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**Learning about Sustainability:
An Action Research Study of a Small Tourism Organization Undergoing the Sustainable
Travel Finland -Program**

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Abstract

Sustainability has become the integral focus in tourism during the past years. Since the industry is very prone to global threats like the climate change, sustainability management has to become more comprehensive and the common responsibility of all tourism organizations. Small tourism organization have the tendency for the lack of systematic sustainability work and silent sustainability actions, meaning the work done as a part of the everyday actions without even knowing it could be related to sustainability. These actions are not measured, communicated, or given a deeper attention, so the work is not that efficient and doesn't cover all the dimensions of sustainability. Previous research about sustainability management has been focusing on for example competitive advantages and improvement of market position, but there is a lack of research about what can organizations learn through their sustainability management journey. Also, in many cases the research focus has been on larger organizations, even though small and medium size organization represent the majority in the tourism field.

If an organization wants to develop and grow, learning is an integral part of the process. Therefore, this research is focusing on the learning journey of a small tourism organization operating in the northern Finland with the intention of improving their sustainability management with the help of a sustainability management program called Sustainable Travel Finland (STF). The main research question is: How can sustainability management programs support sustainability learning in small tourism organizations? The methodological approach of the research is an action research study, and the empirical data is collected through participant observation and semi-structured interviews.

The findings show that among small tourism organizations it was possible to identify a three-step learning path, where learning is experienced in different forms. The steps include finding a purpose for the sustainability work, learning about their current sustainability knowledge, and transferring new knowledge into actions. The STF-program was seen as an effective tool especially for small tourism organizations. It was showed how these organizations are able to identify their strengths, current knowledge and find new development aspects which were able to transfer into practical actions with the use of new management tools and systematic working. It was also found that the STF-program was supporting the continuous sustainability learning and helping small tourism organizations to plan long-term strategies and goals for the future.

KEYWORDS: organizational learning, sustainable tourism, action research study, small tourism organizations

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1 INTRODUCTION

The tourism industry has changed dramatically in the past decades, and it's also said to be one of the fastest growing economic sectors in the world (UNWTO). Tourism industry is a very complex one with multiple different stakeholders and dimensions, and it's also very prone to global threats and challenges. One of the most severe challenges to tourism have been identified to be for example the climate change and natural disasters (Blackman & Ritchie, 2008), which has caused the raise of consciousness about sustainability issues and the impacts of tourism. The discussion about sustainability issues has been increasing a lot in the recent years, and the awareness and concrete actions to prevent the negative impacts of tourism have gained support. As tourism just keeps on growing, and UNWTO has been predicting that by 2030 the number of tourists travelling across borders will reach to 1.8 billion, long-term sustainability planning and prevention of the negative impacts of tourism has been found to be more important than ever. Tourism organizations are an integral part in the fight against the negative effects and impacts of tourism, and the needed actions have to be done before it's too late. If the negative impacts of the physical, socio-cultural, and economic environments will keep on increasing, tourism and travelling perhaps will not be possible in the future.

UNWTO defines sustainable tourism as tourism taking responsibility of its current and future economic, social, and environmental impacts, which takes into consideration the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment, and the host communities. Previously sustainable tourism was understood to be just a specific type of tourism, but nowadays it is expected that all tourism should be sustainable (Berno & Bricker, 2001). Sustainable tourism aims to increase the positive impacts of tourism and decrease the negative ones with long-term impacts. Organizations operating in the tourism sector are expected to work towards sustainability, and in addition, today's consumers are slowly but steadily starting to appreciate it more as well. Bučar, Van Rheenen, and Hendija (2019) stated that as tourists are becoming more concerned of the environmental issues while travelling, it is forcing tourism providers to plan their products in a sustainable way. Also, Hellmeister and Richins (2019) discussed that because of globalization and the growing public awareness of the climate change, consumer culture has changed to the direction of valuing social and environmental sustainability. When an organization is aiming for the transition towards sustainability, the organizational culture often must change in the form of values, norms, attitudes, and strategies. In order to make a change,

organizations need to learn, and through organizational learning companies can evaluate their current actions and habits and develop them with new knowledge provided by learning. (Yusoff, Omar & Zaman, 2019.) Sustainability development and organizational learning have a lot in common, since they are both dominated by the same nature of continuum (Dicle & Köse, 2014). It has been noted that the raise of sustainability has put tourism organizations to the position where new approaches and strategies have to be applied and new ways of actions are needed more than ever (Bučar et. al, 2019). For this purpose, organizational learning has been seen as a very powerful concept.

One of the recent issues about sustainability and learning has been the need to learn how sustainability can be measured, and how organizations could learn to take all out of the sustainability development work. The measurement and effective sustainability work has been done with different eco-labels and certifications, which help organizations to be more transparent in their sustainability work and on the other side help consumers to make informed decisions. Ecolabels are not new innovations in the field, since the first ecolabel in the world, Blue Flag, was launched already in 1985, but the popularity of these has grown dramatically. (Bučar et. al, 2019.) Unfortunately, systematic, measured and communicated sustainability and responsibility especially in small tourism companies is still regarding a lot of work. Small and medium size organizations represent the majority in many tourism destinations (Binder, 2019), but sustainability work in these organizations differs a lot from large ones. The problem in most cases is that bigger organizations have more clear structures and strategies (Russo & Tencati, 2009) and for example have their own sustainability departments, which are only working among these themes. Then again smaller organizations don't have these kinds of resources, and often the sustainability development work is only behind one person responsible for other tasks as well. Instead of clear sustainability strategies, for example the values of the owners in small tourism organizations have a huge influence on the nature of their business (Russo & Tencati, 2009).

In many cases, especially in small organizations, a lot is already done among the themes of sustainability but unaware of them being sustainability actions. This issue has been discussed and defined for example with the concepts of "silent sustainability" and "sunken corporate social responsibility (CSR)" (García-Rosell, 2013; Perrini, 2006). These organizations are often not aware of all the dimensions of sustainability and take these actions for granted and do them as a part of their daily routines (Font, Garay & Jones, 2016). Even though the work might

not be that visible, it doesn't mean that the work is completely ignored and not seen as an important topic. For example, among accommodation and activity service providers acting sustainably was seen as the only possible way to do business. Still the need of a sustainability certificates is concerning many small tourism organizations because of the costs, workload, lack of knowledge and valuing the everyday tasks more than an official certificate. (Visit Finland, 2018).

In Finland the work towards sustainable and responsible tourism started around the 1990's. For example, the national commission for sustainable development (Ministry of the Environment), which aims to promote and coordinate the sustainability development work, was established in 1993 as one of the first ones in the world. In 2006 sustainable tourism was brought up as one of the cross-sectional values in the Finnish Tourism Strategy with multiple operations to support the work. In 2015 the international Green Key certification program was started in Finland, and in the same year Visit Finland started an active promotion of environmental programs for tourism organizations. Sustainability and responsibility were also a big part of the program called Laatu-tonni, which was established in 2000 for tourism organizations to develop the quality of the tourism services to the next level. (Visit Finland, 2018.)

Nowadays there is a large variety of sustainability programs and certifications in Finland, but many tourism organizations have been struggling to find the right options for them. Especially among small operators the participation in certification processes and programs hasn't been that popular or seen as a necessity. (Visit Finland, 2018). The responsibility of sustainability in tourism cannot lay only on the laps of the large organizations, and every company in the field should start taking sustainability issues seriously. The work never stops, which is why the concept of constant learning is always present in the sustainability development work. It's also not enough to focus on the environmental issues, but sustainability as a concept has to be understood more widely, and the other levels of sustainability have to be considered as well. There are no shortcuts for this, and for the future sustainability has to be in the values and strategy of every tourism organization in order to make a difference. It requires a lot of work and companies will not ever be finished with the learning process, but it should be seen as an opportunity instead of a threat.

This thesis aims to research and understand the process of organizational learning from the viewpoint of sustainability management and development in a small tourism organization. It

uses the Visit Finland's Sustainable Travel Finland (STF) -program as an example of a sustainability management program, and studies how sustainability programs and certificates can help small tourism organizations to learn and manage their sustainability actions. As organizational learning is an effective way of changing organizations policies and learn how to manage different development aspects inside an organization, it brings a lot of benefits to the process of understanding sustainability and how to integrate and manage sustainability actions into the company culture. The thesis scrutinizes the process from the viewpoint of a small-scale tourism organization operating in the northern Finland, which started their journey in the STF-program in order to learn how to further manage their sustainability actions. The case organization has been working with sustainability in their minds from the start of the business, but as the world and the industry keeps on changing, the actions done before are not enough, and constant development and learning is required.

1.1 Empirical phenomena

The empirical phenomenon of this thesis focuses on the learning perspectives of the sustainability work done by small tourism organizations with the help of sustainability programs and certifications. Even though the increase of sustainability in tourism has been going on for a while already, it has been noted that the same issues still occur. For some tourism organizations sustainability work is done for example just getting financial benefits or having a better market position in the intense competition between tourism providers, but the learning possibilities are not seen as a big part of the process. The competitive advantage of sustainability is well-known, and it has been found out that the more companies are involved in sustainability actions, the more they get appreciation and market value. (Stoddard, Pollard & Evans, 2012.) This can lead to the misuse of sustainability, so doing it for the marketing purposes only, and because of this tools for measuring the sustainability actions and verifying the work are highly needed. To get the real benefits out of the sustainability development work, companies need to start working on a more comprehensive level, and understand that the development requires constant work, and what's most important: constant learning. Siebenhüner and Arnold (2007) even claimed that organizational learning is the key in the process of integrating sustainability in companies.

To solve this problem, there are nowadays multiple sustainability certification and programs for tourism organizations, which are specifically powerful tools for the measurement and

verification of the work. In Finland Visit Finland launched a brand-new sustainability label concept called Sustainable Travel Finland in 2019. The purpose of the program is to act as guideline for all tourism companies, and the goal of the program is to show that each company, despite the size or the current level of sustainability work, are able to improve their operations. The program also helps to identify the strengths and the weaknesses, and from the results the organizations are able to learn how to transfer the new knowledge into actions, and by that way develop their organizations even more towards sustainability. The need for a sustainability program, which would put all tourism organizations on the same level and helping organization to work with common guidelines, came from the organizations themselves. Before the start of the program, it was researched that 94% of the organizations who already had a sustainability certification, and 83% who did not have a certificate, were supporting the development of the STF-label, and would be willing to utilize it. (Visit Finland, 2018.)

Many active sustainability certification organizations (for example Green Key, Biosphere, ISO14001) describe that sustainability certifications can offer for example tools for multiple different development processes, measurements, and operations management. They can support the concept of constant learning, which is necessary in the sustainability development process, since usually the certifications are re-evaluated either yearly or at least regularly. In the recent years the measured and communicated sustainability work has been mostly done by big tourism organizations, for example hotel chains and airline companies, and the similar work has been lacking among the small tourism organizations. Bigger operators, like airlines and shipowners, have highlighted their social responsibilities as a central reason for the sustainability work, since usually the environmental effects of the big companies are massive, when again in small organizations the work is done almost on its own, alongside with other daily operations (Visit Finland, 2018). The challenges of sustainability management have also been seen larger among small tourism organizations. The problem usually does not lie in the lack of interest or not feeling like the sustainability issues are important, but in the fact that small companies often find it hard to identify and transfer these issues into action (Oikarinen-Mäenpää, 2019). Also, smaller operators have not been able to work in the same level as bigger operations because of for example lack of time, and the benefits of for example getting a sustainability certification have not been seen important for small operators (Bacari, Séraphin & Gowreesunkar, 2021).

Like mentioned earlier, the work is still lacking focus on the most important aspect, which is the possibility to learn, the continuum of the work and increase of long-term impacts instead of

the benefits in marketing and visibility. Since the goal is to get sustainability as an integral part of every tourism organization, despite the size, it is important that also smaller organizations would have the same opportunities, guidelines, and tools for the constant sustainability work. These tools should allow companies to learn and effectively manage their sustainability work. Binder (2019) states that as many destinations in the tourism industry highly depend on small and medium size enterprises, it's important that the focus on the sustainability issues is also taken into consideration in these organizations and not only the big ones, since these enterprises are the majority in the tourism field.

In this study the focus will be on the viewpoint of sustainability learning among small tourism organizations, and how sustainability learning is happening among these organizations. The research aims to go deeper on the learning process and see what factors can be seen as the drivers for starting the sustainability learning journey, and how can sustainability certificates and programs help small tourism organizations to learn and to manage their sustainability operations in an effective way. In this research the STF-program is used as an example of a sustainability management program, and the case study organization in the research follows the guidelines and steps of this specific program in order to learn more about sustainability.

1.2 Previous research

Sustainability in tourism has been one of the most researched topics in the field in recent years, and ever since sustainability became one of the key factors of the tourism industry, the amount of research has been just growing. Also, organizational learning in tourism has been researched before, as well as organizational learning and sustainability, but the combination of all three is lacking research especially from the viewpoint of small tourism organizations. Many of these studies have been focusing on large-scale organizations, destinations or for example hotels, and the research focus has been on the motivations, capability, performances, and customer preferences.

The research about organizational learning in tourism has been focusing on destination management, tourism networks and collaborative visioning projects (Beesley, 2015; Binder, 2019; Schianetz, Kavanagh & Lockington, 2007; Halme, 2001), but there is a lack of research from the side of small and medium tourism enterprises, which are indeed the most common organizations in the tourism field (Binder, 2019; Khoshkhoo & Nadalipour, 2016). As the goal

in the tourism industry is to get the whole tourism destinations to be sustainable, it cannot happen before the organizations operating inside the destination have been adapting and learning how to improve and manage their sustainability constantly. Also, the competitive advantage of sustainability in tourism has been researched before. Oregio and Wainaina (2019) talked about the link between strategic organizational learning capability and firm performance and found out that knowledge transfer and all dimensions of strategic organizational learning had a positive and significant influence on organizations performance. Sampe and Limpo (2019) again based their research of tourism services on the relationship between organizational learning and financial performances.

Fu (2017) was researching the need of organizational learning in hotels and found out that hotels with high organizational learning would create a higher knowledge. There are also many other studies from the viewpoint of small hotels, for example from Bacari et. al (2021), who were researching the sustainable actions of hoteliers around the world. Their study revealed some interesting information especially from the small-size hotels. It was found out that in general the hotel sector is committed to the sustainable development goals, but that small companies in the accommodation sector don't realize the importance of brand management and focus more on short-term business strategies rather than long-term effects. On the other hand, small companies were found to have better abilities to be innovative because of their flexibility and capacity to adapt the sustainable development goals in their everyday business. The viewpoint of small tourism organizations was found for example in the research of Lehtola (2011), where the environmental action development process utilizing the organization's own premises was studied with the use of action research. The research was focusing on the contributing factors and how the context of small organizations had an impact on the realization of the development process. The findings showed that the nature of small organizations, which is often more practical than aiming for long-term strategic planning, should be highly taken into consideration when the development processes are implemented, in order to get the most efficient results.

Some previous studies from the Finnish Lapland about sustainability management and development were also found, which were including sustainability certifications and tools for management, but again the concept of learning and continuous development was lacking. Oikarinen-Mäenpää (2019) was researching sustainability in tourism companies from the viewpoints of valuation, acts, motivations, and challenges in Ruka-Kuusamo area. In his research Oikarinen-Mäenpää found that all parts of the sustainability were seen as important,

and the companies were missing an outside party, who would monitor the processes from the outside. Sustainability evaluation process has been researched by for example García-Rosell & Mäkinen (2012), where they argued about the importance of stakeholder involvement in the evaluation process within tourism settings. The research proposed a theoretical and methodological framework to be used together with different stakeholders in order to get a comprehensive understanding of sustainability practices.

Motivation for socially responsible behaviour has been researched by different authors (Perrini, Russo & Tencati, 2007; Font et. al, 2016). Perrini et. al (2007) found different sources of motivations, for example public visibility, economies of scale and strengthening of competitiveness, and that since most of the actions require time, finances, and energy, they are often harder for small companies to fulfil. Font et. al (2019) again discovered that for small companies the so-called pro-sustainability behaviour is common, and that factors like environmental protection and improvements in the society had bigger importance than cost savings and marketing benefits. Väänänen (2020) was researching the sustainable destination management practices in Lapland, and also found out that there is a need for clear guidelines, monitoring and a national program in order for sustainability to be effective.

During the past years, there have been developed various ways to manage sustainability, especially through different kind of certifications and sustainability labels. As today's consumers are more interested and conscious of sustainability issues, these labels and certifications have become a popular and rather easy way to make sure that the service provider they are using are acting sustainably. In general, the number of studies about sustainability certifications in small tourism organizations is rather small, but for example Bacari et. al (2021) found out that on the accommodation field, certification processes for smaller companies were described as tedious and time-consuming, and it was not seen as a priority to get because of the uncertain benefits it can bring to the sustainable operations of their business. Penz, Hofmann and Hartl (2017) found that customers would prefer choosing a tour operator with a sustainability certification, but they would want to be surer that the certifications are trustworthy. The purpose of the different sustainability certificates is in fact to improve companies' performances and to promote sustainable consumption (Font, 2007), but since there is a huge variety of different certificates and labels, it can also cause a lot of misuse and greenwashing among companies, and the mislead customers. As the previous research of the certifications in small tourism companies is lacking, much information could not be found, but

Visit Finland (2018) found that for small companies' factors like limited resources of finances and staff were reasons why they did not have a sustainability certificate. The variations between the operations of small and large-scale tourism organizations in general are large. Studies have revealed that when it comes to sustainability, the mindset in bigger companies is often for example in financial performances, managing of the environment and controlling and reporting strategies. Then again, the recognition of the importance of having a responsible behaviour and fulfilling personal values was more important for small and medium-size companies. (Font et. al 2016; Perrini et. al, 2007.)

1.3 Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study is to find out how learning is visible in the sustainability management journey of small tourism organizations, and how sustainability management programs can support the learning. The STF-program from Visit Finland will be working as a case example of sustainability management programs in the present study.

The main research question is:

Q1: How can sustainability management programs support sustainability learning in small tourism organizations?

And the sub-questions are:

Q2: What kind of learning stages are visible in the sustainability learning process of small tourism organizations?

Q3: What are the drivers in the sustainability management programs supporting small tourism organizations to start their sustainability learning journey?

As the research gap of the study shows, most of the research has been focusing only on the improvements of market position from sustainability development or the journey from the viewpoint of large-scale tourism organizations, so this research focuses on the learning aspects and other potential benefits that a small tourism company can get from their sustainability management journey. As the STF-program is fairly new in the Finnish tourism field, it's important to look deeper into the benefits it can offer to the organizations participating on the program and how it can help on the way to recognizing organization's own strengths and

weaknesses in the field of sustainability. The focus of the study is on small tourism organizations, and the premises of this kind of development and management project can differ between big and small companies. So, the present research also brings up features like the challenges and possible preventing factors concerning specifically small tourism organizations.

1.4 Data and research methodology

This thesis focuses on the small tourism organization's sustainability learning journey, and the research is done by using an action research methodology. As the aim of the research is to understand the sustainability learning process of small tourism organizations and see what is happening inside the organizations during the STF-program, the practical and problem-solving nature of an action research fits well for the research purposes. The aim of an action research is to understand, evaluate and create a change in an organization, and these three factors are also visible in the present study (Costello, 2003, p. 5). Action research includes research cycles (Ballantyne, 2004), and in this study one action research cycle is implemented in order to research the organizational learning and find out the current state of the operations through evaluation, action, and reflections. Action research requires close cooperation between the researcher and the participants, and the work group is often stronger than what the individual partners could be able to establish. (McNiff & Whitehead, 2002, p. 15-16; Saaranen-Kauppinen & Puusniekka, 2006.) In the present study the research is done together with the case organization, and the organization is involved in all of the different phases of the research and have a role of co-researchers.

The research is done with the use of qualitative research methods in order to get a comprehensive understanding of the research phenomena (Heikkilä, 2014). The research data is collected with two different methods: participant observations and semi-structured interviews. The data consists of five semi-structured interviews and observation notes collected from the participant observation during the time of June 2020-June 2021. The data is then analysed with a data-driven content analysis in order to get a compact description of the empirical phenomenon (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2009, pp.103-108).

1.5 Structure of the thesis

This thesis consists of eight main chapters presenting the theoretical framework, research methodology, findings from the data-analysis and the conclusions and implementations. After the introduction the second chapter introduces organizational learning as a concept, its brief history and how organizational learning has been used in research with tourism and with sustainability. The third chapter is about sustainability in tourism and focuses on the history of the use of sustainability and how its role has been changing with the past years. It also introduces the challenges of sustainable tourism and the role of certifications in sustainability work. On the fourth chapter sustainability in small-scale tourism organizations is handled more deeply, and the chapter introduces how sustainability in these companies has seen and what kind of challenges do small tourism companies have with sustainability. The fifth chapter introduces the research methodology of action research, the empirical setting of the study, data collection and analysis methods and ethical considerations. In the fifth chapter also the STF-program and the case company of this research are briefly introduced. In the sixth chapter the findings of the study are introduced and chapter number seven includes the discussion of the research findings. Lastly the research conclusions, limitations of the study and proposals for future research are made in the chapter number eight.

2 ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING

Organizational learning means the processes of creating, acquiring, transferring, and integrating knowledge into the organizations via continuous learning (Yusoff et. al, 2019). Organizational learning is done inside an organization in order to improve its actions through new knowledge and understanding. One of the most important parts in organizational learning is the actual learning process, and that the learned aspects will become an integral part of the organizations' actions and that the learning will also continue in the future. Gomes and Wojahn (2017) define that organizational learning will help organizations to create, transfer and integrate knowledge and experience, and also learn continuously. The main aims in organizational learning are positive development, change, and management aspects that can give the organization new kind of competitive advantages and tools to survive from future challenges. Bratianu (2018) succeed to put the main goal of organizational learning in one short sentence: "As a result of organizational learning, a company can adapt faster and better to the external environmental requirements". Milway and Saxton (2011) identified four integral parts in organizational learning: supportive leaders, culture of continuous improvements, intuitive knowledge process and defined learning structure. They highlighted that for example the leaders of the organization must be committed by setting the visions and goals for learning, and also act as role models in the process by participating in the learning activities.

After organizational learning, the organization can also become a learning organization, which is a related concept. Hanaysha (2016) defines learning organization as a supportive entity, and also Odor (2018) explains that organizational learning is a process that in the best case leads to an ideal state of a learning organization. Schwandt and Marquardt (1999, pp. 3) talk about learning organizations as places where both groups and individuals continuously engage in new learning processes. Perhaps the easiest way to make the difference between organizational learning and learning organization is to think about them as the process and the product. Schwandt and Marquardt (1999, pp. 26) argued that organizational learning is the representation of the human process which aims to increase the cognitive capacity of the total organization, where again learning organization is the representation of the desired end. Odor (2018) states that after a learning organization is developed, the management must ensure that the learning will not stop, but that the tempo has to be increased on a continuous basis. This supports the definition of organizational learning, which aims for the continuum of the learning

process. It can be hard to identify where goes the line when an organization has learned enough to become a learning organization. Gustafsberg (2016) states that to determine that an organization has learned, the knowledge and learning objectives have to become a practice that can be implemented as stated in the organization's strategy.

The concept of organizational learning has been discussed for a half a century already, and the discussion and the importance around the topic is constantly growing (Saadat & Saadat, 2016). The actual term 'organizational learning' originates from the business management literature (Lalani, Bussu & Marshall, 2020). Easterby-Smith and Lyles (2011) stated that based on their research, Richard M. Cyert and James G. March were the first authors to reference organizational learning in their book "A Behavioral Theory of the Firm" in 1963. Same authors stated that the concept of organizational learning was first used in a publication title in 1965 by Vincent E. Cangelosi and William R. Dill. Since organizational learning is such a multidisciplinary topic and many scholars from different fields have done research about it, there are also multiple different definitions. Many times, organizational learning is understood to be learning from the mistakes done in the past (Cook & Yanow, 1993). This is partly true, but it's sure isn't the whole truth. All organizations will make mistakes which it can learn, but in organizational learning the organization can also learn how to for example manage upcoming threats and how to manage its actions better. Cook and Yanow (1993) also state that organizational learning doesn't necessarily imply change, but in fact an organization can learn something in order not to change: this can mean for example the situation of an organization to learn which of their actions are helping them to succeed. Organizational learning can be an excellent management tool to see the strong and weak points in the organization's actions: what works and shouldn't be changed and what should be changed and developed.

Even though it's said that organizational learning origins from the business field, it has expanded to many other fields as well, and there is a lot of existing literature from multiple viewpoints. The field of organizational learning overlaps with many research areas like knowledge management, change management and adaptation (Ferincz, 2016). Because it is so expanded, there is also a little lack of agreement on for example the definition of the concept since it has become such a multidisciplinary topic. Previous research has been done for example in the fields of sociology, psychology, management, and industrial economy. (Saadat & Saadat, 2016.)

2.1 Evolution of organizational learning

There are many reasons why the meaning of organizational learning started to change and grow. Nowadays organizational learning is becoming more and more important, and many organizations are willing to change their behaviour when facing the challenges of the future. Before the 1970's, the topic didn't get much attention (Saadat & Saadat, 2016). Gherardi (2001) claims that the growth in the field started after 1980's due to three external factors, which were 1. the speed of technological change, 2. the advance of globalization and 3. the growing corporate competition. Antunes and Pinhero (2020) claimed that organizational learning had its development in the field of business sciences and that it became an important research topic in that field in the 1990's.

The importance of education, learning and performance in relation to organizations efficiency and competitiveness was noted quite late, in the fold point of 1980's and 1990's, and this was the era when organizational learning was really started to use to develop company's strategies (Heiskanen, 2008). When comparing the world of 1980's, when the interest towards the concept started to grow, and today's world in 2021, the number of changes is massive: the technological revolution, globalization, consumption habits and environmental crisis to mention a few. It can be only guessed what will happen in the upcoming 40 years. In the constantly developing world organizations have to understand the strong and weak points in their operations and to be ready to develop them and also learn from their mistakes. In order to counter the global changes, the structures of organizations have to change, and they also need to have the needed tools to survive in the changing world. Generally speaking, the competitive value of learning and knowledge has grown, and the common assumption is that learning in organizations is the main source of future competitive advantage. (Ferincz, 2016).

In the current organization life things like knowledge management, learning and constant development have raised interest, and Schwandt and Marquardt (1999, p. 10) even claimed that knowledge has become more important for organizations than financial resources, market position, technology, or any other company asset. They state that in order to provide quality services, the need of new knowledge is the prior thing. Also, Liburd and Edwards (2010, p. 226) argued that without knowledge, in their case in sustainable tourism development, tourism will continue to leave negative marks on different parts of the environment, but with ongoing

knowledge acquisition they have the chance to improve their actions constantly, and also improve the whole industry. It has been noted that it's not enough to only modify or recreate the organization strategy, but the organization or its culture must change too (Ferincz, 2016). So, it's about having the knowledge, but also about the management of the knowledge and the development of the knowledge that can help the organizations to constantly learn and grow. Schwandt and Marquardt (1999) were discussing that the enormous changes in the economic environment caused by for example the globalization and technology have obligated organizations globally to make transformations in order to adapt, survive and succeed in the new world. And in the framework of organizational learning, they claim that change doesn't only mean external elements of the organization, like products, activities, and structures, but the internal ways of operating so the values, mindsets, and the organizations' primary purpose.

Ferincz (2016) talked about the challenges of organizational learning referring to the fact that many organizations only focus on the environmental challenges and future trends and challenges, even though there can be other aspects and learning opportunities. He thinks that in organizational learning, the possibilities are so wide and that they should be extended to 1) challenges inside the organization and not just external things, 2) questioning earlier adaptation processes done inside the organization and 3) evaluate the management previous organizational adaptation processes. This thought clears up the difficult and versatile nature of organizational learning: it's so multi-level, and even defining the concept is quite challenging. Ferincz (2016) made his own definition of organizational learning, which brings up many of the argued elements of the learning process, the participants, and the levels it should consider:

Organizational learning is an organizational ability and process of change in cognition and behaviour, using both single-loop and double-loop processes. It is based on the organizational members' (individual) learning and individual and organizational level learning are in interaction. It includes interpreting and reevaluating past experiences and actions, understanding current organizational performance and environmental factors, and generating new knowledge to grow and survive in the future. Organizational learning is therefore a process of adaptation to internal and external challenges.

As said, in the fast-developing world we are now living the organizations have to constantly develop and critically manage their actions in order to survive in the competition. Heiskanen (2008) states that organizations which are flexible to the changing environment, and which

constantly renew themselves by the new demand of customers are the ones which will be successful in the future. Schwandt and Marquardt (1999, pp. 2) described that organizations must learn faster and adapt to the changes in the environment, or they simply will not survive. They also stated that within the next decade only learning organizations will survive. Even though an organization is successful now and their operations work well, it doesn't mean that the same actions will work forever. It's important to be aware of possible threats, challenges and changes that might come up in the future and be ready to respond to them. This is a problem that many companies might have: they are not ready to change the way they are operating, and the learning doesn't happen at all or it's not at the level other companies have it. The organizations must develop constantly and be conscious all the time. Naudé (2012) brought up the concept of the Titanic syndrome. With the Titanic syndrome he refers to a situation where managers don't believe that their particular Titanic is sinkable in any situation, and they don't see any need for actions to fix ongoing problems. They also don't see the need to slow down their operations or to change their ways of doing things even though the risks are clearly visible. Naudé refers that this is a problem which is still visible in many organizations.

Organizational learning is the key to this development process. The competition in many fields is tough, and Heiskanen (2008) argued that the only clear competitive advantage in the changing world is that the organization will learn faster than its competitors. In this scenario it's not enough for one person to learn for the whole organization, but the entire team has to be in it. Like mentioned by both Saadat and Saadat (2016) and Odor (2018), organizational learning is one of the key elements when growing the organizations' competitiveness, and that it's important to notice that many companies tend to fail in this since they completely stop the learning process after some goals are met. To fully meet the goals of organizational learning, it has to become a permanent element of the organization's strategy. Antunes and Pinheiro (2020) also agreed on this when stating that the learning must be guided and integrated into the systems, practices, and structures of the organization, and to make the possible changes or development tasks, they must be shared among the whole organization. Odor (2018) mentions that if an organization aims to develop, learning should become a part of the organization and its philosophy as one of the core values and part of the organizational culture. Crossan, Lane and White (1999) also agreed that organizational learning can be thought to be the principal mean of achieving the strategic renewal of an organization. The learning in organizational learning is understood as the learning done by the whole organization, and not just individuals inside it (Cook & Yanow, 1993). In this kind of learning it is important that the whole team is

involved in the process, because if the changes are wanted to become a permanent part of the organizational life, it means that the learning happens in all levels of the organization, and not just for example among the managers.

Perhaps the biggest critic towards organizational learning is the question that can organizations as whole even learn. Many scholars have been discussing that is organizational learning after all about the individuals inside the organization learning and is it really possible to separate these two situations. Fiol and Lyles (1985) claimed that even though individual learning is important in organizations, organizational learning is not the sum of individual member's learning. Cramer (2005) explains that authors are divided by their opinion whether all forms of learning are organizational learning, or just those forms of learning which will lead to new knowledge and renewal of the organization. Cook and Yanow (1993) have tried to tackle this by explaining that individuals in the organizations were not born with the ability to perform certain parts of their activities, and also the organization hasn't always been possessed with the same abilities. So yes, the individuals in the organization are learning but the learning still happens through the organization and helps the whole organization. Cook and Yanow (1993) also stated that organizational learning describes a category of activity that can only be done by a group, and the same effect couldn't really be done by an individual.

Roder (2019) argued that there are four different types of learning in an organization: individual, group, organizational and interorganizational. Learning obviously happens in an individual level, but in order to maximize the benefits of it to the organization, the new skills and knowledge must be shared with the whole organizations, or otherwise there will be a situation that the skills and knowledge will leave the organization with the person. Like the saying goes, sharing is caring, and this also goes with organizational learning: there must be a way to share the knowledge to make the learning of the individual to a learning of the organization.

2.2 Organizational learning in tourism

As mentioned earlier, the tourism industry is very vulnerable for many current issues happening in the world right now. Still tourism is one of the biggest and faster growing industries in the world, and people's desire to travel hasn't decreased, but on the contrary it has been estimated that tourism will grow even more, and in order to keep the industry going, critical changes have to be made. All the mentioned threats and changes are integral reasons for organizations to start

learning and managing their actions in order to develop themselves but also develop the whole industry. Like discussed in the first chapter, organizational learning is done inside an organization to improve it through new knowledge and understanding, and the threats and challenges of the tourism industry can be applied to this well. The more understanding organizations have about their core values and ways of working towards their goals, the more probable it will be that they will survive in the huge competition inside the industry. Beesley (2015) states that organizational learning in tourism has been mainly used to destination management and collaborative visioning projects in the recent times. Also based on a review of the previous literature the studies of organizational learning in tourism have been focusing on either tourism research, specific tourism organizations like hotels, destination level learning or bigger tourism organizations, but there is a lack of research from the side of small and medium tourism enterprises.

Binder (2019) reviewed existing literature on organizational learning through networking activities in tourism and hospitality research. The review found in total 58 published tourism and hospitality or service industry-oriented journals. Study reveals that more than half of the papers had a specific industry focus, but 39 % were from diverse branches, where mostly common were accommodation, catering, attractions, travel and visitor services and transport. Like mentioned earlier, tourism industry is a very complex one and in many cases tourism and hospitality organizations depend on other organizations and partners, and Binder (2019) also made a notion on this topic that many of the organizational learning studies were focusing on tourism networks. Schianetz et. al (2007) were also reaching the topic from this viewpoint when researching the collective learning process in tourism destinations. They introduced the concept or Learning Tourism Destination (LTD) and stated that in order to advance sustainability in the tourism industry, stakeholders need collaboration and learning on an organization level, but also on a destination and regional level. When thinking of tourism as a phenomenon and the ongoing challenges and crisis it is facing, it's true that the change is hard to implement on individual organizations level, but that the whole industry should start working towards the development. Schianetz et al. (2007) suggested that in order to ensure sustainable development issues in the tourism industry are incorporated, the learning must happen also on a destination and/or regional level. Sustainability issues in the case of tourism and on a big level like the whole destination or region can be hard to identify and isolate, since the industry is so complex in all levels, and involves many stakeholders. In their research Schianetz et al. also described that the goal is no longer on achieving sustainably tourism destinations, but to create

organizations within the destination which can adapt to change and can learn how to improve sustainability continuously. Halme (2001) again approached the same issue stating that a network approach to sustainability is highly necessary in the tourism industry, where a number of small actors can't pursue sustainable development in isolation, but the need for cooperation with other organization and the destination managers are needed as well. When the goal of today's tourism industry is to be as sustainable as possible, it's not enough for individual organizations to work towards more sustainable industry, but the key is that the sustainability values would be in the core of every tourism organization.

The increase of competitive advantage has been noted in most of the earlier studies. Fu (2017) was researching organizational learning and its necessity in the research about tourist hotels. Like discussed earlier about the increase of competitiveness through organizational learning, Fu (2017) also found out that hotels with high organizational learning would create a higher knowledge. The research requested three different topics for the hotels to think in order to improve learning within the organization. First of all, the hotels should encourage their employees to continuous learning for example by strengthening education and training and information circulations and discussions among different departments. This would create a learning climate in the organization and would improve the understanding of different issues. Second, the hotels should rapidly understand and cope with current environmental changes and improve products and services by learning and understanding about customers' needs. Lastly, the research suggests that unlike usually, employees facing challenges or problems should be able to discuss about them with the supervisors rather than only listening to orders. This will create a common learning environment for every member of the organization. Oregio and Wainaina (2019) were also researching the link between strategic organizational learning capability and firm performance. They found out that knowledge transfer and all dimensions of strategic organizational learning had a positive and significant influence on organizations performance. They stated that appropriate organizational learning capabilities will deliver competitive edge and also increase the execution of the organization's goals.

Binder (2019) suggested that learning happens more often in the bigger companies since the smaller ones might have more unplanned and unstructured ways of working. This gap in the research shows the need for more attention to smaller companies, since the possibility to organizational learning does not depend on the size of the organization, and every organization despite the size is able to learn, develop and manage its actions. Binder (2019) also agreed on

this by stating that many countries and destinations with tourism industry depend highly on small and medium size tourism enterprises, there is a need for more theorizing and empirical evidence about collaborative learning in smaller organizations, and how their competitive and innovative power could be improved. Khoshkhoo and Nadalipour (2016) made the same notion on the lack of research about small and medium size enterprises (SME) in tourism industry. They investigated the competition impacts on small and medium size tourism enterprises in terms of organizational learning and stated that since tourist destinations are dominated by SME's, they have major impacts on the quality of the whole industry in destination level.

Since there is a lack of research in this side, Khoshkhoo and Nadalipour (2016) offer interesting findings for example on how smaller organizations the culture and atmosphere usually can be friendlier and more approachable than in bigger organizations, so the interaction, feedback, learning, and communication were very clear and easy. They also noted that the managers were closer to the employees and could easily give them opportunities to learn, though such learning and also training opportunities were limited to the primary principles of work and often the process of learning was not that continuous and updated. These findings though give an interesting perspective to the differences of learning among bigger and smaller organizations, since the atmosphere in the two can be very different and smaller organizations often have more open and closer relationship between managers and employees. Another study with micro, small and medium size enterprises was done by Sampe and Limpo (2019) about the relationship between organizational learning and financial performance of tourism services. They noted that organizational learning practices of for example building trust among employees, helping them to think comprehensively and maintain an up-to-date database of employee skills were in positive relationship to sales, general successful of the organization as well as employee and customer happiness.

2.3 Organizational learning and sustainability

UNWTO defines sustainability as the combination of environmental, economic, and socio-cultural aspects, and in order to achieve and guarantee a long-term effect, a suitable balance between these three parts must be established. In organizational life sustainability is understood as the ability to maintain and demonstrate a positive economic, environmental, and social performance with long-term results (Seow, Hillary & Jamali, 2006). Yusoff et. al (2019) join to this definition by stating that business can be said to be sustainable when organization is

capable of balancing between economic and social aspects without causing negative effects to the environment through their business operations. As mentioned earlier by for example Binder (2019) and Khoshkhoo and Nadalipour (2016), organizational learning as a concept often happens more in bigger companies, and also there is a rather low amount of research done by organizational learning itself from small companies, there is especially lack of research from organizational learning in tourism from the sustainability point-of-view. As Khoshkhoo and Nadalipour (2016) stated, tourism destinations are dominated by the small and medium size organizations, so there is a need to understand the relationship of organizational learning and sustainability from their perspective as well.

Seow et. al. (2006) noticed that starting from the 90's there was a witnessed new shift in paradigms by a growing appreciation towards the need for higher environmental and sustainability management. Sustainable development and management have become an integral part of business life and organizations values, and Siebenhüner and Arnold (2007) claim that organizational learning is the key to embed sustainability in companies. Naudé (2012) defines that sustainable development in the organizational life is not about maintaining the status quo but to continuously develop within the changing environment. Same author also describes that in the balancing process this might require the organization to do a change from the aim for maximization profitability and from the mindset of doing things better into maximization of meaning and value and doing better things. Kiesnere and Baumgartner (2019) were stating that instead of correcting the outcomes of actions of unsustainable matters companies should start focusing on tackling the sources of unsustainability. Seow et. al (2006) discussed that even though the growing consensus of CSR in an international level, organizations are having problems with the lack of proper sustainability management framework that would address, balance, and integrate all the three dimensions. In the process of increasing and managing sustainability, organizational learning becomes an integral tool.

As sustainability is becoming more and more important in the organizational and business life, there has started to be seen a worldwide shift towards sustainable development and safer environmental practices in all global industries. When talking about CSR, it has been learned that companies are not responsible of their actions to just to the owners, but to a group of wider key stakeholders (Seow et. al, 2006). Organizations have started to notice the potential in knowledge assets to produce value to the organizations, and there has also been an increase on how to use natural resources in a way that it increases the value and quantity over time (Paquette

& Wiseman, 2006). It could be said that in today's world sustainability is not an option anymore but a self-evident which is reflected to all the different parts, and Naudé (2012) also recognized that today's organizations understand the dangers of not adopting sustainable development into their organization. Yusoff et. al (2019) even claim that many organizations are forced to reconfigure their business processes because the competitive environment is so strong. When an organization is aiming for the transition towards sustainability, the organizational culture often has to change in the form of values, norms, attitudes, and strategies (Dicle & Köse, 2014). There is an inevitable meaning of competitiveness when it comes to sustainability, since when it's highly valued by the external environment of the organization, the ones doing actions to increase and value sustainability will be the ones which are appreciated in the competition. Dekoulou and Trivellas (2014) also argued that the fundamental source of sustainable competitiveness in the 21st century is the capacity to generate and integrate new knowledge and to transform the organization into a learning organization.

Naudé (2012) states that there are clear links between sustainable development and organizational learning, and that if an organization wants to be sustainable, it has to constantly be able to find balance between economic, social, and environmental dimensions. Paquette and Wiseman (2006) also discussed that when an organization wants to success in the arena of sustainability, they must recognize that their activities are straight linked to the primary challenges of sustainability, and they also have to view sustainable development as a benefit to the organization rather than an encumbrance. Both sustainability development and organizational learning are dominated by the same nature of continuum: sustainability issues are not disappearing, but vice versa the meaning increases all the time so also the actions done for it must be done constantly, and also the learning of an organization is a continuous process like Odor (2018) was stating. Continuous learning is one of the most critical parts when implementing sustainability in the organizations' actions, and the importance of understanding how to continuously learn about sustainability comes critical when companies are engaging in sustainable business practices (Siebenhüner & Arnold, 2007).

As sustainability and organizational learning have a lot in common, understanding the link between the concepts is crucial when trying to understand how organizations can benefit from organizational learning in their journey towards a sustainable organization (Dicle & Köse, 2014). Naudé (2012) discussed that since organizations don't operate in a vacuum but are all the time in contact with the environment surrounding them, it's important to understand the

effect they have for the surrounding environment. As sustainability is a very complex topic, and often organizations have at least some networks or partnerships with other organizations, it can be difficult to make common sustainability goals that suit for everyone. Like Naudé (2012) also stated, sustainability in organizations is always influenced with internal and external stakeholders, they have different beliefs, needs and values, so the challenge lies often in the combination process. The need and want for sustainability should come from the inside of the organization, but for example Kiesnere and Baumgartner (2019) found in their research that investors and media and public were the main promoting stakeholders for sustainability implementation. This shows that also the outside pressure is having an integral part in the starting process for companies to become more sustainable.

Naudé (2012) defined a list of practical actions and guidelines to help organizations to integrate sustainability into their operations. First, the leaders and managers of the organization have to develop a commonly agreed interpretation for their sustainability development goals together with internal stakeholders, so the employees, and external stakeholders, so for example community members and policy makers. Second, always when talking about sustainability, it's important to take the triple-bottom-lined sustainability into consideration, so that the three different dimensions (economic, social, and environmental) are equally valued and managed in all actions. Third notion concerns the measurement and evaluation process regarding sustainable development. Individuals and organizations should be able to examine the causes of mistakes, make the right actions to improve and correct the errors and learn a lesson from them. Fourth part that is good to bring up from the guidelines is the need for training. Training in sustainability should be either a new, standalone activity or then to be added into already existing training programs. The last part highlights the notion that in order to get real effects out of sustainability development and organizational learning, both parts have to be integrated into the organizations core business plan and corporate structure, and basically in every level of the company. The leaders are also in big part in the process, and they have to critically question and analyse their current strategies and practices, and also be open to new ideas and ways of operating.

As seen, sustainability and organizational learning can work hand-in-hand, since both concepts require overviewing the organizations' current values, manners, and practices, and in most cases some parts are seen as development points. Also, both sustainability development and management and organizational learning are continuous processes, and it's not enough just to

do a few improvements, but the situation enquires continuous development, evaluation, and also open-minded worldview. Seow et. al (2006) state that a sustainable organization is continuously ready to renew their processes and products and adapting new ways of action in necessary ways. In sustainability openness is the key, and Seow et. al (2006) also claimed that openness to change is the basic ingredient in the triple bottom-line integration transition to sustainability.

Since sustainability is such a wide topic and can be applied to all organizations despite the field, there can obviously be differences in how different organizations work and what kind of sustainability actions they are implementing into their operations. As the interest towards sustainability is still rather new, even though at today's organizational world it's almost required to have a sustainability management program, companies overall can be in very different stages in the implementing process. Seow et. al. (2006) discussed that in research about organizational learning and sustainability it has been said that it's quite challenging to draw comparisons between different companies since the stages of maturity and learning on sustainability can be in very different stages. Although the framework of sustainability is quite clear, and it's known that in order for an organization to be sustainable they have thought about the three different dimensions, every company is different and same actions might not apply for everyone. Seow et. al (2006) argued that each organization have to find their own solutions and come up with their own development and management plans, and not straight borrow them from others. Same authors also identified that some organizations perhaps don't have to take any radical steps or create huge brand-new systems, but the goal is to recognize each company's already existing strengths and re-shape the current strategies. Kiesnere and Baumgartner (2019) again stated that in some cases the organization is not able to contribute their sustainable development without changing the underlying business logic, so it really differs from company to company.

3 SUSTAINABILITY IN TOURISM

Stoddard et. al (2012) state that sustainable tourism refers to tourism activities with long-term results that benefit the three different dimensions: ecological, economic, and socio-cultural. UNWTO defines that in the environmental level the main goal is to optimally use environmental resources, maintain essential ecological processes and conserve biodiversity and natural heritage. In economic level sustainable tourism aims for viable, long-term economic operations by providing benefits to different stakeholders and for example stable employment, social services to host communities and contribution to poverty alleviation are taken into consideration. In socio-cultural level sustainable tourism is respecting the authenticity of host communities and aims to conserve built and living cultural heritage and traditional values. Costa, Rodrigues, and Gomes (2019) described that sustainable tourism aims to meet the needs of both the tourist and the host regions and at the same time protects and increases opportunities for the future. They also explained that while often an industry destroys to produce, tourism has to do the opposite so to preserve to produce, since if the elements of environment, economic and people are destroyed, there can't be tourism. Aall (2014) stated that the relationship between tourism and sustainable development could be thought in a way that tourism has a critical role on promoting sustainable development that goes beyond only decreasing the environmental impacts.

Previously sustainable tourism was conceptualized to be an elite form of tourism (Berno & Bricker, 2001), so seen as a separate type of tourism instead of a comprehensive concept that should cover all types of tourism. Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 2020) also stated that sustainable tourism shouldn't be considered as only as special form of tourism, but all forms of tourism should be strived to be more sustainable. There are many similar concepts to sustainable tourism, for example eco-tourism, cultural tourism, green tourism, and nature-based tourism (Aall, 2014). Sustainable tourism could be kept as an umbrella term of all of these, since all the other concepts are mainly focusing on one level of the sustainability aspect, for example the environment or socio-cultural level, but sustainable tourism again includes all of them. Stoddard et al. (2012) also supports the use of sustainable tourism as an umbrella concept and pointing terms like eco-tourism, geo-tourism and heritage and culture tourism to be the sub-concepts. Turunen (2010) discussed about the use of eco-

tourism, responsibility, environmental consciousness, and fair tourism, and claims that in the basis they all similar but are emphasizing slightly different topics.

The definition and notion of the term has changed a lot during the years as well. The term 'sustainable tourism' began to be used only in 1980's, but at that time it was more common to talk about 'green issues' or 'green tourism'. (Swarbrooke, 1999, pp. 9.) Also, Liburd (2010, pp. 5) noted that initially the focus was on ecotourism, and the concept of sustainable development started to gain more attention quite slowly in tourism research. Only in the early 1990's sustainable tourism started to become more commonly used. (Swarbrooke, 1999, pp. 9.) Nowadays sustainable tourism is one of the key elements of the tourism industry. It's one of the core values and perhaps the biggest focus point when thinking about tourism development around the world. Also, responsible tourism is often thought as same as sustainable tourism, but there is also a slight difference between these two terms. Sustainable tourism refers to tourism with long-term goals, and responsible tourism refers to a process where for example tourists, companies and other stakeholders take the concrete actions for working towards sustainability (García-Rosell, 2017). Both terms include the three dimensions, but sustainable tourism is more concerned with tackling big, global issues like the climate change, where again responsible tourism focuses on individual actions and destinations. When talking about sustainable tourism, often the goal is to preserve destinations for future generations, but responsible tourism takes into consideration the present and increases the possibilities for the people live in the time to get advantages of tourism rather than being used by it.

3.1 The history of sustainable tourism

Sustainable tourism has a long history, and its roots go all the way to the 1950-1960's when the popularity of mass tourism started to rise. Many negative impacts of tourism were recognized, and many initiatives with the aim to develop tourism towards more sustainable industry were taken by different public sector bodies. (Swarbrooke 1999,9.) In the beginning, sustainable tourism was seen as a new form of tourism practiced by small companies and entrepreneurs, who were aiming for community conservation and protection of the local culture. The discussion around the need for sustainability in tourism didn't get the best reception in the beginning, and the concept was in fact very debated and received hostility from the tourism industry itself, since it was growing extremely fast and all of the sudden there was a concept

which was putting limits to the growth of the field. Sustainable tourism was seen as the ivory tower and totally unrelated to the real market situation. When international tourism continued its growth, it became obvious that the range of negative impacts was bigger than expected, and afterwards sustainable development became a focus for tourism as a development tool. (Berno & Bricker, 2001.) Sustainable tourism has been on a steady rise, excluding some decreases caused by for example terrorism and SARS-epidemic in the early 2000's (Turunen, 2010). After the second half of the 20th century mass tourism started to show significant expansion, and afterwards also the negative impacts of tourism started to rise. Mass tourism again brought another problem, over tourism, which has caused a lot of problems to the locals of the tourism destinations. (Costa et. al, 2019.)

There are some severe reasons why sustainability issues weren't taken as serious as they were supposed to. Berno and Bricker (2001) describe that international tourism was first seen as clean and renewable industry, since it was using free resources like the sun, sea and people. When compared to other industries like manufacturing, mining, and forestry, it was seen differently, and the negative impacts were not noticed for a long time. They also state that mainly the large potential of tourism was seen, meaning for example the benefits to the economy in least developed countries and the possibilities for new jobs. Because of all the multiple benefits and positive impacts, the negative sides were left outside and were not noticed or thought that highly. By the beginning of the 70's, it was finally noticed that tourism as the 'smokeless industry' was not that smokeless after all. The problem was also that since sustainable tourism is often seen as an individual type of tourism, the polarization of sustainable tourism away from the mass tourism doesn't show the full potential of sustainable tourism development. (Berno & Bricker, 2001.)

The first conference focusing purely on environmental questions was organized in Stockholm in 1972. 15 years later in 1987 a report called "Our Common Future" by Brundtland Commission brought up for the first time the social and economic needs of people in addition to the environmental problems. The report wasn't really concerning tourism, but the principles that were brought up in the report, for example poverty alleviation, connection between economic growth and unsustainable development and minimizing the negative impacts of urbanization could be suited up for tourism as well. (Turunen, 2010.) The first actions to improve the negative impacts were series of initiatives by the public sector parties with the aim to manage tourism throughout different visitor management techniques, and the goal of these

was to improve the worst impacts in the short-term (Berno & Bricker, 2001). Already in 1998 for example the experts in Venice suggested that the city can't handle more than 25 000 tourists per day, and at the high season in 2017 the number of tourists was closer to 70 000. Because of the noted impacts the tourism industry has been required to have a higher responsibility when it comes to sustainability issues. Over-tourism has a lot of negative impacts to the tourism destinations and to its locals, like raise of prices and destruction of local infrastructure, but it also harms the travellers and the tourist experience. (Costa et. al, 2019.) Even though the negative impacts of tourism were noticed that early, there wasn't that much interest towards the topic of sustainable tourism, unlike today. As the popularity of tourism grew, obviously also the negative impacts started to grow, but the width and complexity of the environmental problems of tourism was admitted only decades later. Swarbrooke described in 1999 that at that time the interest towards sustainable tourism among tourists wasn't big, and for example boycotts towards air traffic or other economically unfriendly ways of travelling were not happening. Fast forward to 2021 when sustainability issues are in the core of the whole tourism industry, and each tourism organization has or at least should have sustainability development and management as a highly concentrated focus in their actions. Turunen (2010) states that there is no point on wondering whether individual travelling is a more sustainable option compared to mass tourism, but the aim should be in the thought of developing all forms of tourism to follow the principles of sustainable tourism. Berno and Bricker (2001) claimed that by their nature no single type of tourism is naturally more sustainable than others. With individual arrangements sustainable tourism cannot be achieved, but the main point is to take responsibility of the environment and the people in all levels and areas of tourism (Turunen, 2010).

Berno and Bricker (2001) discussed that as the tourism industry is often driven by the mindset of getting immediate economic return, it is in direct conflict with the need for social and environmental resources protection. They explain that with this mindset the tourism industry is actually destroying its own products it seeks to promote, and this is why sustainability is a very elusive concept to implement, and it's hard to be integrated into the industry. An example could be that many tourism activities happen in the nature, and of course the possibilities the nature has to offer are wanted to utilize as much as possible to get the best benefit out of it. When the resources are overused, they are destroyed and then the whole activity cannot be implemented anymore, so with their own greed and perhaps bad planning they can ruin the site which is an integral part of their operation.

3.2 Challenges of sustainable tourism

Like stated earlier, the whole tourism industry is facing serious challenges and changes, and the current ways of operations without sustainability actions are not enough anymore. Budeanu (2005) claims that tourism needs immediate actions in the levels of strategy, development plans and governance and organizations if the risk of “too much tourism killing tourism” is to be prevented. Sustainability in tourism has changed from being just a concept and a form of tourism to a key part in the industry, and sustainability actions are nowadays ruling the whole tourism sector. In best case scenario strategic and well-planned tourism development can raise awareness of cultural and environmental values of travel destination, help with financial problems and management of protected areas and increase the locals (OECD, 2020). Seraphin and Gowreesunkar (2021) were studying the problems of achieving sustainable development goals, and it was found out that the main problem is the lack of frameworks and common rules in the sustainability work. The need for common guidelines and tools is world-wide, and Seraphin and Gowreesunkar (2021) also brought up that when sustainable development becomes a shares responsibility, and will clearly be in the core of decision-making, the sustainability goals of individual operators can be significantly strengthened. One of the current challenges of sustainability in tourism is the assessment of the work, which is noted to be difficult because of for example the number of stakeholders involved in in many tourism processes. Sustainability cannot be viewed only from the destination level, but a comprehensive multi-stakeholder approaches are highly needed in order to enable different tourism organizations to engage with their stakeholders. (García-Rosell & Mäkinen, 2012.)

The road to sustainability is not easy, and there are still many challenges. OECD (2020) stated that in order to truly achieve sustainable outcomes, it requires genuine commitment and integrated approach from a whole industry. One of the big themes in sustainability is that even though environmental problems especially in tourism are very important to be managed, it is as important to protect the local population and their rights and make sure that the benefits from tourism actually stay in the destination. Stoddard et. al (2012) claimed that several tourism companies are engaged to the environment for example through ecotourism or cultural tourism, but fewer are seen to be engaged from the viewpoint of the societal perspective. It's important to remember that all three parts of sustainability should be equally taken into consideration.

Sustainable development makes sure that a company or a destination will have a long and profitable lifespan, which again will improve its competitive advantage. Tourism companies who take responsibility of their actions and want to develop the sector will be noticed, and this way will also get more customers and more importantly more committed customers. (Turunen, 2010.) Moscardo and Murphy (2014) brought up that even though sustainability in tourism has been growing a lot during the past years, the fundamental problem of balancing the competing pressures and impacts associated with tourism still remain the same. Sustainable tourism has been getting academic attention for over 30 years, but it seems that there is still a lot to improve, and little has been changing in the practice in many organizations. Each aspects of sustainability in tourism have their own challenges. In the economical side tourism often bring a lot of income to tourism organizations and whole destination, and also increases the number of jobs. But quite often these jobs are seasonal, low-waged and for example medical benefits and future employment cannot be quarantined. (Budeanu, 2005.) Environmental issues are clear, since for example air traffic causes a lot of pollution and over-tourism can ruin natural sights and other parts of the travel destination. From the socio-cultural side tourism can also exclude the local population and be harmful for the local businesses if they are not considered enough. These issues still occur, and it's not enough just to talk about them but to really work to improve them.

Since the benefit and competitive advantage of sustainability in tourism is noted, it unfortunately also causes some misuse of the concept. Many tourism organizations can claim themselves being sustainable and having sustainability as their one of their core values, but for some it's only done because of the marketing benefits and competitive advantage. When used for the right purpose, sustainability in tourism organizations can bring cost savings, improve stakeholder relations, and bring benefits to the wider community in addition to the improved marketing positions, but if companies are only doing it for the marketing purposes, they will not ever get all the possible benefits. (Stoddard et. al, 2012.) Nowadays there are many labels and certificates which help organizations who are actually working towards sustainability, since the labels and certificates are often highly measured and evaluated yearly, so it's not possible to work against the principles. Turunen (2010) described that even though a sustainability label can bring positive image to an organization, it cannot be used only for getting economic benefits. She states that the most reliable labels are certified and issued by an outside source.

The main aim of sustainability in tourism is ensuring the positive long-term impacts and not the immediate profitability, but as the market pressure and new consciousness of consumers are

causing a lot of competition in the field, many organizations fail on delivering the real purposes of sustainability development. There are still many managers who only take sustainability actions as a part of their operations to get the economic benefits without even considering other options that can be much more beneficial in the long-term. (Malheiro, Sousa, Liberato & Liberato, 2020.) The real requirements of sustainability need to be fulfilled in order to get the full benefits. Willers and Kulik (2011) claim that it is not seldom when the results from the topic are considered as greenwashing reproaches. With greenwashing they are referring to the so-called creative reputation management, as Akturan (2018) described it, and with greenwashing companies are able to cover up, mask and hide their deviances. When a company is not able to fulfil its claim of being ‘green’, it can be said that the company is using greenwashing. Greenwashing has been also researched to negatively impact on consumers’ perception and behaviour, since the probability that a consumer would purchase green products, but if it’s noticed that the promise is not kept, the consumers will obviously feel fooled. (Akturan, 2018). Willers and Kulik (2011) discussed that quite often even though the sustainability approach would be implemented to the organization’s operations, the tracking of profit maximization of measured more often than for example the social help. As researched before, the use of sustainability as a company value and way of communication can have an advantage in the competition. But in order to avoid greenwashing, or even scepticism from the consumer side, the engagement and messaging has to be done in a transparent and visible way (Willers & Kulik, 2011).

3.3 Sustainability certifications in tourism

To manage and measure sustainability in tourism, different kind of certification and eco-label processes have become popular during the past years. The first ecolabel in the tourism industry is called Blue Flag, which was launched in France in 1985. The primary idea behind the concept of ecolabels was to help tourists to make informed decisions about the purchases and selection of travel destinations. After the late 20th century, the amount of tourism ecolabels and certifications has increased rapidly. (Bučar et. al, 2019.) For companies the certifications and eco-programs are helping with for example structuring the sustainability development steps and making communications and marketing more transparent, and the programs are also audited and monitored by a third party, which makes them more reliable and trustworthy (Oikarinen-Mäenpää, 2019). Since the consumer culture in tourism has changed into a way of valuing sustainability even more, there has been a huge increase in the popularity of sustainability

certifications, initiatives, and awards among tourism companies in the recent years (Hellmeister & Richins, 2019).

Font (2007, pp. 387-388) defined that tourism certifications are used for improving the performance of tourist organizations and to promote sustainable consumption, and they act as instruments desiring for market transparency. Especially for consumers sustainability certifications can be the key actors of selecting between different options, and as today's consumers are becoming more and more conscious of sustainability issues, certifications can act in a big role in the competition between companies. Previous research about sustainability certification process highly brings up the benefits from the viewpoint of marketing and market position, but there is very little researched knowledge of the other benefits certification process can bring to tourism companies, and also on the contrary from the negative sides of certification processes. Penz et. al (2017) stated that people prefer choosing a tour operator with a sustainability certification, but that they also want to be sure that the certifications are trustworthy. As there are so many variations, and as it's known some companies can use sustainability just as a way to increase their business and competitive advantage, the labels and certifications can be very confusing to consumers and it's hard to know which ones actually promote and benefit the sustainability work. Penz et. al (2017) were also discussing that the awareness and familiarity of ecolabels in tourism is generally low.

Previous studies about sustainability certifications and labels are highly focusing on improving the market positions and stating that many organizations feel like when having a sustainability certification, just that can help them be more visible in the competition. Bučar et. al (2019) stated that these certifications and ecolabels can in the best-case scenario increase local sustainable development, but they need to be standardized processed in order to be something more than just a superficial part of a marketing strategy. One of the problems of these certifications is that since there are so many different variations and each certification can have their own requirements and ways of acting, it's almost impossible to know if these certificates actually improve the actions towards sustainability or are they only for marketing purposes. Font (2007, pp. 387-402) was also agreeing with this by stating that the key challenge in the tourism certification is that even though a company would have some kind of a label, it doesn't necessarily mean that their products would be higher quality than their competitors. From the available information consumers cannot know whether one certificate is better than another one. In the best-case scenario certificates can act as a management tool in the sustainability

journey, and they require constant work and development done in order to keep the certification active. As mentioned earlier, greenwashing is a problem when talking about sustainability, and also Font (2002) was discussing that in the promotion of sustainable tourism as quality products, there is a lack of methods to ensure that greenwashing is not happening. He also stated that the amount of different sustainability programs and labels have led to the problem and customers can even ignore these so-called green messages, since the confusion of what to believe is getting overwhelming. As each process can have their own limitations, it's hard to separate the successful and trustworthy programs from the unreliable ones, and as Font (2002) was discussing, there are no common regulations to limit how a company can call themselves sustainable, green, or eco-friendly. As a natural benefit of the process, it's clear that in today's tourism field sustainability is an important factor and organizations acting sustainably usually have a better chance of surviving and stand out from others, so a better position in the market is a benefit from the process. Font and Epler Wood (2007) stated that a certification of responsible practices can help companies to distinguish their approach and can give a unique position in the market, and that in general certificated products have a better competitive advantage.

Even though certifications in general are seen as a positive thing, the problem of reliability is perhaps the biggest one that occurs, but there are also big differences in the opinions and views of importance between large and small companies. For example, the costs of the certification process can be very high for a small operator, and also the lack of resources effects on the decision of either participating on the certification process or not. The research from Visit Finland (2018) shows that especially small tourism companies felt like the limited resources of finance and staff were one of the reasons why certification processes were not done, and that the process requires a lot of money and time. Research from Bacari et. al (2021) also brought up the viewpoint from small accommodation companies, and it showed that the certification processes for smaller companies were seen as tedious and time-consuming, and definitely not as a priority. The companies participating in the study were uncertain about the benefits that a sustainability certification could bring to the sustainability operations of their business. Even though of these challenges, the research from Visit Finland (2018) showed that the respondents were discussing that having a certificate gives benefits and helps especially in the foreign market. It was discussed that having a sustainability certification can bring a more positive image of the company and help for example in transparent marketing and communication work.

Certificates were also seen as a help or guideline in the everyday working and training of the staff.

4 SUSTAINABILITY IN SMALL TOURISM ORGANIZATIONS

Small and medium size enterprises play an integral role in the global market, but research focus of the benefits and impacts sustainability management and CSR have been in many cases on corporation levels or bigger tourism organizations (Zou, Liu, Ahmad, Sial, Badulescu, Zia-Ud-Din, & Badulescu, 2021). Loucks, Martens and Cho (2010) stated that since small organizations have different resources and profiles than larger firms, it has to be recognized and realized that the support these small organizations need in the sustainability management issues has to be done in different ways. It has been noted that small tourism organization have the tendency for ‘‘silent sustainability’’ or ‘‘sunken corporate social responsibility’’ (García-Rosell, 2013; Perrini, 2006; Perrini, Russo & Tencati, 2007), meaning the involvement to environmental and socially responsible actions done sub-consciously and as a natural part of the operations. Font, Garay and Jones (2016) showed that also the sustainability activities differ between small and big organizations in multiple ways. For example, with the case of small companies, sustainability doesn’t necessarily have a direct relationship with financial performances, which often can be the case with larger companies. Sustainability for smaller organizations has to do with personal values and is a part of their routines and gives a different kind of satisfaction. Bacari et. al (2021) found that in the accommodation side, small-size hotels were generally well-committed to the sustainability development goals but didn’t necessarily realize the real importance of brand-management, and the work was also focusing more on short-term business strategies rather than long-term effects. Then again Guden, Girgen, Saner and Yesilpinar (2021) found that in small hotels the main efforts for sustainability management are cost saving reasons, when again in many other cases the motives are in fact in marketing and improvements of the market position. It has been noted that the work of small tourism organizations in sustainability shouldn’t be ignored, but on the contrary there should be more attention paid for it, since for example Perrini (2006) was discussing how small and medium size enterprises have strong influence on the surrounding communities. Small and medium size enterprises have also said to have stronger relationships to several stakeholders and local communities than big corporations.

4.1 Main issues of sustainability in small organizations

It is interesting that even though small and medium size enterprises represent about 95% of private sectors firms in most modern nations (Schaper, 2002), and in the tourism industry small and medium size enterprises are the most common organizations and many destinations highly depend on these, still the verified sustainability actions are not that common among these companies. Zou et. al (2012) mentioned that for example lack of resources, especially financial resources, play an integral role on the constraints to CSR implementation, which can be one of the reasons why the research has been highly focusing on larger organizations, since smaller ones perhaps do not have the best premises for sustainability development. It's known that usually bigger organizations have better chances to improve their actions if it for example requires financial aspects. Hellmeister and Richins (2019) stated that since small and medium-sized enterprises in tourism are generally not that keen to invest in sustainability practices, it is hard to disseminate the sustainability practises to cover the whole industry. Oikarinen-Mäenpää (2019) again added that even though small organizations are not in some cases capable of for example communicating about their sustainability work as systematically as the large ones, it doesn't mean that they would care less about the topic. Perrini (2006) and Zou et. al (2021) have been discussing about the strong and positive influence small and medium size enterprises have for their surrounding environments. Zou et. al (2021) stated that these enterprises have a significant impact on the social side of sustainability because of a good understanding of their stakeholders, and Perrini (2006) was referring to the same topic but with stating that these are often based on informal and silent relationships. The positive impacts are often unspoken, and the accomplishments are not communicated or measured, so the visibility outside the company is rather low.

Perrini et. al (2007) discussed that even though CSR is fast becoming a mainstream issue for many organizations, it's still in some cases seen as a prerogative of large businesses only. Perrini et. al (2007) found different motivations for socially responsible behaviour, including for example public visibility, economies of scale, instruments for communicating company's values and norm inside the company and to the customers and also strengthening the competitiveness. They stated that when comparing these actions between large scale organizations and small and medium size organizations, the amount of investment of time, finances and energy is often harder to smaller companies, which is why they are not always implemented.

Based on Visit Finland's research (2018), especially small accommodation operators and activity companies, whose products are mainly based on nature environments, felt that sustainability and responsibility were the only possible ways to run their business. There has been research about the differences of sustainability and corporate social responsibility strategies between large scale and small and medium scale enterprises, and it has been noted that small and medium size organizations rarely use the so-called CSR language to describe their activities, but informal CSR strategies are still an integral part of their actions. These smaller organizations are revealing their knowledge and consciousness of sustainability actions and CSR, but they are unwilling to form specific CSR strategies and explicit management systems. (Russo & Tencati, 2009.) This is perhaps one of the biggest differences between the sustainability operations of large and small and medium size organizations: for large scale enterprises the visibility, marketing and communications of the actions play a bigger role, when again as Russo and Tencati (2009) stated, smaller companies have a more natural aptitude to behave responsibly, and it is a part of their operations even though it wouldn't be that visible. Also, in the research from Visit Finland (2018) it was stated that in small tourism organizations the themes of sustainability and responsibility are an obvious and integrated part of their everyday operations, and that they didn't have any specific sustainability programs or strategies, and also that they didn't find those necessary. Sustainability in business is often proved for example by different kind of certifications, but many of these small size companies didn't feel like they had the need for any proof of their actions, since sustainability and responsibility are a part of the organization, nevertheless. Russo & Tencati (2009) also support this notion by suggesting that especially micro firms have a very different kind of approach to CSR than larger firms, and this is shown on informal mechanisms integrated into their corporate strategies.

4.2 Sustainability strategies and behaviour in small tourism organizations

Like already mentioned earlier, the sustainability strategies vary between small and large tourism organizations. Smaller companies can be very aware and interested of the principalities and importance of sustainability but transferring these principalities into action and integrating those into the company policies is often harder for small organizations (Oikarinen-Mäenpää, 2019). The sustainability strategies are also noted to differ between small and large organizations because of the form of management, meaning the form of leadership from big

corporate level management to for example family-owned small size organizations. Russo and Tencati (2009) noted that for example the ethics and form of business are often very much related to the life of the owner-managers. This means that for smaller companies, the values of the owner's matter and influence the nature of the way of business a lot, and that if the owners themselves have a strong drive for sustainability and responsibility actions, this is often an integral part of their company as well. Then again in bigger companies these kinds of personal values of the managers or owners are not visible, and they have very specific strategies and manners which are decided and executed. It has been noted that small and medium size enterprises would have good capabilities to integrate sustainability issues as a part of their strategy, and their close relationship to the local communities and culture have a direct effect to their social capital for example with engaging locals and the business (Perrini, 2006).

Russo and Tencati (2009) discussed how larger firms have better basis to prioritize for example CSR in their agendas because of resources, specific knowledge, and competences. Also, the understood need for sustainability has been noted to differ between small and large organizations, since usually the negative impacts of larger companies have been seen as the bigger evil (Visit Finland, 2018). In order to keep the negative effects as small as possible, they need to strictly follow the strategies for sustainability, but for small organizations the impacts are not so well-thought, so also the strategies are often not implemented. Lähdesmäki (2012) agreed that as a result of the owner-managerial nature of small and medium size organizations, they are considered to operate in less formal structure and looser control systems. Bacari et. al (2021) brought up that small tourism companies, in this case hotels, would actually have better abilities to be innovative because of their flexibility and capacities to adapt. Also, the close relationships with local communities were brought up by Lähdesmäki (2021), which show that the importance of taking local norms and communities into considerations in their business behaviour is more susceptible and personal. So, in this way for example the socio-cultural side of sustainability is almost imperceptibly taken more into consideration than in the case of large companies, which are not in contact with the local community with close relationship.

Font et. al (2016) stated that a survey done for small tourism companies showed that these companies are more involved in being sustainable than it has been previously expected, including for example eco-savings but also a variation of social and economic responsibility actions. For smaller companies the so-called pro-sustainability behaviour is quite common, referring to a more voluntary-based practices for environment preservation, social equity, and

economic demands. Like mentioned earlier, they are necessarily not specified in any strategies of the company but are just an integral part of their actions. Research from Font et. al (2016) also revealed that factors like protection of the environment, improvements in society and lifestyle had a bigger importance for acting sustainably than for example cost savings and marketing benefits. Though the authors also stated that they have witnessed the main motivations to be related to economic and financial goals, but that the reasons do differ based on the importance that the owner's values have. Perrini et. al (2007) also found out that the recognition of the importance of having a responsible behaviour was more important to small and medium size enterprises, when again for large scale operations were more likely to address for example management of the environment and controlling and reporting strategies.

Sustainability issues are important no matter of the size of the organization. But showing the performed sustainability actions and proving the importance of the sustainability as a value of the company is seen to be harder for smaller tourism organizations than larger ones. Like mentioned earlier, especially resources in time and finances were found in multiple studies, and these seem to be one of the biggest issues when considering sustainability development and management possibilities in small size tourism organizations. But even though it has been found that these issues are more easily exceeded by large scale organizations, it doesn't mean that small scale tourism organizations wouldn't work in a sustainable way. Like the research from Russo and Tencati (2009) and Visit Finland (2018), small and medium size organizations are naturally acting in a more sustainable way, since they feel like it's the only possible way to do things, but with this thinking it's very much possible that these companies would have even greater possibilities to improve their sustainability management if the operations would be closely thought and planned unlike now. It is possible that even though a company feels like they are working in a sustainable way, they would still benefit from a clear sustainability strategy, and the making of the strategy could help to manage for example the noted problems of lack of resources.

5 ACTION RESEARCH

The research methodology used in this study is called action research. Action research refers to the approach of taking action and creating new knowledge about the action with a collaborative and problem-solving relationship between a researcher and a member of an organization (Coghlan, 2019). Action research was selected as the methodology for the present study because of the research aim of understanding a commonly defined, real-life problem and the desire for new knowledge creation (Bradbury-Huang, 2010). As a practical and problem-solving methodology, action research involves research, action and systematic and critical reflections made together with the researcher and the co-researchers, and the aim is to understand, evaluate and create a change (Costello, 2003, p. 5). Action research was seen as the best solution to create change and help the case study organization to learn and understand sustainability management in their operations, and both parties, the researcher, and the organization representatives as co-researchers, each were able to bring their expertise into the study. This is the integral difference of action research and traditional research: in order to solve real-life problems, the members of the community are taken as an active participants of the study rather than being just objects of the study (Coghlan, 2019). Typical to an action research, the work together with the organization representatives was stronger and the goals of the study were seen clearer to achieve with an active cooperation than what the researcher or the participants alone could achieve (McNiff & Whitehead, 2002, p. 15-16; Saaranen-Kauppinen & Puusniekka, 2006).

Like stated by García-Rosell and Hakkarainen (2019), the bottom-up approach, relating to the cooperation and inviting research participants in cooperation instead of research process being highly dependent of the expertise of the researcher (top-down approach), was highly present in action research process of this study as well. With the bottom-up approach the participants were able to define the challenges and solutions together with the researcher and had the chance to develop the knowledge and skills that could actually be used in the operations. There are many different paradigms of doing an action research, but in the present study the research was conducted with the use of active participant observation methods (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2009). The researcher had a role of an active observer working closely together with the participants when the social interactions with the participants had an important part in the data collection.

Usually, the start of an action research can be divided into two alternatives. In the first situation, the researcher, external to the organization, enters to the organization with a temporary facilitative role and work with the other members of the organization. On the second one, which is less common, a permanent and full member of the organization takes the researcher's role and has a double role as a member of the community and as a researcher. (Coghlan, 2019.) In the present study the situation was a mix of both, since the researcher was a former employee of the organization, so already familiar to the community, but at the start of the process did not work for the organization. With previous relations to the organization, the action research process was very effective, and the cooperation was smooth, since gaining trust is an important part of the process (García-Rosell & Hakkarainen, 2019), and in this case the trust had already been built before the process.

In this research one action research cycle was completed. The idea of a research cycle is that it can be repeated multiple times in order to achieve the wanted goal. Coghlan (2019) was dividing the action research cycle into four sections: diagnosing, planning action, taking action and evaluating the action (see figure 1 below).

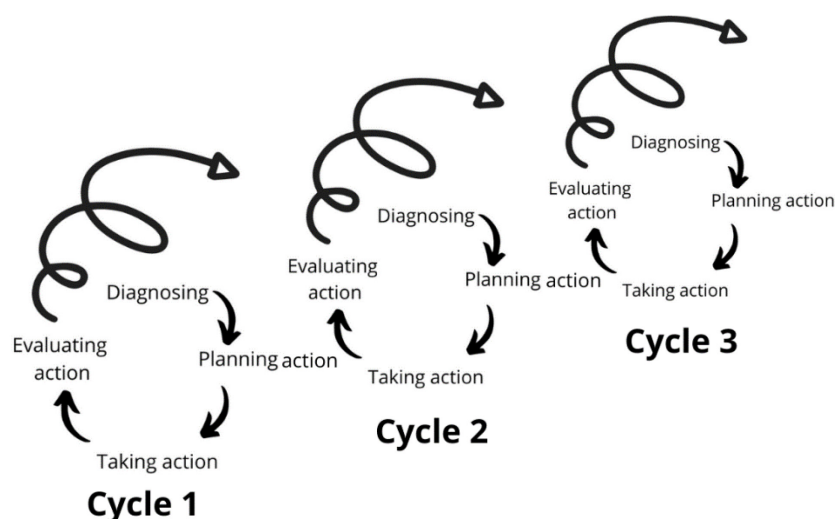


Figure 1. Action research cycle (Coghlan, 2019)

These phases were conducted with the case organization in the particular order. First, the purpose and issues were named together with the participants, so in this case the desire for sustainability learning and how to manage and integrate it into the operations. Second, the focus

was on analyzing and planning the first steps of the action, as the self-assessment of the STF-program was conducted, needed development steps were identified and actions based on these findings were able to be planned. On the third phase the planning was turned into action, so concrete activities were made and at the same time the learning and new knowledge was created. Lastly, the previous steps were evaluated to see if the taken actions were correct and what still needs to be done. From this it would have been possible to start a second cycle, but with the given timeframes only one cycle was able to be done within this study. As for data collection, action research can use both qualitative and quantitative methods. Essentially there are two different data collection methods: seeing and asking, so also known as observational methods and non-observational methods, which can be for example interviews or focus groups. (Burns, 2009.) In this action research the data was collected with observational methods, so collecting observation notes throughout the one year of time when the research was conducted.

5.1 Empirical setting

In this study the request for the research came from the case study organization in June 2020. The company representative brought up the issues of sustainability management in their operations, and how they wanted to get a more comprehensive understanding of sustainability and how it could be more integrated into their business. They wanted to study how the organization would be able to learn from the sustainability issues and turn their learning objectives into concrete actions. The organization in question is a small tourism organization operating in the northern Finland with 1-2 full time employees working year around and the number of staff members growing up to 7-10 in the high season. From the beginning of establishing the company, sustainability has been an integral part of the organization's values. Before starting the research, sustainability was seen as a series of very practical everyday actions, for example recycling, acting responsibly in the nature, paying attention to the staff treatment, and making cooperation with local stakeholders. It was noted that the basic actions were not enough, and the organization wanted to develop their operations and learn about the complexity of sustainable tourism, since it was clear that for example environmental sustainability was the most known for them, but other areas were left outside. Typical for many small tourism organizations, a lot of the sustainability actions were a part of the everyday operations, but the systematic working and measuring the actions was lacking. The researcher and author of this study is a former employee of the case study organization, and in this case was working as an external researcher but an active participant together with the members of

the organization. Following the steps of an action research cycle by Coghlan (2019), the researcher together with the organization diagnosed the problem and created the goal for the action research process. They wanted to find a solution to their sustainability management problems and learn how to manage sustainability in an effective way that would have long-term effects. The goal was to get the organization to get a comprehensive understanding of sustainability as a concept, map their current situation and what actions are required for the future. It was noted that in order to reach their goal, the organization needed support and guiding for their learning journey. It was decided that the STF-program by Visit Finland would be the right choice for them, since it aims for the comprehensive understanding and use of sustainability and is designed especially for organizations operating in with international tourists.

The STF-program was originally launched in 2019, and year before starting the process Visit Finland made a survey for the tourism actors in Finland and 83% of the respondents were supporting the idea of having a national sustainable tourism program. The program covers all the dimensions of sustainability and offers the Finnish tourism industry a complete toolkit for these strategies to be put in action. When a company or a destination gets the STF-label, it is also easy for international stakeholders and partners to identify companies and destinations which are proved to work towards sustainability. In order for a whole destination to get the label, 51% of the companies in the area must have the STF-label. With this program, it's not possible to take the easy way out, since the program and the requisite certificate are re-evaluated regularly, so it is safe to say that companies having this label are really working seriously with the topic. The STF-program provides companies and destinations a clear and structured sustainability development path including a 7-step program. The seven steps are:

- 1) Commitment: making a formal decision to develop sustainable tourism
- 2) Increasing know-how: participating on Visit Finland's STF-workshop and filling up a very profound self-assessment
- 3) Development plan: making a sustainable tourism development plan with short- and long-term goals and plan of action
- 4) Responsible communication: making actions towards more transparent communications to the customers
- 5) Certification & auditing: getting a regularly audited and STF-accepted sustainability certificate

- 6) Verification and measurability: verifying that something has happened during a year and committing to national sustainable tourism indicators
- 7) Agreement & continuous development: committing to regularly renewing the STF-label and making an agreement with Business Finland / Visit Finland about the use of the STF-label

The online-based platform gives companies and destinations a concrete toolkit for sustainable tourism and after undergoing the whole program, the companies are given the STF-label. Companies will also then have the access to the program afterwards as well, and the possibility for constant development work and they will also get marketing support and visibility on Visit Finland channels.

5.2 Data collection

In the present study the data was collected by using qualitative research methods. As the study aims to understand sustainability learning from the viewpoint of small tourism organizations, the descriptive and flexible nature of qualitative research method, (Fossey, Harvey, McDermott & Davidson, 2002; Merriam, 2002, p. 5; Flick, von Kardoff & Steinke 2004, p.5) was seen as the best method for this study. In the core of qualitative research is indeed to get a more in-depth picture or understanding of the phenomenon and social realities (Flick et. al, 2004, p. 5), and there are multiple ways for data collection, which help to get deep understanding and knowledge. For qualitative research the most common data collection methods are interviews, documents, focus groups and observations (Fossey et. al, 2002; Merriam, 2002, p. 12), and for the present study the data was collected with participant observation method and semi-structured interviews.

5.2.1 Participant observation

For the action research the selected data collection method in the present study is participant observation. The observation happened over a time period of one year, starting in June 2020, when the action research process with the case study organization started, and the last observations were made in July 2021. Observations can be done by either being a complete observer or an active observer (Merriam, 2002, p.13). The first one is described to be unknown

for those who are being observed. The second one means that the observer is already a member of the organization who is thus participating while observing. Tuomi and Sarajärvi (2009, pp. 81-83) divided observers into four different types:

1. observer, who participates but the other participants are not aware of the observations made
2. observer, who is known by the other participants, and they are aware of the observation made, but the observer does not participate in their activities
3. observer, who is working actively together with the participants and social interactions with the participants are an important part of the data collection
4. observer, who is actively working together with the participants, but the emphasis is to produce political aspects (also known as Participatory Rural Appraisal, often used by non-governmental organizations).

In this study the researcher was working according to the third form, so having an active participation role while doing the observations. Since the nature of the action research required close cooperation with the organization, active observer was seen as the best choice of collecting the data. Instead of only allowing the participants to say what they do, active participant observations allowed the researcher to be a part of the process and directly see what someone does and how it's done (Walshe, Ewing and Griffiths, 2012; Vilkkä, 2006). Participant observation was an effective way of getting to know the organization and their ways of working in relation to the research phenomenon, since things were seen in their own context (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2009, pp. 81; Vilkkä, 2006).

Like stated by Walshe et. al, (2012), observations can bring advantages when the research focus is on understanding actions, roles, and behaviors, and how these can change in different situations and over time. During the participant observation the researcher was able to pay attention to the initial settings of the organization and how their behavior, motives, feelings, and actions were changed during the process. Through the participant observation the researcher collected 10 pages of observation notes, mostly covering the meetings with the organization representatives and from the different phases of the STF-process. Most of the participant observation was done in person, but some of the observations were written based on for example phone calls and online meetings. As the researcher itself was working together with the organization and as an active participant, the notes from the observations were not

written at the same time, but afterwards, and in most cases in the same day to have a clear and fresh memories from the different situations. There were multiple different phases that were conducted based on the action research cycle, so with the active participant observations it was possible to get an in-depth picture of all of the phases. The close relationship with the researcher and the organization helped the observation atmosphere to be very relaxed and open, and as both of the parties had a common goal, the work was effective, and purposes of each phase were clear. Most of the observation notes were collected based on the meetings, discussions, and development work, but some of them were also made based on for example the self-assessment made together with the organization. It offered interesting insights and comparison for example to the initial settings, when the current state of the organization based on their sayings and feelings was actually differing from the results of the self-assessment in a positive way.

Participant observation as the only data collection method can be hard to analyze if the research focus is on getting a wider picture of a certain phenomenon (Tuomi and Sarajärvi, 2009; Baker, 2006). As the focus on the present study was to get a better understanding of sustainability learning in small tourism organizations, it was decided that to support the observations, additional data collection method would be needed. As the action research process included only one organization, it was important to get data from additional sources in order to find similarities and differences related to the research phenomena. The participant observation was a good way of getting a deep knowledge from the specific organization, but for the research purposes wider picture covering other participants with different experience from the phenomenon would give a better understanding of the research problem.

5.2.2 Semi-structured interviews

The second data collection method to support the participant observation was decided to be semi-structured interviews. A semi-structured interview is a verbal interchange between the interviewer and interviewee. Even though in many cases there is a list of questions, forming from a mix of more and less structured questions, the interview form gives the possibility for open conversation and other streams of conversations, which may have not been listed in the list of questions. (Merriam, 2002, p. 12; Longhurst, 2016.) The respondents for the interview were carefully selected with the criteria of them having knowledge and experience from the tourism field, from the STF-program, from the sustainability certifications and especially from

the viewpoint of small tourism organizations. Among the interviewees there were tourism entrepreneurs, sustainability coaches, tourism educators and sustainability certification auditors. This mix of professionals from the different stages of the STF-program and entrepreneurs with the experience of completing the program gave an interesting picture of the research phenomenon.

Like Adams (2010, pp. 371) described, the agendas in semi-structured interviews are not carved in stone, but the conversation is allowed to take an unexpected turn, and in the best-case scenario can even give some additional and highly valuable information. This was also the case in the present study, and the participants were able to describe the topics on their own words rather than using a 'yes or no' type of answers (Longhurst, 2016). In order to form the questions, the researcher needs to have a deep understanding of the topic and find out the relevant themes and questions which will be asked from the participants (Longhurst, 2016; Adams, 2010, pp. 368-369). At the time of starting the interviews, the action research process and participant observations had been conducted for several months, so the questions were formed with the knowledge and themes that came from the participant observation. Some themes that were brought up by the participant research would have left very one-sided, so the interviews were able to bring new viewpoints for the topics.

For this study five semi-structured interviews were made. The interviews lasted around 30-50 minutes, and because of the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, four of them were made online by using Microsoft Teams, and one of them in person. Before the interviews, the participants were invited to participate to the study via email or via conversation, giving them a brief overview of the ongoing study and its purposes. All of the interviews were made in Finnish and recorded with either audio or video form with the permission of the respondents. Afterwards the transcripts of the interviews were made by using these recordings. All of the interviews had a same list of questions, but in most cases the conversation, common to semi-structured interviews, flowed to additional topics as well. The interview questions were divided into four main categories: sustainable tourism in Finland, sustainability certifications, the challenges of sustainable tourism for small tourism organizations and developing competencies and learning through sustainable tourism. The interviews included 17 questions related to the main categories (Appendix I).

5.3 Content analysis

The data from the observations and semi-structured interviews in this study was analyzed by using a data-driven content analysis. Content analysis aims to get a compressed description of the research phenomenon in a way that the information of the data doesn't disappear in the process (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2009, pp. 108). It's a flexible technique which can be done either empirically or theoretically driven (Stemler, 2015, pp. 1-14). The main benefits of content analysis as a technique are that it's systematic and allows the researcher to compress large amounts of data into content categories based on rules of coding. Its reliance on coding and categorizing makes the technique rich and meaningful. (Stemler, 2000.) The objective in content analysis is to transform for example large amount of text into organized and brief summary of results (Erlingsson, & Brysiewicz, 2017). Content analysis can be used for many different forms of data. Data sources can be for example textual data, visual forms of photos and videos and also audio data (Stemler, 2015, pp. 1-14). When the data is in textual form, the common starting point in content analysis is often large amounts of transcribed interviews, when the texts have to be read and re-read as a whole to understand what the participants of the interviews are talking about.

When the whole material has been read multiple times, it's already possible to get ideas of the main points, which is followed by dividing the text into smaller units. From the units it's possible to formulate codes, which are then grouped into categories. (Erlingsson, & Brysiewicz, 2017.) Prasad (2008) divided the content analysis process into six steps: 1. formulation of the research objectives, 2. selection of content and sample, 3. development of content categories, 4. deciding analysis units, 5. preparing the coding and 6. analyzing the collected data. Like Erlingsson and Brysiewicz (2017) were stating, content analysis is a complex process with no easy linear progression, but it requires identifying and condensing units, codes and categories, which can be re-vised and analyzed multiple times. Like mentioned, content analysis can be done either in an empirical, so data-driven form, or in a theory-based form. Tuomi and Sarajärvi (2009, pp. 108-113) explained, that in data-driven content analysis you go from the empirical material towards a concept-wise vision of the research phenomenon, and the researcher aims to understand the research objects from their own point-of-view in every step of the analysis. Then again theory-driven content analysis is described do be done based on a previously done framework, for example a theory or a concept, and from the data you will pick things that are or aren't part of the framework.

In the present study the collected data consisted of 10 pages of observation notes and 30 pages of transcribed semi-structured interviews. The two data sources were merged into one text document, and first the data was read through multiple times to get an understanding of what had been happening during the participant observation process and what kind of topics were talked about in the interviews. Then irrelevant parts of the data were taken away, for example information of the participants work history and filling questions. After having an understanding of the whole data, the researcher started to go through the text with the idea of finding interesting sentences, combinations, and ensembles. Since the content analysis was made with a data-driven form, there weren't any defaults or certain topics that wanted to be found from the data. The content analysis in this study was made manually, and no external tools or programs were used. In practice this meant that interesting findings were first marked in the text and later transferred into an Excel document, which was working as a base for the content analysis and helped to have a structured way of starting the clustering process. The process had five different stages, that were all marked in the Excel-chart:

1. Original text (full sentences, parts of the sentence or just a few words from the sentences)
2. Reduced and condensed expression of the original text
3. Lower class, where all the similar reduced expressions were collected together
4. Upper class, where all the similar expressions from the lower class were collected
5. Identifying a main class, or theme, based on the upper classes

After reducing the expressions it was noted that there were already many thoughts, ideas and themes related to similar topics, so these were collected together as the lower class. There were in total 14 lower classes collected from the expressions, and from those 14 it was possible to create four upper classes and finally three main themes for the findings chapter. To get the upper classes and finally the main themes for the findings, the data had to be reviewed multiple times and new findings were made in every round. The themes were created from classes representing similar topics like resources and pressure from the competition connecting as problems for the starting point and understanding what is meant by sustainability and making everyday choices without knowing into silent sustainability. Some of the lower classes were easy to identify as upper class, but some of them required deeper analyzing and thinking of their relationship with each other.

The final results are presented in the next chapter, and to support the findings and conclusions some quotations from the participant observation and interviews are used. To identify the quotations from the interviews and observation notes, a simple coding system was created. The interviews are marked with a letter I and a number according to the chronologic order of the interviews and also telling the title of the person in question, e.g. I3, sustainability certification auditor. The same applies to the field notes from the participant observation, where the quotations are marked with the letter F and a number according to the order of when the observation was made.

5.4 Ethical considerations

In every research, the researchers are expected to take the ethical issues into consideration while doing the study and to follow responsible research methods. In the present study there were also some ethical issues that had to be considered, especially in the data collection and analysis process. In this research the guidelines on research ethics of Finnish Advisory board (TENK, 2012) were strictly followed, and in this section the ethical issues handled during the study are explained more specifically.

As the selected research methodology in the present study is action research, which in most cases deals with people the ethical considerations in this research methodology have to be considered carefully (Kettunen, 2018). The organization participating to the research was informed and aware of all of the phases of the research, and even the research problem, development suggestions and required actions were made in cooperation between the researcher and the organization. The active participation for the research by the organization offered them a chance to be a part of the knowledge creation and developing solutions to the problems, so their active involvement together with the researcher supported the validity of the research. The organization was always aware of the current state of the research, and for example the data collection method of observations was accepted by the other participants. The research validity and reliability were supported by the learning and improvements made based on the learning objectives, which were able to be adopted straightly to the organization strategies and operations. Also the systematic data collection and common values and purposes defined together with the co-researchers from the organization were ways to support the validity of the research. To protect the anonymity of the case organization, the name of the organization and

any names of the members participating to the research are not published, and the data collected through the participant observation is only accessed by the author.

The interview participant in this research received an official invitation to the interview after accepting to be a part of the research. The participants were informed that participation to the research was fully voluntary, and that they had the right to withdraw from the study whenever they wanted if they were feeling in that way. The data from the interviews is analyzed with full anonymity, and the participants of the research were also informed about this. All the names of the participants are only seen by the researcher, and also the received data from the interview is not showed to anyone else. In the research findings the participants are only mentioned with a very general definition of their position in the field, e.g. sustainability certification auditor, so that it is not possible to deduce the identity of the respondent. Before the interview, the participants also received a letter of consent explaining the research topic, introducing the purpose of the study briefly and stating that by signing the letter the participants would give their consent to use the material from the interviews confidentially and for research purposes only. The participants were also given the contact details of the researcher and the thesis supervisor and were advised to contact them in any cases. The interviews were recorded, and before the recording the interview partners were told that the recordings are done for the transcription purposes only, and that the recordings were also seen by the researcher.

Lastly, when writing this master's thesis, there were no credits taken for other researchers work and for anything that another research has showed before. All of the other researchers are given recognition by mentioning them while discussing about their research findings.

6 FINDINGS

In this chapter the findings of the research will be introduced. With the content analysis it was possible to identify a three-step learning path in the small tourism organizations' journey towards a better understanding and learning of sustainability issues. The research made it possible to identify what is actually happening inside a small tourism organization during the STF-program, and how learning is happening during the journey. First, the organization has to find the purpose for the work and ask themselves why they want to learn and how it would help their organization to develop. Second, small tourism organizations have the tendency to do the so-called silent sustainability choices, so they have to understand all the dimensions of sustainability and learn that they might actually already know a lot, even without knowing. Third, based on their purposes for the work and previous knowledge, they are able to start identifying the core development aspects and start concrete actions which are based on the sustainability learning. The three steps of the learning journey will be individually introduced in the following sub-sections.

6.1 Finding a purpose for sustainability learning

The first identified step in the learning process was about finding a purpose for the work, which included a lot of questioning of the need of the work, feeling outside pressure from the competition and also relations to previous experiences, hearsay, and attitudes. In the very beginning of the action research process with the case study organization, their initial settings were researched, and as mentioned before, sustainability wasn't a new concept for them. They were branding themselves as an organization working sustainably, and for example their current sustainability actions were listed and communicated through their website. It was still noted that their current stage was not enough in the changing environment. They wanted to learn in order to develop, and the goals of organizational learning, so the capability of adapting faster to changes (Bratianu, 2018), was hoped. The findings showed that the first thoughts of starting the STF-process were highly related to marketing benefits. They knew that they were already operating sustainably, but the proof of the constant, measured and systematic work and the reliability of their sayings were missing, and with these new aspects the work could also bring marketing benefits. The results showed that sustainability among small tourism organizations is often seen as a huge obstacle, that requires impossible amount of work and

actions that are not possible for the small organizations to do. This is one of the reasons why starting the sustainable development process was seen in a negative light, since the amount of work seemed impossible to be implemented into their operations. The first stage of the sustainability learning process included a lot of questioning and thinking of the need for a better managed sustainability management system, and also this kind of reality check related to limited resources.

...reactions like hey, is this necessary? Then coming to the point of saying it's so expensive, it doesn't have any benefits of getting it, why should I pay this amount of money, I don't have money for it. (13, sustainable tourism educator)

There was quite a lot of criticism from different directions that do we really need to have a certificate and how complicated it is and why do I need to get this. (14, sustainability certification auditor.)

As it has been noted before by for example Loucks et. al (2010) and Zou et. al (2012), small organizations can have limited resources and different profiles in the sustainability work when compared to large ones. The present research showed that sometimes the organizations aren't even aware of the real costs, needed resources and amount of work, but base their opinions on hearsay and negative experiences.

I know for a fact that there are some problems with the attitudes, that you've had a bad experiences about certifications and then you are stuck with the idea that they are not good, that they are just a waste of money and there are no benefits at all. (15, tourism entrepreneur)

When the goals of the STF-program were defined together with the case organization, it was noted that the concept of sustainability was lacking a comprehensive understanding, and their work, or in fact the work that was communicated for the customers, was highly focusing on the environmental side. Environmental issues were seen as the prior dimension of the sustainability work, and other aspects were left without that much attention. The effects of economical and socio-cultural sides were not that well-known or were thought that they were not so highly part of their operations. For example, sustainability was added as one of the core

values in their website just before starting the STF-process, but at that time the description at the front page only included information about the environmental protection.

Communication is very environmental based and the impacts for the nature are highlighted, but even though it seems like they have understanding of the other aspects, they are not so visible at the moment (F2).

This issue became the goal of the whole process, so the purpose of for the work, and it was defined in the very beginning. The organization wanted to learn what they were actually doing now, how to take the other aspects into consideration and how it can be done with long-term planning. In organizational learning the new learning aspects are not the only ones that matter, but it is also important to learn what shouldn't be changed, so what they are already doing well (Cook & Yanow, 1993). It was noted that the initial settings and the first thoughts of starting the STF-process included a lot of discussion about the amount of work and especially about the paperwork and documentation. The concrete actions that would appear at some point were not seen as a big deal, relating to the practical nature of working in small tourism organizations. Many things are done as a part of the daily operations and as a part of the practical work: if something needs to be done, it will get done without any bigger considerations. The bigger problem comes in the work requiring documentation, but the actual work or change is very easy to implement. Sustainability can be even a rather strong part of the operations of small tourism organizations, but because of the practical approach, it's often not very visible to the outside world (Russo & Tencati, 2009; Oikarinen-Mäenpää, 2019).

As the organization did not have any clear guidelines, and the transparent and documented work had to be started from the beginning, it was clear that it requires a lot of work. The results showed that it is very common for small organizations to be discouraged even before starting the process because of this, and their own capabilities are underestimated, and the workload is often overestimated. It was stated that the bar is raised quite high. Also comparison to other's work was brought up, and that the key would be to find the right level and right working ways for each company, and stop being so critical towards their own capabilities. Also finding a balance between business and development work raised as one of the issues.

You have to take the time for it, which again is away from other operations. If you don't find it important, you feel like you have to sacrifice a lot for it. (14, sustainability certification auditor.

At the time of the action research, the Covid-19 pandemic was still a very present issue in the tourism field, and all possible energy was naturally guided to keep the business alive. It was understood that eventually when the situation gets normal, the competition will be even harder, and it is very possible that not all companies will survive. Learning has been seen as one of the most effective and important skills an organization can have in order to survive (Schwandt and Marquardt, 1999; Heiskanen, 2008). This became the second purpose and big motivator in the process: the organization needed to learn, develop, and change in order to stay in business. This notion had two sides, since on the other hand this kind of thinking can cause a lot of pressure and the motivations for the work can be affected since the organization feels like it's something forced. On the other hand, at least in this case, it was seen as the only possible option to develop, so from that point of view seen as a positive finding. The important learning outcome in this stage was to pay attention to the goal that was set first, so the actual willingness to learn about sustainability, since they were not aiming for short-term marketing benefits, but the real need was in the lack of long-term work and how to improve it.

The results showed that the nature of sustainability has changed dramatically in the field, since before it was understood to be mainly the responsibility of for example bigger companies with higher negative impacts. Before sustainability actions were mainly practiced by forerunners and specific kind of tourism companies, and they were the ones talking about it and wanted to develop it. Nowadays everyone wants to be, or at least has to be, a part of it. What is positive is that when sustainability development becomes a shared responsibility for the whole industry, also the sustainability goals of individual operators can be significantly strengthened (Seraphin & Gowreesunkar, 2021). The pressure of the work can though lead to the problem of doing sustainability work for marketing purposes only, and even participating on greenwashing activities. In some cases managers can integrate into the business only to get economic benefits (Malheiro et. al, 2020).

There is probably this kind of social pressure: when it looks like everyone is doing it, then I guess we have to do it, too... Some are feeling that well, I guess

we have to, so that we will be competitive (I4, sustainability certification auditor.)

With the case organization, the values and willingness for change played an integral part in the beginning. For them sustainability was already in their values, and they wanted to learn to be better at it, and they had also tried their best to include sustainability in every step of their operations. They were aware of the fact they didn't know everything, and that even though they had already done something, this was only the beginning. When organization is aiming for a change through organizational learning, aspects inside the organization, values, mindsets, attitudes, and strategies may have to change (Schwandt & Marquardt, 1999; Dicle & Köse, 2014). The present study found out that especially values and attitudes were seen very important in the sustainability management and development journey for small tourism organizations. The findings showed that sustainability should be in the strategy of each tourism organization nowadays, but the organization values and concrete actions should meet. It's not possible to list sustainability as one of the core values if the actions it requires are not done, but vice versa: only concrete actions are not enough if they in some way only stay inside the organization, and they are not willing to talk about those.

It's not enough that even though you would have any kind of values and organizational culture and then nothing happens in the real operations. The interesting question is that which one of these should be started to handle and work with and where to start in order to build the change inside the organization (I4, sustainability certification auditor.)

The results showed that the importance of values and the confluence of values and actions was understood to be very important, and that in order to meet the goals, the organization should be fully committed to the work. There was also the realization that the actions need to be constant, and the work never stops.

6.2 The importance of previous knowledge and silent sustainability choices

When the purpose for the sustainability learning was decided and defined, it was time to start clarifying the organizations' current state, strengths, and weaknesses. It was understood that in

order to develop and learn more, they had to find out what they already knew and where the focus of learning should be. The findings showed that silent sustainable practices, a concept present for example in the research of García-Rosell (2013), was very present with the case organization, and they had been doing so much more than was thought before. The actions are not understood to be a part of sustainability, and because of that these actions are not noted to be anything special and are not communicated outside the organization. When the case organization understood how much they had already done, it had a very positive effect on the upcoming work and the mindsets towards the work turned into being much more eager and enthusiastic. Smaller organization having a natural aptitude to behave responsibly, and it is a part of their operations even though it wouldn't be that visible (Russo & Tencati, 2009). The recognition of the current knowledge and importance of previous work play an integral part in the process of outdoing oneself and gaining confidence in their own work. It has also been noted that utilizing previous knowledge has a significant meaning in for example environmental action development processes (Lehtola, 2011).

And very often a lot is already done and is done more than thought. Small companies can be on a very high level, and they are doing a lot of [sustainability] actions but these actions are not recognized. It's not recognized that everyone is not doing the things we are, and that it's something unique and valuable. (I2, sustainable tourism coach.)

First of all, you understand that what are the choices in your own work, that you can change into being more sustainable. It can make you realize that oh, okay, also this is count as being sustainability (I5, tourism entrepreneur.)

The key role in the identification process was the comprehensive self-assessment provided by the STF-program. It covered all the dimensions of sustainability from multiple different viewpoints, so by going through it the organization was able to see what they had been doing already. In this stage it was significantly important to have this kind of guidebook to follow, since it offered a comprehensive view to sustainability. Without similar guidelines it would have been extremely laborious to independently think about all the possibilities that should be taken into consideration, and most probably some parts would have been left out of the process. When the time and energy was directed to the work, it was noted that were a lot of

happy surprises: their current knowledge and stage of sustainability work were in a very good level.

After doing the self-assessment, we found out that there are 70/208 things that they need to develop further, so it shows that 2/3 of the things they are already doing, which is a good amount. (F4).

It was found out that small organizations are either unaware of the dimensions of sustainability, or are just taking the sustainability actions for granted, and because of this they don't feel the need to communicate their actions and talk about. The biggest silent sustainability actions that were noted with the case organization were related to the authenticity of their services, cooperation with the local companies and stakeholders and valuableness of local staff. For example, the staff consisted of people who had a strong knowledge of the area and its special features, which had a high impact on the authenticity of the services. Local culture, habits, and traditions were always present and almost on its own the appreciation towards the local environment was transferred to the customers as well. This was definitely one of the strengths of the organization, but it hadn't been thought to relate so strongly as a positive sustainability action. The organization also had partners and cooperation with local companies sharing the same values, and this kind of close cooperation of course strengthens the sustainability of the whole area.

Like noted, the practical nature is highly present in small tourism organizations, and some of the actions are made as such an integral part of the everyday business, that the understanding of their own actions is lacking. Since often the strategic planning aiming for long-term results is often lacking within small organization, it's important to also note the practical development actions done in the everyday business, which is often done with the resources the organization already has (Lehtola, 2011).

In many organizations there is a lot done, but they are either keeping it for granted, that of course this is how things are done, and that is the reason why they haven't been communicating about it. Or then they just haven't been thinking that it would be in any way important issue to be talked about (14, sustainability certification auditor.)

Another point about the practical nature of the work is that the organizations do not understand that when starting to do actions towards the sustainability management, they are learning all the time. An example from the interviews was that if a small organization notices that something needs development, they will just do it without even thinking about it. What is interesting is that while they are solving the problem, they are of course constantly learning about it.

You might not even think about it as learning, you just think that okay, let's fix it... Let's fix the problem, but you don't think that it's a way of learning, even though it's at the background all the time that hey, I just learned a new thing and that I learned a way to develop my operations. But you just don't imagine it to be learning. (15, tourism entrepreneur.)

Ecological sustainability was definitely the most known of the three main dimensions of sustainability. The findings showed that this was in relation with the practical nature of working for small tourism organizations, since ecological sustainability actions, for example recycling, nature preservation and reducing energy consumption, are very practical and part of the everyday actions. It was described that ecological actions were the easiest to verify for example with concrete measurements of energy and water saving, but actions for the other dimensions were not seen as clear. Even though many small operators might do a lot of cooperation with the local communities and have a local staff, which are examples of common economic and socio-cultural dimensions of sustainability, these are not thought to be anything special. This tends to be the common problem in sustainable tourism, which is tried to be solved with the different sustainability programs and certificates. Same issues had been found by for example Stoddard et. al (2012) by claiming that tourism companies were engaged to the environment, but engagement from the societal perspective wasn't that common.

The key role in the second step of the learning journey was that the organization gained understanding of their current state and what areas of sustainability required more learning and focus. They also learned how to develop and manage the previous knowledge. For example the case organization learned that their previous knowledge about preserving the local culture, cooperation with local companies, equality from various viewpoints and staff treating were something very valuable and these aspects should be also communicated more.

These were aspects that other organizations might not yet have, and these are the things that were separating them from the competitors already now. It was interesting to notice, that all the silent sustainability work can actually bring small tourism organizations a certain kind of vantage, since these kind of actions are necessarily not strategic, but real values and interests of the organization. In most cases small and medium size organizations do not have the same kind of organizational structures as large ones. Like Binder (2009) suggested, learning happens more often in large companies because of their planned and structured ways of working, so from that point-of-view the lack of guidelines and frameworks in small tourism organization's work the management and development work can be harder. But on the contrary, small tourism organizations often don't have a strict bureaucracy and adapting to changes and learning new ways of working can happen very fast in smaller organizations. Similar thoughts have been found by for example Bacari et. al (2021), by stating that small tourism companies have better abilities to be innovative because of their flexibility and capacities to adapt.

I think it's easier, that a small company adapts this [sustainability], because in most cases they are agile and in many ways trendsetters when thinking about the future of tourism (I1, tourism entrepreneur.)

The present study also found out that in addition to the fast capabilities to adapt and change, the sustainability learning and new values and habits are easier to get as a part of the whole organization and each staff member among small tourism organizations. In order to get changes and develop the operations, new knowledge has to be integrated and shared among the whole organization (Antunes and Pinheiro, 2020). The research found out that since in small organization the number of staff members is smaller, it is easier to share the same values and new knowledge. It was also seen helpful in the work as well since there are commonly shared values among all staff members. It has been noted that if an organization wants to learn, the learning should be done by the whole organization instead of individuals inside it (Cook & Yanow, 1993), and this was seen as an effective benefit among small tourism organizations.

“Besides, small organizations are of course more agile, that they only have to look themselves at the mirror and come to the conclusion that okay, this is what we need to do and that's enough (I4, sustainability certification auditor.)

It could be concluded that the key issue in the start of the sustainability management journey for small tourism organizations is to first of all understand what sustainability all of its levels, understand the current level of the organization and to be open-minded and not underestimating their own capabilities. In this situation, small organizations perhaps are not the so-called underdogs, but with the right tools, motivation, and curiosity for learning they have as good chances of standing out in the competition than large organizations.

6.3 Transferring new knowledge into actions

In the third phase of the learning journey, the development plan, which was required for the STF-program, had a huge impact on the learning. After the self-assessment the organization was able to identify their strengths and weaknesses and learn what they already knew, and now it was time to focus on learning new things. The findings showed that after the self-assessment, it was noticed that also the attitudes towards the work had a change to a more positive direction, and now the process of organizational learning got a well-needed confidence boost. It was realized that the issues were not so complicated than thought, but in fact quite practical, and they had good capabilities to develop those. When approaching the development of the company's operations as practical measures in everyday life the development can become concrete and it can be done with the resources the company already has, which is very beneficial especially in the case of small organizations (Lehtola, 2011).

At the same time with the development plan also the process of getting a sustainability certification was started, and the change in attitudes was also noted here. Since the self-assessment, development plan and application for the certification included a lot of similar things, and also the knowledge of sustainability had already grown a lot at this stage, the certification wasn't seen as overwhelming as before. After all, the certification process was done in just a few months, since now the knowledge of sustainability in their own organization had already grown a lot. The process was not that difficult than thought, but it was definitely seen as one of the negative parts of the process because of the financial costs. Most certifications included an audit cost and a yearly entry fee, but it was also realized where these costs come from and in order to develop operations, some financial investments will appear at some point.

...the attitudes and motivation have changed into a better direction, since the most time-consuming parts are done, and now the sustainability issues are slowly starting to look clear and manageable... The beginning of this process was quite rough and many times it seemed that it will not be finished, but after when we just started doing it step by step it all worked out well. (F10 & F11)

The missing aspects, that had come up during the self-assessment, were identified as development aspect, and while making the development plan, the organization was able to create concrete actions to improve these points. In their case, it was noted that there were three topics that needed the most work: staff training, communications, and customer experience. It was interesting to notice that even though there were multiple things that needed work, the solutions were rather easy to implement and were very doable to execute among the other everyday business tasks. When the organization learned that for example the customers could be encouraged to do more sustainability prevention actions during their services, this learning aspect was responded with a concrete action of creating signs, info boards and communication about the issue. In addition to the local expertise it was noticed that the staff could have more sustainability knowledge, so the problem was solved by deciding to create a new section to the staff training. With this kind of system of knowledge transferred into rather simple actions the organization was able to develop their services covering whole new dimensions of sustainability. In this stage it was also noted that even though learning was highly included and acted as a strong part, it was also inevitable to notice that the new knowledge could be used as a tool for marketing. As transparency of the work is one of the goals of the STF-program, it can be used as a way of communication and through that can be seen as a way to improve for example the organization's market position. But it was still interesting to notice that like wished, the marketing benefits were not the only goals but that the learning objectives were seen as strong factors as well.

The biggest difference to their previous work was that now there was a systematic model that would help with the work. In sustainability management it is important to have the tools for continuous measurements and evaluation. For example in Naudé (2012) was discussing that in integrating sustainability into the operations, specific measurement and evaluation tools are highly needed. With the help of the STF-program it was possible to create a management tool in an Excel form, where the development goals, timetables, required actions are people

responsible for those actions were collected. For example, it was noted that the future staff would need a separate sustainability training including the organization values, how sustainability is shown in their actions and how guides should act based on these values. These were set as a goal: the timeline was set in the beginning of the upcoming winter season and the person responsible for this was decided. Another example is how it was decided that emissions from driving wanted to be reduced, so the plans for designing the routes to be more efficient and changing their cooperation partner for fuel to a more ecological option. This kind of systematic work also support the lack of verification: before the tasks would have just been done without anyone noticing, but now they would have a system and the measurement and verification of the work would be demonstrable.

We were able to develop an Excel file, which can be used as a measure tool... With the development plan and the measurement excel it was noted that even though there are quite many things to do, they are doable but are also things that actually bring a lot of benefits for the company. (F8)

The results showed that sustainability learning really had an impact on the understanding of the organization, and how sustainability can be implemented into their own operations in the most efficient way. The comparison to others would not bring results since all organizations have different ways of working. When you are thinking about the impacts of your operations, you learn to understand that what are the factors that you can influence easily and fast, and which factors can require more work and perhaps have a bigger influence on the surrounding environment. Like stated by Seow et. al (2006), organizations should focus on finding their own solutions and not straightly borrow them from others. They discussed that the development necessarily doesn't require any radical steps or create huge brand-new systems, but the goal is to recognize each company's already existing strengths and re-shape the current strategies. The case organization didn't have full possibilities with for example controlling the water facilities of their office space, since the space was rented, so they had to identify other aspects from the ecological sustainability that they could control and develop.

Perhaps the challenge comes from the point of view that you should think how this is related to our work, and if it's a small organization, that doesn't have the [big] staff there, then you should think that what kind of aspects from the social sustainability could be added to our work (I2, sustainable tourism coach.)

Like the previous literature has shown, small tourism organizations are said to need more support in sustainability management because of the lack of systematics, and Seraphin and Gowreesunkar (2021) named the lack of frameworks and common rules as the main problems of achieving sustainability development goals. The present research found out that even though the guidelines and tools for the individual work were very efficient and offered comprehensive insights to the operations, external help and guiding was necessarily as well. The need for cooperation with other organizations and destination managers has been identified to be important in sustainability management in tourism, and it is rather difficult for small actors to pursue sustainable development on their own (Halme, 2001). The certification process in this research included an audit, which was implemented by an auditor from the certification organization, and the coaching sessions and audit brought new viewpoints to the awareness of the organization. With the external help it was possible to do the final touches to the work that the organization had done individually, but now it got the last push and it was made sure that the planned things were correct and fulfilled the requirements.

Based on the findings, it was noted that the STF-process also develops small tourism organizations' understanding of the need for continuous work and continuous learning. When the real meaning of sustainability is learned, the development aspects have been decided and the use of new management tools have been implemented, it was understood that it is just the beginning. Once the process had been started and sustainability in their operations was taken under the magnifying glass, there were constantly new things appearing. It was also noted that the new systematic structures are supporting with the continuous learning, since for example with the case organization yearly goals were set, and these would be re-defined every year.

At least the confirmation that in sustainable tourism we are never fully ready, but you can always develop [your organization] and there are always new areas where we can operate better (I1, tourism entrepreneur.)

‘‘Best learning aspect has been that you shouldn’t stay in your own bubble and in your own comfort zone, but it’s really healthy to challenge yourself also with familiar topics and the understanding that I can learn more all the time and I can accept new challenges and go towards them (I5, tourism entrepreneur.)

Like stated in the quote above, openness to change and challenges is an important factor in the sustainability learning, which has also been noted by for example Seow et. al (2006) by stating that if an organization want's to be sustainable, they have to be ready to continuously renew their products and adapt to changes in the necessary ways. Sustainability development has a nature highlighted by the continuous nature of working and based on the findings the case organization had developed their capabilities for the future in a way that they were prepared for the future, and also open for new challenges. They had learned and adapted new ways to manage sustainability in their own organization, and now the work in the future didn't seem so overwhelming.

7 DISCUSSION

The study shows that small tourism organizations have the tendency for high silent sustainability actions, which are affecting their possibilities for effective sustainability management and learning. It was noted that these organizations have good capabilities for learning and even better, excellent capabilities for changing their learning outcomes into practical actions, since practical work and the capability to adapt to changes and develop is one of the strengths of small tourism organizations. The study was able to identify a three-step learning path that was visible among small tourism organizations, and how all of the phases included different learning aspects. As noted in previous literature (Zou et. al, 2012; Perrini et. al, 2007; Russo & Tencati, 2009) for example the lack of resources, understanding and strategic work are the main obstacles among small tourism organizations in the sustainability work, but the present study found that the use of the STF-program was helpful in many aspects on the journey.

The study shows that the STF-program was seen as a beneficial management tool especially for small tourism organizations, and that it not only supports the sustainability learning, but also the continuous work. According to the findings the dimensions of sustainability among small tourism organizations were not fully understood and recognized, and silent sustainability actions are very common among these organizations. Many actions the organizations are doing were not linked to sustainability, so the management and planning for the future strategies was impossible to do and long-term sustainability goals could not be planned. As the STF-program offers a wide guidebook covering all dimensions of sustainability and tools for understanding how sustainability is shown in your own organization, it was seen that it supports the learning journey from the beginning to the end. As one of the biggest problems among small tourism organizations has been recognized to be the lack of strategies and focus on the present, the STF-program was seen as a good tool for the planning of the future work as well. Even though the program fits for all organizations, it was noted that it is very helpful especially for small tourism organizations. They usually don't have much experience from the documentation, measuring and long-term plans, so with the help of the program all of the aspects will be done correctly and in the most efficient way.

The study revealed that even though the case organization had previous experience and knowledge of sustainability management, it would have been extremely difficult to do the process on their own with no external help. One of the benefits and biggest supports that was recognized from the STF-program was the fact that with the right tools the organizations are able to examine their operations with an outside perspective. This happens in two different forms. With the self-assessment they can put themselves as external evaluators and see their organization with the eyes of an outsider. Also, an actual external evaluation done as well with the certification process since the audits for the certification are done by an external auditor. The two-part evaluation first gives the organization the possibility to learn on their own and evaluate their operations based on their own experiences and knowledge, and later on these findings will be supplemented with the suggestions of sustainability professionals. This was found to be something very valuable from the viewpoint of learning, since they were able to learn and understand what they already know and what was still lacking, and how both of these perspectives could be managed to achieve the best results.

Like defined by Dicle and Köse (2014) and Odor (2018), sustainability and organizational learning are all about the nature of continuum, and the research showed that the STF-program was also seen as an efficient way for the concept of constant learning. With the program small tourism organizations are able to create their own sustainability management plans and define their goals and development aspects and understood that in order to constantly develop and re-new their operations, the work requires continuum. This ensures that the work never stops, and that the organizations are able to learn year after year, since the program is renewed every year. The organizations have clear schedules and timelines for the work, which ensures that the sustainability work is not forgotten, but goes alongside with the other operations all the time. New learning aspects are appeared every year, and the organization has to evaluate their operations constantly and use their new sustainability knowledge to develop their operations. Even though the continuous evaluation is good for the sustainability development process, it is clear that it also brings yearly costs from for example the certification processes. For some organizations the costs can be seen as a negative and unnecessary factor, but the study did also find that developing operations requires financial investments, and the similar kind of work without any external help could be more affordable, but the amount of work would be extremely high.

The research was able to identify a three-step learning path happening while completing the STF-program, which gives insights of how sustainability learning was seen to happen in small tourism organizations. Each phase included different learning aspects and based on the learning the organization was able to learn how to further manage sustainability in their organization. First of all, small tourism organizations needed to find the purpose for the work. Like noted by for example Malheiro et. al (2020) and Willers and Kulik (2011), the purpose and the main driver for becoming a sustainable organization can be the competitive advantage and a better market position, but in the long run, this will not carry the work throughout the years and support the nature of continuous learning. For the case organization the main purpose was the understanding of the importance of the learning, and that they wanted to learn to operate in a sustainable way that would be comprehensive and visible. This was also brought up by Schwandt and Marquardt (1999) and Heiskanen (2008) by stating that constant learning being or at least becoming the number one way to stay in the competition. In general, it was found that the purpose can then be for example the desire to learn, to gain new knowledge or learn how to manage the previous knowledge or even the willingness to change the way of operations or the company values. Learning in the first phase was noted in many different forms. When defining the purpose for the start of the work, they were able to learn about the organization's current values and ways of operating: what was the part that they would like to change, what requires learning and why is sustainability important for their organization?

The second phase was all about current knowledge and the so-called silent sustainability actions, which were noted to be very visible among small tourism organizations. The research showed that in the second phase the learning was divided into two sides: learning what previous knowledge they had and learning how to manage the previous knowledge. For example, when going through the self-assessment, the organization was able to identify that some things that they had been doing as a part of daily operations were actually count as socio-cultural sustainability. After learning that they already had knowledge about some specific area, they would be able to use this previous knowledge and use it to develop their operations. The second phase helped the small tourism organizations to understand example which areas of sustainability they were handling well, and which required more work. The biggest learning aspect that was present in the second phase was that the small organizations were able to understand their capabilities based on the large amount of previous knowledge. It was found that very often they are not at the bottom level, but their current knowledge about

sustainability is actually much higher than thought, but the ways of working needed some development.

When the purpose for sustainability learning is found, it was noted that the STF-program offers multiple drivers for the work, that can help the organization in the beginning and throughout the journey. The study revealed that the tough competition in the field is causing a lot of pressure for small organizations, and it was felt that they cannot be on the same level with larger companies because of the different starting level. One of the drivers that was found in the study was that since the STF-program has been created in order to have common rules for the whole tourism industry, all organizations participating on the program can be seen to be on the same level. The program offers same tools, guidelines, and support for all organizations. When the program is completed, the organizations can be seen as equal when it comes to being sustainable. When the sustainability work is done with the frameworks given by the STF-program, it is sure that the work is transparent, verified and covers all the dimensions of sustainability.

The present study and also previous research (e.g. Russo & Tencati, 2009; Oikarinen-Mäenpää, 2019) found out that communications and the transparency of the sustainability work were the weakest areas seen among small tourism organizations, and also the areas where these organizations wanted to develop the most but didn't know how. So one of the drivers provided by the program is that the work made with these guidelines will be done in a transparent and verified way. After completing the program, they have verified proof of their work and they are able to communicate about their values and reasons for sustainability work, and they will get assurance about their work. In some ways this could also be seen as a critique and think that is this again just another way of shining organizations reputation and doing sustainability from the wrong purposes? But then on the other hand, the process is so complex and multi-phased and requires actual interest towards the topic, so based on the research the willingness for learning was seen stronger than just completing the program to get advantages on the competition against others. Last, one driver that was found was the support that organizations can have from the sustainability certification processes and programs. Even though the work is done inside the organization, the program still offers a lot of training, workshops and support from sustainability professionals, and the organizations don't have to start all the work from the beginning. They have good tools, models and people

helping alongside the process, and their own learning is supported and evolved with the help of others as well.

Sustainability in tourism is the responsibility of every organization, and the study shows that sustainability learning and management are very much possible to implement among small tourism organizations as well. The beginning can be time-consuming and development and change always require time and commitment. Like the results show, sustainability was seen as something huge and impossible to achieve, even though in reality the issues and actions are very practical and easy to implement into the business. When thinking about the process from a more critical point of view, it was also noted that the pressure of competition and surviving in the future with the help of learning were present during the study. For the case organization, it was noted that their current actions were not enough, so the pressure could be seen as one of the drivers to start the process as well. This can lead to the thought of whether the willingness to start sustainability management comes from the pure interest towards the topic or is it in any case related to the competitive position. What ever the reason is, it can be still thought that when the work is done with the use of these sustainability programs, it is made sure that the work is done properly, and it can bring actual benefits and increase organizational learning throughout the way.

Once the purpose for the work has been defined and the organization finds the willingness, motivation, and reasons for the work, it has to be realized that the work never stops and that they will never be ready. This should not be taken as something negative, but on the contrary, as a possibility and a way to always be better, develop the organization and being able to adapt to new challenges. When a small tourism organization finds their own ways of working and is open to the learning, they have the power to grow and also achieve change in the industry and also achieve some concrete benefits like financial savings and appreciation in the market. When the sustainability work becomes a shared responsibility, it raises the awareness and hopefully with systematic, planned, and well-thought sustainability work tourism industry will keep on growing but with ways that will not harm the surrounding environment, people, and cultures.

8 CONCLUSION

Sustainability has become one of the integral parts of the tourism industry in the recent years since the industry is so prone to many global threats and because the current form of tourism is causing a lot of negative impacts to the surrounding environment. If previously sustainability was understood as an individual form of tourism, nowadays it is the responsibility of everyone. Without effective sustainability management work the tourism industry will not have a bright future. Small and medium size organizations represent the majority on the field, but sustainability work among these organizations has been noted to have major issues. The lack of strategic, long-term thinking and systematicity in the work is preventing small tourism organizations to work in the most efficient ways. As a response to these issues in Finland, a nation-wide STF sustainability management program was implemented. This study was focusing on the sustainability learning path of small tourism organizations and the aim was to research how sustainability management programs can support especially small tourism organization to learn about sustainability and develop their operations through learning.

An action research study with a small tourism organization operating in the northern Finland was conducted, and the phases of the STF-program were researched with the method of participant observation. In close cooperation with the case organization the problems, solutions and evaluations of each phase were done in order to achieve the best solutions. It was an effective way to get the organization as a part of the study instead of an objective of the study, since the goal was to solve real-life problems and achieve the needed change. The research was able to identify what kind of learning objectives, challenges, and successes small tourism organization can experience during the STF-program, and how the frameworks provided by the program supported the learning throughout the way. Since the action research was only including one organization, additional data was needed in order to get a more comprehensive picture of the research phenomenon. To achieve this, semi-structured interviews were conducted with sustainable tourism professionals with experience of the STF-program and small tourism organizations. The interviews had participants representing sustainability certification auditors, small tourism entrepreneurs, sustainability coaches and tourism educators.

The research found out that the guidelines and management tools provided by the STF-program were highly supporting the learning journey of small tourism organizations. With the material and support from the program small tourism organizations are able to create sustainability management systems that are suitable specifically for their own operations. The organizations were also noted to have the possibility to evaluate their operations with external eyes and raise their awareness of the sustainability issues, and afterwards turn the knowledge into concrete sustainability actions. The research was able to identify a three-step learning journey that is visible among small tourism organizations going through the STF-program. The phases consisted of finding a purpose for the work, identifying their previous knowledge, and finding what they still need to learn and how these learning objectives can be transferred into actions.

As the beginning of the sustainability management journey was found the hardest one because of negative prejudices, attitudes, and unawareness of the benefits of sustainability work, the research also found that the STF-program provides small tourism organizations the needed drivers for the beginning of the work. The program puts organizations into the same level with each other, so they can be seen as equal. Without measured and documented work this kind of vantage is hard to achieve, so the program drives the small organizations to first of all learn but also to be equal with bigger operations with different resources and possibilities. Verification of the work was also seen as one of the drivers, since when a small tourism organization is provided with the STF-label, it can be trusted that the work is properly done, and they don't have to prove themselves and their work.

To conclude the research, it found that with the right tools and a clear framework for sustainability, small tourism organizations have good capabilities for sustainability learning. Their previous knowledge gives a certain kind of advantage for the work, since it is really in the core of their operations without even noticing, so the willingness for the work is genuine. They are just lacking the transparency of the work and comprehensive understanding of sustainability issues, but once sustainability is understood completely, they are able to bring their learning into the next level and play an integral role in the future of the tourism industry. As a researcher, this study gave interesting insights to the operations of a small tourism organization and how sustainability can be integrated into their ways of making business. It was a great learning opportunity to see the process from the beginning to the end, and see actual changes made based on the development suggestions done in cooperation with the

organization members. The study can be seen as an example and as an inspiration to other small tourism organizations to see how similar kind of sustainability learning could be done in their organization, and what kind of benefits can this kind of process bring to them in the future.

8.1 Limitations of the study

After conducting the research, it was clear that even though the findings from the research introduced new and valuable information of the research phenomenon, the study had its limitations. First of all, as there was only one organization participating in the action research process, the participant observation offers a very limited and one-sided view highlighting the personal achievements, challenges and learning outcomes of the selected organization. Even though the findings were supported with an additional data collection method of the semi-structured interviews, the findings could have been more comprehensive if the action research process would have included multiple small tourism organizations. With the given timeframe and resources it was only possible to include one organization into the research, so it is possible that there could have been more differences and new insights with the use of multiple organizations.

Related to this issue, there were also limitations with the specific area of choice. The organization present in this research is operating in the northern Finland, and sustainability issues of course differ based on the geographical location. As the current organization is operating in the Arctic area, the area is highly influenced for example by the climate change and other impacts which may not be as present in other parts of Finland. So with this perspective, it is possible that small tourism organizations in different locations could experience the sustainability issues in different ways. Luckily the supporting data coming from the interviews offered insights from tourism experts from other parts of Finland as well, but the experiences participant observation are only focusing on the northern Finland, so the results could differ in some ways from the southern parts. If I would conduct the research again, I would still probably only choose one area for the research instead of whole Finland but would perhaps consider the interview participants to have the most experience from that specific area as well instead of having experience from all around Finland. This way the focus would be more clearly in one area and similar research could be conducted in other areas as well.

In this research the action research study was done based on one action research cycle, which offered insights of the beginning of the STF-process to the stage of completing the program. This is one limitation of the study, since with multiple cycles it would have been possible to get results and findings from the future of the organization and see how the current learning objectives and developments are actually put into use in the future. Also, if the same action research cycle would have been conducted again over a longer time-period, so when the organization is about to renew the STF-label, it would have been possible to see the concrete changes and continuous learning in a more visible way. Now the research shows the very beginning of the sustainability learning process, but the future pictures are not yet visible.

8.2 Proposals for future research

As the present study was highly focusing on the northern Finland, even though the data from the interviews was able to give insights from other areas as well, similar kind of research about sustainability learning in small tourism organizations could be conducted in the southern parts of Finland. For example, the capital area in the southern Finland is a very popular tourist destination and has its own challenges in sustainability prevention, so it would be important to research if these organizations are experiencing the similar issues that were found in the present study or are results differing in some areas.

It was found out that the first phase in the sustainability learning path was the most challenging for small tourism organizations, so one possible research topic for the future could be that are there any other outside factors that could help with the beginning. For example, what is the role of destination management organizations, government or the state and how small tourism organizations could be supported better to be able to start paying attention to their sustainability actions even more. Another interesting possibility would be to conduct the action research process in organizations that have been a part of the STF-program for many years, and see how the sustainability management would get easier over the years: or would it?

Lastly, even though the whole core of the study has been small tourism organizations, a similar kind of research conducted for large-scale tourism organizations would most certainly offer interesting insights and deep knowledge of how sustainability issues are managed in these organizations. As it has been noted, large organizations often have more structured ways of

working, it would be interesting to see what kind of things they are able to learn, and even a comparison between the learning objectives of small and large organizations would be helpful for the future of sustainability management work done in the tourism field.

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Appendix I: Interview structure

The same interview structure was used in all of the five semi-structured interviews conducted for this thesis.

1. Sustainable tourism in Finland

- Background: who are you, what is your role with STF-program, personal info etc.
- How can sustainable tourism be developed through sustainability certificates and Visit Finland's Sustainable Travel Finland -programme?
- What changes have sustainability certificates and programs brought to the Finnish Tourism sector in the past 10 years?
- Why are sustainability certificates and programs important to the tourism destinations and to the tourism field in Finland?

2. Benefits of sustainability certifications to small tourism organizations

- What kind of benefits can sustainability certificates and the STF-program bring especially to small tourism organizations?
- If an organization is saying that they are already working in a sustainable way and based on the principles of sustainable tourism, will this kind of organization get any benefits from getting a sustainability certificate or from the STF-program?
- How can sustainability certifications and the STF-program help small tourism organizations to manage their sustainability and responsibility practices?

3. Challenges of sustainable tourism from the viewpoint of small tourism organizations

- What part of the process of getting a sustainability certification or completing the STF-program are especially challenging for small tourism organizations?
- What dimension of sustainable tourism (ecological, economic and socio-cultural) is the hardest one to implement from the viewpoint of small tourism organization and why?
- What factors affect whether or not an organization joins the STF program or applies for a sustainable tourism certificate?
- What factors can negatively affect the ability of small tourism organizations to obtain a sustainable tourism certificate or complete the STF program?

4. Developing competencies and learning through sustainable tourism

- What parts of the organizational culture (values, norms, attitudes and strategies) experience the most change, when an organization starts to work towards sustainable tourism development through sustainability certifications or STF-program, and how can these parts change?
- What kind of new things can small tourism organizations learn through sustainability certificates and through the STF-program?
- What kind of development and learning aspects do small tourism organizations have when they are applying for a sustainability certification or are going through the STF-program?
- Is it hard for small tourism organizations to learn and embrace about sustainable tourism development?
- How an organization can use the learning outcomes from the sustainable tourism development processes to develop its operations?
- What have you learned from the STF-program?