic institutions of cultural memory and identity transmission. https://www.bangladeshcircle.com/tag/bangladeshi-food/

> *"I would prefer charcoal grilling over modern methods because of the flavour, even if it's not the most sustainable." (Dora-CC5)*

This observation problematises the assumptions of stakeholder theory, which often imagines firms as negotiating between diverse stakeholder interests in a rational and responsive manner. In reality, stakeholder expectations in ethnic food systems, particularly those of loyal customers are deeply anchored in symbolic norms such as portion size, ingredient authenticity, and sensory familiarity. These norms are not easily negotiable, which constrains entrepreneurial agency in practice. As one curry house operator put it:

> *"We use a particular spice mix that comes from Sylhet. Without it, the curry just isn't right. Sustainability is good, but not at the cost of our identity, and the authenticity demanded by our customers." (Rasheek-BCH5)*

Such perspectives highlight that sustainability transitions such as local sourcing are not ideologically resisted but perceived as culturally disruptive. As noted by NGO and academic participants, sustainability frameworks that over-emphasise "local sourcing" or "traceability" inadvertently marginalise those whose cuisines require imported spices, halal meats, or traditional packaging that doesn't align with dominant green narratives. In this sense, consumer sustainability discourse becomes a classed and racialised tool, disproportionately rewarding trend-driven eateries over culturally rooted enterprises.

It is crucial to stress that curry house entrepreneurs are not opposed to innovation; rather, they are navigating a context where sustainable change is constrained by the symbolic weight of authenticity and customer loyalty. Many also reported that digital innovation erode 'personal touch' and diminish traditional culinary values. For instance, advanced naan-making machines were seen as efficient, but lacking the artisanal value associated with manual preparation, as articulated by this curry house operator:

> *"They cook chicken tender more efficiently, but you lose the traditional taste and personal touch, and consumers always notice it… It's a trade-off between convenience and authenticity." (Ahmeer-BCH1)*

This insight challenges assumptions in sustainable entrepreneurship, which tends to valorise innovation and efficiency as inherently progressive. Instead, innovation here is often culturally negotiated, not economically optimised. Business decisions are shaped by non-economic factors such as honouring culinary traditions, avoiding generational alienation, and maintaining symbolic ties to community identity.

> *"Using technology means compromising on the taste and quality of dishes…But on the plus side, every naan will taste exactly the same as the one before because it's made by a machine, eliminating human error" (Abukar-BCH15)*

In this context, stakeholders, especially customers and curry house operators hold deeply embedded symbolic expectations such as; taste, authenticity, traditional cooking, and face-to-face services that resist digital innovation, even if it reduces cost or improves consistency. Technology is not seen as neutral, but as a cultural disruptor.

#### 4.4.3.1 Cultural embeddedness of consumption in ethnic foods

In this light, food systems approach offers critical insight by situating sustainability transitions within specific cultural regimes. Dominant ecological discourses frequently universalise what constitutes sustainable innovation, yet these framings are not culturally neutral. In ethnic food systems, expectations around portion sizes, high meat content, or traditional preparation methods are embedded in diasporic identity and collective memory. As one curry house owner noted:

> *"Customers want big portions for value-for-money, but then they leave about 20% of the food behind, in the plate." (Abiduh-BCH3)*

This represents a typical case of consumer food waste behaviour that remain critical in sustainable food systems discourses. In response, most curry houses develop innovative strategies that are culturally embedded through portioning;

> *"We constantly monitor and reduce portion sizes based on consumer behaviour. If portions are too big, we reduce portion sizes if needed" (Rahman-BCH2)*

> *"Our chefs are quite good, and we've got our portion control quite right. So almost 99% of our plates go back clean" (Abiduh-BCH3)*

These insights complicate the notion that ethnic food enterprises are naturally aligned with sustainability due to their small scale or community orientation. Instead, sustainability discourses can conflict with the very practices that provide cultural coherence and economic survival. This highlights a critical blind spot in current food policy and sustainability literature, which often fails to recognise the cultural embeddedness of consumption.

A policy adviser offered this reflection:

> *"There's a lot of cultural nuances we miss when we talk about sustainability in the food sector. What looks like resistance might actually be tradition doing its job." (Jane-PM2)*

This suggests that stakeholder theory must broaden its understanding of legitimacy, not just as an economic or ecological construct, but also as a cultural and moral one. Curry houses

operate within distinct moral economies, where business sustainability is inseparable from community continuity, culinary integrity, and diasporic identity.

This section, therefore, revealed that cultural preservation functions as environmental startegy. It reframes sustainability not as an environmental checklist, but as an ongoing negotiation between cultural continuity and ecological adaptation. Operators do not reject sustainability, instead, they selectively reinterpret it through ethno-cultural meaning systems. This mirrors insights from ethnic entrepreneurship literature, which shows that authenticity can both anchor market value and constrain adaptive capacity.

> *"Authenticity really matters…changing recipes risks alienating customers." (Mohammad-BCH7)*

Therefore, rather than treating cultural authenticity as a static barrier, this study repositions it as a domain of sustainable value, one that must be recognised and supported, not erased or bypassed. Doing so avoids the risk of sustainability imperialism, where externally defined models of innovation displace viable, culturally embedded alternatives. This calls for a pluralisation of sustainability discourse, one that centres not only ecological outcomes, but also cultural legitimacy and lived experience.

### 4.4.4 Structural exclusion and informal resilience

This tension foregrounds how curry houses operate at the periphery of institutional sustainability frameworks, facing exclusion from formal support systems while simultaneously developing resilient, informal community-rooted strategies to survive and adapt. Rather than being passive victims of policy neglect, these businesses respond with creative, context-specific forms of resilience that remain largely unrecognised by dominant sustainability frameworks.

Many curry house owners and association leaders voiced frustration at being consistently overlooked by government sustainability schemes and food policy initiatives. Formal support, such as grants, green procurement schemes, or energy efficiency programmes, tends to favour large, corporate actors. This association representative re-echoed.

> *"Government sustainability grants are always aimed at big businesses. We're left to figure it out ourselves." (Rashiq-BCA1)*

This exclusion can be understood through institutional theory, which explains how formal sustainability frameworks privilege actors who can navigate bureaucratic requirements, demonstrate auditability, conform to codified standards, and formal stakeholder status. Ethnic micro-enterprises like curry houses, often informally organised and culturally embedded are structurally disadvantaged, not because they lack sustainability capacity, but because their

practices fall outside the epistemic boundaries of what is institutionally legible as "sustainable".This curry house operator expressed:

> *"The sustainability toolkits are made for big restaurant chains. I can't even apply half of it to my setup." (Maliki-BCH10)*

This constitutes a critical institutional blind spot or marginalisation, and also reflects a formalisation bias; where policies are designed with assumptions of scale, standardisation, and administrative capacity, sidelining informal, small-scale businesses that sustain themselves through adaptive routines and personal networks. Policymakers themselves acknowledged this disconnect:

> *"We often design sustainability policies with big businesses in mind. Micro-businesses are left navigating these expectations alone." (Rachel-PM3)*

This finding aligns with the BBC-BAME critique that ethnic restaurants are *"consistently overlooked in the UK's green transition,"* especially those not part of large franchising structures, despite their longstanding frugal and low-waste practices[15].

#### 4.4.4.1 Informality as 'invisible infrastructure of sustainability governance'

In response to this exclusion, curry houses have cultivated a robust ecology of informal sustainability practices; what might be called an invisible infrastructure of resilience to navigate exclusionary institutional terrain. These include trust-based credit systems, flexible ethnic supply chains, reuse practices, and adaptive sourcing. These mechanisms are not only cost-effective but deeply tailored to the unique operational rhythms and cultural values of the sector:

> *"Sometimes, we get our special spices from a contact in the community. It's cheaper, and we don't have to deal with unnecessary paperwork." (Ahmeer-BCH1)*

The Curry Life Awards (2023) further reinforced this insight by reporting that;

> *"Smaller curry businesses depend heavily on community-sourced imports to maintain affordability and authenticity in the face of rising supplier prices" (Curry Life Awards, 2023. p.3).*

During one of my field visits, I observed this kind of localized community-based arrangement where meat was supplied by a local supplier during late hours in the evening. The curry house owner suddenly realized he was running short of supplies due to unpredicted customers' orders. He quickly placed a call across, and the supplier delivered to him. I also observed the

[15] BBC Report (2021, para. 4) highlights how BAME communities face challenges accessing green spaces, reflecting broader exclusion from sustainability initiatives. https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-bristol-59340068.amp

absence of any financial transaction at that very moment. This demonstrates how informal, relational economies fill the gap left by institutional neglect. This curry house operator confirmed:

> *“With our community suppliers, we can pay later if business is slow. That keeps us going.” (Rahman-BCH2)*.

From a food systems perspective, these informal networks are not peripheral but constitutive of urban food resilience. They facilitate culturally appropriate, localised sourcing and create social safety nets in the absence of formal infrastructure. Yet because these practices are undocumented and operate outside regulatory frameworks, they are discounted in policy circles and marginal to dominant food governance logics.

These informal infrastructures function as ‘resilience mechanisms’, allowing curry houses to absorb shocks; whether from fluctuating demand, price hikes, or regulatory uncertainty. While invisible to formal metrics, they are central to the operational sustainability of these enterprises. Yet paradoxically, these informal practices achieve many of the same goals (if not better) as formal frameworks in this contest. This indicates that informal systems are not “deficient” but operate with a different logic what institutional theorists describe as ‘institutional logics in parallel’, or selective coupling.

> *"If we stop using our community suppliers and rely on or switch to mainstream ones, our costs will go up, and we won’t survive." (Raju-BCH8)*

Therefore, rather than interpreting informality as deficiency, this study reframes it as alternative infrastructure. Informal credit, community-based logistics, flexible sourcing and tacit knowledge are not just coping mechanisms; they constitute adaptive systems of sustainability that challenge top-down governance paradigms.

> *“We don’t have a policy manual, but everyone in the kitchen knows not to waste anything…it’s just how we were trained.” (Sajeed-BCH9)*

#### 4.4.4.2 Epistemic boundaries in sustainability frameworks

From an institutional theory perspective, this tension draws attention to the mismatch between dominant policy designs and informal micro-enterprise logics. Crucially, the tension is not simply about institutional neglect, but about epistemic exclusion, a failure to recognise alternative logics of sustainability that emerge from within culturally embedded micro-enterprises. As one NGO leader explained:

> *“We advocate for change, but enforcement and business participation remain a challenge.” (Jenie-CN2)*

Such accounts underscore how stakeholder theory falls short when it limits legitimacy to formal engagement or contractual visibility. Curry houses and their informal networks and operationality challenge this conception by demonstrating that system-critical functions (like adaptive sourcing, low-waste practices, and community feeding) can be performed by actors outside the institutional gaze.

Their exclusion is further compounded by risk discourses around informality. While informal supply chains offer flexibility, they pose challenges to traceability and quality assurance, which in turn limits curry houses' ability to scale or contract with larger institutions.

> *"Sometimes, we don't ask too many questions. As long as the price is right and the quality is decent, that's all that matters." (Rasheek-BCH6)*

Therefore, informal resilience is both an asset and a limitation. It enables micro-survival but constrains formal scalability, as empathically expressed by this participant;

> *"We would love to expand and work with bigger clients, but they only deal with businesses that are formal." (Salim-BCH13)*

The misalignment between formal governance and informal adaptive practices also reinforces what some sustainability scholars call 'sustainability inequity', where only those actors who conform to audit-driven regimes gain legitimacy, funding, and visibility. Thus, it is evidenced here that informal networks create more effective governance than formal systems. Therefore, this study argues that informal resilience is not a transitional stage to be formalised but a legitimate sustainability mode shaped by marginality, cultural embeddedness, and practical innovation; a valid and necessary response to structural exclusion. Recognising it requires a paradigmatic shift in how sustainability is conceptualised, evaluated, and institutionalised.

**3. Operational Tensions**

#### 4.4.5 Scaling ambitions amidst workforce precarity

This tension captures a critical contradiction between the aspirational horizon of curry house entrepreneurs; many of whom express the desire to modernise, expand, or diversify, and the fragile labour infrastructure upon which their ambitions rest. When asked about growth aspiration, this operator expressed;

> *"If you'd asked me this question 30 years ago … I would have said I want to have a chain like McDonald's … but now I'm just happy as long as my little restaurant is providing a roof over my head and a food on my table…" (Ahmeer-BCH1)*

Unlike larger hospitality ventures that rely on formal recruitment pipelines and structured training programmes, most curry houses are sustained through familial labour, ethnic

community networks, and informal staffing arrangements. This workforce model, once functional, is now unravelling.

Most curry house owners often narrate a dual consciousness; on the one hand, expressing ambition and pride in their legacy; on the other, acknowledging acute barriers to growth. As one owner reflected:

> *"We'd love to open another branch, but who will run it? We can't find staff, and the boys don't want to work in kitchens anymore." (Raju-BCH8)*

This directly complicates sustainable entrepreneurship, which often assumes that businesses can transition toward green, efficient models through innovation and strategy. In practice, these transitions are labour-dependent. Ironically in this context, the very innovations that could enhance sustainability (e.g., low-carbon innovations or platform-based delivery models) require a stable, upskilled and motivated workforce, precisely what is missing. This leads to a paradox where:

- Curry houses are *ideationally ready* to scale sustainably,
- But *structurally unequipped* to do so.

This creates a structural feedback loop where limited staff reduces innovation potential, which in turn limits the sector's appeal to new entrants.

This tension extends current theoretical work on sustainable entrepreneurship by highlighting a critical blind spot: the dependency of scaling efforts on labour stability. It also calls into question the scalability assumptions in sustainability frameworks that are designed with resource-rich, high-capacity businesses in mind.

The labour crisis is not only economic but deeply generational and cultural. Curry houses have traditionally relied on intergenerational continuity; sons, nephews, or community members taking over kitchens or management. That informal model is now collapsing. Younger generations, shaped by educational mobility, digital aspirations, and career revaluation, are disengaging from the sector, as described by this representative of the assoicitaion;

> *"Recent Bangladeshi migrants are highly educated… They arrive with degrees. They don't want to work in restaurants anymore."* (Naseer-BCA2)

This represents a generational decoupling of identity and occupation. The ethnic restaurant, once a site of community identity and entrepreneurial pride, is now often seen as a site of precarity; labour-intensive, underappreciated, and difficult to professionalise. This aligns with ethnic minority entrepreneurship, which recognises that the viability of ethnic businesses is shaped by broader labour market shifts, cultural aspirations, and migration trends.

From a stakeholder theory perspective, these businesses are doubly marginalised: they are underserved by both labour policies and sustainability funding structures, despite their central role in the urban food system. There is a critical lack of inclusive policy platforms where curry house operators can voice their human resource challenges and influence solutions.

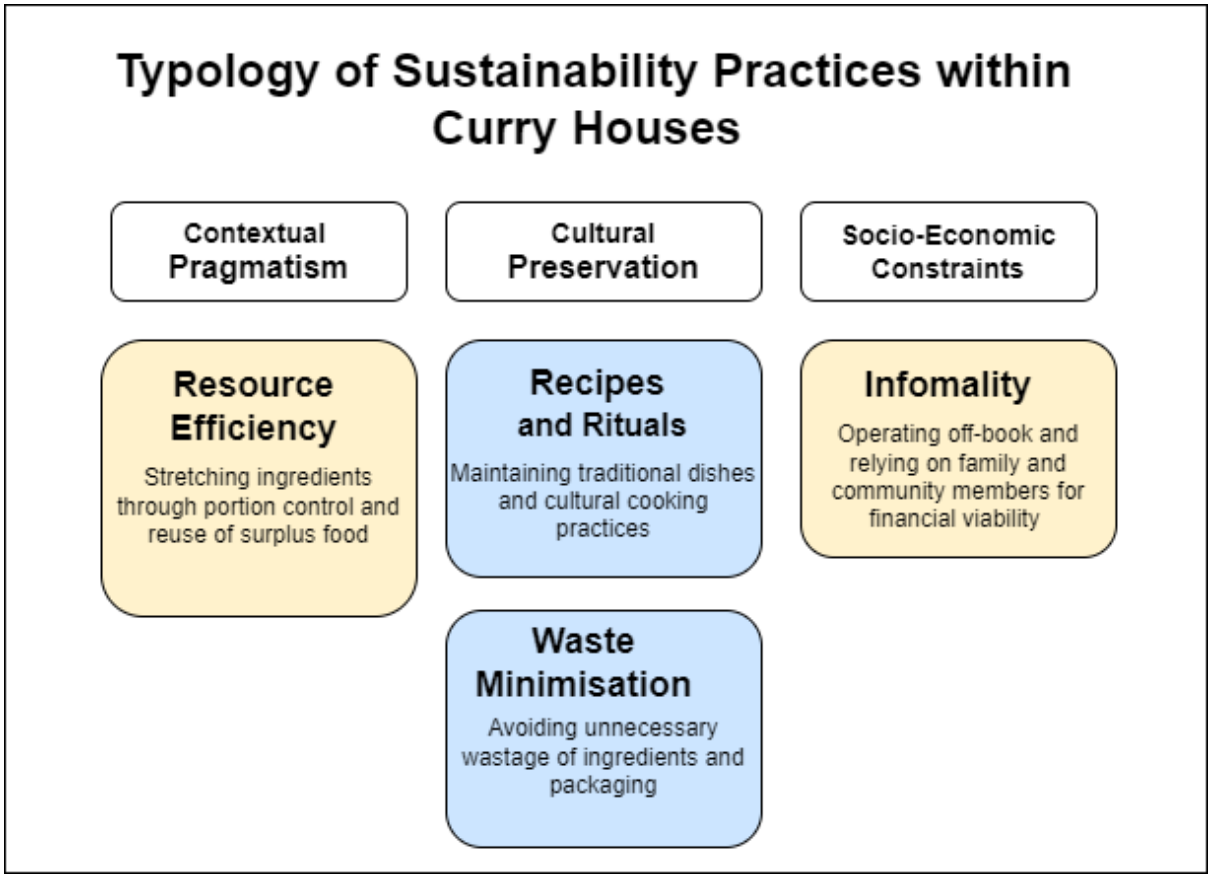
Meanwhile, food systems approach foregrounds the relational dimensions of sustainability, including the human capital and social infrastructures that sustain food production and delivery. The precarity of labour here is not merely a human resources problem; it is a food system sustainability chokepoint (**as *discussed further in the next chapter***). Without a stable and skilled workforce, curry houses cannot transition to more sustainable business models, invest in training, or implement long-term strategies.

This tension ultimately calls for a re-theorisation of sustainability capacity, one that recognises human capital as a core dimension of sustainable transformation. For curry houses, scaling sustainably will require more than ambition; it will depend on workforce reform, cultural revaluation of hospitality labour, and targeted policy mechanisms that address the ethnic food sector's unique vulnerabilities. Without a culturally resonant strategy to attract, train, and retain workers, even the most visionary sustainability frameworks risk collapse at the point of execution.

### 4.4.6 Typology of sustainability practices

The findings reveal four-part typology: resource efficiency, waste minimisation, cultural recipes, and informality at the intersection of contextual pragmatism, cultural preservation and socio-economic constraints, as presented in **figure 13** below. These practices reflect micro-scale adaptations that deviate from mainstream sustainability narratives.

*Figure 10: Typology of sustainability practices*




## 4.5. Conceptual model development

### 4.5.1 Survivalist sustainability in curry houses

Drawing on the empirical findings in this chapter, the analysis revealed that sustainability in curry houses is not framed through dominant environmental discourses or formal standards, but rather emerges through the integrated operation of vernacular innovation, cultural embeddedness, structural adaptation, relational governance, and institutional navigation as analysed through the five thematic tensions.

Practices such as portion control, flexible sourcing, frugal waste management, and daily procurement emerged not as deliberate green strategies, but as survivalist; through culturally constituted, adaptive responses to structural constraints that generate environmental benefits through necessity-driven adaptation rather than strategic choice. This concept captures how sustainability in this marginalized food economy simultaneously enacts survival, cultural preservation, and environmental stewardship.

*Figure 11: Depicting the conceptual model of survivalist sustainability*


This conceptual model challenges dominant paradigms across the five theoretical domains by demonstrating that sustainability can be, and often is practiced under constraint, outside formal structures, adaptive and in culturally embedded ways. By shifting attention from idealised models to situated practices, this chapter offers a critical lens through which sustainability can be reimagined: not as a distant goal for marginalised food actors to reach, but as something they already enact; if only institutions and systems would recognise it. It contributes theoretically by framing informal, ethnically embedded practices as valid responses to systemic exclusion. This framework is further developed and discussed in **chapter six** as the primary theoretical contribution of this study.

### 4.5 Chapter Conclusion: Rethinking sustainability from the margins

This chapter revealed that stakeholders across the curry food system hold diverse and sometimes conflicting perceptions of sustainability. Suppliers influence practices primarily through pricing and availability mechanisms; consumers exert influence through patronage decisions and verbal feedback; policy makers shape the regulatory environment but

demonstrate limited understanding of curry house constraints; and NGOs/BCA provide intermediary support but face resource limitations. These influence mechanisms operate simultaneously, creating a complex web of pressures and supports that operators must navigate.

The chapter further explored how these complex stakeholder influences shape how Bangladeshi curry house operators understand and practice sustainability through a series of lived tensions; balancing cultural continuity with innovation, economic survival with environmental goals, and informal resilience with formal governance structures. These tensions reveal that sustainability in this sector is not driven by ideological alignment with mainstream frameworks, but emerges from adaptive practices rooted in necessity, heritage, and practical knowledge. By foregrounding the concept of survivalist sustainability, the chapter contributes a critical counterpoint to dominant models of sustainable entrepreneurship, which often valorise proactive innovation and resource abundance. Here, sustainability is reactive, incremental, and deeply entangled with the realities of economic necessity, informality, and cultural specificity.

The chapter also challenges institutional and stakeholder theories that equate legitimacy with visibility, standardisation, and compliance. Curry houses enact sustainability through alternative infrastructures; community supply chains, verbal credit arrangements, energy conservation by habit which remain largely invisible to formal governance mechanisms. These forms of ecological agency complicate the binary between formal and informal, sustainable and unsustainable, central and marginal. Through these theoretical tensions and vernacular practices, the chapter demonstrates that sustainability is not a universally translatable agenda but a culturally mediated, structurally constrained process. Ethnic food businesses such as curry houses are not lagging in sustainability transition. They are innovating on their own terms, under conditions of precarity and exclusion.

The next chapter turns from these embedded practices to examine the key structural chokepoints that emerge from these thematic tensions, limiting their recognition, support, and scalability, as well as identify culturally responsive pathways for enhancing sustainability in ways that are just, inclusive, and systemically aware.

# Chapter Five:

*From Constraints to Chokepoints: Unlocking sustainability pathways through culturally responsive and inclusive transitions*

## 5.1 Introduction

This chapter extends the findings presented previously by exploring the conditions under which sustainability practices in Bangladeshi curry houses can be more meaningfully supported, formalised, or scaled. While Chapter 4 introduced "survivalist sustainability" as an adaptive response to structural constraints, this chapter fundamentally reframes sustainability challenges in ethnic food systems, shifting from traditional framings of independent barriers or constraints to systemic chokepoints.

The chapter draws on stakeholders' perspectives (Q3) and the thesis's cross-domain theoretical framework to identify both constraint mechanisms and strategic intervention pathways. Critically, examining how support structures can be reconfigured to align with the adaptive strategies already operative within curry houses. In doing so, the chapter directly addresses RQ2: *What structural barriers and enablers shape sustainability transitions, and what pathways might leverage existing innovations?*

### *5.1.1 The emergence of chokepoints from theoretical tensions*

The five theoretical tensions analysed in **Chapter four** revealed sites of concentrated constraint where multiple sustainability pathways converge and become blocked. These convergence or leverage points crystallise from the friction between competing demands: economic survival versus sustainability innovation, cultural preservation versus adaptive change, market pressures versus ethical aspirations, structural exclusion versus informal resilience, and scaling ambitions versus workforce precarity. Rather than remaining abstract tensions, these dynamics materialise into concrete systemic bottlenecks that operators encounter daily. These chokepoints are not merely logistical or attitudinal but embedded within deeper systemic inequalities and tensions across economic, institutional, and cultural domains.

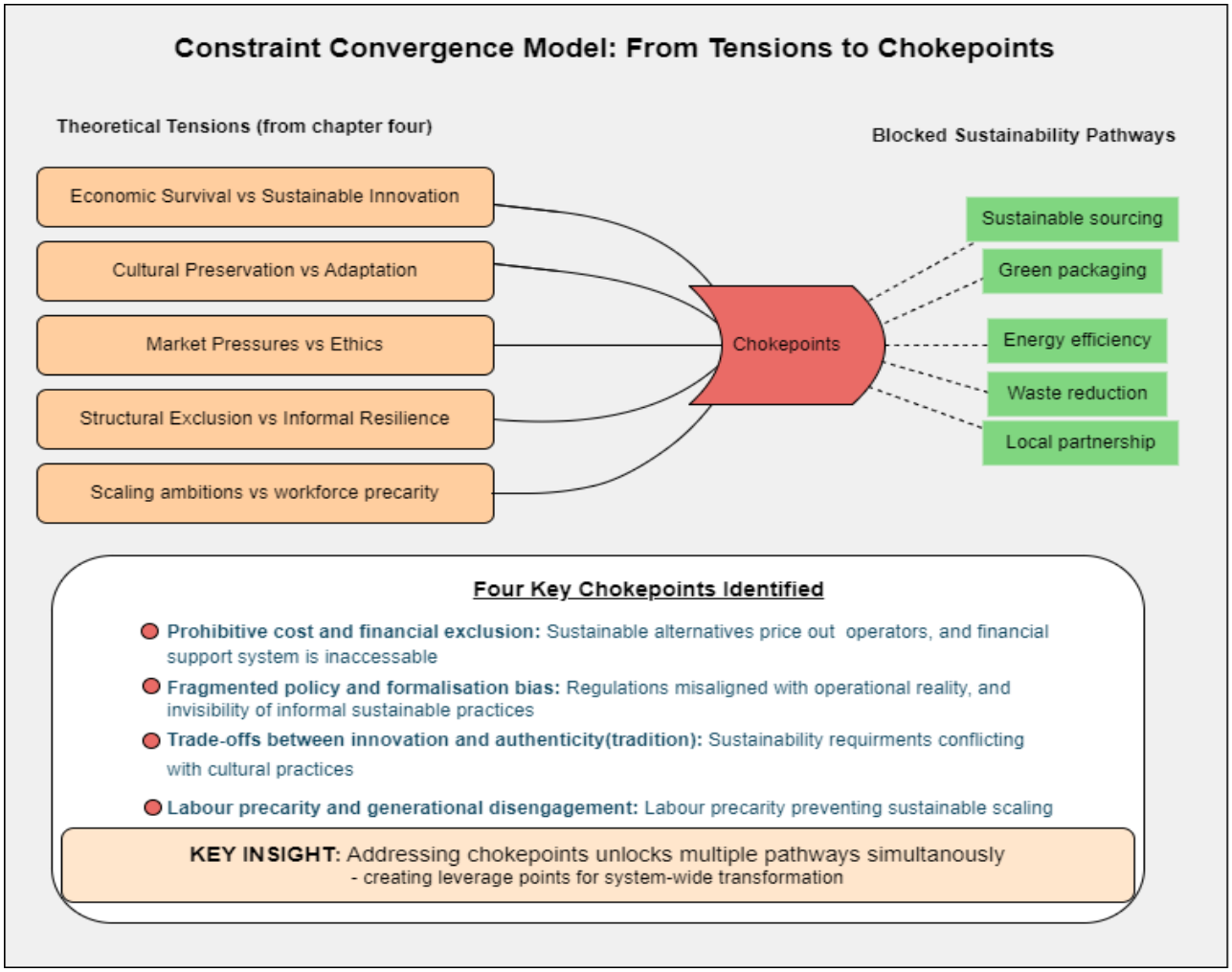
### *5.1.2 Defining chokepoints: Strategic constraint convergence*

Chokepoints, as conceptualised in this context, represent leverage points where constraint removal unlocks multiple pathways; strategic points of systemic convergence where sustainability transformation can be either throttled or catalysed. Unlike discrete obstacles that can be circumvented through alternative routes, chokepoints function as structural bottlenecks

where economic, cultural, regulatory, and operational constraints intersect to create compound blockages that amplify barriers exponentially rather than additively.

Consider sustainable packaging as an illustrative example: what appears as a simple cost barrier reveals itself as a chokepoint when traced across multiple dimensions. High prices intersect with razor-thin profit margins (economic tension), clash with cultural expectations around food presentation (cultural tension), collide with consumer price sensitivity amplified by delivery platform fees (market tension), encounter absent regulatory incentives (exclusion tension), and overwhelm already-stretched operational capacity (workforce tension). The result is not merely an expensive choice, but a systemic impasse where sustainability becomes structurally impossible. **Figure 14** below visualises this constraint convergence process, mapping how the five theoretical tensions identified in Chapter 4 flow into systemic chokepoints that simultaneously block and unlock multiple sustainability pathways.

*Figure 12: Constraint convergence process: From tensions to chokepoints*



This convergence logic explains why conventional sustainability interventions fail: they address symptoms rather than chokepoints, attempting to force change through blocked pathways rather than clearing the strategic constraints that create systemic bottlenecks. These chokepoints are not merely operational deficits, and represent more than the sum of individual constraints; they constitute structural convergence points embedded within economic precarity, institutional blind spots, policy misalignment, and cultural specificity. However, this same convergence logic reveals the transformative potential of strategic intervention.

When chokepoints are addressed at their structural core, their removal creates cascading enablement effects across multiple dimensions simultaneously. For instance, addressing the sustainable packaging chokepoint through targeted policy intervention (regulatory tension), combined with cooperative purchasing schemes (economic tension), creates ripple effects: costs decrease, cultural acceptance grows through normalisation, operational capacity is freed for other innovations, and market dynamics shift toward sustainability as the viable option rather than the impossible choice.

This aligns with Meadows' (2015) hierarchy of leverage points, where chokepoints typically represent paradigm-level constraints (the shared ideas and assumptions that create the system). By operating at these deeper structural levels rather than at the parameter level (numbers, subsidies, taxes), chokepoint interventions can shift entire system dynamics. Abson et al. (2017) similarly emphasise that sustainable transformation requires interventions at points where system structure and function can be fundamentally altered, precisely what chokepoint removal achieves. Understanding chokepoints thus reveals both how change becomes blocked in marginalised food systems and, crucially, how strategic constraint removal can unlock systemic sustainability transformation, moving beyond piecemeal approaches to address the structural bottlenecks that determine system-wide possibilities.

This chapter fundamentally reframes sustainability challenges in ethnic food systems, shifting from conventional framings of technological diffusion or behavioural change toward one centred on equity, recognition, and infrastructural reconfiguration. It argues for an expanded understanding of sustainability that is culturally responsive, economically realistic, and institutionally inclusive. In doing so, the chapter directly addresses my second research question: *What structural barriers and enablers shape sustainability transitions, and what pathways might leverage existing innovations?*

The analysis proceeds through two interconnected sections that operationalise the chokepoint framework developed above. Section 5.2 identifies and analyses four key chokepoints that systematically constrain sustainability action. Section 5.3 then demonstrates how strategic

intervention at these chokepoints unlocks context-sensitive pathways that can enhance sustainability outcomes across multiple dimensions simultaneously. Together, these sections propose a systemic, equity-oriented vision for sustainability transformation; one grounded in recognition, not reinvention, of the considerable ingenuity already embedded within the curry house sector.

## 5.2 Structural chokepoints to sustainability

While Bangladeshi curry houses demonstrate considerable ingenuity in their day-to-day sustainability practices, their ability to scale or institutionalise these practices is significantly constrained by a complex web of structural chokepoints that inhibit deeper sustainability practices. This section analyses four key chokepoints that obstruct deeper sustainability engagement, not as fixed barriers, but as sites for potential transformation if addressed with tailored and inclusive interventions.

### 5.2.1 Prohibitive cost of sustainable innovation and financial exclusion

Although curry house operators engage in cost-saving, frugal practices as highlighted in the previous chapter, the financial threshold for adopting formal sustainable innovations remains a persistent chokepoint. While digitisation and technological upgrades are widely recognised as enablers of sustainability, offering tools for inventory management, energy monitoring, and waste tracking; the reality for most Bangladeshi curry houses is a persistent digital exclusion. Owners often express both interest and hesitation around adopting new technologies, citing prohibitive cost, usability, and trust issues. This operator reflected on the cost.

> *"Energy bills are going up… we'd love to invest in better, energy-efficient kitchen appliances, but they're too expensive for a small restaurant like mine." (Mohammad-BCH7)*

A more eloborated narrative of this chokepoint was eloquently shared by this representative of the Caterers' Association:

> *"Rising costs are affecting both our restaurants and customers. Where a meal once cost £10 per head, it's now £20, and with utilities and ingredient prices continuing to climb, partly due to Brexit. This could rise even further. As affordability declines, customer numbers drop, forcing restaurants to operate with fewer staff to stay profitable. However, high utility and ingredient costs remain, creating a tough balancing act for our businesses" (Naseer-BCA2)*

Most small-scale farmers expressed similar concerns.

> *"The costs of production are skyrocketing… how do small farmers like me manage that while staying sustainable?" (Flora-CF5)*

The adoption of energy-efficient solutions among curry house operators is further hindered by financial inaccessibility. Curry houses find themselves caught between a desire to adapt and a system that renders that adaptation impractical. The absence of targeted support mechanisms and transitional funding creates a stalling effect. This research and innovation expert expressed;

> *"There is an energy-efficient and waste management technology designed for restaurants… but it would cost £200–£250 per week. That's unaffordable for most curry houses, I suppose." (Mercy-RI3).*

This insight underscores a broader tension between financial pragmatism and sustainability ideals. Dominant frameworks within sustainable entrepreneurship literature frequently assume a proactive, innovation-driven model which are financially costly, yet this expectation is mismatched with the lived realities of ethnic food businesses operating on razor-thin margins. Here, sustainability emerges not as a deliberate investment strategy but as a cost-minimisation strategy, a finding echoed across multiple curry house operators and stakeholders, as analysed in the previous chapter.

Food systems approach adds a vital layer to this analysis by situating these financial chokepoints within the relational economy of food provisioning. Curry house businesses are nested within a wider supply system where cost pressures, whether from global commodity chains, landlord-controlled utilities, or lack of local infrastructure constrain what forms of sustainability are possible.

> *"…. If the rent, staff, and bills aren't sorted, there's nothing left for green packaging or energy-efficient ovens." (Mohammed-BCH7)*

Moreover, sustainability support grants and schemes are typically designed for high-capacity actors, with requirements (e.g., certification, financial reporting) that small ethnic businesses find difficult to meet due to financial barriers. Therefore, rather than treating the cost barrier as a passive constraint, it is reconceptualised here as a misalignment between dominant sustainability frameworks and the adaptive realities of marginalised enterprises.

In sum, the chokepoint lies not in the lack of willingness to change or improve, but in the structural and epistemic disconnect between how sustainability is formalised and how it is actually practiced on the ground. Addressing this requires policy instruments that recognise and reward cost-minimisation, frugality, low-waste practices, and adaptive reuse as legitimate sustainability achievements, not only technological upgrades or formal compliance which are financially costly for curry houses, as well as providing targeted funding schemes to subsidies cost for ethnic minority food business. This Caterers' Association remarked:

> *"If British produce were available at a sustainable cost, our restaurants could maintain or even raise prices while promoting locally sourced ingredients... buy you see even chicken produced locally are way expensive than the imported ones" (Rashiq-BCA1).*

### 5.2.2 **Fragmented policy access and formalisation bias**

A recurring chokepoint highlighted across interviews and focus groups is the systemic exclusion of curry houses from formal sustainability governance, funding mechanisms, and policy dialogues. Many participants described a persistent disconnect between national-level sustainability frameworks and the on-the-ground realities of ethnic food enterprises.

> *"Nobody consults us when they make new food regulations. We just get to hear about them when they are made." (Khaleed-BCH12)*

This exclusion is symptomatic of deeper institutional logics that favour scale, standardisation, and codified sustainability metrics, hallmarks of what institutional theory terms *formalisation bias*. Programs such as green finance schemes or sustainable procurement policies often hinge on application procedures, performance indicators, carbon audits, procurement standards or certifications that marginalised, micro-enterprises struggle to meet or even access due to financial, and procedural barriers. As such, they are rendered 'policy-invisible' despite their extensive role in urban food provision and community livelihoods.

Stakeholder theory provides another layer to this analysis by critiquing how legitimacy is conferred. In many mainstream sustainability agendas, only formal actors with visibility and organisational capital are considered stakeholders. This effectively excludes informal, relational actors like local suppliers, ethnic food networks, or family-based businesses; even though they are vital components of the food system's functioning.

From a food systems perspective, curry houses are embedded within complex webs of cultural practice, trust-based procurement, and adaptive workarounds. These informal infrastructures are integral to how sustainability is enacted daily, yet they are neither recognised nor supported by food policy. As one policy advisor admitted:

> *"It's always difficult to reach out and engage with ethnic food businesses. It's a big challenge for us, but we really want to engage them." (Lizy-PM1)*

The implication is clear: curry houses are structurally disconnected from systems that could support their sustainability because they operate in ways that challenge dominant expectations of formality, scale, and data. As the Curry Life Awards and other sectoral reports have emphasised, curry houses possess rich, context-sensitive ecological knowledge, but lack institutional visibility. This tension signals a critical need to pluralise governance frameworks; to move beyond large-scale, top-down initiatives toward participatory mechanisms that reflect the heterogeneity of food economies. Exclusion is not simply a gap

in communication but a structural failure of policy design that misunderstands the operational grammar of marginalised enterprises. As this policy maker eloquently noted:

> *"……. In many ways, these businesses are already doing sustainability, perhaps, just not in the language we've imposed." (Rachel-PM3)*

Therefore, reimagining this chokepoint as a site of opportunity entails co-designing policy instruments with ethnic business associations, recognising informal sustainability efforts (e.g., waste reduction, flexible sourcing), and embedding ethnic voices into food strategy consultations. Doing so would not only legitimise their contributions but also enable more grounded and equitable forms of sustainability governance.

### 5.2.3 Cultural trade-offs between sustainability and authenticity

Another key chokepoint lies in the cultural tensions between sustainability demands and the imperative to maintain culinary authenticity. Many curry house operators feel torn between shifting towards local, seasonal, or plant-based ingredients, and meeting customer expectations shaped by long-standing cultural norms and taste preferences. The need to deliver familiar dishes; rich in meat, spices, and traditional cooking methods often conflicts with calls to modernise menus for environmental reasons. This consumer expressed.

> *"I would prefer charcoal grilling over modern methods because of the flavour, even if it's not the most sustainable." (Dora-CC5)*

From a stakeholder theory perspective, this chokepoint reflects a legitimacy gap: sustainability discourses often overlook the cultural embeddedness of food practices, thereby delegitimising businesses that rely on culturally specific production methods. From an institutional theory perspective, the emphasis on standardisation and formal metrics in sustainability governance systems often penalises businesses that prioritise tradition over uniformity. For example, curry houses using traditional tandoori ovens or charcoal grills face criticism for inefficiency, despite these being central to culinary authenticity. At the same time, regulatory frameworks rarely accommodate hybrid models that balance sustainability and cultural specificity. This operator shared:

> *"We have technology in the kitchen, like naan-making machines and combi ovens, which help with efficiency and reduce the need for staff. They cook chicken tender, but you lose the traditional taste and personal touch in dishes like naan and chicken tikka. Plus, these machines are expensive, so it's a trade-off between convenience and authenticity."*(Rahman-BCH2)

This chokepoint, therefore, demands a pluralised sustainability lens; one that accounts for cultural legitimacy alongside ecological and economic outcomes. Rather than assuming that

environmental sustainability must be achieved through substitution or technological redesign, more inclusive frameworks would engage culinary stakeholders in co-designing solutions that align with both heritage and climate concerns. For instance, rather than discouraging charcoal grills outright, tailored energy-efficient adaptations could be supported to preserve taste while lowering environmental impact.

Ultimately, these trade-offs illustrate that sustainability, when framed too narrowly, risks marginalising those whose practices fall outside dominant paradigms. Instead, curry houses should be seen as active contributors to food system diversity; where authenticity and innovation need not be mutually exclusive but require thoughtful mediation.

### 5.2.4 Labour precarity and generational disengagement

The declining availability of skilled labour within the curry house sector presents a significant chokepoint, stalling both operational continuity and the ambition to adopt more sustainable or modernised business practices.

> *"Independent restaurants are closing faster than ever as customer trends and needs change, and the labour issues persist. Only those who can adapt will survive, but I can see many, including mine, shutting down in the next few years because it's just too difficult to keep going" (Salim-BCH13)*

Many curry house owners expressed a strong desire to scale or innovate through menu expansion, digital tools, or delivery-only kitchens, but are constrained by workforce shortages and a lack of generational succession, reflecting a crucial chokepoint.

> *"At the moment, we want to expand our business, maybe start delivery-only kitchens, but we can't even find reliable staff, especially for busy Friday nights." (Ali-BCH14)*

This workforce fragility reflects broader structural factors, including the ageing of the traditional Bangladeshi restaurant labour pool, reduced migration from South Asia, and a generational disinterest in food sector careers. Younger British Bangladeshis are more likely to pursue white-collar professions, distancing themselves from what is perceived as a low-prestige, high-burden industry. This operator expressed;

> *"My son is not interested. He's studying tech. None of our kids want to be chefs, it's too hard and too thankless." (Sajeed-BCH9)*

This aligns with literature on ethnic minority entrepreneurship which notes that family labour, once a cornerstone of many immigrant-run businesses, is no longer a dependable pipeline. Younger generations are increasingly disengaged from the sector due to perceived lack of prestige, work-life balance, and professional development. Labour precarity is compounded

by post-Brexit immigration restrictions and the limited capacity of micro-enterprises to offer competitive wages or career pathways.

> *"…But what's happening now since 2020, Bangladeshi migrants coming to the UK have been more educated than previous generations. They arrive with strong English skills and degrees in fields like medicine, law, computing, and education. Unlike earlier migrants who worked in restaurant kitchens, their ambitions are to become doctors, solicitors, accountants, or tech engineers" (Ali-BCH14)*

Sustainable entrepreneurship tends to underplay the importance of labour stability as a precondition for sustainability. Yet, innovations such as digitised inventory systems or low-carbon cooking technologies require both skilled labour and reliable staffing infrastructure; resources that many curry houses now lack. Without these foundations, efforts to transition toward more sustainable models remain aspirational.

From a food systems perspective, this chokepoint disrupts the human element of sustainability. While policies often target inputs (e.g., sourcing, packaging) or outputs (e.g., waste reduction), the embodied knowledge and labour that sustain food production are overlooked. The curry house sector's informal, experiential labour model, rooted in generational skill transfer is increasingly incompatible with formal training expectations, regulatory demands, and modern work preferences.

From the lens of institutional theory, this labour crisis reveals how smaller ethnic businesses are excluded from policy frameworks that might otherwise support workforce development, such as apprenticeships, training subsidies, or recruitment platforms. These institutional gaps not only limit growth but also reinforce perceptions of the ethnic food sector as an undesirable career path, suggesting the need for a reconfiguration of how workforce development is understood in food policy.

> *"It's hard to find staff willing to work restaurant hours now. They'd rather work in retail or offices." (Ahmad-BCH11)*

The impilcation of this disengagement is enormous and transcends beyond mere closure of curry houses to deeper generational loss and institutional discontinuity. Ahmed a participant at the Farm-to-fork conference sternly expressed:

> *"…shutting down curry restaurants would mean breaking the tradition of families handing down the business from one generation to the next…We're going to lose kind of an institution if we're not able to do something." (Farm-to-Fork Conference, 2022)*[6, 7].

In this light, workforce precarity is not simply a human resource (HR) issue, it is a structural chokepoint that constrains both continuity and sustainability. Addressing it requires policy frameworks that integrate labour equity, vocational recognition, and incentives for long-term

employment in marginalised food economies. Rather than framing sustainability solely in technical terms, interventions must include structured training, culturally relevant hospitality education, and dignified career pathways that regenerate labour from within the communities they serve.

To conclude, this section reveals that barriers to sustainable practice are not merely behavioural or attitudinal, but deeply structural. Curry houses demonstrate commitment, creativity, and cultural knowledge, yet lack equitable access to tools, funding, and policy support. Without systemic realignment, sustainability will remain a privilege of resource-rich actors, rather than a shared pathway for diverse business models. The following section discusses the potential pathways to enhanced sustainability.

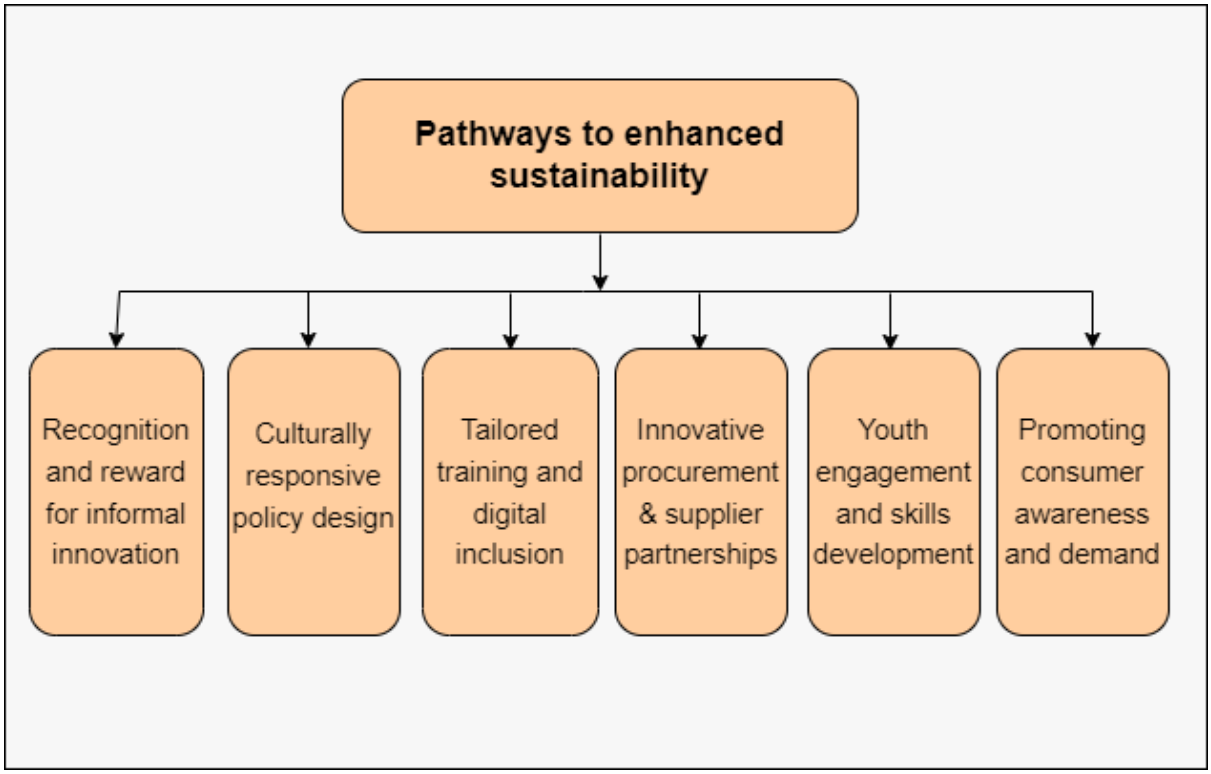
### 5.3 Pathways to unblocking chokepoints and enhancing sustainability

The preceding analysis of chokepoints revealed that Bangladeshi curry houses are not failing to engage with sustainability. Rather, they are navigating a structurally inequitable terrain that undermines their efforts, obscures their innovations, and limits their scalability and participation in formal sustainability governance. This section shifts from diagnosing constraints to identifying practical, culturally embedded, and theoretically grounded pathways for enhancing sustainability in the curry house sector.

Importantly, these pathways do not prescribe a one-size-fits-all model. Instead, they acknowledge the heterogeneity of curry house practices and the embeddedness of sustainability within everyday economic survival, cultural fidelity, and community-based adaptation. Drawing on food systems transformational approaches, this approach foregrounds systemic interconnections, and highlights that transformation requires coordinated shifts across governance, supply chains, consumer behaviour, and knowledge infrastructures. At the same time, stakeholders and institutional theories remind us that unless policy environments and funding systems are recalibrated to include informal and marginal actors, sustainability will remain inequitable. Stakeholder theory further demands that curry house operators as cultural entrepreneurs, labour providers, and community anchors be actively engaged in shaping the future of food policy and innovation.

Building on these theoretical insights, the section outlines strategic responses co-developed from empirical findings and stakeholder perspectives. It highlights what curry house operators are already doing and what forms of support can amplify these actions. The pathways are presented across six interlinked areas of intervention as presented in Figure 15 and discussed below.

*Figure 13: Pathways to enhanced sustainability*




### 5.3.1 Recognition and reward for informal innovation

A central insight from this study is that many Bangladeshi curry houses are already practicing sustainability, not through formal certifications or compliance regimes, but via informal, tacit, and culturally rooted adaptations. These practices, while often invisible to policymakers and sustainability assessors, routinely deliver outcomes aligned with key sustainability goals, particularly in waste minimisation, resource efficiency, and labour optimisation.

> *"We don't have a policy manual, but everyone in the kitchen knows not to waste anything, it's just how we were trained." (Raju-BCH8)*

Such strategies reflect what food systems scholars describe as vernacular sustainability through tacit knowledge; a context-sensitive adaptations grounded not in external toolkits, but in lived knowledge, economic pragmatism, and relational practice. These practices are passed down intergenerationally and embedded within community dynamics, yet they rarely receive formal validation. This Caterers' Association representative expressed.

> *"Big chains get awards for sustainability because they print it on their menu. We've been cooking fresh daily and avoiding waste for over 20 years. No one notices." (Naseer-BCA2)*

From an institutional theory perspective, this reveals a critical visibility bias. Formal sustainability governance tends to equate legitimacy with codifiability: eco-labels, audits, procurement protocols. As a result, micro-enterprises like curry houses operating through informal systems shaped by limited resources and regulatory alienation should be recognised and made visible in dominant sustainability narratives. Matt, an NGO participant remarked:

> *"Many small restaurants are already doing the right thing, but we haven't found the tools to capture or support that." (Matt-CN-3)*

Though, what remains unrecognised is not unimportant. Stakeholder theory, when extended to include liminal and informal actors, demands a broader conceptualisation of who counts in sustainability transitions. If governance systems only recognise formal actors, they miss entire economies of practice operating under different logics. As one policymaker noted:

> *"It's important we stop assuming that sustainability means technology or certification. In many ways, these businesses are already doing sustainability, just not in the language we've imposed." (Rachel-PM3)*

This is not a rejection of innovation, but a reframing of where and how innovation happens. The informal economies of sustainability; frugality, low-waste cooking, flexible sourcing, adaptive labouring are not signs of underdevelopment; they are assets. To unlock their full potential, these practices must be seen, supported, and rewarded.

Therefore, policy and practice must shift to legitimize adaptive, informal sustainability through formal recognition schemes and reframed assessment tools that value narrative and culturally rooted indicators over documentation burdens. This requires designing low-barrier visibility platforms; local showcases, grants, storytelling campaigns—that celebrate micro-enterprise innovation, coupled with practice-based certifications and participatory documentation systems where community organizations themselves record and share their sustainability work, building both pride and policy influence

Recognising informal innovation is not merely symbolic. It represents a shift towards a pluralistic governance model, one that values the how and why of sustainability as much as the what. Only then can we move from exclusion to equity, and from imposed definitions to a shared vision of sustainability that includes everyone already doing the work.

### 5.3.2 Culturally responsive policy design

Building a sustainable future for Bangladeshi curry houses requires more than retrofitting universal policies to marginalised contexts. It demands a fundamental shift towards culturally

responsive governance that recognises ethnic micro-enterprises not as passive recipients of policy, but as active co-creators of sustainability knowledge. This section reframes the policy disconnect not simply as a structural barrier, but as a transformable pathway towards more equitable and pluralistic sustainability systems. As this policymaker acknowledged:

> *"We often design sustainability policies with big businesses in mind. Micro-businesses are left navigating these expectations alone." (Rachel-PM3)*

From a food systems perspective, this reflects a misalignment between dominant sustainability governance and the embedded, culturally situated realities of ethnic food economies. Food systems approach insists that sustainability must be shaped not only by ecological metrics or economic forecasts, but by relational, identity-driven dynamics, food as memory, food as cultural continuity. Curry houses are sites of heritage, not just commerce; and as such, they require policy frameworks that honour this embeddedness rather than override it with top-down blueprints.

Current toolkits, audits, or grants often assume a generic "green" entrepreneur: literate in bureaucracy, resourced with time and capital, operating within scalable business models. This vision clashes with the daily realities of curry house operators, whose practices often stem from tacit, oral, intergenerational knowledge. Yet, many of these practices such as batch cooking, spice preservation, low-waste preparation, cost-saving procurement already align with sustainability values, even if they lack formal recognition.

Focus group discussions and interviews consistently highlighted the need for institutional legitimacy of these adaptive strategies. Inclusion must go beyond tokenistic consultations to involve curry house operators in co-governance structures, where they can shape the frameworks that govern them. As this NGO expert stated:

> *"Policy engagement has to go beyond consultation. It has to be about creating shared spaces where marginal voices shape the rules." (Sarah-CN4)*

This vision also invites a reconnection between tradition and sustainability. As some farmers and curry house owners noted, traditional ecological practices such as soil regeneration using herbal lays or small-batch procurement can offer ecologically sound models if supported appropriately. These are not backward methods, but resilient blueprints developed through lived experience.

> *"A lot of what's happening now is really going back to what our grandparents did… Farmers are now changing what's growing in the ground using herbal lays to improve soil health." (Paul-CF4)*

To enable such a shift, policy must cease to treat tradition as a constraint and begin to see it as a resource untapped; a foundation for innovation rather than an obstacle to it. Aziz, a grower, supplier and importer expressed:

> *"In the future, I hope the government supports the restaurant sector by increasing access to British lamb, reducing reliance on imports from New Zealand. Also, Indian vegetables and spices, like coriander, could also be grown locally in greenhouses under the right conditions" (Aziz-CS2)*

This implies that policy frameworks must institutionalize feedback loops where curry house operators co-design sustainability tools that reflect lived practice, supported by ethnic food sector advisory panels within local governance and revised funding criteria for micro-enterprises. Simultaneously, diversity quotas in city food policy councils must ensure these businesses shape urban sustainability visions from the ground up, while culturally grounded capacity-building—delivered through in-language workshops, peer mentorship, and community-trusted channels like radio and visual guides—builds genuine engagement with policy frameworks.

By reimagining policy as a collaborative, culturally embedded process, this pathway not only enhances uptake and legitimacy, but reclaims sustainability as a shared civic project, one that honours survivalist ingenuity and repositions ethnic entrepreneurs as leaders in the food sustainability transition.

### 5.3.3 Tailored training and digital inclusion

Digital tools offer transformative potential for enhancing sustainability in the curry house sector, enabling smarter inventory management, energy monitoring, and waste reduction. Yet the full promise of digital transformation will remain unrealised unless its implementation is relational, culturally situated, and structurally inclusive. Rather than viewing digital exclusion as a static barrier, this section reframes it as a pathway to innovation, contingent on community-tailored approaches. As this operator reflected:

> *"Now we have everything calculated automatically… but older owners don't trust these systems." (Bhadi-BCH4)*

This hesitancy is not merely generational. It reveals a deeper epistemic misalignment: most curry house operators rely on tacit knowledge, oral transmission, and intergenerational expertise, systems of knowing that are often overlooked in digital interventions designed for standardised, corporate food models.

Stakeholder theory offers critical insight here by emphasising capacity-building as a condition for participation. Stakeholders cannot meaningfully engage in sustainability transitions if they are structurally excluded from the tools and literacies required. Digital inclusion is not just

about access to hardware. It is about recognising diverse knowledge ecologies and designing around them.

Food systems approach further challenges the neutrality of technology by foregrounding infrastructural inequalities. Technological solutions may unintentionally deepen exclusion if they fail to consider cultural habits, linguistic preferences, and sector-specific rhythms. Digital tools, like sustainability policies, must be context-sensitive, and adapted to the lived realities of marginalised food economies. Policy and research stakeholders echoed this need for co-designed approaches. As one research and innovation expert articulated:

> *"Tech adoption is not just about installing software, it's about trust, relevance, and usability for specific communities." (Mike-RI3)*

Thus, digitalisation must move beyond the rollout of apps or systems to a model of collaborative enablement. When embedded within cultural logics and community networks, digital tools can support real-time monitoring, reduce waste, and improve financial resilience without disrupting the tacit expertise that already sustains many curry houses.

Consequently, policy and practice must develop culturally contextualised training that blends technical skills with everyday business needs, supported by intergenerational mentorship schemes pairing digitally fluent youth with experienced owners in culturally respectful ways. Simultaneously, low-cost digital infrastructure—smart meters, Wi-Fi, tablets—must be made accessible to small food businesses, alongside co-created, user-friendly sustainability apps featuring visual interfaces, multilingual options, and customisable workflows tailored to curry house operations.

Tailored digital inclusion, when approached relationally and respectfully, becomes a powerful enabler of sustainability; not through enforced disruption, but through embedded innovation that strengthens both environmental outcomes and business viability.

### 5.3.4 Innovative procurement and supplier partnerships

Curry house associations, while often overlooked in formal policymaking, play a critical role in coordinating advocacy, resource pooling, and shared learning among Bangladeshi food entrepreneurs. These grassroots collectives offer an underutilised channel through which sustainability interventions can be amplified, localised, and adapted to sector-specific realities.

An association representative explained:

> *"If there's an association with a future restaurant plan, they should approach suppliers… 'I've got 50 places, give me a cheaper rate.'" (Rashiq-BCA1)*

This insight points to the latent capacity of industry associations to serve as procurement consortia, sustainability knowledge hubs, and intermediaries between small enterprises and

regulatory bodies. Within food systems approach, these associations represent meso-level structures; entities that bridge micro-level actors (individual restaurants) and macro-level systems (regulatory bodies, market structures). They can buffer the structural exclusion that individual curry houses face by collectivising voice, visibility, and bargaining power.

From a stakeholder theory perspective, empowering associations helps correct for the asymmetry of influence that marginalised food actors experience in policymaking and sustainability discourse. Currently, large restaurant chains or high-visibility culinary brands dominate consultations and benefit from sustainability incentives. By contrast, curry house owners often remain at the periphery.

Yet, associations of Bangladeshi caterers have already shown interest in initiative in areas like bulk procurement of eco-friendly packaging, facilitating shared access to food safety training, and campaigning for fair immigration policies affecting hospitality labour. These existing activities signal strong institutional readiness for deeper engagement with sustainability agendas. As this association representative noted:

> *"We're already doing training and supplier negotiation, but we need formal support and recognition of our role in sustainability." (Naseer-BCA2)*

This aligns with institutional theory's critique of policy centralisation, where change is often driven top-down, with limited engagement from intermediary or community-based actors. Therefore, policy and practice must fund associations as sustainability hubs offering shared services and tailored training, while establishing formal advisory bodies with representatives from ethnic food sectors and micro-enterprises that actively shape policy co-design. Procurement policies must be revised to recognize informal and semi-formal suppliers serving ethnic businesses, supported by local procurement hubs and sustainability certification frameworks specifically tailored to small-scale operators and their supply partners.

Innovative procurement models do not require wholesale disruption of existing systems. They demand flexible, context-sensitive strategies that elevate local sourcing, collective agency, and the sustainability potential already latent in ethnic food economies.

### 5.3.5 Youth engagement and skills development

A sustainable future for Bangladeshi curry houses depends not only on financial capital or technological tools, but critically on the regeneration of the sector's labour force. As operators navigate rising customer demands, sustainability expectations, and digital transitions, their capacity to adapt more hinges on the presence of a skilled, motivated, and culturally attuned workforce. Youth engagement, therefore, emerges not as an optional supplement, but as a strategic pathway for long-term resilience and sustainable transformation.

> *"Something urgent must be done to attract the younger ones. They don't want to work here anymore." (Salim-BCH-13)*

This section reframes the workforce precarity (previously highlighted), through a solution-oriented lens, proposing that sustainability initiatives be rooted in intergenerational continuity and vocational renewal. The goal is not only to fill labour gaps, but to reinvigorate food work as a dignified, future-facing career within South Asian communities.

> *"Staff in restaurants don't get the same benefits as workers in other industries…This needs to change" (Rasheek-BCH6)*

From a sustainable entrepreneurship perspective, this requires expanding the definition of innovation to include human capital development. The sustainability of small, ethnically embedded food enterprises cannot be abstracted from the people who operate them. Training young people in culinary skills, energy-efficient practices, and digital tools while grounding such efforts in cultural pride and community relevance ensures that sustainability becomes lived, not just legislated.

Stakeholder theory, too, must evolve to include future workers as active stakeholders. Young people are not passive inheritors of business legacies but potential co-creators of new sustainability trajectories. Yet current policy and institutional frameworks rarely provide incentives or platforms for their inclusion. As a representative of the Caterers' Association insightfully noted:

> *"Restaurant jobs should be seen as a career path, not just a fallback… some celebrity chefs started here." (Rashiq-BCA1)*

Food systems approach further strengthens this pathway by foregrounding the importance of labour reproduction in system sustainability. A just and resilient food system must attend not only to environmental metrics but also to the social infrastructure of skill, motivation, and identity that sustains it. When food work is devalued or abandoned, the entire system becomes brittle—regardless of how ecologically efficient it appears on the surface.

Thus, youth engagement is not merely about solving a staffing problem; it is about building a culturally grounded and professionally viable sustainability pipeline. Investing in skills development ensures that sustainability is embedded across generations, not just as a policy agenda but as a shared aspiration.

Policy and practice must develop hospitality training programs tailored to ethnic food contexts, weaving together sustainability values, culinary heritage, and digital skills, while launching youth-focused campaigns that position curry house work as entrepreneurship, creativity, and community service. Simultaneously, culturally accessible digital labour platforms must be

utilized to match skilled and semi-skilled workers with curry houses in responsive, community-centred ways.

This pathway recognises that sustainability is ultimately human work. Without young people to carry it forward; trained, inspired, and respected, the future of ethnic food enterprises, and the values they carry, remains at risk. Repositioning curry house labour as a space of opportunity rather than obligation is thus essential for unlocking the sector's sustainable future.

### 5.3.6 Promoting consumer awareness and demand

A meaningful shift towards sustainability in Bangladeshi curry houses cannot occur in isolation from consumers. Consumer perceptions and purchasing behaviours are pivotal levers in shaping what sustainability practices are viable. Yet curry houses often operate within a double bind: expected to modernise and adopt greener practices, while still delivering low-cost, high-portion meals rooted in nostalgic culinary expectations. As one caterer expressed:

> *"The public still perceive curry as a cheap night out, which was true in the '90s when dining at Indian and Chinese restaurants was affordable. Back then, non-licensed restaurants thrived because customers could bring their own alcohol, significantly reducing their bills and allowing them to dine out more frequently. However, the dining scene began shifting even before COVID, altering these dynamics…. That mindset has to shift." (Ahmad-BCH11)*

This entrenched price-value psychology discourages investments in sustainability innovations such as eco-friendly packaging or ethically sourced ingredients, particularly when those enhancements would require raising prices. Importantly, these constraints are not merely economic; they are culturally and historically constructed, reflecting longstanding racialised commodification of ethnic food as cheap, abundant, and service-oriented.

Through the lens of food systems approach, this challenge reveals deeper systemic inequalities. Dominant consumer narratives often obscure the labour, sourcing complexity, and cultural care embedded in ethnic cuisine. Sustainability, in this context, is not only a matter of kitchen practices but also of social recognition and revaluation. Without reshaping public understanding of what these meals represent and what they cost to produce sustainably, the space for meaningful transition remains narrow.

Meanwhile, stakeholder theory compels us to reposition consumers not as passive end-users, but as active co-producers of sustainability. Their expectations shape market norms. Their willingness to pay influences whether sustainable sourcing is viable. Their recognition can uplift or marginalise the quiet sustainability already practiced within ethnic kitchens. This repositions the public not as barriers, but as untapped partners in advancing equity-oriented sustainability.

Policy and practice must launch public education campaigns celebrating curry houses' sustainability efforts—frugality, fresh sourcing, community impact—fostering cultural respect alongside ecological awareness, supported by recognition schemes and labels rewarding informal and low-waste practices. Simultaneously, "eco-authentic" branding models must link culinary heritage with sustainable practices, enabling restaurants to communicate values authentically, while incentive structures like loyalty schemes, green discounts, and local food vouchers reward conscious consumption and strengthen local food economies.

This pathway recognises that shifting consumer consciousness is central to enabling sustainability in marginalised food economies. Reframing curry houses not as cheap options but as responsible stewards of cultural and ecological value can turn public demand into a driver not a deterrent of sustainability.

### 5.4 Chapter conclusion: Towards culturally responsive sustainability future

This chapter has built on the previous findings by shifting the analytical lens from the practices and perceptions of sustainability (Chapter 4) to the chokepoints and opportunities that shape curry houses' capacity to sustain and evolve those practices. Rather than framing the challenges as fixed barriers, the chapter has presented them as structurally embedded yet intervenable chokepoints; conditions that, if engaged with thoughtfully and inclusively, could unlock more just and contextually appropriate sustainability transitions.

The first part (Section 5.2) unpacked four interrelated chokepoints, ranging from the prohibitive cost of formal sustainable innovation to workforce precarity and misaligned sustainability frameworks. These chokepoints are not isolated. They intersect and compound one another, forming a system of friction that limits curry houses' ability to engage with sustainability beyond their current adaptive practices.

In response, the second part (Section 5.3) has proposed contextually grounded pathways forward, ranging from culturally responsive policy reforms to consumer education. These pathways are not prescriptive or technocratic solutions, but directional strategies grounded in real-world practice and theoretical critique. Each pathway emphasises the need for a pluralised, relational, and equity-oriented sustainability framework; one that values frugality, cultural embeddedness, and adaptive ingenuity as legitimate sustainability modalities. Together, they offer a roadmap for rethinking sustainability from the margins: not as a deficit model, but as a site of potential. The analysis reinforces the need to decentre universalist sustainability assumptions and replace them with frameworks rooted in lived experiences and real-world conditions of marginalised entrepreneurs. It calls for an expanded definition of

sustainability that does not only privilege technological fixes, certifications, or standardisation, but rather recognises diverse practices of care, continuity, and community survival.

This prepares the ground for the next chapter, which synthesises the theoretical contributions emerging from both empirical chapters and reflects on how the insights from the Bangladeshi curry house sector can contribute to broader debates across various theoretical domains in a connected and integrated way.

# Chapter Six: Theoretical Contributions

*Survivalist sustainability in ethnic food systems: An integrated framework for understanding marginalised environmental Practice*

## 6.1 Introduction

This chapter advances a unified theoretical framework that fundamentally reconceptualises how sustainability emerges, operates, and evolves within marginalised entrepreneurial contexts. Through empirical analysis of Bangladeshi curry house enterprises, this research reveals the operation of *survivalist sustainability in ethnic food systems*; a sophisticated mode of environmental practice that challenges the universalist assumptions embedded within mainstream sustainability scholarship while exposing the limitations of dominant theoretical paradigms across sustainable entrepreneurship, ethnic minority entrepreneurship, food systems governance, stakeholder theory, and institutional frameworks.

### 6.1.1 Survivalist sustainability as paradigm-challenging framework

The experiences of Bangladeshi curry house entrepreneurs expose profound theoretical tensions that emerge not as analytical inconsistencies but as fundamental challenges to the epistemological foundations that have shaped scholarly understanding of sustainability, entrepreneurship, informality and marginalised economic actors (Ribas Cardoso, 2023; Bruton et al., 2013). These tensions reveal the operation of what this thesis termed *marginalised sustainability epistemologies*; ways of knowing and practising environmental responsibility that have been systematically excluded from academic and policy discourse despite their sophistication, effectiveness, and cultural significance.

Consequently, this study advances survivalist sustainability in ethnic food systems as a paradigm-challenging theoretical framework that fundamentally inverts dominant assumptions about the relationship between resources, innovation, and environmental practice. Rather than treating marginalised entrepreneurs as deficient actors requiring external intervention, this framework positions them as sophisticated innovators whose constraint-driven practices reveal the epistemological limitations of mainstream sustainability scholarship.

#### *6.1.2 Defining survivalist sustainability: Construct boundaries and core logic*

Survivalist sustainability is defined as an integrated mode of environmental practice that emerges from structural precarity rather than resource abundance, operates through cultural embeddedness rather than formal compliance, and generates legitimate environmental outcomes through adaptive innovation driven by necessity rather than opportunity.

Survivalist sustainability represents more than an alternative pathway to environmental outcomes, it constitutes a distinct epistemological approach that integrates economic survival,

cultural preservation, and environmental stewardship through logics fundamentally different from mainstream sustainable entrepreneurship (Stepan et al.,2025). This framework emerges from the recognition that ethnic minority food enterprises operate within complex intersections of structural constraint, cultural obligation, and environmental necessity that resist reduction to single theoretical explanations while simultaneously revealing alternative pathways that operate through different logics, knowledge systems, and organisational forms.This construct operates within specific boundaries as summarised in table 21 below.

*Table 23: What survivalist sustainability IS and IS NOT*

| ***What survivalist sustainability IS:*** | ***What survivalist sustainability IS NOT:*** |
|---|---|
| • Constraint-driven environmental innovation emerging from economic necessity | ○ Opportunistic environmental entrepreneurship based on resource abundance |
| • Culturally-constituted practices integrating economic survival with environmental stewardship | ○ Technologically-driven innovation requiring capital investment |
| • Informal knowledge systems generating legitimate sustainability outcomes | ○ Formal compliance with externally-imposed sustainability standards |
| • Adaptive responses to structural exclusion that preserve cultural authenticity | ○ Strategic environmental positioning for market advantage |
| • Distributed innovation processes operating through community networks | ○ Individual heroic entrepreneurship disconnected from cultural context |

The construct's theoretical boundaries distinguish it from related concepts: unlike green entrepreneurship, survivalist sustainability emerges from necessity rather than opportunity; unlike frugal innovation, it is culturally-constituted rather than purely resource-driven; unlike social entrepreneurship, it integrates rather than separates economic and environmental objectives.

*6.1.3 Paradigmatic challenge: Inverting core assumptions*

Survivalist sustainability challenges three core assumptions dominating sustainability scholarship:

(1) Environmental innovation requires resource abundance and deliberate strategic intent: Mainstream frameworks assume that environmental practice emerges from surplus resources,

technological capacity, institutional support, and deliberate strategies (Shepherd & Patzelt, 2011, 2018; Dean & McMullen, 2007; Cohen & Winn, 2007). Survivalist sustainability demonstrates the inverse: structural constraints generate rather than inhibit environmental innovation, with resource scarcity catalysing adaptive and pragmatic practices that achieve environmental outcomes through economic necessity.

(2) Formal institutions drive effective governance: Dominant approaches privilege formal certification, regulatory compliance, and institutional recognition as indicators of legitimate environmental practice (Scott, 2008; Powell & DiMaggio, 2000), and posit that governance operates through unified institutional arrangements (Freeman et al., 2010; Mitchell et al., 1997). Survivalist sustainability reveals how informal, culturally-embedded governance systems operate independently of formal institutional frameworks while generating sophisticated environmental outcomes through community-based validation and accountability mechanisms.

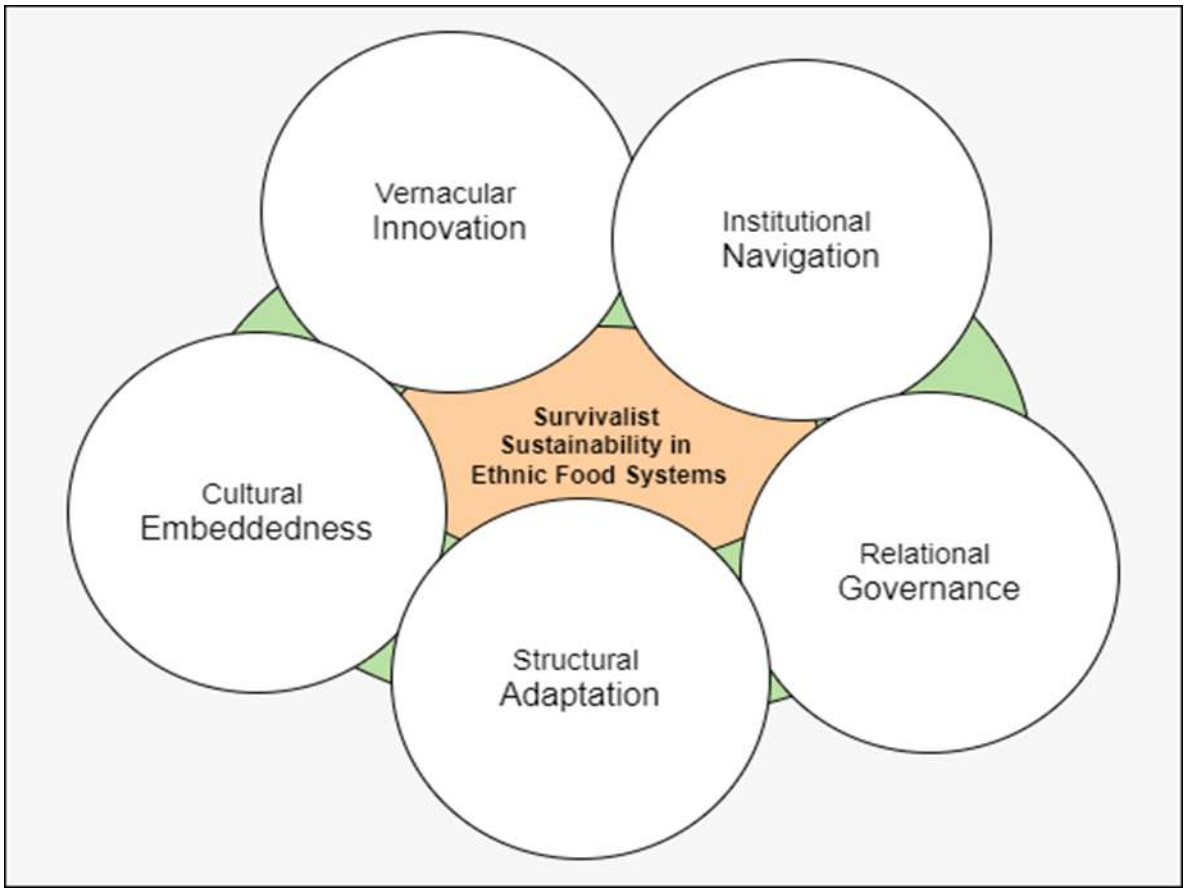
(3) Cultural preservation conflicts with environmental adaptation: Traditional sustainability theory treats culture as either a barrier to overcome or an external influence on rational decision-making (Shepherd & Patzelt, 2018). Survivalist sustainability demonstrates that cultural preservation becomes environmental practice, with traditional knowledge systems, community expectations, and cultural authenticity requirements driving rather than constraining environmental innovation.

These inversions constitute paradigmatic rather than incremental challenges, demanding reconceptualisation of fundamental assumptions about agency, innovation, and governance within sustainability transitions (Meynard et al., 2017; Yap, 2023).

*6.1.4 Five interactive mechanisms: System dynamics rather than separate categories*

The survivalist sustainability framework operates through five interactive mechanisms that function as a coherent system rather than separate analytical categories. These mechanisms demonstrate emergent properties where their interaction produces outcomes that cannot be predicted from individual components:

*Figure 14: The survivalist sustainability framework depicting five interconnected dimensions*




These dimensions are not separate theoretical contributions but mutually constitutive elements of a coherent framework that explains how survivalist sustainability emerges as an integrated response to the complex challenges facing marginalised food enterprises. The theoretical significance lies in demonstrating how these dimensions interact to produce legitimate environmental outcomes through pathways that operate outside, yet parallel to dominant sustainability frameworks (Sutter et al., 2019).

Vernacular Innovation ↔ Cultural Embeddedness: Traditional knowledge systems generate environmental practices that are simultaneously resource-efficient and culturally authentic, creating positive feedback loops where cultural preservation reinforces environmental innovation.

Cultural Embeddedness ↔ Structural Adaptation: Cultural values emphasising moderation and stewardship enable creative responses to resource constraints, while adaptive practices are evaluated through cultural rather than technical criteria.

Structural Adaptation ↔ Relational Governance: Economic constraints are addressed through horizontal stakeholder networks that provide resources and knowledge, while community relationships shape which adaptations are culturally acceptable.

Relational Governance ↔ Institutional Navigation: Community-based legitimacy systems provide alternatives to formal institutional recognition, while selective engagement with formal requirements maintains minimal compliance without compromising cultural authenticity.

Institutional Navigation ↔ Vernacular Innovation: Informal knowledge systems create parallel governance mechanisms that operate independently of formal sustainability frameworks, while institutional exclusion necessitates community-based innovation processes.

These interactions demonstrate system-level coherence where each mechanism both shapes and is shaped by all others, producing integrated sustainability outcomes that resist decomposition into separate components (Abson et al., 2017). These dimensional interactions and their emergent properties are further discussed in **Section 6.7** following the discussions on the five integrated paradigmic dimensions of survivalist sustainability.

*6.1.5 Temporal dynamics: Evolution and reproduction across time*

Survivalist sustainability exhibits distinct temporal dynamics that differentiate it from static sustainability models:

**Intergenerational Knowledge Transmission:** Environmental practices are preserved and adapted across generations through apprenticeship, cultural reproduction, and community socialisation rather than formal training programmes. This creates path-dependent innovation where current practices build on accumulated cultural knowledge while adapting to contemporary constraints.

**Adaptive Cycles:** The framework exhibits cyclical patterns where external shocks (regulatory changes, market disruptions, supply chain crises) trigger adaptive responses that become embedded cultural practices, which then inform responses to future challenges. These cycles demonstrate dynamic stability where core cultural logics persist while specific practices evolve.

**Network Evolution:** Stakeholder relationships evolve over time as community demographics change, generational succession occurs, and institutional contexts shift. The framework shows relational durability where network structures persist even as individual actors change, maintaining system coherence across temporal transitions.

**Institutional Co-evolution:** Formal and informal governance systems influence each other over time, with survivalist practices occasionally being recognised and incorporated into policy frameworks while maintaining their essential characteristics. This demonstrates selective institutionalisation where some practices gain formal recognition without losing cultural authenticity.

### *6.1.6 Scope Conditions: When and where this framework applies*

Survivalist sustainability operates under specific scope conditions that determine its applicability versus other sustainability conceptualisations:

*Table 24: Summarising the scope conditions of survivalist sustainability*

| Applicable Contexts: | Non-Applicable Contexts: |
|---|---|
| • Marginalised entrepreneurial contexts characterised by resource constraints and institutional exclusion | ○ Resource-abundant contexts where sustainability emerges from surplus rather than constraint |
| • Culturally-embedded enterprises where economic activity is inseparable from cultural reproduction | ○ Contexts where cultural and economic logics are clearly separated |
| • Informal economies operating parallel to but outside dominant institutional frameworks | ○ Formal institutional environments with strong regulatory frameworks and enforcement capacity |
| • Small-scale enterprises embedded in community networks and horizontal relationships | ○ Large-scale enterprises operating through hierarchical rather than network structures |
| • Post-colonial contexts where traditional knowledge systems persist alongside formal institutions | ○ Environments where formal innovation systems provide adequate support for environmental entrepreneurship |

**Boundary Conditions:** The framework's effectiveness diminishes when:

(1) structural constraints become so severe that survival takes precedence over environmental considerations; (2) cultural communities fragment to the point where collective validation mechanisms break down; (3) formal institutional pressure becomes so intense that informal governance systems cannot provide viable alternatives; (4) generational succession fails, disrupting intergenerational knowledge transmission.

### *6.1.7 Framework Applications Across Theoretical Domains*

The subsequent sections of this chapter demonstrate how survivalist sustainability provides paradigmatic alternatives to dominant theoretical approaches across scholarly domains in an integrated and interconnected way; explaining how marginalised entrepreneurs navigate sustainability challenges within a coherent system of survivalist sustainability in ethnic food systems. Rather than offering incremental additions to existing theory, each section shows how the framework fundamentally reconceptualises core assumptions:

**Section 6.2** repositions ethnic micro-enterprises from peripheral food system actors to integral nodes whose vernacular innovation contributes to system resilience through mechanisms invisible to formal governance frameworks.

**Section 6.3** demonstrates how sustainability practices are culturally constituted rather than culturally influenced, challenging both essentialist and structuralist approaches to ethnic minority entrepreneurship.

**Section 6.4** reveals how constraints generate rather than inhibit environmental innovation, inverting opportunity-driven models that dominate sustainable entrepreneurship.

**Section 6.5** expands stakeholder theory beyond conventional business boundaries to accommodate invisible, future-oriented, and culturally legitimated actors whose influence operates through different logics than economic stakeholders.

**Section 6.6** shows how marginalised enterprises create viable alternatives to formal institutional frameworks, challenging assumptions about the necessity of institutional recognition for effective governance.

**Section 6.7** presents an interated framework of survivalist sustainability, highlighting muttual constitution, multi-dimensional interactions, emergent properties and theoretical propositions.

Together, these applications demonstrate survivalist sustainability's paradigmatic potential to reconceptualise sustainability theory toward more inclusive, culturally sensitive, and structurally-aware approaches that recognise the sophisticated environmental innovations already embedded within marginalised communities. Essentially, the theoretical framework developed here demonstrates that sustainability transitions cannot be understood through universal models but must accommodate the cultural, spatial, and structural diversity of contemporary entrepreneurial landscapes (Welter et al., 2017; Kolk et al., 2017). This recognition demands fundamental reconceptualisation of core theoretical assumptions about entrepreneurial agency, innovation pathways, stakeholder legitimacy, and institutional design while contributing to emerging scholarship on pluralistic sustainability and advancing theoretical frameworks that can accommodate the complex realities of marginalised entrepreneurs operating within contemporary food systems.

### 6.2 Elements of survivalist sustainability framework and theoretical propositions

The five elements of survivalist sustainability framework and the theoretical propositions are discussed hereunder.

### 6.2.1 Vernacular Innovation: Repositioning ethnic enterprises as integral food system nodes

The first dimension of survivalist sustainability challenges dominant food systems frameworks by repositioning ethnic micro-enterprises from peripheral actors requiring formalisation to integral nodes whose vernacular sustainability practices enhance system resilience through mechanisms invisible to formal governance frameworks. This repositioning fundamentally disrupts technocratic approaches that privilege formalised, scalable, and technologically-driven solutions while marginalising informal, localised, and culturally embedded food economies (Hayson, 2020; Pereira & Drimie, 2016; Sonnino et al.,2016).

#### 6.2.1.1 From technocratic models to plural food systems

Food systems approach has undergone significant evolution in its conceptualisation of sustainability, moving from predominantly technocratic models toward more inclusive and pluralistic frameworks (Maye et al., 2025; Kalkanci et al.,2019). However, traditional food systems scholarship remains dominated by what scholars describe as coordinated organisational and scientific efforts that privilege formalised, scalable, and technologically driven solutions (Sutter et al., 2019). These approaches typically centre large agribusinesses, supermarket chains, and institutionally recognised suppliers while marginalising informal, localised, and culturally embedded food economies such as the curry houses.

The dominance of such frameworks has created a visibility bias in food governance, where practices that cannot be easily quantified, audited, or scaled remain peripheral to policy consideration (Moragues-Faus, 2020, 2021). This bias systematically excludes the sophisticated sustainability practices operating within ethnic food networks, despite recent recognition that the global food industry faces sustainability challenges due to climate change, resource depletion, food security and health concerns (HLPE, 2020).

This research reveals *vernacular sustainability*; practices rooted in cultural knowledge, intergenerational learning, and adaptive responses to constraint that contribute to local food system resilience through mechanisms operating outside formal recognition systems (IDRC, 2024; Loring, 2023; Meynard et al., 2017; Mincyte, 2012). These practices include informal sourcing networks connecting ethnic entrepreneurs to specialised suppliers, low-waste preparation routines developed through cultural knowledge and economic necessity, energy conservation techniques transmitted through community learning, frugal resource management to reduce wastes, and labour-sharing arrangements enabling operational flexibility (*as summarised in **Table 20** in chapter four*).

Unlike formal sustainability initiatives that privilege data, certifications, and codified standards, vernacular sustainability operates through tacit knowledge and relational networks that resist conventional measurement frameworks (Maynard et al.,2017; Anderson et al., 2019). The

theoretical significance of this repositioning lies in its challenge to dominant assumptions about what constitutes legitimate sustainability practice while contributing to emerging scholarship on food justice and inclusive food systems (Galt et al., 2016).

#### 6.2.1.2 Parallel food circulation systems and resilience

The study extends transition theory (Geels et al., 2023) while incorporating what this research terms *'vernacular transitions'*; sustainability adaptations that emerge from cultural practice rather than institutional design. These transitions are characterised by their embeddedness in social relationships, their responsiveness to structural constraints, and their integration of cultural preservation with resource efficiency.

Curry houses participate in parallel food circulation systems; informal networks that are shorter, more relational, and more adaptive than conventional supply chains, demonstrating remarkable resilience during disruptions and maintaining functionality when formal systems fail. These networks operate through reliance on informal networks of suppliers, many of whom are also ethnic entrepreneurs, contributing to what can be conceptualised as alternative food networks that provide alternative pathways during supply chain crises like COVID-19 (Atalan-Helicke & Abiral, 2021). Curry house entreprenuers consistently expressed how these informal networks facilitate culturally appropriate, localised sourcing, social safety net and economic lifeline. This insight resonates deeply.

> *“If we stop using our community suppliers and rely on or switch to mainstream ones, our costs will go up, and we won’t survive.” (Raju-BCH8)*

This resilience emerges not from formal planning but from what scholars describe as adaptive capacity; the ability of social-ecological systems to respond to changing conditions through reorganisation and innovation (Cabral et al.,2025; Korede et al., 2023). The theoretical framework advanced here suggests that such adaptive capacity is often concentrated in marginalised communities precisely because their structural exclusion from formal support systems necessitates creative problem-solving and network-based solutions. The curry house sector demonstrated this adaptive capacity in the face of Brexit uncertainties, COVID-19 disruptions, and recent inflation pressures through informal network activation, menu adaptation, and operational flexibility that proved particularly valuable during these crises. The theoretical significance of these parallel systems lies in their capacity to maintain functionality during disruptions while providing alternative pathways that operate independently of formal transition frameworks.

#### 6.2.1.3 Cultural politics of sustainability and authenticity constraints

A significant theoretical contribution lies in analysing how cultural politics intersect with environmental practice in ways that challenge conventional sustainability frameworks (Hammond, 2021, 2025; Brownell et al.,2025). The emphasis on authenticity, both demanded by consumers and maintained by curry house operators, reveals how sustainability cannot be decoupled from cultural reproduction and identity formation. This finding extends recent scholarship on the cultural dimensions of food systems transitions, which has increasingly recognised that the accomplishment of food and nutrition security for all across sustainable food systems is tied to the Sustainable Development Goals through socio-cultural inclusion, economic development, environmental safety, inclusivity, and the development of sustainable food systems (HLPE, 2020; Meireis & Rippl, 2019; Kalkanci et al.,2019).

The research demonstrates how sustainability transitions in ethnic food businesses must be understood as simultaneously environmental, cultural, and political processes. Decisions such as using charcoal grills or sourcing spices through community networks are not merely technical choices but reflect what can be theorised as cultural sustainability (Meireis & Rippl, 2019); the maintenance of practices that preserve cultural authenticity while navigating environmental constraints. Authenticity constraints emerge as cultural expectations shape environmental practice through cultural rather than technical logics. This concept challenges the traditional separation between environmental and cultural concerns that characterises much sustainability policy while supporting Duxbury et al.'s (2016) emphasis on the importance of civic engagement and cultural participation in sustainability efforts.

#### 6.2.1.4 Toward epistemic justice in food systems

The theoretical framework developed in this study contributes to ongoing debates about epistemic justice in sustainability research; the recognition that different knowledge systems and ways of knowing have legitimate claims to validity (Kusch, 2020). By foregrounding the sustainability practices of curry house operators, this study challenges what this thesis termed 'epistemic colonialism' in food systems approach: the tendency to privilege Western, scientific, and formalised knowledge over indigenous, traditional, and experiential ways of knowing. Recent scholarship has increasingly recognised the need for participatory food governance that involves co-production of policy tools and culturally situated sustainability interventions (Sandover, 2020). This study advances this theoretical agenda by demonstrating how ethnic food entrepreneurs can be repositioned as knowledge-holders rather than passive targets of sustainability intervention.

The theoretical contribution here lies in the development of a 'decolonial sustainability framework', one that recognises the legitimacy of diverse knowledge systems and the ways in

which marginalised communities have always practiced sustainability, even when these practices remain invisible to dominant measurement systems. This framework challenges the assumption that sustainability must be taught to ethnic entrepreneurs and instead suggests that they are already engaging in sophisticated forms of environmental and social innovation.

**Proposition 1:** Sustainability in marginalised entrepreneurial contexts emerge from constraints and necessity-driven vernacular practices rooted in cultural knowledge systems and adaptative response rather than formal designs or opportunity recognition, challenging technocratic models that assume resource abundance and strategic choice.

*This vernacular innovation dimension establishes that ethnic food enterprises function as integral system nodes whose sustainability practices emerge through vernacular innovation; informal knowledge systems and parallel governance structures. However, these innovations are not culturally neutral, they operate within broader systems of cultural embeddedness, which forms the second dimension of survivalist sustainability.*

### 6.2.2 Cultural Embeddedness: Beyond essentialism toward constitutive practice

Building upon the vernacular innovation dimension's recognition of ethnic enterprises as integral food system nodes, the second dimension demonstrates how these practices are fundamentally constituted through rather than merely influenced by cultural contexts. This insight disrupts both the cultural neutrality assumed in mainstream sustainable entrepreneurship and the essentialist tendencies that reduce ethnic minority entrepreneurship to static traditionalism (Basu et al.,2024; Ram et al., 2017).

#### 6.2.2.1 Reconceptualising culture as constitutive

Dominant sustainable entrepreneurship frameworks treat culture as an external variable that influences entrepreneurial decision-making—a backdrop against which rational actors pursue environmental opportunities (Dean & McMullen, 2007; Shepherd & Patzelt, 2011, 2018). This approach fails to recognise how sustainability practices emerge from and reproduce cultural knowledge systems, moral economies, and collective identities that cannot be separated from environmental action itself. The theoretical landscape of ethnic minority entrepreneurship has been characterised by persistent analytical polarisation between culturalist and structuralist paradigms. Traditional culturalist interpretations have privileged explanations centred on community values, ethnic solidarity, and inherent 'entrepreneurial drive', while structuralist accounts have emphasised systemic barriers including discrimination, labour market exclusion, and constrained access to capital (Jones et al., 2014; Alexander et al., 2022).

Recent theoretical developments in mixed embeddedness theory (Kloosterman & Rath, 2018) have attempted to transcend these reductive frameworks by recognising that ethnic

entrepreneurs are embedded both in their ethnic communities and in the surrounding society, with this mixed embeddedness shaping entrepreneurial activities and strategies (Selcuk & Suwala, 2020; Jones et al., 2014, 2023). The curry house context reveals sustainability practices that are culturally constituted: portion control emerges from cultural norms about excess; ingredient sourcing reflects diasporic connections and authenticity expectations; waste minimisation practices derive from intergenerational experiences of scarcity; and energy conservation develops through community-based knowledge sharing. These practices resist translation into conventional sustainability metrics precisely because their logic is cultural rather than technical (Shaid et al.,2023).

#### 6.2.2.2 Mechanisms of cultural constitution

This cultural constitution operates through multiple interconnected mechanisms that demonstrate the sophisticated integration of environmental and cultural logics:

Diasporic memory shapes resource conservation practices through embodied experiences of scarcity and abundance across migration trajectories, creating what might be termed ‘memorial sustainability’ where past experiences inform present environmental practices (Ugueto-Ponce & Felicien, 2022). Religious-cultural frameworks provide moral guidelines that emphasise moderation, stewardship, and community obligation, generating sustainability practices that emerge from spiritual rather than purely secular environmental consciousness.

Intergenerational knowledge transfer preserves and adapts traditional practices to contemporary constraints through mechanisms that recent scholarship recognises as critical for network embeddedness and entrepreneurial bricolage (Uzzi, 2018). Community accountability ensures practices align with cultural authenticity expectations while meeting environmental challenges, creating feedback loops that reinforce both cultural preservation and environmental outcomes.

These mechanisms contribute to what this study conceptualises as ‘relational agility’; the capacity to navigate multiple embeddedness contexts while maintaining cultural authenticity and business viability (Ram et al., 2017; Högberg & Mitchell, 2023). This concept extends beyond traditional notions of resilience to encompass the creative and strategic responses that marginalised entrepreneurs develop to navigate racialised and exclusionary systems.

#### 6.2.2.3 Spatial embeddedness and transnational networks

Cultural embeddedness operates through spatial dimensions that connect local practices to transnational networks of knowledge, resources, and accountability, aligning with recent theoretical developments recognising dynamic interrelations between entrepreneurship and opportunity structures beyond venture start-up (Högberg & Mitchell, 2023). Curry houses

function within ethnic spatial economies characterised by informal supply chains, community-based labour arrangements, and alternative governance structures that enable particular forms of sustainability practice. These spatial arrangements create conditions for vernacular knowledge circulation where sustainability practices develop through tacit learning, peer observation, and community experimentation rather than formal training or policy intervention. Knowledge travels through kinship networks, supplier relationships, and community gatherings in ways that resist codification within conventional innovation frameworks (Nancheva, 2024).

The spatial dimension reveals how sustainability practices are simultaneously local and transnational, embedded in neighbourhood economies yet connected to global supply chains, traditional knowledge systems, and diasporic communities. This multi-scalar embeddedness enables adaptive responses to local constraints while maintaining connections to broader cultural and economic networks, contributing to what recent work describes as mixed embeddedness perspective offering a holistic approach to understanding entrepreneurship as embedded in myriad contexts (Kloosterman & Rath, 2018).

#### 6.2.2.4 Beyond cultural essentialism: Innovation through cultural preservation

This study fundamentally challenges residual essentialist tendencies within EME literature that conflate cultural resilience with static traditionalism. The research demonstrates that curry house operators exhibit remarkable adaptive capacity, strategically modifying menus, adopting digital technologies, and adjusting labour practices within severe structural constraints. This entrepreneurial behaviour represents neither nostalgic nor static responses but what this study conceptualises as *survivalist agency*; forms of entrepreneurial action that emerge precisely because of, rather than despite, structural exclusion.

The theoretical contribution lies in demonstrating how cultural preservation becomes environmental innovation when authentic cooking methods happen to be resource-efficient, when traditional knowledge systems emphasise waste minimisation, and when community expectations align with sustainable outcomes. However, this alignment is neither automatic nor unproblematic. Entrepreneurs must navigate tensions when cultural authenticity conflicts with environmental efficiency, when community expectations clash with regulatory requirements, and when economic pressures threaten cultural continuity. These tensions are resolved through cultural innovation; adaptive practices that preserve essential cultural elements while responding to environmental constraints. This process involves selective adaptation of traditions, creative interpretation of cultural requirements, and negotiation of authenticity boundaries within community networks, demonstrating what can be termed the 'productive tensions' of ethnic minority entrepreneurship.

**Proposition 2:** Cultural embeddedness constitutes rather than merely influences sustainability practice, requiring theoretical frameworks that can accommodate non-Western epistemologies and value systems that integrate environmental, cultural, and spiritual concerns.

*The cultural embeddedness dimension reveals how sustainability practices emerge from deep cultural logics rather than external policy frameworks, while simultaneously adapting to structural constraints, leading naturally to examination of how these constraints themselves become catalysts for innovation in the third dimension.*

### 6.2.3 Structural Adaptation: Constraints as catalysts for innovation

The structural adaptation dimension builds upon cultural embeddedness by demonstrating how the very constraints that marginalise ethnic food enterprises, rather than strategic opportunities, generate distinctive forms of environmental practice that challenge innovation-centric models dominating sustainable entrepreneurship (Cohen & Winn, 2007; York & Venkataraman, 2016). This insight fundamentally disrupts assumptions about entrepreneurial agency, resource requirements, and innovation pathways within sustainability transitions while revealing how cultural embeddedness enables creative responses to structural limitations.

#### 6.2.3.1 Challenging the innovation-centric paradigm

The theoretical landscape of sustainable entrepreneurship has been dominated by innovation-centric models that position entrepreneurs as proactive agents of environmental change. Dominant frameworks conceptualise sustainable entrepreneurship as emerging from deliberate strategic choices, where entrepreneurs recognise environmental market failures and deploy innovative solutions to create both environmental and economic value (Shepherd & Patzelt, 2018). This prevailing narrative constructs sustainable entrepreneurs as visionary leaders who internalise environmental logics and strategically position their ventures to capitalise on emerging green markets (Hossain et al.,2016). Recent scholarship has reinforced this perspective, emphasising how entrepreneurial ecosystems contribute to sustainable development through innovative practices and technological solutions (Audretsch et al., 2020).

However, this study's findings fundamentally challenge these foundational assumptions. The experiences of Bangladeshi curry house entrepreneurs reveal a markedly different reality, where sustainability emerges not from strategic environmental vision but from adaptive responses to structural constraints and economic precarity. This divergence reveals ‘innovation bias’ in existing theoretical frameworks: a tendency to privilege formalised, capital-intensive, and technologically-driven approaches while marginalising informal, adaptive,

culturally-embedded and knowledge-driven sustainability practices (Sutter et al., 2019; Audretsch et al., 2020).

#### 6.2.3.2 From opportunity-driven to necessity-driven sustainability

The curry house context reveals sustainability emerging from necessity-driven adaptation to structural constraints including labour shortages, financial limitations, regulatory pressures, and market volatility. These constraints generate rather than inhibit innovative environmental practices through mechanisms that operate outside conventional innovation frameworks, challenging the universality of innovation-centric models that assume entrepreneurial agency exists within stable institutional and resource environments (Bruton et al., 2013).

Resource scarcity drives portion optimisation, waste reduction, and energy conservation practices that achieve environmental outcomes through economic necessity. Labour constraints necessitate efficiency improvements, multi-tasking arrangements, and equipment sharing that reduce environmental impacts while addressing operational challenges. Regulatory pressures generate adaptive responses that often exceed formal requirements through informal innovation processes. High cost of ingredients necessitates the use of informal community based suppliers for flexible credit arrangements, and shorter supply chains.

This necessity-driven approach aligns with recent work challenging universalist approaches to sustainable entrepreneurship (Muñoz & Cohen, 2018; Spence, 2016) while advancing the concept of survivalist and necessity entrepreneurship; the capacity of marginalised entrepreneurs to navigate competing demands and constraints while sustaining viable enterprise models (Munoz et al., 2025; Rosca et al., 2018).

#### 6.2.3.3 Frugal innovation and cultural efficiency

The research advances theoretical understanding of frugal innovation within sustainability contexts by demonstrating how resource constraints interact with cultural knowledge systems to generate practices that are simultaneously economically efficient, environmentally beneficial, and culturally meaningful. While recent scholarship recognises frugal innovation as a source of sustainable entrepreneurship in addressing social and environmental challenges with limited resources (Tiwari et al., 2017; Weyrauch & Herstatt, 2017; Iqbal et al., 2021), this study extends this theoretical framework by showing how frugal innovation operates within culturally-specific contexts that resist conventional innovation metrics (Rosca et al., 2018).

The theoretical contribution lies in identifying 'cultural frugality'; resource-efficient practices emerging from cultural values and traditional knowledge rather than purely economic constraints. This concept challenges the assumption that frugal innovation is primarily driven

by resource scarcity, suggesting that cultural embeddedness can generate sustainability practices that are both economically efficient and culturally meaningful (Tiwari et al., 2016).

Traditional cooking techniques happen to be energy and cost-efficient due to prohibitive cost energy saving technology, community sharing arrangements reduce waste streams, and intergenerational knowledge transfer preserves resource conservation practices developed under different historical conditions. This cultural dimension of frugal innovation suggests that sustainability research must develop more pluralistic approaches to understanding innovative practice, positioning frugal innovation not as a second-best alternative to conventional innovation but as a legitimate pathway to sustainability that may be more appropriate for certain contexts and communities.

#### 6.2.3.4 Adaptive capacity and system resilience

Structural constraints generate adaptive capacity; the ability to respond creatively to changing conditions through reorganisation, experimentation, and network mobilisation as consistently expressed by curry house entrepreneurs. This adaptive capacity contributes to broader food system resilience by maintaining functionality during disruptions, preserving cultural knowledge systems, and providing alternative pathways when formal systems fail. Survivalist innovation emerges from this adaptive capacity as entrepreneurs develop solutions that address immediate survival challenges while generating broader environmental and social benefits. These innovations resist conventional scaling logics because they are embedded in specific cultural and structural contexts, yet they contribute to system-wide sustainability through distributed adaptation processes (Abson et el.,2015).

The framework's theoretical significance lies in its integration of these adaptation mechanisms into a coherent model that explains how survivalist sustainability emerges, operates, and evolves within specific cultural and structural contexts. Unlike conventional frameworks treating adaptation as separate from culture and innovation, the survivalist sustainability framework positions them as mutually constitutive elements of a complex adaptive system.

**Proposition 3:** Structural constraints generate adaptive capacity that contributes to system-wide resilience through distributed innovation processes operating outside formal governance frameworks, challenging assumptions about the relationship between resources and innovation capacity.

*The structural adaptation dimension demonstrates how constraints interact with cultural embeddedness to generate innovation, while simultaneously creating complex relationships with diverse stakeholder groups whose expectations shape and are shaped by these adaptive practices. This leads to examination of the relational governance dimension.*

### 6.2.4 Relational Governance: Expanding stakeholder boundaries beyond conventional frameworks

The relational governance dimension emerges from understanding how structural adaptation and cultural embeddedness create complex stakeholder relationships that extend beyond conventional business frameworks to include invisible, informal, and future-oriented actors whose legitimacy derives from cultural rather than economic criteria (Freeman, 1984; Jones et al., 2018). This insight fundamentally expands stakeholder theory to accommodate the relational complexity characterising marginalised entrepreneurial contexts while challenging narrow conceptualisations of legitimacy that privilege formally constituted entities, visible actors, and those with established channels of influence (Chowdhury et al., 2024).

#### 6.2.4.1 Challenging conventional stakeholder recognition

Stakeholder theory, as originally articulated by Freeman (1984), fundamentally challenges traditional business paradigms by positioning organisations within complex webs of relationships that extend beyond immediate economic transactions. The theory posits that long-term organisational success and ethical accountability depend on acknowledging and managing the interests of all stakeholders, not merely shareholders or dominant actors (Freeman et al., 2010). However, the operationalisation of stakeholder theory in sustainability contexts has been constrained by narrow conceptualisations of legitimacy that privilege formally constituted entities, visible actors, and those with established channels of influence. While emerging scholarship has begun challenging these limitations through work on marginalized stakeholder-centric entrepreneurship (Chowdhury et al., 2024), and calls for procedural fairness in multi-stakeholder initiatives (Schleifer, 2019; Tortosa-Edo & López-Navarro, 2025), significant gaps remain.

The empirical findings reveal a profound disconnect between stakeholder theory's normative aspirations and its practical application in marginalised food systems. Curry house operators expressed how they have been routinely excluded from consultation processes, procurement policy formation, and green financing schemes, despite their significant economic contributions and deep community embeddedness. This exclusion reflects what this thesis termed structural invisibility; the systematic non-recognition of stakeholders who operate outside dominant institutional frameworks.

#### 6.2.4.2 Plural stakeholder constituencies

The research identifies four distinct stakeholder categories operating within survivalist sustainability contexts, challenging traditional stakeholder mapping approaches while calling for more sophisticated frameworks that can accommodate diverse forms of stakeholder legitimacy (Crane & Ruebottom, 2017):

*Visible stakeholders* include customers, suppliers, and regulators who interact through formal channels but whose relationships are mediated through cultural expectations and informal networks that complicate conventional stakeholder management approaches (Freeman et al., 2010; Phillips, 2003). *Invisible stakeholders* encompass kinship networks, community elders, and cultural gatekeepers who exercise significant influence despite having no formal business relationship, determining the legitimacy of sustainability practices through cultural rather than economic criteria (Frooman, 1999).

*Future stakeholders* include younger generations whose expectations about sustainability and cultural preservation shape current practice, representing a temporal dimension of stakeholder relationships rarely acknowledged in conventional frameworks (Post et al., 2017). *Proxy stakeholders* involve community members representing broader cultural values extending stakeholder networks beyond direct business relationships into the wider diasporic community (Mitchell et al., 1997; Agle et al., 1999).

#### 6.2.4.3 Cultural legitimacy and symbolic relations

Traditional stakeholder theory assumes that stakeholder claims are transparent, negotiable, and subject to rational compromise (Mitchell et al., 1997). However, curry house contexts reveal stakeholder expectations that are deeply symbolic, moral, and culturally situated, necessitating a fundamental reframing of stakeholder theory to better incorporate non-economic rationalities and culturally bounded expectations. Customer preferences for portion sizes, cooking methods, or flavour authenticity are not merely functional or market-driven but are shaped by diasporic memory, affective loyalty, and intergenerational cultural transmission. Cultural legitimacy emerges from alignment between business practices and shared cultural values and moral commitments rather than economic efficiency or formal compliance (Rendtorff, 2020).

This reveals the operation of moral economies where tradition, obligation, and cultural recognition shape business survival (Uzzi, 2018), aligning with scholarship highlighting how cultural costs play a significant role in shaping community acceptance or resistance (Soones et al.,2018; Meireis & Rippl, 2019). Rather than assuming that businesses mediate conflicting claims through rational compromise, the theory must acknowledge that some stakeholder demands, particularly those grounded in cultural identity, may be non-negotiable.

#### 6.2.4.4 Horizontal networks and relational governance

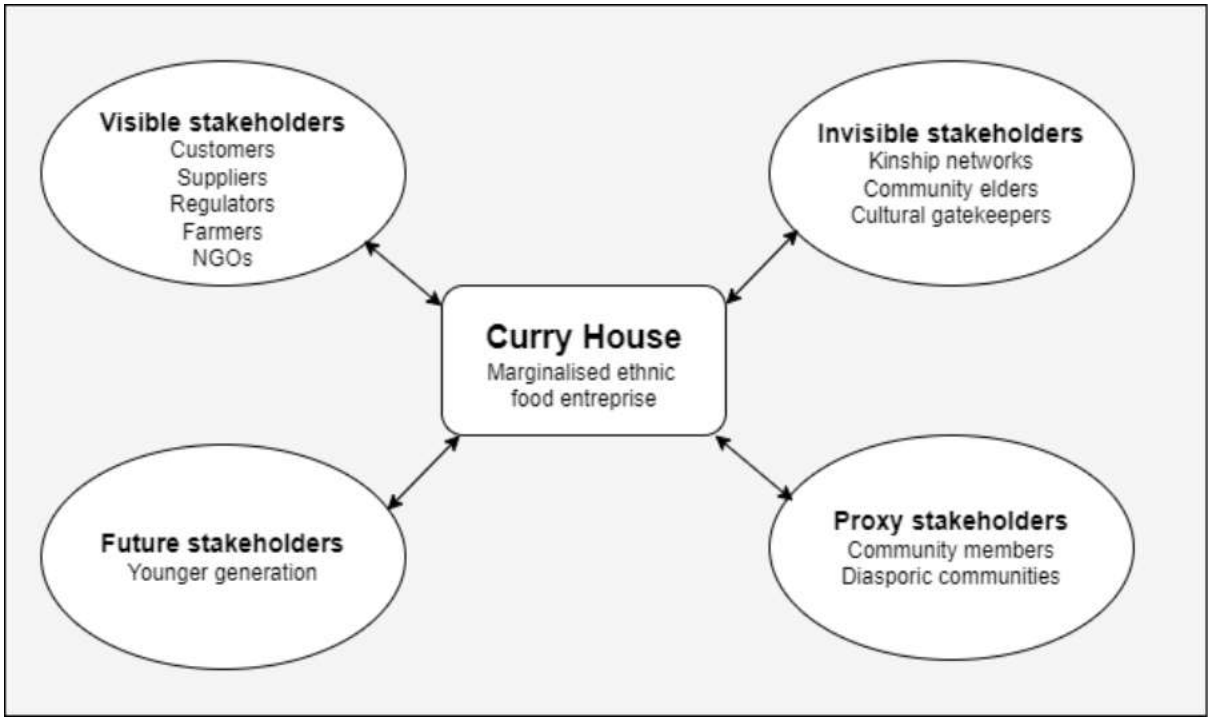
The research reveals horizontal stakeholder networks; dense webs of relationships characterised by trust, reciprocity, and mutual obligation that blur conventional boundaries between stakeholder categories. These networks include informal credit arrangements, intergenerational training systems, collective resource sharing, and community support

mechanisms enabling business resilience, challenging conventional stakeholder theory's assumption of discrete, identifiable stakeholder groups with clear interests and boundaries (Agle et al., 1999).

These relationships reveal stakeholder systems characterised by multiplicity, fluidity, and interdependence where suppliers become community members, customers become cultural guardians, and family members become business partners in ways that confound traditional stakeholder mapping exercises. This finding aligns with recent scholarship on food governance structured around alternative food systems that emphasises the need for governance approaches that can accommodate the complex, relational nature of food system stakeholder networks (Oñederra-Aramendi et al., 2023).

The relational dimension of stakeholder engagement suggests that effective governance requires understanding not just who stakeholders are, but how they relate to each other within embedded networks of reciprocity and obligation, supporting calls for more processual approaches to stakeholder theory that recognise the dynamic, evolving nature of stakeholder relationships (Kujala et al., 2022).

*Figure 15: Horizontal stakeholder networks and relational governance in ethnic food systems*




#### 6.2.4.5 Intergenerational sustainability and future constituencies

The study reveals critical structural inequalities in stakeholder voice that extend beyond immediate business relationships to encompass intergenerational sustainability challenges. A particularly significant but invisible stakeholder group consists of younger generations who are

increasingly disengaged from the curry house sector due to perceived social stigma, economic insecurity, and limited social mobility prospects.

This intergenerational disconnect represents a fundamental threat to the long-term viability of curry house businesses and the cultural heritage they preserve, reflecting broader limitations in temporal conceptualisations of stakeholder theory. Traditional approaches focus on present relationships and immediate interests, failing to account for the long-term cultural and social reproduction necessary for business sustainability in culturally embedded enterprises, connecting to recent work advocating for a paradigm shift toward considering future successors as legitimate stakeholders and effective stakeholder dialogue (Johannsdottir & Davidsdottir, 2024; Kaptein, 2017).

**Proposition 4:** Complex stakeholder networks extending beyond conventional business boundaries shape sustainability practice through cultural rather than economic criteria, requiring expanded stakeholder theory frameworks that can accommodate invisible, future-oriented, and proxy stakeholders.

*The relational governance dimension reveals how survivalist sustainability operates through complex stakeholder networks that provide cultural legitimacy, horizontal network and community support for adaptive practices. However, these networks develop within broader institutional contexts that systematically exclude marginalised enterprises, creating tensions between community expectations and formal regulatory demands. This institutional complexity forms the final dimension of the survivalist sustainability framework*

### 6.2.5 Institutional Navigation: Creating legitimacy beyond formal recognition

The institutional navigation dimension builds upon the complex stakeholder relationships revealed in relational governance by examining how marginalised enterprises engage with formal institutional requirements while creating alternative legitimacy structures that operate parallel to dominant governance frameworks (Powell & DiMaggio, 2012; Scott, 2008). This insight extends institutional theory beyond its traditional focus on formal compliance toward more complex understandings of institutional multiplicity and creative adaptation while revealing how institutional exclusion operates through design assumptions rather than explicit discrimination.

#### 6.2.5.1 Challenging the formalisation bias in institutional theory

Mainstream institutional approaches, particularly those rooted in the foundational work of DiMaggio and Powell (1983) and Scott (2008), emphasise how organisations conform to dominant rules, norms, and cognitive scripts to achieve legitimacy within organisational fields. However, such frameworks often presume that institutional actors operate within formally

structured fields and possess the capacity to respond to policy and market cues in rational and strategic ways. This assumption is profoundly challenged when applied to marginalised ethnic micro-enterprises operating within institutionally fragmented fields—spaces where formal policy instruments (sustainability certifications, energy grants, procurement regulations) are fundamentally misaligned with the realities of informal labour arrangements, culturally specific supply chains, linguistic barriers, and historically accumulated distrust of regulatory authorities (Geels et al., 2023).

Recent scholarship has begun to recognise the limitations of this formal institutional bias (Ackrill et al., 2024). While informal entrepreneurship has received increased recognition because of its theoretical distinctiveness and practical relevance, theoretical frameworks continue to marginalise these economic forms (Bruton et al.,2012). This study contributes to emerging work that challenges narrow epistemological approaches to informality based on absence (Ackrill et al., 2024), demonstrating that institutional exclusion creates conditions where sustainability becomes less about institutional compliance and more about adaptive navigation through institutional opacity and systematic exclusion.

#### 6.2.5.2 Institutional shadow economies and parallel governance

The concept of institutional voids, originally developed to explain entrepreneurial challenges in emerging markets, requires reconceptualisation when applied to ethnic minority enterprises operating within developed economies. Recent work has demonstrated how institutional voids and institutional logics coherently demonstrate a high degree of conceptual sensitivity to multiple combinations of institutional conditions, particularly in contexts of informal entrepreneurship (Welter et al., 2019). This study reveals that curry house operators do not simply face institutional voids in the traditional sense of absent institutions. Rather, they encounter what this study conceptualises as institutional shadow economies; parallel systems of governance, exchange, and legitimacy that operate alongside, but remain invisible to, formal institutional frameworks. These shadow economies are characterised by:

*Relational governance systems* based on trust and reciprocity that replace or complement formal contracting mechanisms. *Cultural legitimacy structures* operating independently of formal certification schemes through community-based validation systems. *Informal knowledge infrastructures* where tacit sustainability practices are transmitted through apprenticeship and cultural reproduction rather than formal training programmes. *Survivalist institutional logics* that prioritise cultural continuity and economic survival over formal compliance requirements.

The study demonstrates that many curry house operators are not merely non-compliant with formal sustainability frameworks; they are institutionally invisible, lacking both recognition and

access within dominant sustainability infrastructures. Green finance schemes and carbon reporting mechanisms assume bureaucratic literacy, digital access, and surplus organisational capacity; resources that are systematically absent in enterprises operating under survivalist conditions (Weiss et al., 2024; Osinubi & Simatele, 2025).

#### 6.2.5.3 Redefining institutional legitimacy

This study fundamentally challenges conventional conceptualisations of institutional legitimacy by demonstrating how formal sustainability governance frameworks systematically devalue informal, culturally embedded sustainability practices. The research reveals sophisticated informal sustainability systems, including intergenerational frugality practices, community-based waste sharing arrangements, and tacit energy conservation routines that operate outside formal recognition systems yet demonstrate significant environmental and social effectiveness.

These findings align with recent theoretical developments that recognise the need to move beyond institutional approaches centred on formal compliance toward more pluralistic frameworks that can accommodate diverse epistemologies and practice systems (Huttunen et al.,2021; Ribas Cardoso, 2023). The study demonstrates how institutional theory and digitalization capabilities concerning sustainable growth challenges provide new perspectives on the roles of environmental, social, and governance strategy, while revealing the limitations of digitally mediated sustainability governance for marginalised enterprises.

The research contributes to institutional theory by proposing an expanded understanding of institutional legitimacy that encompasses what this study terms *cultural-institutional legitimacy*; forms of legitimacy derived from community recognition, cultural authenticity, and effectiveness within specific cultural contexts rather than formal institutional validation. This reconceptualisation challenges the prevailing assumption that legitimacy is contingent upon formal institutional recognition or adherence to dominant organizational forms, building on existing theoretical frameworks that demonstrate how ethno-racial diversity fosters entrepreneurship by enhancing the novelty of information and perspectives available for innovative recombination (Cordero & Lewis, 2024).

#### 6.2.5.4 Hybrid institutional strategies and creative response

The study reveals how curry house entrepreneurs develop sophisticated hybrid institutional strategies that simultaneously engage with and resist formal sustainability governance frameworks. These strategies challenge traditional institutional theory's emphasis on

isomorphic pressures toward conformity (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983), instead revealing how marginalised actors develop creative responses to institutional exclusion that preserve cultural integrity while adapting to external pressures.

These hybrid strategies encompass: *Selective compliance* involving strategic engagement with formal requirements that align with cultural and economic priorities while avoiding or circumventing incompatible regulations. *Cultural translation* where sustainability practices are adapted to align with cultural values and community expectations while maintaining operational effectiveness. *Informal institutionalisation* creating parallel governance systems that provide legitimacy and coordination within ethnic business networks. *Survivalist innovation* developing sustainability practices that emerge from resource constraints rather than policy incentives.

This finding contributes to scholarly work on sustainability transition theories and their role in perpetuating or breaking with the status quo (Biely & Chakori 2025), while aligning with research showing that internal resistance within organizations when change agents work on transitions can significantly impact transition effectiveness (Fischer & Newig, 2016; Huttunen et al., 2021; Schaltegger et al., 2024). The strategies demonstrate how institutional quality in emerging economies relates to informality through poorly understood drivers (Williams & Shahid, 2016), requiring more nuanced theoretical frameworks that can accommodate institutional complexity.

#### 6.2.5.5 Institutional embeddedness and positionality

The research demonstrates that sustainability in ethnic micro-enterprises must be understood as fundamentally shaped by what this thesis termed *institutional positionality*; the structural positioning of enterprises within hierarchies of institutional recognition and access. This positionality is not merely about resource availability but about the epistemological and cultural assumptions embedded within institutional frameworks.

Curry house entrepreneurs navigate multiple institutional contexts simultaneously: formal regulatory environments, ethnic community governance systems, religious institutional frameworks, and transnational kinship networks. This multiple institutional embeddedness creates complex negotiation processes where sustainability practices must satisfy diverse and sometimes conflicting institutional demands, resonating with recent work on building an inclusive entrepreneurship ecosystem for all kinds of people, particularly minority and women entrepreneurs (Xu & Dobson; 2019; Malhotra et al.,2025).

This finding extends institutional theory beyond traditional organisational field approaches toward more complex understandings of institutional multiplicity and embeddedness,

demonstrating how marginalised enterprises create parallel legitimacy structures that operate alongside formal institutions while contributing to broader debates about agency and institutional conditions for governments working on sustainability transitions (Yap, 2023; Janssen et al.,2023; Huttunen et al., 2021; Fischer & Newig, 2016).

#### 6.2.5.6 Towards inclusive institutional design

The theoretical contributions of this research point toward the need for more inclusive institutional design approaches that can accommodate the institutional diversity of contemporary food systems. The study demonstrates how current sustainability governance frameworks systematically exclude marginalised enterprises not through intentional discrimination but through institutional design assumptions that privilege formal organisation, bureaucratic literacy, and cultural assimilation.

The research advocates for pluralistic institutional design approaches to sustainability governance that can recognise and work with diverse institutional logics, cultural knowledge systems, and organisational forms. This includes multi-institutional recognition systems that acknowledge diverse sources of legitimacy and effectiveness; cultural-institutional interfaces that can translate between formal policy requirements and culturally embedded practices; distributed governance architectures that can accommodate informal, networked, and community-based organisation; and adaptive institutional capacity enabling systems to learn from and incorporate marginalised knowledge and practices.

**Proposition 5:** Alternative legitimacy structures provide viable governance mechanisms for sustainability transitions in contexts where formal institutions systematically exclude marginalised actors, challenging assumptions about the necessity of formal institutional recognition for effective governance.

*The institutional navigation dimension completes the five-dimensional framework by demonstrating how enterprises create alternative legitimacy structures while engaging selectively with formal requirements. This navigation occurs through all the previously examined mechanisms: vernacular innovation provides alternatives to formal systems; cultural embeddedness determines which institutional requirements align with community values; structural adaptation influences capacity for formal compliance; and relational governance creates accountability systems independent of formal institutions. Together, these five dimensions constitute a coherent theoretical framework that explains survivalist sustainability as an integrated phenomenon rather than separate analytical categories.*

### 6.3 An integrated framework of survivalist sustainability as coherent theory

The five dimensions discussed above; vernacular innovation, cultural embeddedness, structural adaptation, relational governance, and institutional navigation, constitute a coherent theoretical framework that explains how *survivalist sustainability in ethnic food systems*

emerges as an integrated response to complex challenges facing marginalised food enterprises. This framework demonstrates how sustainability practices that appear informal, constraint-driven, small-scale, or culturally-specific constitute sophisticated environmental innovations that operate through different logics than mainstream approaches while generating legitimate environmental outcomes through pathways that operate outside, yet parallel to dominant sustainability frameworks.

### 6.3.1 Theoretical integration and mutual constitution

The framework's theoretical power lies in recognising these dimensions as mutually constitutive rather than separate analytical categories. This integration challenges theoretical approaches that treat culture, structure, institutions, stakeholders, and innovation as separate variables, instead revealing how these dimensions interact to produce emergent sustainability outcomes that cannot be predicted from individual components but emerge from their dynamic interaction within specific contexts (Abson et al.,2017).

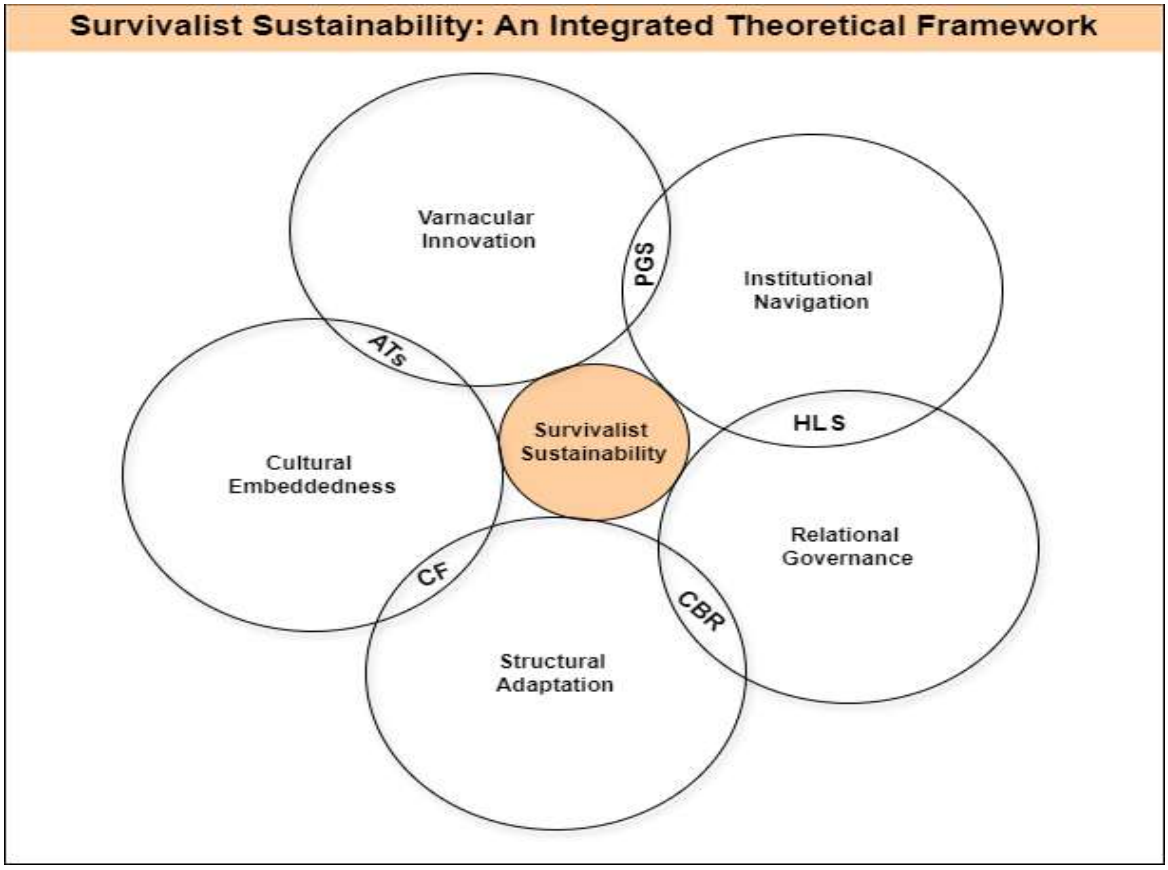
*Vernacular innovation* provides the foundational recognition that ethnic enterprises function as integral food system nodes whose informal knowledge systems contribute to resilience through adaptive capacity. This innovation emerges through *cultural embeddedness*, where sustainability practices are constituted through cultural values, traditional knowledge, and community expectations rather than external policy frameworks.

*Structural adaptation* demonstrates how the economic constraints facing these enterprises generate rather than inhibit innovative environmental practices, with cultural embeddedness enabling creative responses to limitations. These adaptive practices operate within complex *relational governance* systems where stakeholder relationships extend beyond conventional business boundaries to include invisible, future-oriented, and culturally-legitimated actors.

Finally, *institutional navigation* reveals how enterprises engage selectively with formal requirements while creating alternative legitimacy structures, with all previous dimensions shaping how this navigation occurs. Cultural embeddedness influences which institutional requirements are accepted or resisted; structural adaptation determines capacity for compliance; vernacular innovation provides alternatives to formal systems; and relational governance creates accountability mechanisms independent of formal institutions.

**Proposition 6:** The five dimensions of survivalist sustainability operate as mutually constitutive elements rather than independent variables, producing emergent sustainability outcomes through their dynamic interaction within specific cultural and structural contexts.

*Figure 16: An integrated theoretical framework of survivalist sustainability: Depicting mutual constitution, dimensional interactions and emergent properties*




The above figure represents the most comprehensive framework showing all five dimensions interconnected around the central concept of 'Survivalist Sustainability in Ethnic Food Systems. Each dimension is connected to every other dimension with intersections, showing specific interaction mechanisms, including feedback loops, emergent properties, and outcomes at system level.

### 6.3.2 Dimensional interactions and emergent properties

The theoretical sophistication of survivalist sustainability lies in understanding how the five dimensions interact to produce emergent properties that transcend individual components:

*Vernacular-Cultural Synthesis:* The interaction between vernacular innovation and cultural embeddedness produces adaptive traditions **(ATs)** that preserve cultural authenticity while responding to contemporary environmental challenges. Traditional cooking methods are maintained not simply for cultural reasons but because they prove environmentally efficient within contemporary constraints.

*Cultural-Structural Integration:* Cultural embeddedness and structural adaptation combine to create culturally-informed frugality **(CF)** where traditional values emphasising moderation and stewardship reinforce resource conservation practices developed under economic constraint.

This demonstrates how cultural and economic rationales reinforce each other rather than competing.

*Structural-Relational Dynamics*: Structural adaptation and relational governance interact to produce community-based resilience **(CBR)** where economic constraints are addressed through horizontal stakeholder networks that provide resources, knowledge, and support during difficulties. These networks become more important precisely because formal institutional support is absent.

*Relational-Institutional Nexus:* The combination of relational governance and institutional navigation creates hybrid legitimacy systems **(HLS)** that operate across formal and informal domains simultaneously. Community recognition provides legitimacy when formal institutions exclude, while selective institutional engagement maintains minimal compliance requirements.

*Innovation-Institutional Interface:* Vernacular innovation and institutional navigation produce parallel governance systems **(PGS)** where informal knowledge systems create alternatives to formal sustainability frameworks. These systems provide coordination, validation, and continuous improvement mechanisms independent of external recognition.

### 6.3.3 Epistemological implications and decolonial contributions

The framework advances decolonial sustainability epistemology by demonstrating how marginalised communities practice sophisticated environmental stewardship through knowledge systems that have been systematically excluded from academic and policy discourse despite their effectiveness and cultural significance (Sonnino et al., 2016). This epistemological contribution challenges the universality of Western sustainability frameworks while providing theoretical tools for recognising and supporting diverse approaches to environmental challenges.

The framework positions marginalised sustainability epistemologies as legitimate alternatives rather than deficient versions of mainstream approaches. These epistemologies integrate economic survival, cultural preservation, and environmental stewardship through logics that resist separation into distinct categories, offering insights for more holistic approaches to sustainability transitions that recognise the sophisticated contributions of those who have always practiced sustainability, even when their practices remain invisible to dominant measurement systems.

By foregrounding these alternative epistemologies, this framework contributes to broader decolonial efforts within sustainability scholarship while providing practical frameworks for more inclusive and effective approaches to environmental governance in diverse and

multicultural contexts (Ghule, 2023; Ribas Cardoso; 2023; Gilani, 2024; Ajewole & Sahi, 2025).

## 6.4 Theoretical contributions to existing Literature

The survivalist sustainability framework makes significant theoretical contributions across multiple scholarly domains by demonstrating how marginalised entrepreneurial contexts require fundamental reconceptualisation of dominant theoretical assumptions. These contributions extend beyond mere additions to existing knowledge to constitute paradigmatic challenges that demand new theoretical approaches.

### 6.4.1 Advancing sustainable entrepreneurship

This framework fundamentally reconceptualises sustainable entrepreneurship by moving beyond innovation-centric, opportunity-driven models toward necessity-based, culturally-constituted approaches (Patzelt & Shepherd, 2011, 2018; Muñoz & Dimov, 2015). The contribution challenges core assumptions about entrepreneurial agency, resource requirements, and innovation pathways while revealing alternative sustainability logics operating within marginalised communities.

The framework reconceptualises entrepreneurial agency by challenging heroic narratives of individual strategic choice, demonstrating how sustainability emerges from collective, culturally embedded, and constraint-driven processes rather than individual entrepreneurial vision (Munoz & Cohen, 2018). It expands innovation concepts beyond technological solutions to include cultural adaptation, informal learning, and survivalist creativity, challenging innovation-centric models by demonstrating how adaptation, cultural preservation, and maintenance can generate legitimate sustainability outcomes.

The framework pluralises sustainability pathways by challenging the universality of dominant sustainability models, demonstrating how different cultural and structural contexts generate distinct approaches to environmental practice that require recognition rather than replacement (Ely, 2022). It advances frugal innovation theory by revealing how resource constraints interact with cultural knowledge systems to generate sustainability practices that transcend purely economic rationales, extending constraint-based innovation by showing how structural limitations become catalysts for environmental practice rather than barriers to overcome (Rosca et al., 2018).

### 6.4.2 Enriching ethnic minority entrepreneurship

The research transcends culturalist-structuralist binaries that have dominated ethnic minority entrepreneurship scholarship by demonstrating how entrepreneurs navigate multiple embeddedness contexts through integrated approaches that simultaneously pursue economic

viability, cultural preservation, and environmental responsibility (Ram et al., 2008, 2017;Jones et al., 2014).

This contribution challenges essentialist approaches that reduce ethnic entrepreneurship to cultural traits while avoiding structural determinism that positions entrepreneurs as passive victims of systemic barriers. Instead, the framework reveals survivalist agency; forms of entrepreneurial action that emerge precisely because of, rather than despite, structural exclusion, demonstrating remarkable adaptive capacity through strategic modification of practices while maintaining cultural authenticity.

The framework advances mixed embeddedness theory (Kloosterman & Rath, 2018; Kloosterman et al., 1999) by incorporating environmental dimensions and demonstrating how sustainability practices emerge from the interaction between ethnic community contexts and broader structural arrangements. This extends beyond traditional mixed embeddedness approaches by showing how multiple institutional contexts create both constraints and opportunities for innovative environmental practice (Jones et al., 2014; Yetkin & Tunçalp, 2023).

### 6.4.3 Transforming food systems approach

The research repositions ethnic micro-enterprises as integral nodes in urban food system sustainability rather than peripheral actors requiring formalisation or intervention. This contribution challenges technocratic approaches that privilege formal, scalable, and technologically-driven solutions by demonstrating how vernacular sustainability contributes to system resilience through mechanisms invisible to formal governance frameworks.

The framework advances food justice aproaches by revealing how cultural politics intersect with environmental practice and demonstrating the need for governance approaches that can accommodate authenticity constraints and cultural sustainability requirements (Galt et al., 2016). It contributes to food systems transitions theory by showing how marginalised actors engage with environmental challenges through alternative pathways operating outside formal transition frameworks, broadening understanding of how sustainability transitions occur across diverse social and cultural contexts (Geels et al., 2023).

The research advances epistemic justice in food systems by challenging 'epistemic colonialism'; the tendency to privilege Western, scientific, and formalised knowledge over indigenous, traditional, and experiential ways of knowing. This contributes to decolonial food systems scholarship while providing frameworks for more inclusive approaches to environmental governance.

### 6.4.4 Expanding Stakeholder Theory

The research extends stakeholder theory beyond conventional business boundaries by identifying invisible, future-oriented, and proxy stakeholder categories whose legitimacy derives from cultural rather than economic criteria (Freeman, 1984; Mitchell et al., 1997). This contribution challenges assumptions about stakeholder identification, legitimacy, and management while revealing the operation of horizontal networks that blur traditional stakeholder boundaries.

The framework proposes cultural legitimacy as a valid form of stakeholder recognition operating independently of formal economic relationships, demonstrating how stakeholder expectations can be deeply symbolic, moral, and culturally situated in ways that resist conventional stakeholder management approaches (Mitchell et al., 1997). This extends stakeholder theory to accommodate moral economies where tradition, obligation, and recognition shape business survival through non-market mechanisms (Uzzi, 2019). The research reveals temporal dimensions of stakeholder relationships through identification of future stakeholders whose expectations shape present practice, contributing to emerging scholarship on intergenerational stakeholder management and long-term sustainability governance (Johannsdottir & Davidsdottir, 2024).

### 6.4.5 Developing institutional theory

The framework advances institutional theory by revealing how marginalised enterprises create parallel legitimacy structures that operate alongside formal institutions, extending understanding of institutional multiplicity while proposing cultural-institutional legitimacy as a valid form of governance recognition operating independently of formal validation systems (Scott, 2008; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983).

The research challenges formalisation bias in institutional theory by exposing how emphasis on formal institutions obscures sophisticated informal institutional systems governing marginalised enterprises (Webb et al., 2015; Sutter et al., 2019). It reveals institutional shadow economies; parallel systems of governance, exchange, and legitimacy that operate alongside but remain invisible to formal frameworks, requiring theoretical approaches that can accommodate institutional complexity.

The framework contributes to informal economy studies by demonstrating how informal practices can generate legitimate sustainability outcomes contributing to broader environmental goals, challenging tendencies to position informal practices as problems to be formalised rather than resources to be supported (Bruton et al., 2013; Welter et al., 2019).

### 6.4.6 Theoretical and research implications of the framework

The framework suggests new research directions that centre marginalised voices and epistemologies while challenging conventional methodological approaches:

*Decolonial Methodologies:* The framework demands research approaches that privilege community knowledge and cultural ways of knowing rather than imposing external analytical frameworks, requiring methodologies that can capture vernacular sustainability practices and their contributions to system-wide resilience through ethnographic methods, participatory research designs, and collaborative approaches that position ethnic entrepreneurs as research partners rather than subjects.

*Multi-scalar Analysis:* Understanding survivalist sustainability requires examination of how practices operate across local, transnational, and diasporic scales rather than focusing only on local or global levels, necessitating research designs that can capture the multi-scalar embeddedness characterising ethnic entrepreneurship while understanding how sustainability practices connect neighbourhood economies to global networks.

*Longitudinal Ethnography:* The framework requires understanding how sustainability practices evolve over time through cultural transmission, structural adaptation, and institutional navigation, demanding research approaches that can capture temporal dimensions including intergenerational knowledge transfer, adaptive responses to changing constraints, and evolution of institutional strategies.

*Network Analysis:* Mapping informal relationships and knowledge circulation systems that operate outside formal organisational boundaries becomes essential for understanding how survivalist sustainability functions through horizontal networks, relational governance, and community-based coordination mechanisms.

### 6.4.7 Framework implications

The framework's practical implications demand fundamental transformation in sustainability governance approaches, requiring shifts from compliance-based to co-creation models that recognise and build upon existing cultural practices:

*From compliance to co-creation:* Moving beyond top-down policy implementation toward collaborative approaches that build on existing cultural practices and community knowledge systems, requiring governance mechanisms that can recognise vernacular sustainability and incorporate informal innovation into formal policy frameworks without destroying their embedded effectiveness.

*From deficit to asset models:* Recognising marginalised entrepreneurs as knowledge-holders and innovators rather than targets for intervention or recipients of capacity-building

programmes, requiring policy approaches that build on existing practices rather than attempting to replace them with externally imposed solutions.

*From universalist to pluralistic approaches:* Developing culturally-responsive governance mechanisms that can accommodate diverse sustainability pathways rather than imposing uniform standards, requiring recognition that sustainability transitions occur differently across cultural and structural contexts and must accommodate this diversity.

*From formal to hybrid recognition systems:* Creating legitimacy structures that acknowledge informal, cultural, and community-based forms of environmental practice alongside formal certification schemes, requiring institutional design that can accommodate multiple forms of legitimacy and effectiveness validation.

### 6.4.8 Governance transformation requirements

The framework demands governance approaches that move from institutional exclusion toward inclusive design that can accommodate the institutional diversity of contemporary food systems:

*Multi-institutional recognition:* Developing frameworks that acknowledge diverse sources of legitimacy and effectiveness rather than privileging formal institutional validation, requiring governance systems that can recognise cultural-institutional legitimacy and community-based validation alongside formal certification.

*Cultural-institutional interfaces:* Creating mechanisms that can translate between formal policy requirements and culturally embedded practices without requiring cultural assimilation or practice abandonment, enabling selective engagement that preserves cultural authenticity while meeting regulatory objectives.

*Distributed governance architectures:* Accommodating informal, networked, and community-based organisation rather than requiring formalisation into conventional organisational structures, enabling governance that can work with horizontal networks and relational coordination mechanisms.

*Adaptive institutional capacity:* Enabling systems to learn from and incorporate marginalised knowledge and practices rather than imposing external standards, creating feedback mechanisms that allow formal institutions to evolve based on informal innovation and community effectiveness.

## 6.5 Conclusion: Toward paradigmatic transformation in sustainability scholarship

This chapter has demonstrated that understanding sustainability in marginalised entrepreneurial contexts requires fundamental reconceptualisation of how environmental

practice emerges, operates, and evolves within complex intersections of culture, structure, institutions, relationships, and innovation. The survivalist sustainability framework reveals sophisticated environmental innovations that challenge every major assumption within mainstream sustainability scholarship while providing theoretical foundations for more inclusive, effective, and just approaches to environmental governance.

The five dimensions of survivalist sustainability; vernacular innovation, cultural embeddedness, structural adaptation, relational governance, and institutional navigation, operate as mutually constitutive elements of a coherent theoretical framework rather than separate analytical categories. Their integration produces emergent sustainability outcomes that transcend individual components, revealing how environmental practice in marginalised contexts requires holistic approaches that can accommodate the complexity of constraint-driven innovation, cultural preservation, and community resilience.

The theoretical contribution extends beyond academic refinement to demand paradigmatic transformation toward more inclusive, culturally-sensitive, and structurally-aware approaches to sustainability governance. By demonstrating that marginalised entrepreneurs are not deficient in sustainability capacity but operate through different epistemologies that resist conventional recognition, this framework disrupts deficit models while revealing alternative pathways that may be more appropriate for diverse, multicultural societies.

The framework's epistemological implications challenge the universality of Western sustainability approaches while providing theoretical tools for recognising and supporting diverse environmental practices. By positioning marginalised sustainability epistemologies as legitimate alternatives rather than deficient versions of mainstream approaches, this research contributes to decolonial sustainability scholarship while advancing practical frameworks for more inclusive environmental governance.

Crucially, the integrated framework provides both theoretical tools for understanding marginalised environmental practice and practical foundations for developing more effective and equitable approaches to sustainability governance. This represents not merely an addition to existing theory but a fundamental challenge to the epistemological foundations of sustainability scholarship; one that centres marginalised voices, recognises plural knowledge systems, and builds governance frameworks around existing cultural practices rather than attempting to replace them with externally imposed solutions.

The urgency of climate challenges demands such paradigmatic transformation. Sustainability transitions that systematically exclude marginalised communities not only reproduce inequality but miss valuable innovations already embedded within survivalist practice. The theoretical framework developed here provides foundations for more inclusive, effective, and just

approaches to environmental governance that recognise the sophisticated contributions of those who have always practiced sustainability, even when their practices remain invisible to dominant measurement systems.

Future sustainability governance must move beyond compliance-based approaches toward co-creation frameworks that acknowledge the legitimacy of diverse knowledge systems, the effectiveness of informal innovation processes, and the importance of cultural preservation within environmental transitions. The survivalist sustainability framework offers both theoretical foundations and practical directions for this transformation, contributing to more equitable and effective responses to contemporary environmental challenges while honouring the sophisticated environmental practices already embedded within marginalised communities.

This paradigmatic shift from universalist to pluralistic sustainability frameworks, from deficit to asset-based approaches, and from compliance to co-creation governance models represents more than academic innovation; it constitutes an urgent response to the failures of dominant sustainability approaches to engage meaningfully with the diversity of contemporary environmental challenges and the sophisticated responses already developed within marginalised communities. The survivalist sustainability framework thus contributes not only to theoretical understanding but to the practical transformation of environmental governance toward more just, inclusive, and effective approaches that honour the complexity and sophistication of marginalised environmental practice.

The theoretical journey undertaken in this chapter; from recognising the limitations of dominant frameworks to developing an integrated alternative that centres marginalised experience reflects broader transformations needed within sustainability scholarship. By demonstrating how environmental practice emerges from the intersection of vernacular innovation, cultural embeddedness, structural adaptation, relational governance, and institutional navigation within specific contexts, this research provides a foundation for more nuanced, inclusive, and effective approaches to understanding and governing sustainability transitions in diverse, multicultural societies that recognise and build upon the sophisticated environmental innovations already operating within ethnic minority food systems.

Having established the theoretical foundations and contributions of survivalist sustainability in ethnic food systems, the next chapter synthesises these insights with the empirical findings to provide concrete recommendations for policy, practice, and future research. The chapter provides actionable strategies for transforming sustainability governance, supporting marginalised entrepreneurs, and creating more inclusive approaches to environmental

challenges that honour both the urgency of climate action and the sophistication of existing practices within ethnic minority communities.

# Chapter Seven: Conclusion

## 7.1 Introduction

This final chapter synthesises the core insights of this thesis and establishes their significance for transforming sustainability scholarship and practice in diverse, multicultural societies. This conclusion focuses on actionable implications that can inform more inclusive approaches to sustainability governance, institutional design, and entrepreneurial support. It proposes concrete mechanisms for policy transformation, institutional redesign, and practice innovation that recognise and build upon the environmental innovations already embedded within marginalised food economies.

The chapter establishes: (a) a synthesis of key findings, (b) clear statement of theoretical, empirical, and methodological contributions, (c) honest acknowledgment of limitations, (d) stakeholder-specific implications for practice and policy, and (e) strategic directions for future research. Moving beyond critique toward constructive intervention, it addresses how these insights can inform transformation across multiple stakeholder groups including entrepreneurs, diaspora communities, policymakers, support organisations, and systemic-level actors.

## 7.2 Key Findings: The evidence base for transformation

Through a cross-domain theoretical analysis, this study reveals that sustainability in marginalised food economies represents sophisticated environmental innovation operating through different epistemologies, knowledge systems, and organisational forms than those recognised by mainstream sustainability discourse. Six critical insights emerge:

1. Environmental sophistication operates outside formal recognition: Curry houses demonstrate sophisticated resource management through daily sourcing creating adaptive supply chains, portion control reducing waste while managing costs, traditional cooking methods achieving energy efficiency, and community-based coordination enabling resilience. These practices achieve environmental outcomes through cultural and economic logics yet remain invisible to conventional sustainability metrics.

2. Sustainability emerges from scarcity, not surplus: Small-batch sourcing, portion control, and menu simplification produce environmentally beneficial outcomes through frugal practices born of necessity rather than formalised green strategies, challenging assumptions about resource requirements for environmental innovation.

3. Cultural embeddedness functions as resource rather than barrier: Cultural expectations, intergenerational norms, and deeply held values around food, community, and honour provide

resources for environmental practice rather than obstacles to overcome, revealing how cultural preservation and environmental protection can be mutually reinforcing.

4. Parallel coordination systems demonstrate superior resilience: Informal networks, flexible sourcing arrangements, and community-based support mechanisms maintain functionality during COVID-19, Brexit, and inflation crises when formal systems faltered, offering alternative models that prioritise adaptation over standardisation.

5. Systematic exclusion reflects governance design: Structural marginality to policy and financial mechanisms designed for scalable, codifiable sustainability reveals institutional misfit rather than entrepreneurial deficiency, demonstrating how well-intentioned policies fail to recognise sophisticated informal innovations.

6. Hybrid innovation characterises adaptation: Selective technological adoption prioritising survival, efficiency, and cultural continuity represents strategic adaptation rather than wholesale technological integration, revealing how marginalised enterprises navigate environmental challenges within resource constraints.

Together, these findings establish that sustainability in marginalised contexts requires recognition and support rather than replacement with external solutions, offering insights for developing more effective, equitable, and culturally responsive approaches to environmental governance in diverse, multicultural societies.

## 7.3 Contributions to knowledge

This thesis makes significant contributions that demand paradigmatic transformation in how sustainability is conceptualised, researched, and governed in diverse societies.

### 7.3.1 Conceptual and theoretical contributions

Survivalist sustainability framework: The primary theoretical contribution conceptualises survivalist sustainability as environmentally aligned practice emerging from economic survival imperatives rather than ideological commitments or strategic positioning. This fundamentally challenges innovation-centric models dominating sustainable entrepreneurship by demonstrating how constraint-driven adaptation produces environmental outcomes through necessity rather than choice (Cohen & Winn, 2007; Dean & McMullen, 2007).

The five-dimensional integrated framework of survivalist sustainability (comprising vernacular innovation, cultural embeddedness, structural adaptation, relational governance, and institutional navigation) explains how environmental practices emerge from dynamic interaction of multiple dimensions rather than single theoretical explanations. This enriches ethnic minority entrepreneurship by transcending culturalist-structuralist binaries (Ram et al.,

2017; Sepulveda et al., 2016), transforms food systems approaches by repositioning ethnic micro-enterprises as integral resilience nodes (Brunori et al., 2020), and expands stakeholder theory beyond conventional boundaries to include invisible, future-oriented, and culturally-legitimated actors (Freeman et al., 2010; Mitchell et al., 1997).

Epistemological transformation: The research advances decolonial sustainability epistemology by challenging universalist assumptions while positioning marginalised sustainability epistemologies as legitimate alternatives rather than deficient versions of Western approaches (Sonnino et al., 2016). This pluralises sustainability by demonstrating how environmental practices are always filtered through contextualised cultural, institutional, structural and historical conditions (Welter et al., 2017), disrupting monolithic models while offering analytical tools for evaluating sustainability in informally governed sectors.

### 7.3.2 Empirical contributions

Comprehensive sectoral documentation: First comprehensive analysis of sustainability practices within UK's Bangladeshi curry house sector fills significant research gaps while positioning curry houses as crucial sites for understanding alternative sustainability futures rather than obstacles to progress.

Novel practice typology: Four-part typology (Resource Efficiency, Cultural Preservation, Waste Minimisation, Informality) challenges conventional sustainability categorisations by revealing how environmental practices are embedded within cultural, economic, and social logics rather than existing as standalone initiatives, providing practical tools for identifying vernacular sustainability in similar contexts.

Parallel system identification: Documentation of parallel food systems governance, demonstrating remarkable resilience during crises contributes to understanding alternative food networks providing distributed resilience through mechanisms operating independently of formal governance (Nemes et al., 2021).

## 7.4 Implications for policy and practice: Stakeholder-specific transformation requirements

Current sustainability governance systematically excludes marginalised food entrepreneurs through inappropriate scales, metrics, and assumptions. This section provides stakeholder-specific implications addressing entrepreneurs, diaspora communities, policymakers, support organisations, and systemic-level actors.

### 7.4.1 For curry house entrepreneurs and ethnic food business owners

Asset recognition and leverage: Document existing environmental practices (daily sourcing, portion control, traditional cooking methods, community coordination) to demonstrate sophistication of current operations when engaging with support organisations or seeking recognition.

Peer network activation: Establish or strengthen horizontal knowledge-sharing networks with other ethnic food entrepreneurs to circulate adaptive strategies, collective purchasing arrangements, and crisis response mechanisms operating independently of formal support systems.

Cultural legitimacy assertion: Articulate how environmental practices align with cultural and religious values (Islamic principles of moderation, stewardship, waste prohibition) when negotiating with policymakers, demonstrating cultural integrity of sustainability approaches.

Selective technology adoption: Prioritise technological investments that enhance rather than replace existing efficiency practices, maintaining cultural authenticity while addressing operational challenges through strategic rather than wholesale integration.

Collective advocacy development: Collaborate with ethnic business associations to advocate for culturally-responsive policies, alternative recognition schemes, and constraint-appropriate support mechanisms designed for low-margin enterprises.

### 7.4.2 For diaspora communities and cultural organisations

Knowledge preservation and documentation: Systematically document traditional environmental practices, intergenerational knowledge about resource conservation, and cultural principles supporting sustainability to create repositories accessible to younger generations and policymakers.

Intergenerational bridge-building: Develop programmes connecting elders possessing traditional knowledge with younger community members to enable cultural knowledge transfer while adapting practices to contemporary environmental challenges.

Cultural sustainability advocacy: Articulate connections between cultural preservation and environmental protection when engaging with policymakers, demonstrating how cultural practices achieve environmental outcomes through different logics than mainstream approaches.

Community accountability mechanisms: Strengthen existing community-based validation systems that assess environmental effectiveness through cultural legitimacy criteria, providing alternative governance mechanisms operating alongside formal certification.

Transnational network activation: Leverage diaspora connections to global supply chains, traditional knowledge systems in countries of origin, and international ethnic communities to enhance local environmental practices while maintaining cultural authenticity.

### 7.4.3 For policymakers and environmental agencies

Contextualised governance development: Shift from compliance-driven to context-aware frameworks recognising diverse forms of sustainability practice, particularly in ethnically diverse and economically constrained settings. There is growing scientific debate regarding the suitability of certain modes of governance for promoting sustainable development, and this study provides evidence for pluralistic governance approaches.

Alternative recognition schemes: Develop validation mechanisms acknowledging environmental effectiveness through community-based assessment alongside formal certification. Create peer review processes where ethnic food entrepreneurs evaluate sustainability practices using culturally-appropriate criteria, enabling multiple pathways to environmental recognition.

Constraint-responsive funding design: Develop micro-grants, sliding-scale incentives, and equipment sharing programmes specifically tailored to low-margin enterprises operating under survivalist conditions. Co-design financial mechanisms with sector representatives to ensure accessibility rather than imposing blanket policies inappropriate for resource-constrained contexts.

Inclusive stakeholder engagement: Structurally embed curry house operators and ethnic food entrepreneurs in sustainability governance through advisory panels, participatory forums, and decision-making bodies, moving beyond tokenistic consultation to meaningful participation. Co-production is now considered best practice in policymaking, characterised by actors with different types of knowledge working together (Bovaird & Loeffler, 2017).

Cultural impact assessment: Systematically evaluate how environmental requirements interact with cultural practices before policy implementation, identifying opportunities for alignment and developing accommodation mechanisms for potential conflicts rather than assuming cultural neutrality.

Hybrid compliance pathways: Develop flexible regulatory approaches focusing on environmental outcomes rather than standardised processes, enabling enterprises to achieve compliance through culturally-appropriate methods maintaining informal coordination effectiveness.

### 7.4.4 For support organisations and NGOs

Asset-based programme design: Begin all support interactions by mapping existing environmental capabilities rather than assessing deficits, designing interventions enhancing existing practices rather than replacing them with external solutions. The four-part typology provides frameworks for identifying Resource Efficiency, Cultural Preservation, Waste Minimisation, and Informality practices.

Cultural competency integration: Develop systematic capacity to work within diverse cultural contexts through training addressing religious principles, community hierarchies, and cultural values shaping environmental practice, moving beyond superficial cultural awareness toward deep understanding of how culture constitutes rather than merely influences sustainability.

Frugal innovation support networks: Connect ethnic food entrepreneurs with appropriate technologies, bulk purchasing cooperatives, and resource-sharing arrangements reducing individual costs while maintaining environmental effectiveness, building upon existing community coordination mechanisms.

Peer learning facilitation: Create horizontal knowledge-sharing mechanisms enabling circulation of adaptive practices and innovation strategies rather than relying exclusively on expert-led training programmes that may not understand cultural contexts or informal coordination mechanisms.

Integrated assistance approaches: Address environmental challenges alongside business viability, cultural preservation, and community development rather than treating sustainability as separate from other enterprise needs, recognising how environmental practice emerges from complex interactions between cultural, economic, and structural factors.

Cultural-institutional brokerage: Develop capacity to translate between formal policy requirements and informal governance systems, enabling productive engagement without requiring abandonment of effective informal mechanisms through intermediary roles facilitating dialogue.

### 7.4.5 For systemic-level Actors (Industry bodies, academic institutions, funding agencies)

Governance architecture transformation: Restructure environmental agencies and sustainability organisations to accommodate institutional multiplicity and hybrid legitimacy structures rather than privileging formal organisation and bureaucratic literacy. Create organisational units responsible for community engagement, cultural liaison, and alternative assessment interfacing between formal requirements and informal coordination.

Measurement system redesign: Develop environmental assessment tools capturing effectiveness across formal and informal systems, enabling recognition of vernacular sustainability alongside conventional metrics. Design indicators measuring distributed, community-based, and culturally-embedded environmental contributions rather than requiring standardised documentation.

Research agenda prioritisation: Fund comparative studies across different ethnic minority food sectors testing framework applicability, intersectional analysis examining how gender and generation shape environmental practice, longitudinal tracking of adaptive capacity evolution, and action research piloting alternative governance approaches.

Knowledge infrastructure development: Establish Community Knowledge Hubs documenting and circulating vernacular sustainability practices across ethnic networks, operating as intermediaries between informal knowledge systems and formal policy frameworks while preserving cultural authenticity.

Capacity building transformation: Fundamentally restructure how environmental professionals are trained, supported, and evaluated to develop systemic cultural competence rather than superficial awareness programmes, requiring sustained investment and institutional commitment.

Coalition building for systemic change: Convene multi-stakeholder platforms bringing together entrepreneurs, diaspora organisations, policymakers, support organisations, and academic institutions to co-design transformation pathways, ensuring coordinated rather than fragmented approaches to governance change.

### 7.5 Actionable transformation strategies: Translating the survivalist sustainability framework

The multi-dimensional survivalist sustainability framework: vernacular innovation, cultural embeddedness, structural adaptation, relational governance, and institutional navigation provide more than analytical tools; it offers a blueprint for fundamental transformation in how sustainability is governed, supported, and practiced in diverse, multicultural societies. **Table 23** translates the five-dimensional framework into concrete, implementable strategies across policy intervention, institutional redesign, and practice innovation for each dimension.

*Table 25: Actionable Transformation Strategies by Framework Dimension*

| | | | Actionable Strategies | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Framework Dimension** | **Current Problem** | **Framework Translation** | **Policy Intervention** | **Institutional Redesign** | **Practice Innovation** | **Implementation Mechanism** | **Lead Actor(s)** | **Supporting Actors** |
| **Vernacular Innovation** | Informal knowledge systems remain invisible to formal sustainability frameworks, preventing recognition and support. | Ethnic enterprises function as integral food system nodes whose informal knowledge contributes to resilience outside formal governance. | Develop Alternative Recognition Schemes validating effectiveness through community assessment. Create peer review processes using culturally-appropriate criteria. | Establish Community Knowledge Hubs documenting and circulating vernacular practices across ethnic networks as intermediaries between informal and formal systems. | Implement **Vernacular Innovation Grants** for practices demonstrating effectiveness through cultural legitimacy. Fund community-led initiatives strengthening existing practices | Partner with ethnic organisations to co-design assessment criteria. Pilot in 3-5 local authorities within 18 months. | Local authorities (Environmental Health/Sustainability Departments), Ethnic business associations | DEFRA, NGOs, ethnic community support organizations, Academic institutions with sustainability/food systems research), Funding bodies (National Lottery Community Fund, UKRI |
| **Cultural Embeddedness** | Sustainability policies assume cultural neutrality, forcing choice between compliance and community legitimacy | Sustainability practices are constituted through cultural values, requiring governance working within cultural frameworks. | Create Cultural Impact Assessments evaluating how environmental requirements interact with cultural practices. | Establish Cultural Liaison Positions in environmental agencies with deep community knowledge to facilitate dialogue. | Develop Culturally-Adaptive Environmental Standards achieving outcomes through methods aligned with cultural practices. | Collaborate with religious/community leaders to identify environmental principles within cultural frameworks. | Environmental agencies (DEFRA, Environmental Quality Division), Local authority sustainability departments | Religious/community leaders, Cultural organisations (BCA), Diaspora networks, Policy advisory bodies |

| | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Structural Adaptation** | Support assumes resource abundance, failing to recognise innovations emerging from economic constraint. | Economic constraints generate rather than inhibit environmental innovation, requiring constraint-designed support mechanisms. | Design Constraint-Responsive Funding with micro-grants, sliding-scale incentives, and equipment sharing for low-margin enterprises. | Create Frugal Innovation Support Networks connecting entrepreneurs with appropriate technologies and resource-sharing arrangements. | Establish Survivalist Sustainability Incubators developing solutions within existing constraints rather than requiring expensive investments. | Partner with ethnic business associations to identify shared constraints. Create revolving loan funds for environmental improvements. | Funding agencies (British Business Bank, Local Enterprise Partnerships), Local authority economic development departments | Ethnic business associations (BCA, Asian Business Association), Business support charities & enterprise hubs, Community Development Finance Institutions, credit unions, Technology providers |
| **Relational Governance** | Governance uses narrow stakeholder definitions excluding invisible, future-oriented, and culturally-legitimated actors. | Complex stakeholder networks extend beyond conventional boundaries, requiring expanded participation frameworks. | Implement Inclusive Stakeholder Mapping including invisible, future, and proxy stakeholders in planning processes. | Create Community Advisory Panels with formal governance roles including extended network representatives. | Develop Intergenerational Sustainability Forums negotiating practices honouring continuity while adapting to challenges. | Establish liaison roles facilitating participation by stakeholders lacking formal advocacy capacity. | Local authority sustainability governance teams, regional sustainability partnerships | Diaspora organisations, young professionals' networks, student societies, respected business leaders, religious figures, NGOs, Translation services, Curry house entrepreneurs |

| | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Institutional Navigation** | Governance requires formal compliance conflicting with informal coordination, forcing choice between systems. | Enterprises create parallel legitimacy structures while selectively engaging formal requirements. | Develop Hybrid Compliance Pathways meeting standards through informal mechanisms while maintaining regulatory legitimacy. | Create Parallel Governance Recognition acknowledging community accountability alongside formal certification. | Establish Cultural-Institutional Brokers translating between formal requirements and informal systems, enabling productive engagement without abandoning effective informal mechanisms | Pilot flexible approaches focusing on outcomes rather than processes, enabling culturally-appropriate compliance. | Environmental agencies (DEFRA, Food Standards Agency, Environment Agency), Local authority regulatory departments (Environmental Health, Trading Standards) | Cultural organisations (BCA, ethnic community trusts), Support intermediaries (business advisors with cultural competence), Academic institutions (policy evaluation researchers), Community validation bodies |

### 7.6.1 Implementation challenges requiring attention

*Institutional resistance:* Current governance systems may resist transformation toward inclusive approaches due to embedded assumptions about legitimate organisation, cultural neutrality, and standardised compliance requirements, necessitating strategic change management and coalition building.

*Resource allocation difficulties:* Supporting diverse pathways to environmental outcomes requires more complex allocation mechanisms than current blanket policy approaches, creating administrative challenges requiring systematic attention and capacity development.

*Cultural competency development:* Training sustainability professionals to work effectively across diverse cultural contexts requires sustained investment and institutional commitment that may face resistance from conventional professional development approaches, demanding leadership commitment and accountability mechanisms.

## 7.6 Methodological reflections and limitations of the study

While this study yielded rich, contextually embedded insights enabling development of the five-dimensional framework, honest acknowledgment of limitations strengthens academic credibility while identifying crucial directions for future investigation.

### 7.6.1 Reflexivity and Research Positionality

As a researcher situated within yet distinct from the Bangladeshi culinary community, my insider cultural knowledge as a minoritised African of British colony facilitated rapport and access to nuanced cultural meanings, while outsider academic training informed critical distance and theoretical synthesis. This dual positioning reflects complex negotiation of insider-outsider dynamics in qualitative research (Yip, 2024), with cultural proximity benefits balanced against potential assumed understanding and strategic self-presentation by participants.

These challenges were systematically addressed through prolonged engagement over fifteen months, triangulation across data sources and methods, and iterative analysis involving member checking (Pratt et al., 2020). This reflexive approach positioned reflexivity as analytical strength rather than weakness, enabling nuanced understanding accessible only through cultural engagement (Olmos-Vega et al., 2023).

### 7.6.2 Scope and Representation

Focus on Bangladeshi-led curry houses in Birmingham limits generalisability to other regions, communities, or cuisines. However, the goal was analytical rather than statistical generalisation, contributing to theory-building through context-rich insights informing broader

understanding (Gehman et al., 2018; Yin, 2018). The structural challenges and adaptive strategies resonate with wider patterns in informal food economies and ethnic entrepreneurship, offering transferable conceptual insights corroborated by national industry reports. For instance, a participant who took part in the Farm-to-fork resilience conference 2022 expressed:

> *"All of our family members are in the trade up and down the country and [are experiencing] exactly the same thing…It's a really dark time for the industry."*[16]

Significant gender representation gap: Male-dominated sector meant women's roles in back-end operations and familial labour remained underexplored despite their crucial importance for understanding how sustainability practices are transmitted and legitimated. This reflects broader challenges where gender remains fairly invisible in entrepreneurship studies (Jennings & Tonoyan, 2022; Bullough et al., 2022), with women's informal labour often underpinning identified practices. Future research must systematically address these gendered dimensions.

### 7.6.3 Theoretical integration and interpretive limits

Theoretical pluralism across sustainable entrepreneurship, food systems, institutional theory, and stakeholder theory enabled multidimensional analysis while risking interpretive complexity (Pratt et al., 2020). Care was taken to weave frameworks through iterative analysis rather than superficial application (Dahwa, 2024). However, selective emphasis on survivalist sustainability and vernacular innovation necessarily constrained attention to other relevant theoretical domains including postcolonial theory, cultural political economy, or critical race theory that may offer additional insights into power dynamics and structural inequality (Dorobantu et al., 2024).

These represent important avenues for future theoretical development, particularly in understanding how colonial legacies and racialised structures shape contemporary sustainability practices in ethnic food businesses. The current study's theoretical choices, while multi-dimensional and productive, should be seen as one pathway among several possible theoretical engagements with this empirical domain.

### 7.6.4 Temporal and policy context

The research was conducted during a particularly volatile period characterised by post-COVID recovery, rising inflation, and the aftershocks of Brexit. The economic landscape of the United

[16] BBC Report. (2022, September 8). *Curry houses in dark place without help: Birmingham owner*. https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-birmingham-62824523.amp

Kingdom has been significantly shaped by the intertwined issues of Brexit, COVID-19, and their interconnected impacts, creating unprecedented challenges for small businesses and ethnic food enterprises. These dynamics deeply coloured participants' perceptions of sustainability as survival rather than strategy, reinforcing the study's central finding about survivalist sustainability emerging from economic duress rather than ideological commitment.

This temporal context represents both a methodological strength and limitation. Qualitative researchers may bear a special obligation in relation to time, as the context they hope to preserve for the phenomena they study is, in large part, temporal (Valtakoski & Glaa, 2024). The crisis period provided a unique empirical window into how marginalised entrepreneurs navigate sustainability under extreme constraint, revealing adaptive practices that might remain invisible during periods of economic stability. The convergence of multiple crises; health, economic, and regulatory created natural experimental conditions that illuminated the relationship between precarity and environmental practice.

However, this temporal situatedness also means that findings are contextually bounded and may not fully represent sustainability practices during periods of economic stability or growth. The Covid-19 pandemic provides an empirical testing ground for assessing the impact of critical events on societal transitions (Kanda & Kivimaa, 2020), but such critical events are exceptional rather than routine conditions. As economic or regulatory conditions evolve, so too may the attitudes, capacities, and priorities of ethnic food entrepreneurs regarding sustainability investments and practices.

The methodological implications of this temporal specificity are significant. The global response to mitigate the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic brought about massive health, social and economic impacts that affected both research participants and research processes

(Tremblay et al., 2021). While these conditions enhanced the study's theoretical insights into survivalist sustainability, they may have obscured other forms of environmental engagement that emerge under different economic circumstances. Longitudinal or follow-up studies could illuminate these temporal shifts and provide a more comprehensive understanding of how sustainability practices evolve across different economic cycles.

### 7.6.5 Resource limitations and methodological adaptations

As a full-time doctoral student managing concurrent academic responsibilities, this research was conducted within significant time and resource constraints that shaped both methodological choices and analytical depth. As noted in Marshall et al. (2013), constraints may arise due to methodological choices, data availability, time constraints, or gaps in the

literature, and acknowledging these limitations enhances rather than weakens the study's credibility by demonstrating critical awareness of scope and potential shortcomings.

In this study, the most significant constraint was the inability to conduct a second focus group that would have brought multiple stakeholders; curry house owners, policymakers, NGO representatives, and consumers together in dialogue. This multi-stakeholder focus group was originally planned to generate rich interactional data and facilitate direct engagement between normally separated actors in the food system. However, competing administrative responsibilities, including thesis supervisory team obligations, conference presentations, and teaching duties, combined with limited research funding and difficulty in getting a convenient time for all participants, made this methodologically desirable but resource-intensive approach unfeasible within the doctoral timeline. Time constraints and resources present particular limitations for qualitative research, which can be time-consuming and resource-intensive, particularly with collection methods such as interviews (Vasileiou et al., 2018).

These constraints were managed through several strategic adaptations that maintained methodological rigour while working within practical limitations. The multi-stakeholder focus group was compensated through intensive triangulation of individual interviews across stakeholder groups, ensuring that multiple perspectives were captured and cross-referenced, even if not in direct dialogue. When faced with time constraints, researchers must think creatively while avoiding reducing time spent on data analysis, as this is likely to jeopardise the quality of findings and insights (Braun & Clark, 2023). The time constraints generated some unexpected methodological benefits. The pressure to maximise data collection efficiency led to more focused, theoretically-informed interview protocols and more intensive analysis of each data point. The resource constraints reflected the very conditions of constraint and adaptation that characterised the research participants themselves, creating a form of methodological alignment between researcher and researched experiences.

While these limitations undoubtedly shaped the study's scope, they also demonstrate how rigorous qualitative research can be conducted within practical constraints, a reality that faces most doctoral researchers. This honest methodological reflection strengthens rather than undermines academic credibility by acknowledging the material conditions within which knowledge is produced.

### 7.6.6 Methodological strengths

Despite limitations, commitment to contextual authenticity, participant voice, and systemic reflexivity establishes research rigour (Olmos-Vega et al., 2023). Prolonged engagement with participants allowed for the development of trust relationships and observation of practices beyond initial interview presentations. Triangulation across stakeholders (curry house owners,

NGOs, policymakers, consumers etc.,), methods (interviews, observation, document analysis), and analytical perspectives strengthened interpretive validity (Pratt et al., 2020). Multi-stakeholder approach enabled comprehensive understanding from multiple perspectives captures stakeholder complexity extending beyond conventional boundaries (Pratt et al., 2020), providing templates for sustainability research accommodating relational governance and cultural legitimacy structures.

Industry reports and policy documents provided contextual validation of participant accounts, while iterative analysis involving member checking enhanced credibility. This reflexive approach positioned reflexivity not as methodological weakness but as analytical strength, enabling nuanced understanding of how sustainability practices are negotiated within specific cultural and economic contexts, insights that would have been inaccessible through purely external research approaches.

Additionally, structuring analysis around theoretical tensions rather than thematic silos enabled critical interrogation of dominant assumptions while allowing insights to emerge from empirical contradictions rather than predetermined frameworks (Morse et al., 2021). This approach demonstrates strength in foregrounding marginalised voices and knowledge, providing grounded account of sustainability from margins (Grodal et al., 2021).

## 7.7 Future research directions

This opens critical research directions that could accelerate paradigmatic transformation toward more inclusive and effective sustainability governance. Rather than broad research suggestions, these represent strategic priorities for establishing the evidence base necessary for field-wide change:

### 7.7.1 Cross-community validation studies

*Comparative studies:* Examining survivalist sustainability across different ethnic minority groups (Chinese, Somali, Caribbean etc.), geographical contexts, and business sectors to identify common patterns and contextual variations, enabling development of more generalizable theoretical insights while preserving attention to contextual specificity. Such research could employ a comparative research design to establish the generalisability versus contextual specificity of survivalist sustainability, providing evidence for either universal application of the framework or development of culturally-specific variants. This evidence is crucial for policy development and support system design

*Transnational sustainability networks:* Investigation of connections between UK-based ethnic food businesses and global supply chains, traditional knowledge systems, and diaspora

communities could reveal how local environmental practices connect to broader networks of cultural and economic exchange.

### 7.7.2 Intersectional and longitudinal analysis

*Intersectional sustainability analysis:* Systematic investigation of how gender, generation, class, and migration status intersect with environmental practice could address significant research gaps while revealing additional innovation mechanisms and support requirements invisible in male-dominated analysis. Such research would deepen understanding of how survivalist sustainability operates across different social positions while revealing additional innovation mechanisms and support requirements that remain invisible in male-dominated sectoral analysis.

*Longitudinal adaptation studies:* Tracking how environmental practices evolve across different economic cycles, regulatory changes, and generational transitions could illuminate temporal dimensions of adaptive capacity while revealing how constraint-driven innovations respond to changing structural conditions.

### 7.7.3 Governance transformation research

*Scaling mechanisms:* Investigating how survivalist sustainability practices might inform broader sustainability transitions without losing their cultural embeddedness and contextual specificity, exploring distributed scaling models that preserve local variation while enabling system-wide learning.

*Policy translation:* Developing governance mechanisms that can recognise and support survivalist sustainability without imposing formalisation requirements that undermine its effectiveness, creating institutional interfaces that enable productive engagement between formal and informal systems.

*Digital integration:* Examining how digital technologies might support rather than replace informal knowledge systems and vernacular innovation processes, exploring possibilities for technology that enhances rather than displaces community-based coordination and knowledge sharing.

### 7.7.4 Theoretical development priorities

*Decolonial sustainability frameworks:* Further development of theoretical approaches accommodating non-Western epistemologies and knowledge systems without compromising environmental effectiveness could contribute to emerging scholarship on inclusive environmental governance.

*Institutional multiplicity analysis:* Research examining how formal and informal governance systems can interface productively without requiring abandonment of effective informal coordination could inform hybrid governance design for diverse societies.

### 7.8 Conclusion: The transformation imperative

This thesis establishes that effective sustainability governance in diverse societies requires fundamental transformation from exclusionary compliance models toward inclusive co-creation approaches building upon environmental innovations already embedded within ethnic minority communities. The five-dimensional framework of survivalist sustainability provides analytical tools for understanding marginalised environmental practice and practical mechanisms for developing governance systems that recognise and strengthen existing innovations.

Climate urgency combined with increasing cultural diversity creates an imperative for sustainability approaches working with rather than against knowledge systems and cultural practices characterising contemporary societies. Current governance systems excluding marginalised communities waste sophisticated environmental innovations while reproducing inequalities undermining collective capacity to address environmental challenges effectively.

The transformation pathways outlined here provide concrete mechanisms for translating theoretical insights into practice across multiple stakeholder groups. The actionable strategies—alternative recognition systems, culturally-responsive governance, constraint-responsive support, inclusive stakeholder engagement, and hybrid compliance pathways—offer immediate implementation opportunities while building evidence for broader systemic change.

The research demonstrates that marginalised entrepreneurs are not obstacles to sustainability transitions but crucial contributors whose knowledge and adaptive capacity offer insights for more effective environmental governance. The sophisticated innovations documented within curry house operations reveal alternative approaches achieving environmental outcomes through different logics and governance mechanisms while potentially offering superior models for diverse societies.

The implementation imperative recognises that climate challenges demand inclusion of all available environmental knowledge rather than privileging particular cultural approaches. The adaptive capacity and vernacular innovations within ethnic minority food systems represent irreplaceable resources for sustainability transitions that remain invisible to governance systems designed around narrow assumptions about legitimate environmental practice.

This thesis concludes with recognition that transformation requires paradigmatic courage in abandoning comfortable assumptions about environmental practice. The choice remains: will sustainability governance develop capacity to work with sophisticated environmental knowledge already embedded within ethnic minority communities, or continue privileging approaches that exclude precisely those innovations most needed for diverse societies?

The survivalist sustainability documented here offers vision for environmental futures strengthening cultural diversity while advancing planetary health through approaches serving community wellbeing alongside environmental goals. Realising such futures requires the paradigmatic transformation this thesis documents and advocates while providing practical frameworks for translating insights into governance transformation worthy of both environmental urgency and cultural sophistication.

Overall, this research highlights the importance of listening to those who sustain others. Curry house entrepreneurs may not use the language of sustainability, but through their everyday practices, they offer critical insights into what more equitable, grounded, and pluralistic sustainability could look like. The challenge ahead for researchers, policymakers, and practitioners is to centre these voices (the missing middle) in conversations and frameworks shaping the future of food systems, recognising that real system change happens only when every voice, from farm-to-fork, is heard, valued, and empowered.

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# Appendices

## Appendix 1: Focus Group Questions (Bangladeshi Caterers)

The questions below seek to analyse how participants co-construct stories and frames as they respond collectively to the questions. These questions were asked to the Bangladeshi caterers in one focus group before the personal interviews. The insights generated helped in reframing the focus of this study from exporing challenges to investigating adaptive sustainability strategies amidst multi-faceted challenges.

| Questions | Justification | Research question(s) to be addressed |
|---|---|---|
| What is the general perception about sustainability in the curry food supply chain? | To analyse how participant co-construct 'sustainability' and to analyse how dominant frames emerge. | Q1 |
| Can you share experiences or insights about successful or unsuccessful attempts at adopting sustainable practices in your operations? | To analyse various shared insights/experiences about adopting sustainable practices | Q1 |
| How do you collectively envision overcoming challenges in adopting sustainability measures within the curry food supply chain? | To analyse collective solutions to overcoming sustainability challenges | Q1 |
| What strategies or initiatives do you believe could help in the adoption of more sustainable practices? | To analyse potential strategies for local sourcing | Q2 |
| What do you perceive as the potential impacts of local sourcing strategies on your business and the broader curry food supply chain? | To analyse collective perceptions on potential impacts of local sourcing strategies | Q2 |
| What resources or support do you need to enhance your adoption of sustainable practices? | To analyse resources and support needed to enhance adoption of sustainable practices and local sourcing | Q1, Q2 |
| How do you interact with other components of the curry food supply chain, such as suppliers, consumers, distributors, or retailers? | To analyse collective views on the interactions within the curry food supply chain | Q1, Q2, Q3 |
| What potential benefits do you foresee from collaborative efforts within the supply chain, specifically related to local sourcing? | To analyse potential benefits of collaboration within the curry food supply chain | Q2 |
| How do you perceive the role of various stakeholders in fostering collaboration for local sourcing initiatives? | To understand and analyse views on the shared sustainability interest of various stakeholders in fostering effective collaboration for local sourcing | Q2, Q3 |
| What role do you think the regulatory environment plays in influencing sustainable practices within the curry food supply chain? | To analyse the role of policy in influencing sustainable practices within the curry food supply chain | Q1, Q2, Q3 |

## Appendix 2: Interview Questions (For Bangladeshi Caterers)

***Exploring Sustainable Practices in Curry Food Systems***

*Can you briefly introduce yourself and tell me how long you have been into this business?*

1. Can you give me a brief overview of your business and how your supply chain works, from getting materials to delivering your service?
2. When you hear the word 'sustainability,' what comes to mind for you in terms of how you run your business operations?
3. What key environmental factors influence/affect how you run your business day-to-day? (This could be energy, waste, sourcing, climate condition, pollution control, regulations and policies, etc).
4. How do you manage food waste in your operations, and what challenges do you face in reducing waste?
5. What social factors, like customer expectations or community needs, affect how you run your business? (others could be public perception about health, safety and ethics, fair wages, labour practices, working conditions, etc)
6. How do you make sure your business goals (like profit) align with taking care of the environment and meeting social responsibilities?
7. What are some sustainable practices you've put in place in your catering business, and how did you go about setting them up? (e.g sourcing local and organic ingredients, food waste reduction, eco-friendly packaging, energy efficiency, water, sustainable menu planning, training of woekers, etc)
8. How does culture shape the way you approach and implement sustainable practices? (e.g tradition and heritage, community and stakeholder pressure)
9. How do you see your sustainability efforts affecting your local environment, community, and your business profits?
10. How do you get your workers involved in and trained to implement sustainable practices?
11. What challenges or obstacles have you encountered when trying to implement sustainable practices such as local sourcing of ingredients?
12. How have recent events, like Brexit or the COVID-19 pandemic, affected your efforts to adopt sustainable practices?
13. What kind of resources or support would help you tackle the challenges and improve your sustainable practices?
14. What new ideas, innovations or technologies do you think could help make your operations more sustainable?
15. What strategies or initiatives do you think could help you and others adopt more sustainable practices

***Exploring Stakeholders' Interactions, Influence and Collaboration for Local Sourcing of cooking Ingredients***

16. Can you walk me through how you currently go about sourcing ingredients for your dishes?
17. How do you work with and communicate with farmers, suppliers, customers, and other people involved in your supply chain?

-How does your interaction with them influence/impact the sustainability decisions you make?

18. Have you noticed any shifts in what your customers want or expect regarding sustainability in your cooking operations?
-What kind of feedback have you gotten from customers about your sustainability efforts?
18. What partnerships have you formed with farmers and suppliers to improve local ingredient sourcing, and what results have you seen from these efforts?
19. Can you tell me about any challenges or successes you've had when working or collaborating with other people in the curry food supply chain, like farmers, suppliers, or NGOs, to improve sustainability?
20. What opportunities do you see in working more closely with others to improve local sourcing practices?

***Exploring General Supply Chain and System Dynamics***

21. How do you think your operations contribute to the overall sustainability of the curry food system?
22. How do you assess the impact of your sustainability initiatives on the curry food supply chain?
23. Are there any resources, skills, or capabilities you have (or generally in the sector) that you think could be used better to improve sustainability?
24. How do you think regulations and rules impact the adoption of sustainable practices in the curry food supply chain?

**Appendix 3: Interview Questions (For Farmers):**

1. What types of crops or livestock do you produce for the curry food market?
2. How is climate change impacting your farming practices, and what are you doing to adapt to these changes?
3. What sustainable farming practices are you using right now, and what challenges have you encountered in putting them into place?
4. How does technology or innovation play a role in your farming, especially when it comes to sustainability?
5. How do you manage to keep your farming economically viable while also sticking to sustainable practices?
6. Do you supply or sell directly to the caterers or through middlemen?
7. How do you perceive the demand for locally sourced ingredients from caterers, middlemen, and consumers?
8. What challenges do you encounter in producing/supplying to the curry food supply chain?
9. How do you work with caterers and others in the supply chain to promote sustainable practices?
10. How do you think caterers and other actors/stakeholders in the supply chain can better support local farmers like you to boost local sourcing efforts?
11. What kind of help do you get from the government for sustainable farming, and what other support would make a difference for you?

**Appendix 4. Interview Questions (For Suppliers):**

1. Can you briefly introduce yourself, your business, and the ingredients/products you supply to the curry market? How many years have you been in this business?
2. How do you source your products, and are they locally produced?
3. What specific sustainability initiatives have you implemented in your supply chain operations?
4. How do you assess the impact of your sustainability initiatives on the curry food supply chain?
5. How are you using technology or innovation to improve sustainability?
6. What are the biggest challenges you face when sourcing products sustainably, and how do you address them while keeping your prices competitive?
7. What specific challenges do you encounter when supplying to caterers and other stakeholders in the curry market?
8. Have you observed any trends or preferences among consumers related to sustainable sourcing?
9. How do you collaborate with caterers and other stakeholders to promote sustainable practices, such as local sourcing/growing in the supply chain?
10. What are the key challenges and opportunities in local sourcing of food ingredients?
11. In what ways can you contribute to developing and supporting local sourcing initiatives?
12. What policy changes or recommendations would you suggest supporting sustainable sourcing and practices?

**<u>Appendix 5.</u> Interview Questions (Associations, i.e Bangladeshi Catering Association):**

1. What initiatives or programs does your association have in place to promote sustainability in the curry food supply chain?
2. How does your association work with suppliers and other stakeholders to advance sustainability goals?
3. How do you engage your members in sustainability initiatives, and what strategies have been most effective?
4. How can associations help foster collaboration and sharing of knowledge among stakeholders?
5. How can your network or association help develop and support local sourcing initiatives?
6. What are the biggest challenges your association encounters when promoting sustainability in the curry food supply chain?
7. How do you assess the impact of your sustainability initiatives on the curry food supply chain?
8. What future initiatives or programmes is your association planning to further promote sustainability in the curry food supply chain?
9. What policy changes or recommendations would you suggest supporting sustainable sourcing and practices.

**Appendix 6: Interview Questions ( for curry consumers):**

1. What factors influence your choices when dining at curry houses?
2. What specific sustainability issues in the curry food supply chain concern you the most?
3. How important is the use of locally sourced ingredients in your food purchasing decisions?
4. Are you aware of any sustainability issues in the curry food supply chain?
5. What could encourage you to choose caterers who prioritize/focus on sustainability?
6. How can caterers improve how they share/communicate their sustainability efforts with consumers?
7. How can you support develop and support local sourcing initiatives?
8. What trade-offs, like higher prices or limited menu options, are you willing to accept for more sustainable dining options?
9. Where do you usually find information about the sustainability practices of restaurants or food businesses?
10. Can you share any positive experiences you've had with restaurants that focus on sustainability?
11. How important is it to you that sustainability practices in curry restaurants align/match with traditional cultural practices?"

**Appendix 7. Interview Questions ( for Policy Makers):**

1. What policies are currently in place that help support sustainable practices in the food and hospitality industry?

2. How do these policies address the specific needs of Ethnic Minority Business (Bangladeshi caterers) and other actors in the curry food supply chain?

3. What are the key challenges to implementing and enforcing these policies?

4. Are there any gaps in existing policies that need to be addressed?

5. How do you assess whether policies promoting sustainability in the food and hospitality industry are working?

6. How do you manage the interests of different groups, like businesses, consumers, and environmental organizations, when creating sustainability policies?

7. How can policy support in developing and promoting local sourcing initiatives?

8. How can policymakers collaborate with stakeholders to improve sustainability outcomes in the industry?

9. What new policy ideas are you considering to tackle the latest sustainability challenges in the food and hospitality industry?

**Appendix 8. Interview Questions (Researchers):**

1. What research has been done on sustainability challenges in the curry food supply chain, especially at the Restauranteurs/catering segment?

1. What are some of the main findings and recommendations from these studies?
2. How can research findings be translated into actionable strategies for stakeholders?
3. What are the opportunities for more research in this area?
4. How can researchers work with stakeholders to fill knowledge gaps and help with decision-making?
5. How can research support in developing and supporting local sourcing initiatives?
6. What research methods have you found most useful for studying sustainability in the curry food supply chain?
7. What are the biggest challenges you encounter when researching sustainability in this sector?
8. How do you use interdisciplinary approaches in your research on sustainable food supply chains?
9. What emerging trends or issues do you think are crucial for future research in this field?
10. How do you think your research findings can help shape policy decisions on sustainability in the food and hospitality industry?

**Appendix 9: Interview Questions (Third Sector/NGO/Charity)**

1. How can you describe the role of the third sector in driving sustainability in food supply chains, especially the foreign curry (EMBs)?
2. What initiatives or programs does your organization have in place to promote sustainability in the food supply chain?
3. How do these initiatives address the specific needs of Ethnic Minority Business and other actors in food supply chain
4. How do you measure and report on the impact of your sustainability initiatives in the food supply chain?
5. How do you see the role of collaboration among supply chain actors
6. How do you engage and collaborate with various stakeholders (farmers, caterers, suppliers, consumers etc) to ensure the success of your sustainability initiatives?"

7. What are the main challenges and opportunities for local sourcing of food ingredients?
8. How can NGOs/Charities support in developing and supporting local sourcing initiatives?
9. What funding challenges do you face in implementing sustainability initiatives, and how do you address them?"
10. What should be the role policy in promoting sustainable food initiatives?

**Appendix 10. Interview Questions (Innovation Experts):**

1. How do you define innovation within the context of the food catering sector?
2. Can you give some examples of innovative practices or technologies that have been used to boost sustainability in the industry?
3. How do you identify opportunities for innovation in sourcing, production, distribution, or waste management?
4. What barriers do you encounter when introducing new ideas or technologies to stakeholders in the sector?
    - How do you overcome these barriers?"
5. How do you collaborate with other actors and stakeholders to foster innovation and sustainability?
6. Can you share any success stories or case studies where innovation has led to positive sustainability outcomes in the curry food supply chain?
7. What role do you see for innovation in addressing future challenges and opportunities in the industry?
8. How can innovation be effectively integrated into existing practices and processes to promote sustainability?
9. What recommendations do you have for caterers, suppliers, and policymakers to encourage a culture of innovation in the curry food industry?
10. How can innovation support in developing and supporting local sourcing, production, distribution, and waste management?
11. What emerging technologies do you see as having the most potential to revolutionize sustainability in the food catering sector?