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UNIVERSITY OF VAASA

Roosa Sillanpää

Sustainability management and internal sustainability communication in  
an MNC: The Millennials' perspective

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**Author:** Roosa Sillanpää  
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**ABSTRACT:**

People are aware of the sustainability issues today and this has also impacted the business world. Organizations need to consider how they deal with the sustainability aspect and how they could succeed in managing sustainability through everyday business practices. This is especially challenging for the MNCs as they have a dispersed workforce and they face different sustainability-related norms in different parts of the world. This thesis focuses on the employee perspective on organizational sustainability management. It is explored how the employees and to be more specific, the millennials, perceive sustainability management and its internal communication in an MNC. Also, it is examined how their expectations and experiences of these areas impact their participation in organizational sustainability-related objectives.

The theory in this thesis consists of the separate chapters on sustainability management, internal sustainability communication, and the millennials' expectations for these two. The employee perspective and the MNC context are present in each of these chapters. Finally, the theoretical viewpoints are summed up and linked to each other.

The empirical part aims at creating new understandings of the topic area. Therefore, a qualitative research approach was used. The data collection method was a focus group research. There were two focus groups that consisted of 10 participants in total. The participants were millennials who had at least two years of working experience from MNCs. Moreover, this research applied qualitative content analysis and thematic analysis to organize and understand the data collected.

The results of this thesis indicate that the millennials' expectations for sustainability management and its internal communication do not entirely correspond with their experiences, which has a negative impact on their participation in the organization's sustainability-related objectives. They would like the sustainability to be more authentic and comprehensive. This includes especially the internal impacts of sustainability management. Also, they consider it to be of high importance that the core of the business is not unsustainable. As it comes to internal sustainability communication, the results suggest that there is a need to improve the visibility and understandability of sustainability as well as its relatedness to one's job. Thus, there is a call for more communication and the communication processes should be supported in different ways to encourage the millennials to share their views and participate in organizational sustainability.

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**KEYWORDS:** Sustainability management, internal sustainability communication, employee participation, Millennials

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# 1 Introduction

Considering sustainability issues is a competitive advantage for a rising amount of organizations across the globe. Still, implementing a successful sustainability strategy can be a major challenge. One way to implement an organizational sustainability strategy could be considering the role of the employees and their contribution to the strategy. However, the employee contribution seems to be highly affected by the perceptions that the employees have of the organizational mechanisms. This thesis focuses on the employees' perceptions of the overall sustainability management and internal sustainability communication in an MNC. Moreover, it is examined how the perceptions of these two affect employee participation in the organization's sustainability-related objectives. The employee group of this study consists of the millennials who will soon form the major part of the workforce around the world.

This chapter starts with the presentation of the background for the study. After that, the research gap and the key concepts of the research are explored. Then, the research questions and objectives are introduced. Finally, the delimitations are considered and the structure of the thesis is explained further.

## 1.1 Background for the study

In August 2019, the CEOs from various US companies signed a declaration. According to the declaration, corporations have five stakeholders: shareholders, customers, employees, suppliers, and communities. They stated that all these stakeholders are important and they commit to deliver value to them all. (Business Roundtable 2019). Thus, they challenged the old view that focuses mainly on the shareholders' interest and agreed to bridge the gap between profit and purpose. What makes this especially remarkable is that the group of CEOs are from companies that represent almost 30% of total U.S.

market cap. For example, MNCs like Apple and Walmart were included. (Gartenberg & Serafeim 2019).

The declaration may be a significant step towards a more sustainable world. However, this declaration was not surprising as people are increasingly interested in sustainability-related concerns today. The stakeholders demand more openness related to entire value chains. The globalization and the development of technology have also increased transparency, which has set a new kind of pressure for organizations to reconsider the ethical and sustainability aspects of their operations. The organizations understand what this means for the competition in business. In other words, they need to consider these issues to stay competitive. This means that they must find solutions to integrate the social, economic and environmental impacts into their day-to-day business operations. (Mol, 2015; Epstein, 2017, pp. 21-23).

However, turning the promises and purposes into everyday practices is not that straightforward. The policies and practices that organizations have related to sustainability management are often incomplete. Many organizations have stated that they are committed to sustainability and understand why it is crucial for their business. However, this commitment cannot yet be seen, for example, from the studies that monitor these areas. (Dyllick & Muff, 2015, pp. 2). This is particularly challenging if the organization operates internationally as there are often different regulations that govern the sustainability issues in different countries. Overall, organizations need new perspectives on how to make sustainability work in their processes and practices. This is also supported by Baumgartner & Rauter (2017) as they propose that concrete guidance is what the organizations now need to be able to act strategically and successfully in a sustainable way.

Epstein (2017, pp. 23) instructs that implementing sustainability can be a challenge because it is different as compared to implementing other organizational strategies. The challenge stems from the goal of sustainability which is to simultaneously manage and measure not only social and environmental but also financial performance. This is when

trade-offs are often needed but, for example, the shareholders' response to those trade-offs cannot always be predicted. (Epstein, 2017, pp. 23). However, according to a recent article by Eccles and Klimenko (2019), investors around the world give more and more emphasis on the organization's ESG performance. ESG refers to the environmental, social and governance aspects and it is the investors' way of evaluating the organization's sustainability when they make investment decisions (Eccles & Klimenko, 2019). The major problem that organizations have is that they do not know how to talk to the shareholders and potential investors about their sustainability efforts even though they usually understand that they should do that somehow (Scott 2019). In the same article, Mindy Lubber, the CEO of sustainable investment group Ceres states that only few companies succeed in communicating *"sustainability as an integral component of business strategy and decision-making, or as a driver of increased business resilience and revenue growth."*

One way to communicate and build trust between an organization and its stakeholders (including the shareholders) is to consider the role of one of the key stakeholder groups: the employees. They are often considered as a valid source of information by other stakeholders. Yet, organizations often neglect their role in implementing a sustainability strategy. (Kataria, Kataria, & Garg, 2013, pp. 46). Cornelissen (2009, pp. 195) also recognizes this and he thinks that for example, the development of new technologies enables the employees to easily distribute their information about an organization for external stakeholders. In addition to the shareholders, the message can reach some prospective employees and customers who are interested in the organization's sustainability-related actions. For example, as stated by Oladipo, Iyamabo, and Otubanjo (2013) the prospective employees seek clear communication and credibility when they evaluate employer brands and make employment decisions. Therefore, the employee voice could support the signals that are sent out of the organization. However, conveying the sustainability message for external stakeholders is just one example of how the employees can contribute to the sustainability management of the business. There are also many other ways for an employee to contribute to that. For example, an employee could be valuable for an organization already by sharing one's ideas and viewpoints and participating in

the sustainability-related discussion. The challenge is that usually, the sustainability efforts are not an official part of one's job but instead they are voluntary (Ramus and Killmer, 2007). In other words, it cannot be considered self-evident that the employees would like to get involved with the sustainability strategy of the organization. If that is the case, the organization's internal processes must be re-evaluated.

When planning the internal processes to get the employees involved with the organizational sustainability-related objectives, it is important to understand how the employees currently perceive the organization's overall sustainability management. Understanding this perception is important because, as stated by Cornelissen (2009, pp. 199), the perceived organizational mechanisms affect the employees' identification with the organization and, hence, this may impact the employee participation. The organization's overall sustainability management can include a broad range of factors, such as considering the environment, processes and structures, communities, products and services, economy, and employees (Aaltonen, Luoma, & Rautiainen, 2004, pp. 43-47). The stronger the employees identify with the organization and its relationship with these factors, the more likely it is that they want to participate in contributing to those.

Moreover, Kataria et al. (2013, pp. 47) emphasize the role of an organization's internal communication in creating participation. They explain that working towards a sustainable organization should not only belong to the top management but it should be formed to be a collective objective that each organization member can strive for. Various researchers (Puusa, Reijonen, Juuti, & Laukkanen, 2012, pp. 94-95; Hobart & Sendek, 2014, pp. 165) have also shown that the internal communication and, to be more specific, the two-way internal communication is what motivates employees to work and go even the extra mile for a collective organizational objective. Accordingly, this could also be applied when it comes to internal sustainability-related communication and setting collective sustainability objectives. This is also supported by Maon, Lindgreen, and Swaen (2009) who state that communication within the organization is the key to the successful implementation of sustainability. Yet, Kataria et al. (2013, pp. 46) highlight that there is little

information about how the employees perceive the organization's internal sustainability communication.

What makes this especially interesting is that there is one generation that will in six years form three-quarters of the workforce. This generation is the millennials (the generation Y). The people from this generation are stated to consider sustainability issues either important or very important to them on a personal level. Hence, they also value organizations that contribute to sustainability. (Peters, 2019). Thus, they might be interested in supporting sustainable employers by contributing to their sustainability projects and processes. However, they are also evaluated to have values that do not speak for committing to one organization and the focus is often primarily on developing one's value in the labor market (Kultalahti & Viitala, 2015). What is more, the millennials demand more from their management than the previous generations and, for example, the fairness of that is constantly monitored by them (Hobart & Sendek, 2014, pp. 111-113). In general, taking a role in advancing an organization's sustainability efforts and, for example, writing or talking about these processes in public requires that a person is committed. There is always an alternative option of putting all the efforts into developing one's own value in the labor market and focusing on the core of his or her job. In addition, even if the role in contributing to the organizational sustainability management would not be that official, the employees usually talk to their friends and family about the important things to them – if that is sustainability, as it is for an increasing amount of people, and it is not an integral part of the organization where one works, that most likely affects also the perception that the message receiver gets on the organization and its products or services.

All in all, sustainability has increased its importance in business but implementing a sustainability strategy can be challenging, especially if the context is international. Employees could have a vital role in the implementation process and, considering the millennials' attributes, they seem to have a lot of potential for that. However, this requires that they are supported and encouraged in the right way. This research focuses on the

importance of the perceptions that the millennials have of the organization's sustainability management and internal sustainability communication in encouraging the millennials to join and support the organization's sustainability efforts.

## 1.2 Research gap

Management and the sustainability aspect in it has been researched to some extent, but as outlined by Starik and Kanashiro (2013, pp. 13): *"the existing management theories do not fully acknowledge the changing organization-and-environment field and its implications in the long term; the interdependence and integration of relationships of humans, organizations, and society; and the paradoxical demands inherent in a dynamic society"*. Also, De Lange (2010) explains that most of the previous management studies focus more on the business organization or their industries instead of the sustainability aspect. Thus, there is space for new insights in sustainability management, and this study aims at contributing to the employee perspective of it.

There are a few studies that consider sustainability management and especially the employee aspect in it. For example, there is a research that focuses on the employees' perceptions on the organizational support toward the environment (Lamm, Tosti-Kharas, & King, 2015) and another one that examines how ethical work climates are impacted by HRM practices (Guerci, Radaelli, Siletti, Cirella, & Shani, 2015). However, these earlier studies on sustainability management have different focus areas as this research is not limited to the environmental aspect of sustainability management. Moreover, it does not focus on the role of HR and/or ethical work climates. Instead, sustainability management is seen as a broad entity and the emphasis is on the internal sustainability communication and the employees' participation in sustainability-related objectives.

Internal communication has been increasingly studied but the research related to internal sustainability communication is lacking. There are some articles but those focus mainly on external sustainability communication (e.g. the mission and value statements of an organization). There are fewer studies on the internal sustainability communication

and especially the employee perspective is usually left out (Kataria et al. 2013, pp. 46-47). However, Singh (2013) has discussed how sustainability can be achieved through internal communication and soft skills. The study takes into account the employee perspective but the focus is on soft skills and it excludes the wider perspective on sustainability management. Moreover, it does not include empirical research, which would be key to producing new insights into the phenomenon. Then there is a study conducted by Craig and Allen (2013) on sustainability information sources (internal and external) as perceived by the employees. However, this thesis does not only focus on the sources of sustainability communication and, while Craig and Allen (2013), conducted the research through surveys, this thesis aims at examining the deeper understandings that the employees have of the internal sustainability communication and how it affects their employee experience. In this research, it is also expected that the internal sustainability communication is a key function in the organizational sustainability management and therefore, the views support each other and provide a comprehensive outlook on the topic.

Finally, the millennials and their views from the employee perspective bring a new aspect to the study. There is not much research on how the employees perceive an organization's internal sustainability communication (Kataria et al. 2013, pp. 46), let alone how the millennials perceive that. Also, the sustainability management from the millennials' perspective is not extensively studied as the previous research focuses more on their general views on sustainability or, for example, their views on increasing business performance through sustainability-related actions (Valente & Atkinson, 2019). This study is interested in contributing to an understanding of the kind of sustainability management and internal sustainability communication that the millennials would like to receive (expectations) and how these themes are experienced by them in their current positions (experiences). Moreover, the millennials bring a new kind of outlook on working life and sustainability-related issues. For example, in addition to considering sustainability issues as important, they also have a global mindset and they understand the global marketplace (Hobart & Sendek, 2014, pp. 94). As it comes to sustainability management and internal sustainability communication, the international perspective intensifies the

challenges. This thesis focuses on the millennials in an international context and, therefore, those intensified challenges are covered as well.

Also, most importantly, integrating all these aspects is something that has not been previously studied as far as it is known by the author.

### 1.3 Key concepts

The chosen topic for this research is broad and, therefore, some decisions must be made related to the points of view. Otherwise, the subject would be too broad to be controllable and integrated at the same time within the extent of a master's thesis. This has an impact on how the key concepts of this study are viewed. In this study, the key concepts are sustainability management, internal sustainability communication, millennials, and MNCs. These are elaborated further in the theoretical framework but now they are briefly defined in terms of what they mean in the context of this research.

***Sustainability management*** is defined as “*the formulation, implementation, and evaluation of both environmental and socioeconomic sustainability-related decisions and actions*”. This definition is compiled by Kanashiro & Starik (2013, pp. 12) from several other studies (Bell & Morse, 2008; Dunphy, Benveniste, Griffiths, & Sutton, 2000; Elkington, 1998; Laszlo, 2003; Stead & Stead, 2004). This concept does not have a narrow definition so the perspectives can vary. This research focuses on organizational sustainability management and the employee perspective of it.

***Internal sustainability communication*** refers to the internal communication that is about sustainability. Internal communication is the “*communication between an organisation's strategic managers and its internal stakeholders*” (Welch & Jackson, 2007). In this research, this includes the internal communication that is targeted directly at the millennials as well as the internal communication related to other things that affect the

millennials' perceptions of the overall sustainability management in the organization. In general, this communication can be either downward or upward and there are various ways to implement these (Cornelissen, 2009, pp. 195-197).

**Millennials**, who are also known as the generation Y, are in this thesis understood as defined by Smola and Sutton (2002, pp. 371). According to them, the millennials are a group of people that were born between 1978 and 1995. There is a lot of research related to the millennials but this study focuses on their views on sustainability management and internal sustainability communication in organizations.

**An MNC (multinational corporation)** is an organization that operates across national boundaries. Typically, it has a headquarter in one country and production or other units in one or more other countries. (Enright & Subramanian, 2007, pp. 906; Mead, 1998). Due to the international context, the characteristics and challenges that the MNCs have may also be different as compared to organizations that are fully domestic as it comes to the sustainability management and internal sustainability communication.

#### **1.4 Research questions and objectives**

The research investigates empirically the millennials' experiences and expectations on sustainability management and internal sustainability communication. Moreover, it is explored how these experiences and expectations affect their participation in the organizational sustainability-related objectives. Also, all these aspects are examined within the context of MNCs. To be more specific, the following research questions are formed:

*What do the millennials expect of the sustainability management and internal sustainability communication in MNCs?*

*How are the sustainability management and internal sustainability communication experienced by the millennials in MNCs?*

*What do the millennials think about participating in the organizational sustainability-related objectives in MNCs?*

The author strongly believes that by answering the research questions and reaching these objectives, it is possible to contribute to the common knowledge base within the topic area of this thesis.

## **1.5 Delimitations**

In general, the topic under research is current and the pressure that organizations face as it comes to implementing their sustainability strategies has increased significantly (Laszlo & Cescau, 2017). Due to the novelty and the extent of the topic, the theories related to sustainability management are still emerging, which limits the exact definition and understanding of the concept. In addition, there is not much literature on sustainability management and internal sustainability communication as it comes to the employees' or the millennials' perspectives. This thesis aims at using the existing theories that are the most relevant in expanding the understanding of the topic and supporting the research.

Moreover, internal sustainability communication is in a major role in this thesis to evaluate the organization's sustainability management and the employees' contribution to that. It is understood that there may also be other factors that would have an impact on that but, due to the extent of the master's thesis, this delimitation was made. Overall, the organizational sustainability management and the related internal communication might have an impact on a wider understanding of employee engagement. However, this thesis is interested in their impact on the employees' participation particularly in sustainability-related objectives where the major advantage is the employees' experience of meaningfulness.

Finally, the interviews conducted for the study lasted for less than three hours in total. This was due to the resources of the study and the chosen data collection method which was a focus group interview. The small amount of data limits the generalizability of the results even though they were here enough to answer the research questions. Also, the study is qualitative so the main objective is to provide new insights and understandings instead of generalizations.

## **1.6 Structure**

The thesis started with an introduction to the topic. Next, the theoretical framework is presented. This consists of separate chapters in sustainability management, internal sustainability communication, and millennials. These themes are elaborated to the extent to which they are relevant to the thesis topic. Moreover, the employee perspective is strongly present in each of them. Also, the international perspective is taken into account in each of these sections. After the theoretical framework, the research design is introduced. Then, it is time to present the research results. Finally, there is a discussion of the results and conclusions of the overall study.

## **2 Sustainability management**

This chapter starts by presenting an overview of sustainability management, including the definition of it. After that, a look is taken into the motives for organizational sustainability management. Later, the employee aspect is explored from the perspectives of sustainable HRM and employee participation in different sustainability-related processes. Finally, sustainability management is examined further in an international context.

### **2.1 An overview of the sustainability management**

Typically, sustainability is seen through three dimensions: social, environmental and economic sustainability. This is based on a concept of the triple bottom line (TBL) which was created by John Elkington in 1994. The concept states that the financial performance of an organization cannot be the only measurement of corporate success but the other aspects need to be considered as well. The TBL has become a widely used term by organizations and researchers around the globe during the last few decades and it has had a major impact on how people view sustainability. However, according to Elkington (2018), the real impacts and practical actions due to the TBL can be questioned and, therefore, he pronounced a recall. According to the recall, the definition from 1994 does not entirely respond to the current problems and contribute to a holistic view of sustainability. Even if some businesses have applied a more sustainable direction after using the model, many still value the profit targets and would do anything to reach those but fail to do the same for their people and planet targets. (Elkington, 2018).

Moreover, some complementary views have been created related to the TBL and sustainability. For example, Aaltonen, Luoma, & Rautiainen, (2004, pp. 43-47) presented a 6+1 model which describes an organization to have six areas of responsibility: environment, processes and structures, communities, products and services, economy, and

employees. According to the model, all these aspects are adapted based on the prevailing organizational culture (Aaltonen et al., 2004, pp. 43-37). This model reflects the change to a more holistic view of sustainability and sustainability management. Now, 25 years after the creation of the TBL concept, the discussion has come to a point where sustainability must be authentic and it must cover the entire value chain of a product or a service. However, it is important to understand that sustainability means different things for different organizations. In other words, they should have different focus areas based on their industries. The most important thing is to recognize the business impacts and to take responsibility for those. The chosen focus areas for an organization's sustainability management should be concrete and understandable so that they can also be acted upon and the results can be measured. (Kurittu, 2019).

When exploring sustainability management, it is likely that the concept of corporate social responsibility (CSR) is also encountered. According to Chandler (2014), there are various definitions for CSR and it is often defined based on an organization's preferences. In some cases it can mean, for example, the products or services created for consumer needs, providing employment opportunities, taxation, or the shareholder returns to the investors (Chandler, 2014). Also, the European Commission (n.d.) has defined it very generally stating it to be the social impact of the organization and, hence, it must always be locally managed by the organization in question.

All in all, many themes emerge when talking about sustainability and it is often context related. Therefore, sustainability management does not have a definition that would have very exact limits. Sustainability management is a rather new concept and, therefore, the theories related to it are still strongly in the development phase. What is more, when talking about sustainability, the concept of sustainable development is also often used. (Kanashiro & Starik, 2013, pp. 12; Crane & Matten, 2010, pp. 32). However, this thesis has the focus on the employee perspective and, therefore, it is more justifiable to connect the view to the theories of management and, more specifically, to sustainability management.

In this research, a definition that is used is compiled by Kanashiro & Starik (2013, pp. 12) from several other pieces of research (Bell & Morse, 2008; Dunphy, Benveniste, Griffiths, & Sutton, 2000; Elkington, 1998; Laszlo, 2003; Stead & Stead, 2004): sustainability management is “*the formulation, implementation, and evaluation of both environmental and socioeconomic sustainability-related decisions and actions*”. Despite the closeness of the definition to the concept of TBL, this research takes a holistic approach to sustainability management with a strong emphasis on the importance of practical actions. Also, it is understood that a major separation between the sustainability management and CSR is *time*. The sustainability management focuses on viewing the decisions and actions over time and responds to short-term needs while sustaining the ability to respond to future needs. CSR, instead, stands for good initiatives but, in some cases, it may be guilty of borrowing resources and capital from the future to meet the needs of today. (Bansal & DesJardine, 2015). Bansal and DesJardine (2015) also assess that activities cannot be both sustainable and responsible which is, however, challenged by many researchers. In this study, CSR is seen as a hyponym of the sustainability management that focuses on the social aspect and, thus, it is believed that actions and decisions can be both sustainable and responsible as long as they are considered overtime.

Finally, sustainability management can have various executors. For example, the decisions that individuals make related to the aspects of sustainability are about individual sustainability management. Instead, managing sustainability collectively on a corporate level is about organizational sustainability management. In addition, there is the societal level of sustainability management, which refers to the decisions that some major institutions make (e.g. plans related to transportation). (Sharma, Starik, & Husted, 2007; de Lange, 2010). This thesis focuses on *the organizational sustainability management*. To be more specific, the employees and their views on sustainability management in an organization are at the center of this study. It must be noted that, while the overall picture of sustainability has changed during the years, also the culture of management has changed moving from an authority to a more dialogical culture where the employee is

seen as a specialist in his or her job (Puusa et al., 2012, pp. 31). Therefore, the sustainability management of the employees has also changed and it includes entirely new aspects. What sustainability management can signify and be in practice for the employees is covered later in this chapter. Now, motives for organizational sustainability management are presented.

## **2.2 The key drivers of the organizational sustainability management**

To understand the big picture of sustainability management, it is important to understand the key drivers for why an organization would pursue a more sustainable way to conduct its business. These drivers (a.k.a. the reasons or motives), as well as the embeddedness of sustainability, can vary between the different organizations. Moreover, there are also many theories to explain the drivers further. Now, the most relevant ones concerning the thesis topic are presented. These theories, the stakeholder theory, and the institutional theory are also very frequently used among the researchers. Besides these theories, the most current drivers for organizational sustainability are briefly discussed in the following text.

The stakeholder theory is probably the most common way to examine the motives for organizational sustainability. It refers to the impacts that the organization has on its stakeholders as a result of undertaking sustainability management. The objective of this theory is to have a positive impact on the relationship with the stakeholders and, consequently, to have a positive impact on the business. (Gray & Stites, 2013, pp. 101-102). Considering the target group of this thesis, it can be understood that the stakeholder theory also responds to the needs and expectations of the employees. However, as stated by Hörisch, Freeman, and Schaltegger (2014, pp. 337), considering the stakeholders is not always that simple as it cannot be assumed that all the stakeholders have the same interests as it comes to sustainability. Hörisch et al. (2014, pp. 337), continue by explaining that a major challenge of the sustainability management is to solve the conflicts of interest between the different stakeholders so that the potential unifying value

behind them, the sustainability, can be made use of. (Hörisch et al., 2014, pp. 337). This applies to different stakeholders but not the least to the employees whose interests may differ from each other. The potential positive outcomes of considering the employee expectations might be, for example, the reduced hiring and retention costs as well as the improved performance. Overall, the outcomes of considering the stakeholder interests might also include the reduced manufacturing and commercial costs as well as the increased revenue and market share which would result in a lowered risk. (Willard, 2012).

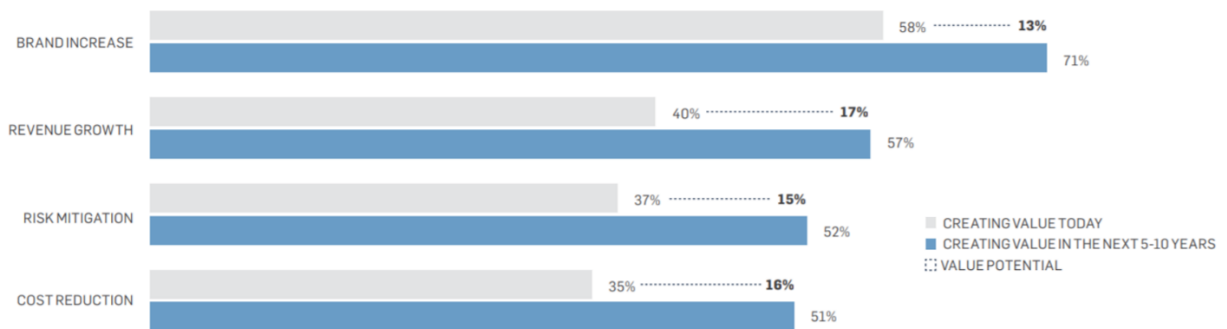
The other very commonly used theory, the institutional theory, is based on the public expectations that often stem from the change in the social environment. Here, the organizations undertake sustainability management to be perceived as lawful and as socially and environmentally responsible. In other words, they act because they feel pressured by some institutions to do so. (Gray & Stites, 2013, pp. 101-102). These institutions could be the regulators (coercive isomorphism), the industry (normative isomorphism) or eventually, the competitors (mimetic isomorphism) (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). However, this theory also relates to the stakeholder theory as sustainable development is fundamentally interested in the stakeholders' views (Escobar & Vredenburg, 2011). Therefore, also the employees' perceptions of the organization could be impacted based on whether the organization follows the institutional environment when it comes to sustainability.

All in all, there can be various drivers for organizational sustainability management. Due to the extent of the master's thesis and the theoretical part's relevance to the thesis topic, the other theories related to that are not elaborated further. Instead, what needs to be understood from here is that the organizations need to see some value in conducting their businesses sustainably. This can be directly related to cutting costs and making a profit out of that but it can also be about considering the overall brand image. According to a recent study by United Nations Global Compact (2019), the organizations perceive sustainability as a value creator for them now and they expect its importance to even grow during the next five to ten years. Table 1 shows the key areas through which

they consider they get the most value when they undertake sustainability management. Here, the UN Global Compact recognizes trust creation to be a major outcome of the organization's sustainability efforts. The UNGC study reaches 1000 CEOs and 1500 business executives through a survey worldwide and they also conducted 100 in-depth interviews to get a deeper understanding of the results.

**Table 1** Value today and value potential. Adapted from the UN Global Compact CEO Study (2019, pp. 37).

To what extent is sustainability and trust creating business value across these areas for your company today?  
To what extent do you believe sustainability and trust will be a critical driver of business value across these areas in the next 5–10 years?



In general, the increased sustainability and people's interest in it has changed the way that the organizations compete (Laszlo & Zhexembayeva, 2011, pp. 38). This can also be seen from Table 1 and the theories presented above; to be able to compete and survive, the organizations need to consider how they could contribute to sustainability. Moreover, Laszlo and Zhexembayeva (2011, pp. 38) have made an interesting notice as they point out the differences between bolt-on and embedded sustainability. In bolt-on sustainability, there is often a separate department of sustainability in an organization whereas the embedded sustainability highlights that sustainability is everyone's job. Moreover, there are different views on whether the organization's main objective is to pursue value for its shareholders or sustainable value for the stakeholders, of which the latter is rapidly becoming a source of competitive advantage. (Laszlo & Zhexembayeva, 2011, pp. 38-39).

In the future, the differences between the bolt-on and embedded sustainability strategies may be even more apparent as organizations are now developing their operations considerably. It is likely that these competitive advantages related to sustainability will be used even more heavily, for example, in creating an organization's employer image. Therefore, it is essential already now to examine how sustainability could be embedded in their culture and operations across the entire value chain of their product or service, even across country borders. In other words, that way an organization does not only focus on the areas that can be directly seen by a customer buying a product or a service. As indicated by the UN Global Compact progress report (2019, pp. 14), 90 % of the organizations (of those who participated in the research) have policies and practices on their sustainability management but the embeddedness of these across the organization is still lacking. That is to say that practical actions would still be needed. The embeddedness would have several advantages like, for example, the employees' better understanding of the organization's sustainability (UN Global Compact CEO Study, 2019, 75).

All in all, what could be concluded from the drivers is that, in the best scenario, the sustainability management is embedded in the company culture. There are external pressures too, but to create a long-term competitive advantage, the practices must be reasonable and adapted to the organizational structures and processes. Finally, it is important to understand that fulfilling an organization's ideology with sustainability management does not exclude sustainability-related profit targets. In other words, profit and sustainability can be combined but, to achieve the long-term success that way, sustainability should be an integral part of the strategic management of an organization. Otherwise, it may become a separate function far from the practical processes. (Aaltonen et al, 2004, pp. 49).

### **2.3 Sustainability management and employees**

Now, sustainability management is considered closer from an employee's perspective. As argued by Starik and Kanashiro (2013, pp. 26), the concept of sustainability management does not have exact limits and this is also the case when it comes to sustainability management and employees. However, this text focuses on two different aspects, sustainable HRM and employee participation in sustainability-related objectives. The former is presented because it manages to show the broad extent to which sustainability management can be present for an employee. Instead, the latter aspect emphasizes the employee's subjective experience that he or she gets when getting involved in the organizational sustainability-related objectives. Thus, the employee is not always just the object of it or the contributor to it because it is one's duty. Instead, there are often also personal reasons for why the employee would like to participate.

### **2.3.1 Sustainable HRM**

Sustainable HRM refers to linking sustainability and HRM. This is a rather new approach as it has evolved during the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The definition of sustainable HRM is still developing and, hence, there are a variety of ways to view it. (Kramar, 2014). According to Kramar (2014), there are three main kinds of literature on sustainable HRM that vary in the way that they view the connection between HRM and sustainability. These are now presented to provide an overview of the aspects where sustainability management can be present for the employees.

First, there is capability reproduction. This emphasizes the role of HRM as the creator of *internal impacts through their work with the employees*. HRM can impact, for example, the employees' engagement, their perceptions on the fulfillment of psychological contracts, and satisfaction in their jobs. In practice, this could be e.g. communication with the employees or recognizing their strengths and developing those. Through the employees' experience of these factors and their reflection on the employee performance, the organization may achieve positive economic outcomes and sustainable competitive advantage. Second, there is a group of researchers who focus on the external outcomes

of HRM practices. To be more specific, they outline *the external outcomes related to the TBL and CSR*. These writers emphasize the ecological and social impacts and their inter-mediation of economic outcomes. Here, the employees are a part of the stakeholder group whose expectations may be fulfilled this way. Finally, the third group indicates the relationship between different management practices. According to this view, *the environmental, social and human outcomes are interrelated*. Together, they support the overall sustainability of the organization. This includes, for example, considering different management styles in a business context. Here, the employees can be affected in multiple ways, moving from the decisions on the environmental aspects to the decisions regarding the flexibility of work. What makes this challenging especially for MNCs is that the management styles may vary from a country to another. (Kramar, 2014; Syed & Kramar, 2017, pp. 384; Avery, 2005).

All in all, it is important to note that these three groups are not mutually exclusive and they have some overlaps (Kramar, 2014). Stankevičiūtė and Savanevičienė (2018) have also recognized the role of HR as the contributor of the sustainability and they conclude that there are some certain characteristics that describe the sustainable HRM practices such as *long-term orientation, compliance beyond labor regulations, care of employees and environment, and employee participation*. Thus, these aspects and the three main kinds of literature on sustainable HRM show the large extent to which sustainability management can be present for the employees. This is necessary for this thesis as the focus is on the employees' perceptions which means that a too strict limitation to the understanding of sustainability management cannot be used. What is more, despite the loose definition of the sustainable HRM on this thesis, it must be noted that there are differences between the organizations and the extent to which their HR departments are active in supporting the organizational sustainability management.

Finally, as discussed by Crane & Matten (2010, pp. 331), some concerns related to sustainability management and employees are regulated by the law and the work contract but a lot is still dependent on the employee-employer relationship and how the practices

support the individual needs and desires. From the employee perspective, the successful implementation of sustainability management can be identified especially from the work satisfaction and commitment of the people that work at the organization and value sustainability. Moreover, the implementation of the sustainability management has been successful if the organization renews the practices without turnarounds and manages to use extensively the talent that the organization has (Aaltonen et al., 2004, pp. 117). Also, the employee participation in the sustainability management practices shows that the organization has made an effort to encourage the employees to be active and, that way, to increase their feeling of having a meaningful job. From the perspective on sustainability management, that contributes to solving one of the key challenges which is to ensure that everyone has the right to meaningful work. (Crane & Matten, 2010, 330). Now, employee participation is considered further.

### **2.3.2 Employee participation in sustainability-related processes**

In general, employees can contribute to organizational sustainability management in multiple ways. However, as stated by Casey and Sieber (2016, pp. 74), the management and the supervisors are in key positions to address the time and effort that the employees can invest in different functions. Also, they can have a major impact on the employees' willingness to develop by experimenting, take risks and generate ideas. (Casey & Sieber, 2016, pp. 74). Hence, the way that the employees perceive these decisions and the related practical implementations made by the management and/or the supervisors may impact their willingness to contribute to the sustainability-related objectives. Still, it is important to understand why involving the employees in these objectives, at least at some level, is important not only for the business but also for the personal experience that the employees may get out of it.

Basically, the different sustainability projects and processes link to the employee's experience of meaningfulness in one's work. Meaningfulness is a subjective experience but it can, for example, make the employee feel more whole and motivated. Moreover, it can

increase the employee's perception of the similarity between his or her values and the values of the organization. However, to succeed in these, an organization needs to understand the kinds of social and environmental responsibilities that motivate the employees. This way, it is able to create strategies that increase and maintain employee motivation. If the employees work for something that they consider to be meaningful, they are also more likely to be satisfied and experience intrinsic motivation. Through these experiences, the employee is also more likely to perform better as the intrinsic motivation, for example, boosts creativity and has a positive impact on the retention rates. Thus, considering the sustainability issues only at the macrolevel should not be enough for the organizations as there are several reasons why the microlevel and, more specifically, the employee level is just as important to examine. (Glavas, 2012). To understand the employee's experience of meaningfulness, Glavas (2012) has separated the feeling of meaningfulness to *at work* and *in work* (See Table 2). Briefly, this explains that the feeling can be related to either one's job or the organization or to both/neither of these.

**Table 2** The model of meaningfulness at work / in work (Glavas, 2012).

		<i>In work</i>	
		Low	High
<i>At work</i>	High	<b>Peripheral:</b> Employee loves company but isn't inspired by what he or she does each day	<b>Embedded:</b> Completely engaged employee who loves the company and what he or she does personally
	Low	<b>Disengaged:</b> Completely uninspired employee	<b>Lone Ranger:</b> Employee enjoys functional tasks, but isn't engaged by the company mission

For example, an employee can consider the organization to be sustainable even when one's daily work is not straightforwardly involved with those processes. This is the experience of peripheral meaningfulness. According to Glavas (2012), this is often a result of communicating the organization's efforts to the employees, creating occasional opportunities for volunteering, or making donations for charity. On the opposite, the

lone ranger experiences meaningfulness in one's daily work but the organization as such does not contribute to sustainability. The embedded and disengaged models are the ultimate feelings of meaningfulness or the lack of it. Naturally, the embedded meaningfulness is the model that has the most value for an employee, yet it is also the most challenging for the organization to implement. (Glavas, 2012).

There are also challenges related to implementing the sustainability management processes for employees and engaging them with those. For example, supporting the sustainability management of the local supervisors and work communities may be demanding (Aaltonen et al., 2004, pp. 117). Glavas (2012) also reminds of the same fact that Hörisch et al. (2014, pp. 337), stated to be a major challenge for the sustainability management and especially the stakeholder aspect in it; the sustainability processes in business cannot be approached with a view that everyone has the same preferences. Some people are more motivated by the positive impacts on business that sustainability has while some are motivated by, fundamentally, helping the planet through their jobs (Glavas, 2012). Still, it is useful to have an ongoing discussion related to the different aspects of the sustainability management such as the values of an organization and to the programs related to the CSR as they are relevant in creating an organization's sustainability management practices. To fully succeed in creating employee participation, sustainability should be eventually embedded in the company culture and strategy (Aaltonen et al., 2004, pp. 116-117; Glavas, 2012). Thus, this supports the view by Laszlo and Zhexembayeva (2011), who explained that embedding sustainability in the organizational culture is what creates a long-term competitive advantage.

Finally, not embedding the sustainability in the organization may also cause some contradictions when it comes to employee participation in different sustainability-related processes in an international organization. This applies to the entire organization but especially when the organization is guilty of different breaches in its distant locations. In a situation like that, providing the other employees opportunities for participating in some sustainability projects and processes could, if applied to the research by Laszlo and

Zhexembayeva (2011, pp. 38-39), be a bolt-on extra that does not lead to sustainable competitive advantage. Theoretically, the organization could involve the employees in its distant countries with some of these processes as well. However, it must be noted that if the employee's backgrounds and working conditions are significantly different, their willingness to get involved may also differ. To be more specific, it may be that when for example the employee rights are insufficient, the additional feeling of meaningfulness is not missed or needed unless that would have something to do with improving the situation there. Maslow (1943) states that one's physiological and safety needs are the most important ones whereas the esteem and self-actualization are the last ones. Therefore, it is possible that a person wants to have the basic needs fulfilled first and, after that, he or she wants to make changes on a larger scale and contributions for the external such as for the environment. All in all, the organization and its culture have major impacts on how everything is managed and to what extent everyone is involved in the organization's sustainability processes. Now, the international aspect of sustainability management is covered further, continuing with an emphasis on the employee perspective.

## **2.4 Sustainability management in an MNC**

It is crucial to understand that the challenges faced by the different kinds of organizations in implementing their sustainability strategies are different. The key challenges for MNCs are related to their geographical scopes. They should be able to manage sustainability across the entire value chain of their product or service and the different business functions (UN Global Compact progress report, 2019, pp. 11). For them, this means managing it across the country or even continent borders. According to Escobar and Vredenburg (2011, pp. 40), there is a lack of global sustainability-related regulations and consequently, there are varying sustainability-related norms and pressure that the organizations face in different countries. This has led to some organizations, even the ones with the most well-known brands, to take advantage of the differing regulations in different countries (Baharin & Sentosa, 2012, pp. 51). Typically, these kinds of actions have

occurred in developing countries where the regulations are lower (Crane & Matten 2010, pp. 320).

Considering the extent of sustainability management, the breaches can relate to a wide range of aspects, yet the employees and their management across the country borders is often at the center of attention when the breaches are discussed. For example, an organization may manufacture products in countries where there is a cheaper workforce and, possibly, use child labor, allow risks for health and safety, or to offend the human rights in some other way. The unsustainable actions are often targeted at the voiceless and vulnerable groups of people like kids, migrants and the poor. Again, what makes this challenging is that sustainability management and employee rights are seen differently in different parts of the world. (Economist, 2012; Crane & Matten 2010, pp. 320; Kiggundu, 2002, pp. 303). For example, the views on wellbeing at work vary significantly between Europe and developing countries. However, that does not mean that the employees in the developing countries do not want to be protected. Instead, people have different perceptions of what is wrong and their abilities to intervene are not similar. In the developing countries, the labor standards are typically perceived to be too much, too expensive, and not applicable to their culture or their social and economic situations. Moreover, this is a difficult topic because the organizations provide employment to the developing countries but they always have a reason for having the operations there (the lower costs and the competitive advantage related to that). This does not withdraw their responsibility to act sustainably but to draw the line on what is right is not that simple. (Kiggundu, 2002, pp. 303; Zwolinski, 2007).

Rao and Krishna (2003, pp. 338) advise that an organization should define its objectives, mission, and policies clearly when it starts internationalizing. They highlight that the company philosophy should be planned so that the different cultural values, as well as the organizational values, can be respected despite the time and place. Too often some organizations focus on increasing their cost advantages instead of considering the reality and for example the local NGOs and organized communities who support the employee

rights in those countries where they have operations. The lack of global regulations supports this kind of behavior (Escobar & Vredenburg (2011, pp. 40). Scherer and Smid (2000) take a step forward and they also question whether an organization should take a role in changing the local standards instead of adapting or not adapting to them. This is also recognized by the UN Global Conduct progress report (2019, pp. 76) that argues that the change happens at a local level. Despite the significant impact of the SMEs, also the MNCs should consider the local challenges and priorities and acknowledge the local impacts that they have (UN Global Conduct progress report, 2019, pp. 76). However, the responsibility of these should not be left only to the organizations. As argued by Kiggundu (2002, pp. 302-303), enforcing the labor standards and committing to them is also needed from the governments and the international community. For example, the consumers and their support and contributions are needed. In the end, they are the ones to decide which businesses succeed and what kinds of actions are supported. The consumers have the highest impact to determine how the organizations manage their sustainability. (UN Global Conduct CEO Study, 2019, pp. 25).

Right after the consumers' impact on the organizations' sustainability management comes the impact of the employees. The employees and job seekers may also decide whether sustainability is a major factor in determining where they want to work. Hence, the employees have the second-highest impact on how the organizations manage their sustainability (UN Global Conduct CEO Study, 2019, pp. 25). This is also recognized by App, Merk, and Büttgen (2012) who state that it is possible to create an attractive employer brand by establishing sustainable HRM practices. And, as presented earlier, the sustainable HRM can refer to various functions from the different management practices and capability reproduction to external outcomes where the employee acts as a stakeholder who evaluates the organization's practices (Kramar, 2014). Considering this is important because attracting and retaining highly skilled employees may be a key element for business success. Besides attracting the high-quality workforce, an employer brand that includes sustainable HRM practices may also lower the costs related to recruitment and some employees may even value the employer brand so much that they accept a

lower wage. (App et al., 2012). Thus, the competitive advantage may also be created from embedding the sustainability in the organization and using that effectively in different business functions. However, to which extent the employees and/or job seekers examine the organization's operations in different countries and how that affects the way they perceive the employer brand is dependent on the individual.

These are just a few examples of how sustainability management issues can be complex especially when the context is international. Trade-offs are often required. For example, what is socially responsible may not always be sustainable for the environment. In some cases, the target may be to be entirely sustainable and that is when they need to figure out how sustainability management could be embedded in their culture and operations. All in all, acting fully sustainably requires considering a complex and diverse range of issues and there are few MNCs that manage to do that. Therefore, the evaluation must be focused on the big picture, the overall performance and the trade-offs between the different dimensions of sustainability. (Crane & Matten, 2010, pp. 37, 328-329). Also, there are different kinds of MNCs and their situations vary. For example, an MNC does not necessarily have operations in developing countries. Instead, the organization could have operations only, for example, in Europe and the US. That is also when the challenges are different and a major part of them may, for example, consist of the cultural differences and communication issues. These challenges are now covered further in the main chapter of internal sustainability communication.

### 3 Internal sustainability communication

This chapter consists of presenting what the internal sustainability communication means and why it would be important for the organizations to consider. This is covered through the theories of internal communication as that is through which the sustainability-related internal communication can be understood. First, the concepts are defined and it is addressed what forms the process of an internal sustainability communication. Second, the employee perspective is considered further and it is explained how internal communication is a major contributor to organizational identification and employee participation. Finally, the challenges of communication in an international context are examined and some potential solutions for those are provided.

#### 3.1 Internal communication and internal sustainability communication

In addition to the term internal communication, communication with the employees could be referred to as employee communication or staff communication (Cornelissen, 2009, pp. 195). Despite having the focus on the employees, the concept of internal communication is applied in this thesis as it is the most widely used term in the field. Moreover, it responds to the pervasive needs of this study as the perceptions of the millennials can be shaped not only by the internal communication that is targeted directly at them but also by the internal communication related to other things that affect their perceptions of the overall sustainability management in the organization. Simply, internal communication can be referred to as the “*communication between an organisation's strategic managers and its internal stakeholders*” (Welch & Jackson, 2007). Followingly, internal sustainability communication refers to the internal communication that is about sustainability.

As defined by Cornelissen (2009, pp. 195-196), internal communication consists of two different areas: 1. *management communication* and 2. *corporate information and*

*communication systems (CICS)*. The former, the management communication, is about the communication between a manager and his or her subordinates. This could be, for example, face-to-face communication, skype calls, or emails. In this case, it is the manager's responsibility to take care of the communication but, if there are communication specialists in the organization, they may help the managers in this part of their jobs. (Cornelissen, 2009, pp. 196). For example, concerning the topic of this thesis, the communication professionals could provide training materials to the managers to help them address the organizational sustainability-related objectives and how, when and where the employees could get involved with those. After this, the following communication and discussion between the manager and the employee(s) can then support the training and the actual implementation process (e.g. how to make an impact in one's daily job or to take more responsibility for the sustainability-related objectives in general). The latter communication area, CICS, is about the distribution of some general information to everyone in the organization. The communication department is usually responsible for this and they distribute information, for example, through the organization's intranet and newsletters. (Cornelissen, 2009, pp. 196). As the manager-employee communication emphasizes the certain working environment, CICS is more extensive and therefore, it could transfer information regarding, for example, the current organizational sustainability objectives and achievements and what practical steps are planned for the future sustainability management in the organization.

According to Smith and Mounter (2008, pp. 51), it is extremely important that the implementation of an organization's internal communication is not solely the responsibility of a separate communications department. This is because they may be isolated from the other functions and, therefore, they might view things differently. This is supported by Cornelissen (2009, pp. 197) who states that, in an ideal situation, the management communication and CICS complement each other. This way, both downward and upward communication are actively actualized. These both consist of both the manager-employee communication and CICS. In practice, the downward communication is about informing the employees from the top of the organizational management. (Cornelissen,

2009, pp. 197). As related to internal sustainability communication, this could be about introducing the sustainability-related objectives and practices. In this scenario, the message concerning the general instructions would be shared through CICS and more specific instructions and connections to one's daily work would be provided through the management communication. The upward communication, instead, is the information that the employees want to send upwards in the organizational hierarchy (Cornelissen, 2009, pp. 197). In terms of internal sustainability communication, the employees can, for example, share their ideas and give feedback on the organizational sustainability-related issues and practices and procedures related to that. As a practical example, the upward communication could be implemented through formal or informal discussions between the manager and the employee (management communication) or through the common organizational meetings or communal message systems on the organization's intranet (CICS). However, management communication is a more common practice in upward communication as compared to CICS. (Cornelissen, 2009, pp. 197).

As the organizational strategies usually, also internal communication must be planned so that it fits the type of the business such as the organizational culture and targets, financial resources, staff, and the size of the organization (Kitchen, 1997). This affects, for example, the choice of communication channels. In the study conducted by Kataria et al. (2013), the employees preferred to receive sustainability-related information through informal face-to-face meetings as compared to emails, intranet, company newsletters, bulletin boards, and memos. However, all the employees that were interviewed for that research worked in the same company. The answers may vary as people from other organizations and industries are interviewed. Still, the results may be explained to some extent through a human touch which is what the employees typically prefer to get despite the developed technology and the opportunities that it provides (Smith & Mounter, 2008, pp. 47). Still, Welch & Jackson (2007) suggest that there is a need for organization-specific examinations on employee preferences as it comes to the organization's internal communication channels as not everyone has the same needs. However, there are some shared features that an engaging internal communication process has.

These are customized messages to different groups of employees considering the relevance of the message to their jobs and presenting the content of the message in a logical and realistic way. (Kataria et al., 2013, pp. 50).

All in all, the organization's internal sustainability communication should have different layers. These layers form an integrated system that responds to the organizational needs. In other words, the communication will not succeed if it is unilateral or not suitable for the organizational culture. Moreover, there are some shared characteristics that can be stated to have a positive impact on the organization's internal communication, including the sustainability-related communication but, eventually, the distinctive characteristics of the organization and the situation in question define the best ways to operate.

### **3.2 Employees and internal sustainability communication**

When sustainability-related changes are wanted, they should be implemented with a bottom-up approach. As mentioned earlier, it should start with the interaction with the local communities in MNCs. However, this also includes communication with the employees who work for the organization and are that way in a major role to reach its goals. (UN Global Conduct progress report, 2019, pp. 75). Kataria et al. (2013, pp. 47) agree with this and explain that working towards a sustainable organization should not only belong to the top management but it should be formed to be a collective objective that each organization member can strive for. However, as reported by the UN Global Conduct progress report (2019, pp. 32), 71% of the organizations in their study state to report their overall sustainability performance and make it visible for the public while 66% of those communicate this message internally within the organization. Only 55% monitor and evaluate their sustainability performance. Thus, there is an interesting notice when considering that there are more organizations who report their overall sustainability performance than who evaluate it and want to involve the employees in it. Moreover, the UNGC report did not specify how the communication was carried out in those organizations who stated that they communicate the message internally within the organization.

In this thesis, the employees' awareness, as well as the quality of the communication and the way that the communication is implemented, are in a key role to determine whether the organization's sustainability management is successfully implemented.

To understand the big picture, it is crucial to first realize the reasons why communication and especially the two-way internal communication is needed in an organization. Basically, in an employee-employer relationship, two groups have distinct needs. These are the organizational needs and the personal employee needs. The old management culture used to focus on the former one which emphasized the top-down communication and control while having negative impacts on the self-determination and creativity of the employees. (Puusa et al., 2012, pp. 31; Cornelissen, 2009; pp. 194-195). This culture has changed to some extent but the organizational need for coordination remains. The challenge that the organizations have is to implement a communication strategy that supports the organizational needs and the employees' contribution to those while fulfilling the employees' needs. (Cornelissen, 2009, pp. 195). In the context of this research, this means that the organizations must meet the employee needs and, at the same time, encourage them to get involved with the organizational sustainability-related objectives. Basically, the employee needs could relate to anything but, considering the interests of this research, this could also relate to their perceptions of the organizational sustainability and their subjective experiences of meaningfulness.

The fulfillment of the employee needs can result in various positive outcomes. For example, Carroll (2006) recognizes that there is a strong relationship between an organization's internal communications and employee satisfaction in the workplace. The key elements created by well-functioning internal communications are trust, care and support, respect, and honesty (Carroll, 2006). Similar findings are presented by Welch (2012) and Hunton-Clarke, Wehrmeyer, McKeown, Clift, & King (2002) who report the internal communications to have impacts on the internal relationships in the organization, employee awareness of the opportunities and threats, and the employee's understanding of the organizational decisions and priorities. Simply, the better the employees

are informed and engaged, the better results they will generate (Smith & Mounter, 2008, pp. 2). Internal communication can sometimes be also seen as a tool for internal marketing. Ahmed and Rafiq (2002) argue that internal marketing is used to motivate employees so that the organization's strategies could be implemented and integrated. The same authors state that internal marketing can be used by any type of organization and for the implementation of any organizational strategies. Thus, it can also be a way to implement the organizational sustainability strategies in MNCs. Moreover, Cornelissen (2009, pp. 198-200) has presented three key concepts to internal communication in an organizational environment. These are organizational identification, employee participation, and organizational silence. These are also major factors in either encouraging or discouraging an employee to work towards the organizational sustainability-related objectives. Hence, they are presented now more thoroughly before moving on to the third main topic in the theoretical framework.

*Organizational identification* refers to whether a person develops his or her self-concept through the organization (Van Knippenberg & Sleebos, 2006). Major factors to affect organizational identification are the external reputation that the organization has and the fit between the employee and the organization. If an employee thinks that the organization is highly valued by the externals, it is more likely that one feels proud of the organization and wants to contribute to that perception with his or her actions. The employees are also more likely to identify with the organization if its values and attributes are valued by the employee. (Cornelissen, 2009, pp. 198; Van Knippenberg & Sleebos, 2006). As it comes to the area of sustainability, this could mean that the closer the organization's sustainability-related values, attributes, and actions are to the ones that the employee appreciates and is proud of, the more likely it is that the employee identifies with the organization. Thus, this supports the earlier theory of this thesis where Glavas (2012) stated that the employee's perception of the similarity between his or her values and the values of the organization results in a better performance in one's job. What is more, as argued by Cornelissen (2009, pp. 198), organizational identification is highly affected by whether the employees receive enough communication and whether that

communication is reliable. Also, it is important that the employees feel that they can affect organizational decision-making (Cornelissen, 2009, 198).

The organizational identification is an important contributor to *the organizational participation* but what makes the difference between these two is that the latter refers to the practical processes and structures that encourage or discourage the employee to identify with the goals of the organization and to affect the organizational decision-making (Cornelissen, 2009, pp. 199). This requires contributions from the management as they must be active in creating and promoting the processes that support the employees' participation. In practice, this could be surveys, suggestion boxes, or other communication channels that encourage the employees to participate. (Khalid & Qureshi, 2007; Kappel, 2018). To reach the employee participation, the employees' willingness to contribute to those objectives is needed as well but the management can support them in the process and provide encouragement. As it comes to the positive impacts of employee participation, there are many studies to address those. As an example, it increases job satisfaction, employee productivity and employee commitment (Khalid & Qureshi, 2007). From the sustainability management point of view, the employee participation refers to the willingness and ability of the employees to get involved with the organizational sustainability-related activities and to the efficiency of the work that they do to reach the organizational sustainability objectives. In general, employee participation is crucial for organizations as they attempt to implement something and that should be given enough attention. Encouraging the employees to get involved with the processes does not only let them express their ideas but it also supports their understanding of the processes. Consequently, it is likely to impact the attitudes that they have about change and its implementation. (Hunton-Clarke et al., 2002).

Reaching employee participation is dependable on many factors and, therefore, it is not straightforward. When the employees are, for a reason or another, prevented from participating and addressing issues or problems that they identify and encounter, that is when *the organizational silence* occurs. It means that the employees must keep the information to themselves because staying silent is more appropriate or easier.

(Cornelissen, 2009, pp. 199). For internal sustainability communication, this means that the upward communication flow is not working. Hence, the managers of the organization do not receive the information that the employees would have. Also, this contributes to the employees' lack of understanding of the processes and decisions. Therefore, the employees are less likely to be committed to the implementation of the decisions. (Hunton-Clarke et al., 2002). According to Fard and Karimi (2015), organizational silence has also negative impacts on the employee's commitment to the organization and experienced job satisfaction. This is supported by Tahmasebi, Sobhanipour, and Aghaziarati (2013), whose research addresses that the organizational silence contributes to an employee's emotional exhaustion and burnout.

Milliken and Morrison (2000) persuade in their widely spread research that there are basically two reasons for the silence. First, the managers may have a negative attitude towards the feedback that the employees provide, which often stems from the feelings of fear and threat that negative feedback would trigger. The negative information provided by the employee could relate to the organizational sustainability processes or practices, not the manager him- or herself, but the aim of the manager in these kinds of cases is often to avoid any feedback coming from his or her employees. Second, a manager may assume that the upper hierarchy knows the processes better and, therefore, the employees' views are not counted. This view is also supported by Vakola and Bouradas (2005) who confirm that the managers' and supervisors' attitudes are in the key position to determine whether the employees communicate upwards. They specify that the employees are affected by the potential negative implications of voicing opposing arguments and by the lack of openness and support that they perceive there to be. Milliken and Morrison (2003) add that the organizational silence seems to be a common issue as, according to their research, 85% of employees have at some point during their careers perceived it to be difficult to communicate upward. To solve these silence related problems, Cornelissen (2009, pp. 200) suggests the organizations to use systems that ask for employee feedback after the decisions are made. This would help the organizations to identify the prevailing problems concerning their decision-making processes. Eventually, the organizational silence prevents the organization to address the

potential errors and to fix those. As a result, the organization's performance is not as good as it could be and the employees may lack the feelings of respect and control in their jobs. (Cornelissen, 2009, pp. 200-201). What is more, as argued earlier in this thesis, the international context increases the challenges. This applies also when it comes to internal communications. Now, internal sustainability communication is elaborated further in the context of an MNC.

### **3.3 Internal sustainability communication in an MNC**

In general, the biggest obstacle for the internal sustainability communication in MNCs is very likely to stem from the efforts that the organizations make to implement the communication. As presented earlier, the UN Global Compact progress report (2019, pp. 32) indicated that most companies consider the public representation of the organization's sustainability management to be more important than informing the organization's sustainability efforts internally. This may be, for example, due to the lack of knowledge and skills to do that or simply not prioritizing the sustainability management and the employees' role in it so that the internal communication related to it would be seen as necessary. However, there are still also other challenges that the MNCs may face as they manage and coordinate the internal sustainability communication, and these are what this thesis now focuses on. After the challenges are indicated, some potential solutions are also presented.

The MNCs have typically multiple locations in a geographically dispersed area. For internal communication, this means that face-to-face communication is unusual unless the members of the organization travel between the units. However, frequent traveling can have other questionable consequences on sustainability management such as potential negative impacts on the occupational wellbeing of the traveling employees (Mäkelä & Kinnunen, 2018). In addition, the distance often means that there is a time difference between the units which increases the challenges in communication (Flynn, 2014). The

geographical distance may also lead to the feelings of being isolated and the lack of communality, not getting enough feedback nor knowing who the right person to contact is, receiving contradictory information, and the irrelevance of the received messages (Marschan, 1996). The relevance of the information is also considered to be important by Gupta and Govindarajan (2000) who state that the more value and uniqueness the transferred knowledge has for the unit that receives the message, the more interested the receiving unit is of the information. However, they also continue by emphasizing the role of the unit who receives the message; they must have a positive perception towards receiving the information from another unit instead of concentrating on potential power struggles and they must be able to understand the importance of the information to their unit (Gupta & Govindarajan, 2000).

The internal communication may be demanding in a cross-cultural context also due to the potential language barriers and different understandings of the codes and signs. Choosing the common corporate language may solve some problems but not all of them. The centralization of power may exist within different units as some people have stronger communication skills in the official corporate language and therefore, the tasks may be shared based on the language skills instead of the knowledge needed. However, even native English speakers face problems when communicating in an MNC. (Charles & Marschan-Piekkari, 2002). Already 60 years ago, Hall (1959) summarized the relationship between culture and communication comprehensively: *"Culture is communication and communication is culture"*. Thus, communication consists of both the language and the culture. Therefore, understanding the culture is the key to understanding the communication. This is not simple as, for example, a widely used model by Hofstede includes six different dimensions that vary between the cultures (power distance, masculinity-femininity, uncertainty avoidance, individualism-collectivism, long-term - short-term orientation, & indulgence-restraint). For example, the short-term and long-term orientations may influence how people perceive societal change, such as environmental sustainability objectives versus the old traditions and habits. Also, as argued earlier in this thesis, people in different cultures may have different understandings of what sustainability means

and therefore, this may form a major challenge as it comes to the communication of the sustainability messages. What is more, there may also be prejudices of another culture (Marschan, 1996), which may cause barriers to communication.

As the challenges vary, so do the solutions. Therefore, a universal solution for solving the challenges related to internal sustainability communication does not exist. However, there are some factors that may contribute to successful internal sustainability communication in an MNC. These factors are strongly related to considering thoroughly the organizational processes. For example, it is advised to put effort into identifying the important knowledge sources for a unit. This is because there may be valuable information available within the MNC but the value of it must be realized. (Andersson, Johansson, Karlsson, & Lööf, 2012, pp. 23). Also, it is important to make the decisions on who is responsible for communicating the messages and what should be communicated. This concerns each unit in the organization. Moreover, decisions are needed on which internal communication channels are used. (Mead, 1998). The decisions on the communication channels are considered important also by Gupta and Govindarajan (2000), but they also emphasize the kind of communication that is used. For example, investing in the informality and openness of communication contribute to the extent of knowledge flows (Gupta & Govindarajan, 2000). Moreover, Thill and Boveé (2002) remind that the messages must be adjusted to the different cultural understandings. For this reason, it is important that the person who is responsible for the communication understands the situation in the unit and country and knows how to approach that (e.g. more specific instructions on sustainability practices instead of general guidelines when needed). Thus, as mentioned by Cornelissen (2009, pp. 195), this internal communication strategy connects the employee's and the organization's needs but when considered in an MNC, this should include the needs of the international context as well (e.g. additional resources for adjusting the messages).

Besides analyzing the overall process, it is also of high importance to address the employee needs that occur particularly in an international environment. As argued by

Marschan, Welch, and Welch (1997), the global consistency and the employee experience of shared values can be created, for example, through staff transfers and the creation of international teams. Also, the organizations can support the global consistency, for example, through recognizing the manager's role in showing respect for the cultural differences and varying understandings. This could be as simple as asking questions and encouraging the employees to share their views. Cultural differences must be discussed as ignoring those is likely to result in a negative impact on the organizational culture and atmosphere. (Bloch & Whiteley, 2009; Flynn, 2014). As an example, the employees' willingness to share their views on sustainability management might be impacted negatively as a result of the ignorance of different cultural backgrounds. McLean (2010) supports the importance of discussing the differences and suggests that, for example, training on cross-cultural awareness is one way to encourage the discussion on cultural factors. It is also encouraged to create practices that support communication by making it regular and easy to conduct. For example, scheduling weekly meetings and staying open to adjusting the collaboration tools could be useful. (Flynn, 2014). Furthermore, sometimes there might be a need for the improvement of the language skills and that is when the organization might want to provide the employees opportunities for that. Considering the language skills of the employees should be a part of an MNC's strategic management. (Marschan et al., 1997).

As can be concluded from the theory above, internal sustainability communication is needed because that is key in keeping the employees informed and empowered. Also, if the context is international, that is when it is important to understand the different needs of internal communication as compared to a domestic organization. Without acknowledging the language issues and the geographical and cultural factors, it is unlikely that communication is successful. For example, Marschan (1996) assesses that through effective internal communication across borders, it is possible to promote the organizational values, encourage the employees to socialize and communicate with each other, and to avoid the isolation of the subunits. Without effective planning and implementation of the internal communication in an MNC, the geographical distance

may also contribute to a psychological distance between the employees or an employee and the organization. Therefore, also Flynn (2014) supports the importance of providing the organization members opportunities for communication, preferably both formal and informal, as that is when the empathy for others, trust, and collaboration across country borders improves. For internal sustainability communication, this means, for example, that the colleagues in different countries develop their understandings of the different backgrounds and feel more connected with each other. Hence, they are also more likely to identify with the organization and get involved in the shared sustainability objectives. The best scenario for an MNC is that the employees identify with several organizational entities. This refers to dual organizational identification, which is valuable as it gets the employee involved in both the local unit matters as well as in the organization as a whole. (Pucik, Evans, & Björkman, 2016, pp. 150).

However, it must be noted that there are organizational differences as well. For example, organizations may have different readiness to apply and implement internal sustainability communication strategies across the borders based on the experiences that they have of it in the country of origin. Also, different organizations have units in different countries so they vary from their cultural distance to the country of the headquarter. The organizations are also at different stages as it comes the different technologies and their exploitation in the internal communication. Moreover, there are different kinds of MNCs as it comes to their communication between the headquarter and the subunits. This is based on whether the organization has a centralized or a decentralized approach to manage its operations. These approaches refer to the autonomy of the subunit. In a decentralized model, the subunits are more autonomous and they have the power and resources to make independent decisions. This way, they are more flexible whereas in a centralized firm, the subunits need to communicate more with the headquarter and, thus, the processes take more time. (Hill, Schilling, & Jones, 2014, pp. 389). Each organization can decide which operational approach is the best solution for them. Yet, the organization and its operations need to be structured so that the units are cooperative

and the actions performed in different countries are in line with the organization's values (Rao & Krishna, 2003, pp. 338).

All in all, an effective internal sustainability communication strategy contributes to successful sustainability management. In an MNC, the strategy cannot be successful unless the needs of the international context are also considered and integrated. However, there are different types of MNCs and, thus, the needs for internal communication are different. Due to the current pressure to act sustainably in business and the changed competition in the marketplace, succeeding in the internal sustainability communication may have a significant positive impact on the business. What is more, understanding the employees and their preferences is important. Now, the employee group of this study, the millennials, is presented further by providing an overview of the generational divides and, after that, emphasizing the millennials' distinctive characteristics with relation to sustainability management and internal sustainability communication.

## **4 The Millennials' expectations for sustainability management and its internal communication in an MNC**

This thesis is narrowed to study the millennials (the Generation Y). The millennials are the people that were born between 1978 and 1995 (Smola and Sutton, 2002, pp. 371). In general, there is a long history of defining different generations and those definitions have some variations based on, for example, different national histories. However, this thesis focuses on the definition by Smola and Sutton as it is widely used and it reflects the conventional view. In general, generational divides are needed because they help a person to understand him or herself and other people including, for example, the colleagues from different age groups. This helps them to work with each other besides the potential generational differences. (Järvensivu, Nikkanen, & Syrjä, 2014, pp. 60; Rautjärvi, 2016). The differences between the different generations can relate e.g. to their expectations, attitudes, work ethics and relationships, motivators, and perceptions on change and occupational hierarchy (Glass, 2007).

The generational differences have also an impact on how people view the fulfillment of a psychological contract (Gamage & Thisera, 2012). The psychological contract consists of the expectations that the employee has of the employer and vice versa (Bal, de Lange, Jansen, & Van Der Velde, 2008; Zhao, Wayne, Glibkowski, & Bravo, 2007). It can vary from its content depending on the employee and the organization and their objectives. Understanding and managing the expectations of the employees is important for the organizations because that way they can meet the expectations and fulfill the contract. Also, by understanding the differences between the different generations, they can make use of that knowledge and succeed in the long term. (Festing & Schäfer, 2014; Gamage & Thisera, 2012). Bal et al. (2018) and Zhao et al. (2007) estimate that meeting the expectations leads to positive impacts such as mutual commitment and an employee's intention to stay. In addition, it has a positive impact on employee morale and efficiency (Bannon, Ford, & Meltzer, 2011).

This research focuses on the millennials in working life. There are some distinctive characteristics that the millennials are typically described to have and that also affect their expectations at work. In other words, these characteristics affect their views on the psychological contract. The psychological contract can relate, among other things, to their expectations of the organizational sustainability management and internal sustainability communication which are the focus areas of this study. Now, the characteristics that are stated to be typical for the millennials are analyzed while connecting them to these focus areas.

#### **4.1 Sustainability management**

One of the aspects that is emphasized by the millennials is the management. In general, the millennials are stated to demand more from their management than the previous generations. Especially the fairness of it is constantly evaluated and monitored by them. (Hobart & Sendek, 2014, pp. 111-113). They also emphasize close relationships with their supervisors so that they could be supported personally in their jobs and career development. Hence, it is important to consider what kinds of leaders are recruited to the organization and how these leaders are trained. The millennials also aim at achieving the balance between their work and free time. Therefore, they should be given flexibility related to the times and place of work. As it comes to salary and its importance, the results vary and it has been suggested that this variation is based on one's nationality, even though their other preferences at work are very similar across the different nationalities. (Myers & Sadaghiani, 2010; Kultalahti & Viitala 2015).

Developing one's career and getting challenging tasks is also strongly highlighted when it comes to millennials in working life. The millennials are often stated to have a desire to gain personal achievements and to develop their personal value in the labor market instead of having secured long-term careers in an organization. (Kultalahti & Viitala, 2015). Therefore, there may be a risk that they are not that committed to one

organization and its strategy implementation. However, it might be a good idea from an organization to consider for example job rotation, job crafting, special tasks, and personal coaching as ways to provide the millennials development opportunities at work. (Kultalahti & Viitala, 2015). The millennials are even willing to take international assignments in order to advance their careers. They have global mindsets and, hence, they often have a broader view of the marketplace. Typically, they have gained international experience already through their studies or personal travels. (Myers & Sadaghiani, 2010; Kultalahti & Viitala, 2015; Bannon, Ford, & Meltzer, 2011).

Also, the unwillingness to commit to one organization can be viewed from a different perspective when exploring the results of research conducted by CONE Communications (2016). According to the research, an organization's commitment to responsible business practices is a key factor when the millennials make their employment decisions. For example, 75% of the respondents said that they would be ready to take a lower wage to work for a responsible organization and 88% agreed that they perceive their jobs to be more fulfilling when that includes opportunities to make a positive impact socially and/or environmentally. This is supported by earlier researches which explain that the millennials emphasize having a meaningful work (Zemke, 2001; Wesner & Miller, 2008) and, as compared to other generations, they are more willing to take roles as volunteers in order to do something meaningful (McGlone, Spain, & McGlone, 2011). Hershatter and Epstein (2010) even see the millennials to have the potential of being an organization's "proven change agents" who are interested in the organization's mission and are willing to make positive changes. Hobart and Sendek (2014, pp. 111-113) have also a similar view as they state that the millennials do not monitor only the personal leadership that they receive but they also evaluate the organization's strategic leadership. This means that they evaluate the organization's relationship with the customers, employees and the environment. Thus, the organization's overall strategy and its implementation have a major impact on how the millennials perceive the organization as an employer. (Hobart & Sendek, 2014, pp. 111-113).

What can be concluded from here is that all the three major literature areas in sustainable HRM are present when considering what the millennials value as it comes to an organization's sustainability management. However, some areas might need more attention as compared to other generations. For example, the opportunities for personal growth, international assignments, and getting the experience of meaningfulness may attract them so that they make their employment decisions based on those. Also, based on their global understanding, it can be assumed that they value diversity and understand the challenges of sustainability management in an MNC. Therefore, it may be pivotal that the organization knows how to handle these and how to address them to their millennials.

Next, the internal communication, that is also a key factor to impact the millennials' views on sustainability management and participation in different projects, is elaborated further from the millennials' perspective.

## **4.2 Internal sustainability communication**

As it comes to internal communication, the millennials want the communication to be frequent and open. They do not want to be just informed on organizational matters so that they would know what has been decided but instead, they want to receive information that is current. This is regardless of their position in the organizational hierarchy. This may be due to their parenting which encouraged them to interact with other adults and to possibly even challenge the adults' views with their own already when they were young. Thus, they do not hesitate to talk to people that are higher in the organizational hierarchy or that are older than they are. (Myers & Sadaghiani, 2010; Howe & Strauss 2003). Moreover, the millennials seek details and clarity in the messages and guidelines that they get. Also, if there are expectations, they must be clearly elaborated. (Hershatter & Epstein, 2010). This applies also to receiving feedback as the millennials want that to be sufficient. It is important for the millennials that it is expressed whether their work is appreciated and how they perform. (Walden, Jung, & Westerman, 2010, pp. 85). This

is also supported by Kultalahti and Viitala (2015) who suggest that especially the supervisor's feedback is important for the millennials and it might be useful to systematically evaluate their performance through certain targets.

Also, the millennials have advanced skills in communication and information technologies and their expectations for the organization include having a strong technology platform. Hence, they are also willing to get involved with the organizational information. In other words, the millennials recognize the opportunities that the latest technology can provide as it comes to internal communication and they want to make use of it. (Myers & Sadaghiani, 2010; Howe & Strauss, 2003; Bannon, Ford, & Meltzer, 2011). Still, they are stated to appreciate different communication tools from in-person to online platforms and social gatherings (Walden, Jung, & Westerman, 2010, pp. 85). However, later research conducted by Adobe (2016) found out that 55% of the millennials prefer face-to-face communication over communication that occurs through online platforms. Thus, it can be concluded that in-person communication is valued by the millennials, yet there should be diverse opportunities for internal communication.

When linking these with sustainability management, it may be that the millennials feel encouraged to challenge the organization's actions due to their distinctive generational characteristics. Therefore, the internal sustainability communication should also be open, current and actualize both the downward and upward communications. In other words, besides their own monitoring, they want to know what is going on with the organizational sustainability management and they want to be able to share their perspectives. Moreover, if they participate in the organizational sustainability-related processes, they most likely want to receive ongoing feedback from their performance or they should be given clear instructions for what they should do so that they could get involved.

As argued, the millennials enjoy communicating openly and, preferably, in-person. However, the millennials also enjoy sharing their perspectives by collaborating and networking with others (Meister & Willyerd, 2010). This is supported by Alsop (2008) who states

that the millennials enjoy working and brainstorming in groups. Therefore, they might value getting opportunities to do that through common face-to-face meetings or through the needed communication channels. The latter might be the solution when the team consists of members that work in different locations. As it comes to the topic of this thesis, working in groups could also be made use of when planning the different sustainability processes. This could be, for example, sharing their views on the organization's sustainability management and its implementation. To be more specific, they could share their views on how they would prefer to contribute to sustainability management, what is currently lacking, what kind of support they would need from their supervisors, etc. This way, an organization is also able to find out what types of compensation and other incentives the millennials would prefer, which is important so that the organization has an opportunity to meet the expectations (Bannon, Ford, & Meltzer, 2011).

All in all, most of the millennials are still in the first third of their career paths so the organizations can still modify their ways of delivering internal communication. That way, they can create solid relationships with their employees from the beginning of their careers. (Walden, Jung, & Westerman, 2010, pp. 85). However, when discussing the distinctive characteristics of the millennials or any other generation, it must be noted that the statements are generalizations. Even though the research has shown that there are some shared characteristics that the people from the same generation often have, people are still always individuals and they have different tendencies and preferences. In other words, the generational background is not the only factor that affects employee behavior. For example, as argued by Glavas (2012, pp. 25), the strategies for engaging the employees with sustainability projects might differ by age group, gender, personality, and culture. Thus, also the processes used must always be evaluated based on not just the generation that one represents but, on the organization, employee, and situation in question.

## 5 The sum-up of the theory

So far, the theory has presented the three core areas in this thesis: sustainability management, internal sustainability communication, and the millennials' expectations for these two areas in MNCs. Now, these theoretical viewpoints are summed up and linked to each other before moving on to introducing the research design and the results of the empirical study.

The theoretical framework showed that these days, sustainability is seen as a holistic concept and the raised awareness of that has resulted in the increased pressure and demands that the organizations face towards the sustainability of their operations. Considering the sustainability aspects has the potential to create value for the organizations in several ways but most organizations have not yet succeeded in embedding sustainability across their organizations (the UNGC CEO Study, 2019, pp. 37; Crane & Matten, 2010, pp. 37; UNGC progress report, 2019, pp. 14). The embedded sustainability would be advantageous also for the relationship between the organization and its employees because the employees view sustainability management from different perspectives so focusing only on one of them or some of them does not necessarily bring as much value as the embedded sustainability would. As an example, the millennials are stated to value the organization's environmental contributions, but they also have high demands for their personal management (CONE Communications, 2016; Hobart & Sendek, 2014, pp. 111-113). Therefore, leaving out or managing poorly the other part might have a negative impact on their perceptions of the overall sustainability management in the organization. Also, the embeddedness of sustainability supports employee participation which in turn has positive outcomes for both the employee and the organization (see e.g. Khalid & Qureshi, 2007; Hunton-Clarke et al., 2002).

However, embedding sustainability across the organization is challenging. One of the challenges is the internal communication. In general, the internal communication comprises different layers which together form an integrated system. Each organization has

their specific needs for the communication, but the internal sustainability communication is needed, for example, to support employee participation in the organizational sustainability-related objectives. Moreover, internal communication contributes to organizational identification and it helps to prevent organizational silence (Cornelissen, 2009, pp. 198-200). This is especially true of the millennials who consider it to be important to be aware of the organizational updates and to get involved in the discussion (Myers & Sadaghiani, 2010; Howe & Strauss 2003). Despite the importance of internal communication, many organizations fail to do that as it comes to their sustainability (UNGC progress report, 2019, pp. 32).

Finally, an MNC faces different challenges in its sustainability management as compared to a domestic organization. For example, they need to make important decisions on how to deal with differing regulations and norms in their different locations (Baharin & Sentosa, 2012, pp. 51). Also, the needs for internal communication are different in an MNC. They need to work on issues related to different languages, geographical locations, and cultural understandings (see e.g. Flynn, 2014; Charles & Marschan-Piekkari, 2002; Hall, 1959). Considering these may be even more important now that the millennials are becoming the biggest employee group in the organizations in the coming years. They are stated to have global mindsets and they understand the global environment. (Peters, 2019; Myers & Sadaghiani, 2010; Kultalahti & Viitala, 2015). Therefore, they may have opinions related to how sustainability should be managed in an MNC. Thus, the organizations should carefully plan how to handle and communicate the challenges that they have related to sustainability management in an international context.

## 6 Research design

In this chapter, the empirical framework of this research is presented. The section starts by presenting the methodological approach. After that, the research methods used for this study are introduced, followed by the population and sample. Later, it is explained how the data is analyzed in this research. Finally, there are a few words about research ethics and quality.

### 6.1 Methodological approach

In general, there are two methodological approaches to research, quantitative and qualitative. They have different strengths and they are used for different purposes. Moreover, they can be used to complement each other. Considering multiple standpoints like that would be called mixed methods (Johnson, Onwuegbuzie, & Turner, 2007, pp. 113). Alternatively, one of them can be the only approach that is used and that is usually when the approach is more suitable for the research in question and, hence, using also the other approach would be unnecessary considering the subject, objective, and scope of the research. What separates quantitative and qualitative research from each other is that the former approach is more systematic with testing and verifications whereas the latter emphasizes creating understandings through interpretation and rationales (Ghauri & Grønhaug, 2002). To be more specific, the qualitative study aims at exploring how people make sense of themselves and other people and how they give meanings to different situations. The qualitative data is typically in forms of texts while the quantitative data consists of values, objects, and variables that can be reported in numerical terms. (Hox & Boeije, 2005, pp. 593, 595).

This thesis aims primarily at examining the perceptions, experiences, and feelings of the millennials and, thus, *the qualitative approach* is more suitable for this study. The quantitative approach could provide a different perspective of the same reality but,

considering the primary objective and the resources of the work, the use of the qualitative approach is justifiable.

## 6.2 Research methods

The research methods refer to the ways that the data needed for the study is collected. Basically, the objective, the data required and the population of the research define the method. (Quinlan, 2011, pp. 218). The data collected can be either primary or secondary. Primary data is collected for a certain research problem at hand whereas the secondary data was originally collected for a different purpose. Typically, the secondary data is quantitative and, therefore, it is in forms of variables that can be used in different researches. Some secondary data exists also in qualitative forms but it is more complex to interpret and use unless the researcher is familiar with the context and the participants. (Hox & Boeije, 2005, pp. 593-594).

Despite the advantages that the secondary data has, such as lower costs, this research uses *primary data*. This way, the specific research questions of this study can be answered. Also, the secondary data that would be suitable for this study does not exist as far as it is known by the author. In other words, the primary data needs to be collected so that the data is consistent with the research question.

There are many ways to collect the primary data. For example, it can be collected through participant observation, documents, photographs, etc. (Hox & Boeije, 2005, pp. 595). However, in this case, the data was collected by conducting interviews as it was seen as the most efficient way to reach the research objective. After exploring different interview types, *focus group research* was chosen to be the primary data collection method. As defined by Morgan (1996), the focus group research is "*a research technique that collects data through group interaction on a topic determined by the researcher*". Typically, there are four to eight participants in a focus group interview and the interview is semistructured and held in an informal setting. Moreover, the researcher is typically a

facilitator and he or she maintains and guides the discussion and wraps it up on time. In the focus group research, it is possible to collect empirical data on different viewpoints and experiences. The focus is on spontaneous interaction and free and open expression of different opinions. (Morse, 1994; Quinlan, 2011, pp. 224; Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008, pp. 173-176, pp. 181-183). The focus groups have been used by many researchers since the 1940s and it is stated to have multiple advantages over other data collection strategies. For example, it can provide data that richer and more nuanced and complex. (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2013, pp. 3, 40). However, it ultimately needs to be considered in terms of what is the most suitable method for the study in question. Sometimes, for example, one-to-one interviews are a better option. This is especially when the objective is to produce a list of different topics about a certain research area (Guest, Namey, Taylor, Eley, & McKenna, 2017).

This research does not aim at producing an exhaustive list of different topics. Instead, the objective is to gain rich data from different aspects, depending largely on what the participants decide to disclose. This is also argued by Kamberelis and Dimitriadis (2013, pp. 40) and Chen and Ennis (2012) to be one of the strengths of a focus group research; despite the facilitator's role as having the responsibility for the interview and its progress, the participants of the focus groups often focus on talking to each other. Therefore, the flow of communication is likely to be better which, as a result, may lead to richer and deeper data. This way, it is also justifiable to use the semi-structured interviews where the focus is on the participants. Some specific themes and questions are asked but the facilitator is receptive to new viewpoints and may ask probing questions and the questions may be asked in a different order in different interviews. (Greener, 2008, pp. 89; Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill, 2009, pp. 320).

Besides the general positive aspects of focus group interviews, there are also other topic-specific reasons for using this method. In general, sustainability management and internal sustainability communication are emerging topics. Therefore, it cannot be presumed that all the participants have explored them before. Using the focus group

research may contribute to a group dynamic that encourages different perspectives and insights to generate. By using one-to-one interviews, the standpoints might be narrower. Kamberelis and Dimitriadis (2013, pp. 40) refer to this by "*a memory synergy*" through which the participants can help each other to build connections between e.g. different experiences and feelings. This way, they can make the invisible visible (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2013, pp. 40). Moreover, the participants may express consensus through nods and smiles, which may, to some extent, contribute to the information received (Chen & Ennis, 2012).

Based on the above-mentioned factors, the focus group method was perceived to be the most suitable way to conduct this study. Still, the author recognized that there were some risks related to conducting focus group research. For example, there could have been one person that is more aware of the topic than others and who, therefore, speaks for everyone or does not give the floor to others. However, the author monitored the situation throughout the interviews and encouraged everyone to participate and share their perceptions. Moreover, Guest et al. (2017) encourage the use of pilot-testing to see if the chosen method works for the research in question as, currently, there are not exhaustive comparative studies between one-to-one interviews and focus groups. Thus, also here, the first focus group interview was explored as a pilot-study and the author would have been prepared to change the data collection method if the first focus-group interview had not worked.

### **6.3 Population and sampling**

The population of the study consists of the individuals, items or units that are related to the purpose of the study (Quinlan 2011, pp. 206). In this research, the population comprises the millennials. This is a large group of people and, hence, they could not all be included in the study as such. This thesis needed to be planned so that it can be implemented. Also, the objective was to conduct a study that would be as useful as possible considering the resources available. Therefore, a sample needed to be formed from the

population. Even though sampling is primarily linked with quantitative research, it is also an essential part of a qualitative study. A non-numeric research can but it seldom tries to reach statistically valid conclusions but decisions on who to include are critical also in this kind of research. (Ghauri & Grønhaug, 2005, pp. 155).

Probability and non-probability sampling refer to whether the sample selected can be stated to represent the entire population of the study. In other words, the findings are generalizable to the population in probability sampling whereas in non-probability sampling the sample represents the population but it cannot be stated to be representative of the population. (Quinlan, 2011, pp. 209-213; Showkat & Parveen, 2017). Moreover, in probability sampling, each person in the population has the same opportunity to be selected in the sample (Showkat & Parveen, 2017). In this research, the non-probability sampling was used because the population is large and not everyone had the same opportunity of being selected. There are many ways to conduct the non-probability sampling but, after considering the resources and objectives of this study, the most appropriate methods were chosen to be the *convenience sampling and judgmental sampling* (also known as *purposive sampling*).

The convenience sampling refers to selecting the sample based on who shows interest in participating in the study or who is accessible e.g. geographically or during a given timeframe (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016). The primary reason for using convenience sampling in this research was the access to the data. The author's network was used to find the participants to the study and, therefore, the potential participants were also the ones that were the easiest to get access to. Moreover, the use of the focus group method requires that the participants are available to attend the interview at the same time. In other words, the advantages of the focus group interviews are perceived to be the highest when the environment is synchronous and the participants can express their views spontaneously. As argued by Chen and Ennis (2012), in some cases, the focus group interviews could also be conducted in an asynchronous environment (e.g. blogs, discussion forums). However, in this research, the time was a limited resource and the author

considered it to be the most efficient when the participants attend the interview at the same time. Thus, the participants were selected based on who was able to attend the focus group interview within the given timeframe. Instead, the judgmental sampling means that the researcher makes the decisions on who to include in the study based on who can inform the research the best (Quinlan, 2011, pp. 213). To be more specific, the kind of judgmental sampling that was used in this study was *homogenous sampling*. This means that the people that are selected in the sample are similar, for example, in terms of ages, cultures, jobs or life experiences (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016). In this case, the people in the sample were millennials but, because the context of the study is international with the focus on MNCs, the participants were also required to have at least two years of experience from working in an MNC. As argued in the theoretical framework, one distinctive characteristic in the millennials is typically the global mindset. However, this thesis aims at exploring their perceptions from working life and, hence, they need to have experience of it to be able to inform the research.

All in all, the population of this study consists of the millennials and the sample was selected based on who had at least two years of experience from working in an MNC. Moreover, the author had to be able to contact the potential participants and they needed to be willing to participate in the research during a given timeframe. To provide an overview of the participants, Table 3 was created. Due to privacy reasons, the names of the participants or their companies are not revealed at any point in the thesis.

**Table 3** The participants of the study

<b>Interview</b>	<b>Participant</b>	<b>Years of experience from working in MNCs</b>	<b>Field of activity</b>
Focus group 1	Participant 1	2-3	IT
	Participant 2	3-4	HR (Payroll)
	Participant 3	2-3	Trade; exports
	Participant 4	6-7	Sales
Focus group 2	Participant 5	8-9	Sales, marketing
	Participant 6	4-5	Accounting, HR (HRD)
	Participant 7	6-7	Sales, marketing
	Participant 8	2-3	HR (Administrative)
	Participant 9	5-6	Trade; imports & exports
	Participant 10	2-3	HR (Administrative)

The first focus group had four participants and the second one had six participants. The participants represented eight different organizations. In the first focus group, participants 2 and 3 worked at the same organization (different units) as well as the participants 8 and 10 in the second focus group (the same unit). Before the interviews, the participants were informed that the interview would last for approximately 1-1,5 hours. Eventually, the first interview lasted for an hour and 25 minutes and the second interview, despite the higher number of participants, lasted for an hour and 15 minutes. The first interview was conducted face-to-face whereas the second one was a Skype interview. The interviews were semi-structured. The interview questions were divided into three themes that included some more topic-specific questions. The interview questions of the study can be seen from Appendix 1. However, the focus group discussions were lively and some probing questions were asked so the discussion topics varied to some extent between the different focus groups.

## 6.4 Data analysis

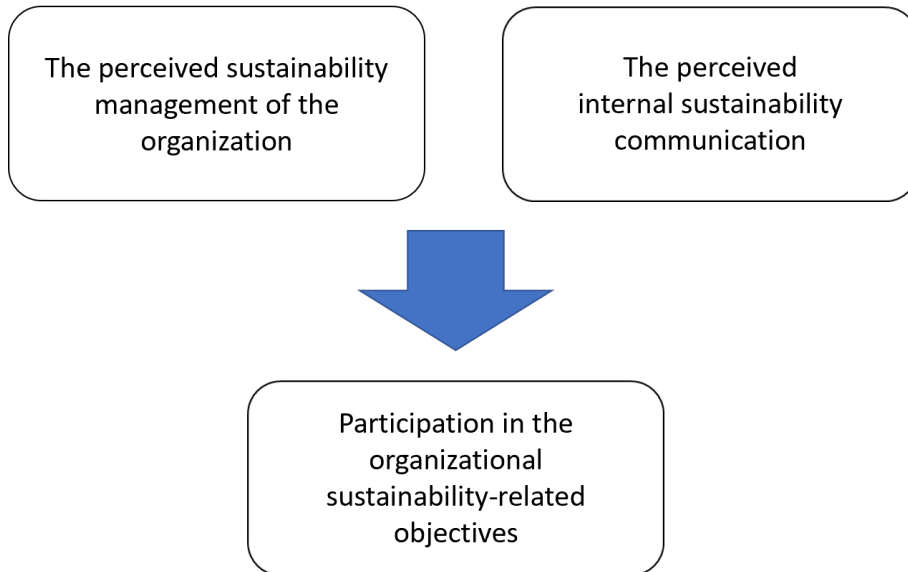
The focus group interviews were transcribed to make sure all the important aspects were included. This was done right after the sessions when the discussion and the potential unclear situations could be still recalled. What is more, as recommended by Quinlan (2011, pp. 363), also other factors such as the non-verbal messages, tones of voice, disagreements, and the repetition of comments were be paid special attention to. Most importantly, the research questions and objectives defined the focus also in this part of the study as advised by Quinlan (2011, pp. 363). This means that when analyzing the data, the most value is given to the viewpoints that relate to the research question and the objectives of the study.

Thorne (2000) argues that the aim of analyzing a qualitative data set is to transform the raw data into new and coherent understandings of the topic that is under study. This research applied the *qualitative content analysis and thematic analysis* to organize and understand the data collected. Here, the data is analyzed through codes, examinations of meanings and searches for new descriptions of the phenomenon under study. The key here is to create themes that make the data easier to manage. (Vaismoradi, Jones, Turunen, & Snelgrove, 2016). As a data analysis method, content analysis has been widely used since the 1920s and it is defined to be a systematic approach for analyzing a communicative material (Mayring, 2004, pp. 266). As explained by Duriau, Reger, and Pfarrer (2007), content analysis can be used to different kinds of phenomena in an organization. It has several advantages such as taking comprehensively into account the language such as word frequency and creating groups based on that. Moreover, it gives centrality to the human language and allows the understanding of different perceptions. (Duriau, Reger & Pfarrer, 2007).

In this research, the theoretical framework guided the process but the understanding of the topic area developed as the data was collected and analyzed. The themes were generated based on both the theory and the interviews. If only the theory was used to form

the approach, it might have left out some important aspects that emerge from the interviews. If only the interviews were used to form the views, that might not have served the exact purpose of the study. Therefore, *this study has elements from both the inductive and deductive approaches*. The former is suggested to develop the theory based on the collected data while the latter uses the theory to form the approach (Thorne, 2000). The approach used in this study is supported by Thorne (2000) as it is stated that, while a quantitative study typically uses the inductive approach, multiple strategies are needed to provide a comprehensive analysis of the qualitative data.

In practice, this study was divided under two main themes and one sub-theme that were formed based on the presented theoretical framework and the conducted focus group interviews (see Figure 2). The main themes are the sustainability management and internal sustainability communication. This research examines the millennials' expectations and experiences on these themes. Moreover, it is explored how these experiences and expectations affect the millennials' views of participation in the organizational sustainability-related processes. Here, the data was compared to the theoretical framework that was earlier presented but the research was also open for new understandings and connections within the topic. This was done through the codes that offer the research understandings of the different themes.



**Figure 1** The themes in data analysis

Finally, the results can be presented and it is time for the discussion and conclusions. However, before the results, a look is taken into the research ethics and quality.

## **6.5 Research ethics and quality**

In the beginning, the aspects of the research ethics are presented. Also, they are considered within the context of this research. After that, the research quality is examined through the concepts of reliability and validity.

### **6.5.1 Research ethics**

When researching humans, the morale related to that is what mainly forms the research ethics. However, the ethical aspect needs to be considered throughout the research process. For example, it starts from the conceptualization and research design, moving on to the data collection and analysis. (Miller, Birch, Mauthner, & Jessop, 2012). Sparks and Pan (2010, pp. 409) have defined an ethical judgment to be *“an individual’s personal evaluation of the degree to which some behavior or course of action is ethical or*

*unethical*". Ethical judgments are not simple because they have multiple dimensions. Moreover, the literature related to research ethics is fragmented with different understandings. (Sparks & Pan, 2010, pp. 409). However, some key concepts are often at the center of attention when evaluating the ethicalness of research. These are also the aspects that are considered in this thesis process. They are now presented in three parts.

First, the participants must always be comfortable with getting involved in the research process. Therefore, they should not be forced or threatened to participate. Also, the participants must receive information about the research before taking a part in it and there should be an opportunity to ask questions or to withdraw at any time. This, protecting the participants, can also be referred to as *informed consent*. (Salkind, 2010). In this study, the informed consent was considered when the interviews were planned and implemented. For example, the participants were informed about the study and its objective. Moreover, to make sure the participants fully understand the research topic before attending the research, they were also described what the concepts of sustainability management and internal sustainability communication mean in the context of this study. Also, each participant was told the reason for why he or she is asked to be included in the sample, and how the data is used in terms of privacy and anonymity. To be more specific, they were promised that their names will not be published and their organizations cannot be recognized from the study. Also, they were asked for permissions to record the interviews and to use their direct quotes when needed. Finally, they were informed of when and where the results could be seen.

Second, there are various advantages of being *transparent* with the research. For example, it makes the research more replicable, accountable, and efficient. In addition, it supports the later process of adding some information to the topic and/or correction of any errors that may occur within a research. (Knottnerus, 2016). This research aims at being as transparent as possible. Therefore, any ethical issues that are confronted are also openly addressed.

Third, conducting ethical research requires being honest, doing no harm, and considering carefully the use of power throughout the research process (Quinlan, 2011, pp. 50). The author of this research is committed to these aspects.

### **6.5.2 Validity and reliability**

A study of high quality should be valid and reliable. Some new concepts have also arisen to define the research quality but as stated by Long and Johnson (2000, pp. 31), they have essentially the same meaning and they do not provide any additional value to the evaluation. Therefore, validity and reliability are used also in this study to discuss the quality.

Especially with the concept of reliability there have been discrepancies between the understandings of the concept. The reliability refers to whether the research and especially its data collection process is consistent and stable. (Long & Johnson, 2000, pp. 31). In other words, by being reliable, the research results should be consistent when the study is repeated and the participants of the study remain the same (Scott and Morrison, 2006, pp. 208). Evaluating the reliability of research is typically simpler for a quantitative study as a qualitative study is always highly bound to the context. However, there are some ways to improve the reliability of a qualitative study. For example, this thesis explains the research design, including the phases of data collection and analysis, as clearly and in as much detail as it is possible. Moreover, Saunders et al. (2009, pp. 156-157), have identified four aspects that should be paid attention to when considering the reliability. First, the participants do not necessarily provide the same answers on different occasions. For example, right after reading about sustainability or watching a documentary about it, or after facing unsustainable management, the employees might consider the sustainability issues more important than before that or a couple of months after. Second, they may answer the way that they think they are supposed to. For example, in a focus group research, the participant may want to emphasize his or her role as a person who cares for sustainability issues and, therefore, the answers may differ from how

sustainability practically affects one's behavior. Third, the participants may be affected by the facilitator of the interview. Here, the participants may notice that sustainability issues are important for the thesis writer, which may affect their answers. Finally, the researcher may interpret the answers in a way that the results are biased. In general, all these potential threats to the quality were taken seriously. The researcher tried to be as objective as possible and did not present any of her own views about the research topic during the interviews. Instead, an open discussion and differing opinions were encouraged. It was also emphasized that the study is interested in the participants' real thoughts and behaviors instead of an idealized version of those. Furthermore, the interviews were fully transcribed to avoid biased interpretations.

Another aspect of the research quality, validity, describes whether the study measures or describes what it is intended to do. Moreover, for a study to be valid, the conclusions must be credible and the interpretations must be justifiable. A reliable study is not necessarily always valid but if the study is not reliable, it cannot be 100% valid either. (Bell, 2014, pp. 121-122; Sapsford & Jupp, 2006, pp. 1). To increase the validity of this research, the participants were presented the topic area of this thesis and throughout the interviews, the researcher made sure that the discussion is in line with the research topic. Moreover, the wording of the questions was carefully thought out and the questions were formed with the support of the theoretical framework. Also, some of the questions were clarified and changed after the first focus group interview to make sure they respond to the needs of the research better in the next interview. As stated by Saunders et al. (2009, pp. 157), the validity can also be questioned, for example, if the participants may face negative implications from providing their authentic views. Here, the participants were promised that their employers cannot be recognized from the research so the implications would not concern them. Finally, the support of the theoretical framework was also used to provide conclusions and discussion at the end of the thesis. What also supports the validity of this thesis is the extensive use of different references so that the arguments are not only from a limited number of scholars.

Now, it is time to present the results of the empirical research.

## **7 Results**

This research examines the millennials' perceptions on sustainability management and internal sustainability communication in MNCs. The research questions emphasized the experiences and expectations that the millennials have of these and how these affect the millennials' participation in different sustainability-related processes. Now, the results of the two focus group interviews are introduced. The chapter is divided into three main topics: perceived sustainability management, perceived internal sustainability communication and employee participation in different sustainability-related objectives. The interviews were conducted in Finnish and the direct quotes presented in this part are translations to English. The author has aimed at translating the quotes so that they would be as close to the original answers as possible. If needed, the interview transcriptions in Finnish can be requested from the author.

### **7.1 The perceived sustainability management of the organization**

In this part of the interview, the participants were asked to discuss themes varying from their role as a stakeholder who evaluates the external impacts of the organization to the management practices that they face in their workplaces and to other internal impacts of the organizational sustainability management. The researcher aimed at starting the discussions with an easy topic which would also serve as an introduction to the research. Hence, it was first discussed whether their perceptions of organizational sustainability management has an impact on their employment decisions when they look for a job. Based on the comments, the participants had very similar views on this. The participants in both interviews told that they would not specifically look for information on organizational sustainability. However, the general view on that could have an impact and if there are, for example, some sustainability projects to contribute to the environmental sustainability, that is seen as a bonus. They perceive most companies to be neutral as it comes to their sustainability and they think that only a few of them make an exception

by being particularly sustainable or unsustainable. They discussed that even though the sustainability issues are important, many other criteria come first, before the sustainability aspect.

*The overall perception of that impacts my employment decisions, for sure. But it is not the most important factor for me. (Focus group 2, Participant 5)*

*I think the sustainability issues are important but there are other factors that I would check first such as the title and the salary. (Focus group 2, Participant 10)*

*The sustainability of the organization matters at some level. For example, I would not apply for \*a company X\* because I have heard quite a lot of their brands and what they have done in their distant locations. However, the job in question, the location, and the salary are basically the most important criteria for me at this point. (Focus group 1, Participant 1)*

Also, they realized that the situations differ. For example, the pressure to get a job would have an impact on what they expect of the organizational sustainability management. Moreover, there are differences in what is expected of a fixed-term contract and a permanent position. It was also stated that today, the participants are more aware of the sustainability-related matters and, even though they are not the most important criteria to the participants, they have more weight than they would have had a few years ago. This is because the participants have educated themselves and these issues are now discussed more in society. However, there were differing views on whether they would challenge the view that they get of the organization's sustainability through different media channels.

*If there was something that would bother me, I would like to know what the truth is. I could ask about it, for example, in the job interview, if there was an appropriate moment for that. I believe that the media can distort and exaggerate things. (Focus group 1, Participant 4)*

*I would not look for information on organizational sustainability when making employment decisions. If I have not heard anything bad about the organization, I would trust that. However, when I have heard something bad, I have not checked*

*up on that either. Typically, I trust what I have heard and make my own conclusions based on that. (Focus group 2, Participant 8)*

*If I find out something that would make me question the organization's sustainability, then I might want to search for more information about it. (Focus group 2, Participant 10)*

Next, it was discussed whether they know the sustainability strategy or the focus areas of sustainability in their organizations. The internal sustainability communication is covered further later but this was discussed at this point to make sure everyone knows what sustainability management means. They were informed on that before the interviews but this would also encourage them to consider the topic area within their organizations. Unfortunately, despite understanding the extent of sustainability management, most of the participants were not aware of what that means in their organizations. Some stated that they know “the big lines” but they were not able to elaborate on that unless the industry of the organization was related to sustainability. Also, there were a few participants who worked in HR and they were able to mention some HR aspects through which they can impact the organization’s sustainability management. The majority considered the sustainability issues to be quite distant.

*I have no idea. I know there are some polished sentences about it somewhere but I cannot remember what they include. (Focus group 2, Participant 8)*

*These things come from very far away, I do not know where these are handled. It feels like they were developed like 50 years ago and have not been touched ever since. (Focus group 1, Participant 1)*

*I think it is a part of our vision so I know it at some level. But this is also because I work in HR and handle people-related matters every day. (Focus group 2, Participant 6)*

However, when asking the participants to consider the expectations that they have of the organization’s sustainability management as it comes to the internal practices, they raised various aspects. They mentioned, for example, having a close relationship with the supervisor, fair management practices, open communication & transparency, and

getting opportunities for personal development. In some of the answers, the expectations of these differed from the experiences.

*Having a close relationship with my supervisor is important and that she wants to support me in my career path. I have both good and bad experiences related to this. (Focus group 2, Participant 10)*

*Transparency and open communication are important to me. And this is not only with the supervisor but across the entire organization. My experience is that there are often some issues with these. (Focus group 1, Participant 3)*

*I also have some negative experiences from not receiving any feedback or support for your career. I think that this has been partly due to my age. For example, I feel like I sometimes have not even got to chance to say why I would be suitable for a certain job duty or a position. This definitely affects my commitment to the organization because I want to develop my skills and learn new things. (Focus group 2, Participant 7)*

Furthermore, the efforts to improve and maintain employee wellbeing were raised several times. In both interviews, some people had experienced their workload to be too heavy. It was stated that this has a direct impact on their performance. From the answers, it could also be seen that the organizations have lately began to put more effort into the wellbeing of employees and the reactions to this were positive.

*We can use our work hours to do some sports. This is a rather new practice and we have enjoyed it a lot. I understand that this is a big investment from our organization but I think that it really pays off as it gives the employees so much energy. Especially for a person like me, who would not necessarily do any sports that often but when you can leave from work, let's say, at 3 pm and go straight to the swimming hall, that really encourages you to do it. (Focus group 1, Participant 4)*

*Well, this is a minor thing but, nowadays, there are always healthy snacks available at our office. I eat those every day. Sometimes for breakfast but typically right before the workday ends. This way, I have the energy to go to the gym after the workday. Also, we can work remotely if we want to. I enjoy it as you save much energy when you do not need to commute every day. (Focus group 1, Participant 1)*

In the first focus group interview, the onboarding processes of the organization or the lack of them took a big role in the discussion. According to them, especially the timing

and the order of the training should be planned carefully and the role and attitude of the closest manager should be considered.

*It would be good if there was a clear onboarding system that would indicate the order in which you should get to know your duties and/or the organization in general. However, especially the job-specific training is often dependable on your closest manager. Some of them take care of that better than others. (Focus group 1, Participant 2)*

*Basically, I did not have any onboarding to my job or to the organization. It was well planned and there were specific steps to be taken but when I asked of those from my closest manager, he just laughed and said that “we don’t need to go through those”. Instead, I had to attend training where I did not understand anything. But if I had participated in the training e.g. 3 months later, I think I would have got much more out of it. I think it would be important to consider the timing. (Focus group 1, Participant 1)*

Next, the discussions were guided to their perceptions of the external outcomes of the organization’s sustainability management. For all the participants, it seemed to be the most important thing that the core of the business does not harm society or the environment. However, when it comes to other additional contributions, there were varying opinions between the individuals. Yet, most participants stated that their organizations could do more for the external good. This is not necessarily an expectation but there would be a positive reaction for it.

*I would not work for an organization that would, for example, harm the environment without taking the responsibility for it. But the organization does not need to be a contributor to everything that relates to sustainability. In the end, the business needs to make a profit. (Focus group 2, Participant 5)*

*We have some campaigns already that contribute to sustainability. However, I would like to see our organization to contribute more locally. It would be cool if an MNC could do something good in those places where it has offices. For example, we could visit the local nursing homes once a year or something like that. (Focus group 1, Participant 3)*

*Our organization donates money for the young so that they can keep their hobbies, which I think is very good. But I think we could do even more. I think managers should take a more active role in this. (Focus group 1, Participant 2)*

However, when discussing with the participants whether the aspects of sustainability management have an impact on how proud they are of the organization, the participants called for authenticity and comprehensiveness of sustainability. It could be seen that the different management practices and their implications are interrelated. Based on these comments, it can be concluded that the internal practices are needed the most, other factors come after that. This was the case in both focus groups.

*If we did something that would actually make a difference for example, on society, that would have an impact on me. I think I could definitely share those things for example on LinkedIn with my own name. However, that is when I should be really genuinely proud of the organization. Today, I feel that so many posts on LinkedIn are about boosting your own organization with things that show only the top of the iceberg, hiding the reality. It takes away the credibility. (Focus group 1, Participant 1)*

*If there are contradictions, I do not feel like I want to share the message. I mean that if for example, the management practices are not working, then having a small project to improve the external outcomes would not make a difference. That would make me prouder, of course, but I would first like to see the internal impacts of sustainability management. (Focus group 1, Participant 4)*

*It has an impact. If I perceive the organization to be sustainable so that it does not only use that for marketing but it is real, then yes, I would also be happy to share the message for the externals. But, for example, in my earlier job, I think there were so many things that did not work. I feel like some practices were unfair between the different employees but the managers did not do anything even though these issues were raised multiple times. That is an example of a situation when I do not think I would have liked to do any extra contributions to make the organization look good for the outsiders. (Focus group 2, Participant 8)*

The participants agreed that they should be proud of the organization, at least from the most parts, so that they would like to share the messages related to their organization's sustainability efforts. What is more, there should be something interesting to share. For example, participant 6 told that the organization that she works for, has an end-product that contributes to sustainability but she does not want to continuously share the message on the smallest technological changes as that is most likely not interesting for other

people. Instead, it would feel easier to talk about what they have done through their projects with external outcomes or what improves their wellbeing at work.

When sustainability management was considered in an international context, all the participants agreed that it is important how the organization conducts its business operations in other countries. Especially the unsustainable practices in their foreign locations would cause a negative perception. However, the internal practices in one's unit and their importance to one's daily job were raised into the discussion once again.

*If there was something clearly unsustainable in our organization's actions in our distant locations, that would bother me for sure. That would make me question the sustainability of the organization as a whole. (Focus group 2, Participant 9)*

*Sometimes we get to read from our company news what they have done to improve sustainability, for example, in India. Those are always nice to read but I do not know. I think for me it would be still important to see it closer and more in practice what the company does to improve sustainability. (Focus group 1, Participant 4)*

*In a global organization, sustainability management becomes more complex and it is not just about aspects like the use of child labor or making harm to the environment. For example, the processes take so much time and sometimes it feels like there is no one to take responsibility for something, such as a bill to pay. It takes a lot of energy to use so much time for minor issues like that. The sustainability of everyday management practices is at the center when I think about sustainability in an MNC. (Focus group 1, Participant 1)*

Now, the next section of the results is presented. Here, the international context is also analyzed further.

## **7.2 The perceived internal sustainability communication**

Open communication and the related transparency were valued by the participants as indicated in the earlier section. Now, the internal communication and particularly the internal sustainability communication is presented as it was perceived by the

participants of this research. The text starts by presenting the downward communication, moving on to the upward communication. How the participants view the communication and its impacts in an international context are here considered mainly as a part of the downward communication as that was where it was discussed further with the participants.

As could be seen from the answers in the previous section, the participants were quite unaware of the sustainability strategies or the focus areas of sustainability in their organizations. Now, they were first asked to consider how they have been communicated about their organizations' sustainability management. Here, the answers showed the reason for the unawareness. They recalled that there has probably been something about it in the trainings that they have had, they have seen some communication related to it on the organization's social media or intranet, or they have received emails about it. However, some participants also stated that it is difficult to evaluate where the organization stands as it comes to sustainability because they do not receive much communication related to it or because they have faced contradictions between the sustainability-related messages and the daily operations. There was a common expectation that the practices should reflect the messages that the organization shares.

*They do communicate on social media and share news about what the employees have done, for example, for society. However, I often read those posts and think that we have not done anything. It feels like it is more about good PR rather than making an actual impact. (Focus group 1, Participant 3)*

*I think there are messages related to that on our Intra page and there have also been some compulsory trainings once a year or so, where there has been a few words about sustainability. I think that I somehow know the big lines about what our organization says that it is committed to as it comes to sustainability. However, I often think that those are just some sentences somewhere and no one remembers them in our daily work. The authenticity is lacking. (Focus group 2, Participant 8)*

*I know the big lines of our sustainability strategy and to me, it also feels like they are followed in our organization. Of course, there could be more practical implications but so far, I do not think there are big contradictions between the daily operations and what I have heard about our firm's sustainability commitments. (Focus group 2, Participant 9)*

In the first focus group, there was a common notice that there are messages related to sustainability but the problem is that they are easy to ignore.

*If an organization wanted to integrate sustainability and its every aspect into its strategy, it cannot be done so that people can ignore it. If you can ignore something at work, you will definitely do it. There are already so many things that cannot be ignored. (Focus group 1, Participant 1)*

*There are messages related to sustainability on our intranet and social media accounts. However, it is up to the employee whether you use your time for those. (Focus group 1, Participant 2)*

*There may be some info sheets somewhere but if sustainability was really a part of the organizational culture, I think it should be a part of our daily life at work. (Focus group 1, Participant 4)*

In the focus group 2, participant 6 told that in their organization, every manager had to talk about sustainability to his/her subordinates recently. According to the participant, this was a good practice and it encouraged thoughts among the employees. This strengthened the participant's perception of the importance of sustainability to the organization. All the other participants in both interviews considered the messages that they have received related to sustainability to be vague. They may provide some overview but typically there are no connections to one's daily job. Also, the role of the closest manager was discussed once again and the participants hoped him or her to take more responsibility for the sustainability-related messages as that would be the preferred way of getting the information.

*The messages have provided me some outlook so that I know the big lines but there has been no connection to my daily job. (Focus group 2, Participant 9)*

*There may be information but at least there are no follow-ups. I think the supervisor could be more active in this so that there would be more concreteness in the organization's sustainability management and what is communicated about it. (Focus group 2, Participant 8)*

*I think it would be the supervisor's responsibility to link the instructions into one's job. It can be very challenging and slow if it is left for the employee to figure it out.*

*The implementation process should be carefully planned as well. It is not enough that the decisions are made and those are informed from somewhere very far away. (Focus group 1, Participant 4)*

Finally, the MNC context was considered and it was discussed whether they know how sustainability is managed in their organization's foreign locations. The discussion was in line with the earlier comments that revealed the unawareness that the participants experience as it comes to the sustainability management in their organizations. Most participants said that they have no idea about sustainability and its implementation in their foreign locations. A few mentioned again that they know the big lines or have heard or read some stories but do not know any further.

*I have no idea about how that works and, honestly, I think that our supervisors would not know this either. (Focus group 2, Participant 5)*

*I have to say that I only know on a very general level about what is happening in our foreign locations. I know the global instructions but I do not know much about the local practices in other countries. But I want to believe that sustainability is managed well in all our locations. (Focus group 2, Participant 9)*

We have the same vision and guidelines everywhere so I think I know it at some level. But of course, you cannot be sure about whether these are followed everywhere in the same way. (Focus group 2, Participant 6)

The participants also discussed the amount of information that they want to receive and they agreed that the communication and transparency in one's own unit are valued the most. However, in both groups, some stated that they consider sustainability management to be so important that they would be willing to know more about it and its implementation also in their foreign locations. One participant questioned whether the organization values sustainability enough to not only communicate about it but also to, for example, organize one's workload so that there would be enough time for familiarizing oneself with the information. Also, the form of the information was discussed.

*It is good that there is communication but, in an MNC, it must be clearly planned. It is necessary to consider what is important enough to be communicated. If there is too much information, you may feel that you just cannot keep up with everything.*

*However, sustainability issues are important to me and I think that there could be more communication about it. And not just about sustainability in our unit but I would also like to hear more about the sustainability of our foreign locations. (Focus group 1, Participant 2)*

*There may have been some reports that would indicate the sustainability of our foreign units but I have not checked those. I think the messages should be short and interesting so that they would not only inform us but also to encourage us to discuss more about the sustainability issues in our unit and organization. (Focus group 2, Participant 8)*

*As I said earlier, if there is something that you can ignore, you will do it unless the message is interesting enough. Also, the management practices should support this so that your workload allows you to keep up with the organization's messages. If you do not have enough time for your work assignments, you do not typically have time for keeping up with the company news either. I think that being sustainable as an employer contributes to the employee's willingness to keep oneself updated on the company news, including the sustainability-related ones. (Focus group 1, Participant 1)*

It was also raised that there were differences in the autonomy of the organizations where the participants work and, consequently, they also experienced the relevance of the information and the need for that in different ways.

*We have a strong autonomy in our unit so we do not even cooperate much with the other units. Hence, I think that what happens in our locations in other countries does not impact us that much so the messages would not necessarily be that relevant to us either. Unless they concern something on a global level. (Focus group 2, Participant 5)*

*In our organization, \*Country X\* has a huge control over everything so the messages that we receive from there are always relevant. There are no country-specific variations really. However, I still do not think that the messages that we have received from there have been related to the organization's sustainability. Although, in my opinion, there could be more information or stories about it. (Focus group 1, Participant 1)*

What is more, five out of ten participants worked or had worked in an international team. None of them had had a supervisor from another country. The same five also said that they feel communality with their international colleagues or at least with some of them.

In both focus groups, it was also discussed whether there have been opportunities for informal discussions and whether they have discussed the cultural differences that there may be between colleagues in different countries. Only two of them said (participants 6 & 9) that they have discussed the cultural differences and one said that there have been opportunities for informal discussions.

*Yes, I feel communality with them! We talk every day. I have also met some of them face-to-face and we have also discussed informal things, not just work-related. --- We have also discussed about our cultural differences. The initiative has come from the supervisor. (Focus group 2, Participant 6)*

*Not really, even though we are an international organization, I don't feel the communality with my colleagues in other countries. We are not really in contact with each other (Focus group 2, Participant 5)*

*I feel communality with the these [overseas] colleagues at least at some level. Sometimes we understand each other better, sometimes not so well. --- The communication between us is quite formal. We have talked about our cultural differences but that is typically when there have been some misunderstandings or something like that first. But I think it would be a good idea to talk about those a lot more and in advance. (Focus group 2, Participant 9)*

Furthermore, there were varying opinions related to whether they think this (communication and relationships with colleagues in other countries) has an impact on their willingness or 'spirit' to reach together some organizational objectives. From the answers, it could be seen that for most participants, the communality and communication with international colleagues would not be enough, although they are valued. The participants want to see the big picture and to evaluate how the project would fit into their own goals and situation.

*I don't know. I think it is not necessarily enough that you know your international colleagues and feel communality with them but there should also be something else behind that. I should be able to trust that they [the international colleagues] also act as we have agreed. And the organization and its processes should also support the willingness to get involved. And by that, I mean, for example, considering the workload and the fit between the person and the project like personal development, etc. (Focus group 1, Participant 1)*

*I would like to say that it does not have an impact but maybe there would be some extra efforts given if we felt more communality. However, of course, it would also depend on what the project or object is about and how it relates to my work. How I can contribute to that and what I get out of it. (Focus group 2, Participant 8)*

*Yes and no. Of course, it is always nice to work with people that you know but as said, when there are people from different countries, sometimes it is easier and sometimes a bit more difficult to work together. And I think that, for example, the sustainability management is such a big entity that it should start from the organization itself like from the internal practices, which would encourage us to work towards those goals. But, of course, the communality with the foreign colleagues would help if the goals were global. (Focus group 2, Participant 9)*

Finally, it was discussed whether the participants are proud of the entire organization or some specific units within the organization. They were encouraged to consider this in general, not just based on whether they are in contact with their overseas colleagues. Only three participants (2, 9 & 6) said that they feel proud of the entire organization, and one participant (8) said that she feels proud of her own unit and of the one foreign unit that she is in touch with. One participant (4) said that she is proud of her unit but not necessarily of the entire unit but some of the things there. The other participants said that they are mainly proud of their own units or their closest colleagues within their unit.

*Our organization is not perfect but I still think that I am proud of it. We are still doing many things right. (Focus group 1, Participant 2)*

*If I thought about it right now, I would say that I am prouder of our unit. (Focus group 1, Participant 3)*

*I am mainly proud of own my own unit and the one foreign unit where some of my team members work. (Focus group 2, Participant 8)*

So far, the results have concerned the internal sustainability communication that is downward in an organization as well as how the participants view the communication and its impacts in an international context. Now, the participants' perceptions of the sustainability-related upward communication are considered through the results.

The discussion related to the upward communication was started by talking about the opportunities that the participants experience there to be to take part in the internal discussion and decisions that affect themselves in the organization. In both focus groups, everyone agreed that there are opportunities to talk and everyone thought that the easiest way to do that is to talk to your supervisor. This is because they have typically created a personal relationship with him or her so it is easier than approaching a person that you do not know. Also, it was stated that you are taken more seriously in face-to-face communication. However, in both groups, some people had concerns about whether their word will have any actual impacts.

*I can talk and I think we have quite an open culture as it comes to that. It is easy to talk. (Focus group 2, Participant 6)*

*We can talk but it is a different thing whether you are listened to. (Focus group 2, Participant 7)*

*In my opinion, it is easy to talk and ask for small things. However, the bigger things such as the development of technology take much more time or you cannot be even sure about whether they are discussed further as they move in the organizational hierarchy. (Focus group 1, Participant 1)*

In addition, those who had experienced uncertainty about whether their words will have any impacts considered this to affect their willingness to raise their concerns.

*Actually, we talk about an invisible wall that there is at the Finnish border. I attend meetings with some of my colleagues in Scandinavia but to me, it feels like nothing proceeds from there. But I understand that big changes take time in an MNC. (Focus group 1, Participant 1)*

*I have sometimes been quite frustrated about something but that is when I have often thought that I will soon leave the organization anyway. Hence, I sometimes think that it is easier to stay quiet. (Focus group 2, Participant 7)*

*I know that some of my colleagues, who have been active in raising issues, have decided to stay silent about something because they have not received any support for being active. Instead, they feel like they have the reputation of being the "difficult one". (Focus group 2, Participant 8)*

The participants told that they have also other ways to communicate upward in the organization besides talking to the closest manager in the organizational hierarchy. There were working committees, other meetings, regular anonymous surveys, intranets, and member satisfaction programs. Some of the participants had more opportunities than others but, in general, the reactions for these were positive if the organization had put effort into the chosen method.

*Every year before making the strategy, a certain amount of people are interviewed from each team. These interviews have an impact on the strategy. In other words, these affect where the money is spent. A new strategy was just released and it was nice to see some of those things there. And knowing what they talk in \*country X\* where our company headquarters is located, that is very interesting. (Focus group 1, Participant 1)*

*You can suggest an idea on our intranet and other people can vote for it. If it ends up being implemented, you will get a monetary reward, which is great. (Focus group 2, Participant 6)*

*I think there is a survey for us once a year or so. I think it asks our satisfaction to the organization but I cannot remember if it asks for any ideas or recommendations. (Focus group 2, Participant 10)*

Next, it was discussed whether they have made use of these internal communication channels or the communication opportunities with the supervisor as it comes to the communication about other factors in sustainability than the ones that are directly related to their own jobs. No-one had done that. Also, they could not recall that they had been explicitly asked any ideas or thoughts related to the organization's sustainability management. The participants had experience from talking about sustainability in their own jobs such as wellbeing at work but otherwise, they had not taken the initiative to talk about sustainability management in their organizations. This applied also to giving ideas on how they could participate in organizational sustainability management. The most common reason for that was that these issues are not visible in the organization. Also, one participant stated that, as the organization is already active in putting effort into its sustainability management, there has been no need for the participant to give priority to that.

*The sustainability issues are not very visible there [in the organization] so it would feel a bit weird to suddenly talk about these. (Focus group 2, Participant 5)*

*Being sustainable is important to me personally but it would still feel unnatural to talk about these, for example, to my supervisor. (Focus group 2, Participant 7)*

*There has been communication about sustainability in our organization but I have not taken the initiative to do that. I think that our organization is already putting effort into that, which is nice. Hence, I haven't felt a need to do that. (Focus group 2, Participant 6)*

Most of the participants agreed that it would feel unnatural to be self-imposed and raise these issues. Again, the internal practices related to one's job were emphasized and they were considered to be at the top of the hierarchy when it comes to communicating upward in the organizational ladders. A few participants stated that they are not encouraged to talk about the sustainability issues in their communication channels and these opinions received supporting comments from others.

*I would have many ideas on how the organization could improve its sustainability. And not just related to my own job and employment but also on how it could take part in the discussion in our society etc. But then there is the hierarchy of needs. When the practices related to your job are not working, you do not have the energy to raise issues related to other things. (Focus group 1, Participant 4)*

*There are surveys and intranets where you could probably get your voice through. However, I have not ever even thought about leaving a comment on organizational sustainability unless it is somehow related to my own job and employment. I think that the questions often lead you to think about these things rather than about the external sustainability processes of the organization, for example. (Focus group 2, Participant 7)*

*I think I would have some ideas and I would share those if there was a direct question on that, for example, on those surveys. Otherwise, sustainability management is not typically the uppermost thing in your mind when filling surveys. (Focus group 2, Participant 10)*

However, none of the participants expressed that they had been discouraged to raise these matters either. Instead, some of them stated they expect the organization to open the discussion first.

*I could talk about sustainability issues and make suggestions. I would know the channels to do that but it would feel difficult to just suddenly start the discussion. (Focus group 2, Participant 5)*

*As an individual employee, I do not think I could make a big impact. I once suggested recycling to our own local office and that was easy to implement. However, getting ideas through on any bigger scale would be difficult. Sustainability is not emphasized in our [organizational] culture and there is not much communication about it so it feels quite distant. I think the first step towards a more sustainable organization should be taken by the management. (Focus group 1, Participant 1)*

*I think there has been some communication about these things but, as said, it has been quite rare and vague. Hence, it would be weird to start talking about it either. (Focus group 2, Participant 8)*

Now, it is time to move on to the results from how the participants perceived the participation in different sustainability-related objectives.

### **7.3 The employee participation in sustainability-related objectives**

In this part, the participants were first encouraged to consider whether they think they, in one way or another, contribute to sustainability through their daily jobs. There were varying answers, yet most participants said that their jobs have no impact on sustainability or that their daily jobs are not directly contributing to sustainability but there is an indirect way that they think they contribute to that. Only one participant said that his or her job contributes directly to sustainability.

*No, not directly in this position. I think that the sustainability that I indirectly contribute to is our end-product and some sustainability projects that our organization does for the external good. (Focus group 1, Participant 2)*

*It is difficult to see any direct or indirect links between my daily job and sustainability. (Focus group 2, Participant 7)*

*Well, our organization supports sustainable development already by its end-product and then we also have those projects that support sustainability in our society. Therefore, I think that I contribute to sustainability already by working for this organization. Then also, I think that sustainability is a relevant part of my job in HRD. (Focus group 2, Participant 6)*

It was also discussed whether the participants would like to experience more meaningfulness at work. Only one participant (participant 6) expressed her satisfaction to the meaningfulness that she experiences through her current job and the organization that she works for. Otherwise, the views were similar in both focus groups. They would like their jobs to be more meaningful and they considered contributing to sustainability to be a good way to achieve that. However, they realized that they cannot demand that at this point in their careers. Right now, it would be important that the core of the business is sustainable and you can be proud of what you do for a living, at least at some level.

*I just discussed with my colleague that my dream job would be something like saving whales, contributing to the environmental good or doing something else that is meaningful. I would like to be able to do that through my own job in IT. But to be realistic, you cannot really ask for that kind of meaningfulness when you have only a few years of working experience from your field. If you get a permanent position from a field that you have studied and it has a good location and a salary that you are satisfied with, you have a bingo there. (Focus group 1, Participant 1)*

*It would be a dream to do something that is meaningful but at this point, I think that it is enough if you get to work for a business that does not make the profit by being unsustainable. (Focus group 2, Participant 9)*

*Right now, I experience meaningfulness when I can deliver great service to my clients. Maybe later I can do something more meaningful to me personally. (Focus group 1, Participant 4)*

In both interviews, the answers reflected the participants' perceptions of sustainability management. This could be seen from the comments above which indicated that sustainability and the related meaningfulness are not at the top of the criteria to them when they consider their employment relationships even though they viewed the

organization's overall sustainability management to be important to them. Also, they again emphasized the authenticity of the sustainability and the importance of the internal management practices that they face in their workplaces.

*To me, the everyday management practices must be sustainable so that you can also in that way be proud of the organization. (Focus group 2, participant 9)*

*Also, it gives me meaningfulness when I get to do a job that I enjoy, get the salary and when after the day at work I still have the energy to spend time with my friends. (Focus group 1, Participant 3)*

*As it comes to sustainability, small steps should be taken first. There is no point in creating great values or experiences of some additional meaningfulness to the employees if the everyday practices are not working. (Focus group 1, Participant 4)*

Next, it was discussed whether the participants have been encouraged to get involved with the organizational sustainability-related objectives and what kind of encouragement they would like to get. Overall, they again showed interest in the sustainability-related processes of their organizations. However, the answers to this question reflect the perceptions that they had regarding the internal sustainability communication and sustainability management. If the communication and other contributions by the organization are lacking, that makes the sustainability issues feel distant for the employees, which also has an impact on their participation in these projects and processes. In addition, again the internal practices and how they work was raised into the discussion by a few participants.

*I know our organization has given the employees opportunities for taking part in some fundraising campaigns. However, there are not usually that many participants because when we hear about it, the calendars are full. I think this example sums up quite well the importance of these issues to our organization. (Focus group 2, Participant 5)*

*There has not been any encouragement. For example, there was a national day to encourage wellbeing at work. In the afternoon, we got an email about it from our marketing manager. I think there is so much more that the organization could do like, for example, to take part in the discussion in our society and it could also involve the employees in these campaigns. (Focus group 1, Participant 4)*

*For me it would be important, for example, to first get the technology that you would need every day at work, to function properly. Maybe after that, I could open my mind to other things, such as making suggestions for organizational sustainability or for how I would like to contribute to that. (Focus group 1, Participant 1)*

All the participants who were hoping to experience more meaningfulness in their jobs one day would also be willing to modify their job descriptions so that there would be more tasks that contribute to sustainability. However, they now strongly highlighted that, even though they value the occasional projects that contribute to sustainability, in the long term they would like their contribution to be mainly related to their core skills and knowledge. According to the answers, this and, alternatively, a business where sustainability is a key part of the operations would be ways for them to get the experience of the sustainability-related meaningfulness. It was suggested that the latter option could be related to the organization's end-product or the business model in general.

*It should not be a trade-off between contributing to sustainability and using your core skills and knowledge. I would not like, for example, to always collect trashes to get an experience of meaningfulness. (Focus group 1, Participant 1)*

*Ideally, it would be a part of your job and there would be an allocated time for these processes. Taking regularly something extra on top of your current job duties does not attract me much. (Focus group 1, Participant 3)*

*It should start with the basics and the sustainability of the internal processes. Doing something good at Christmas is not enough. These occasional external contributions are good but, in the long term, they would not solely bring me the experience of meaningfulness at work. Instead, it could be started from, for example, the end-product or a business model that aims at making the world or working life eventually a better place... These are complicated things but, in my opinion, the most important thing is that it does not make the profit by being unsustainable towards people or the environment. (Focus group 2, Participant 9)*

Now, the results of these three dimensions have been presented. Next, the research questions are answered through these results while also connecting them to the existing research.

## 8 Discussion

This thesis explored the millennials' experiences and expectations on sustainability management and internal sustainability communication. Moreover, it was examined how these experiences and expectations affect their participation in the organizational sustainability-related objectives. The research questions of this study were the following three questions:

*What do the millennials expect of the sustainability management and internal sustainability communication in MNCs? How are the sustainability management and internal sustainability communication experienced by the millennials in MNCs? What do the millennials think about participating in the organizational sustainability-related objectives in MNCs?*

Now, the answers to these questions are discussed, each in their sub-chapters, based on the focus group interviews that were conducted for this study and their connections to the theory.

### 8.1 Expectations

In general, the empirical findings of this thesis are in line with the theory when considering the importance of sustainability management for the millennials and their interest in the organization's mission (see e.g. CONE Communications, 2016; Hershatter & Epstein, 2010). The results indicated that the millennials do not specifically search for any information on organizational sustainability management when they look for a new job. That is when they expect that the sustainability aspect is managed well in an organization if they have not heard anything bad about it. However, hearing something questionable related to the organization's sustainability would affect their views and potentially also the employment decisions that they make. Further, the results showed that when the

millennials work for an organization, they expect sustainability to be authentic and comprehensive. They expect the sustainability aspect to be seen in real practices especially when sustainability is also a part of the organization's external communications. This supports the view by Hobart and Sendek (2014, pp. 111-113) who stated that the millennials evaluate the organization's relationship with the customers, employees and the environment. In other words, they assess the organization's overall strategy and its implementation (Hobart and Sendek, 2014, pp. 111-113).

The answers also addressed that there are differences in the weight that the millennials give to the different areas of sustainability management. Based on the interviews of this research, the millennials have the most expectations for the internal impacts where the different management practices have a major role. Thus, that supports the theories used in this study (e.g. Hobart & Sendek, 2014, pp. 111-113; Kultalahti & Viitala, 2015) which indicated that the millennials expect more from their management than the previous generations. This can be seen, for example, in their demands for flexibility and career development, which were addressed both in the theory and in the discussions with the participants. The organizational sustainability projects and processes with external outcomes were also valued by the participants, which could have been assumed also based on the theory of this research (e.g. CONE Communications, 2016). However, here the participants said that the external outcomes are not always necessary although there would be a positive reaction towards them. The participants agreed that it is more important that the core of the business does not harm the society or the environment and that the internal processes should be made sustainable first. Also, there were some variations between the participants in how much they expect of the external outcomes, which supports the view of Glavas (2012) who emphasized that not everyone has the same preferences as it comes to sustainability in a business context. Moreover, the theory by CONE Communications (2016) suggested that the millennials might be even willing to take a lower wage to work for an organization that is responsible. The discussions in these focus groups were not totally in line with that argument as the participants typically raised the importance of the salary or, for example, the job title instead of the

responsibility or sustainability of the organization when it was discussed how they evaluate the attractiveness of a certain job position in a new organization. Furthermore, the participants expected the organization to operate sustainably also in its foreign locations. According to them, the authenticity of the organization's sustainability would be questioned if the practices in their foreign locations were unsustainable even though what mattered to them the most was the sustainability of the internal practices in one's unit. Still, this supports the earlier research from Myers and Sadaghiani (2010), Kultalahti and Viitala (2015) and Bannon, Ford, and Meltzer (2011) that suggested the millennials to be interested in the global environment and to understand international business.

As it comes to the internal sustainability communication, the participants shared the expectation that the organization should communicate its sustainability-related messages at all levels of the organization if it truly aims at integrating the sustainability in its operations. Moreover, the communication and the following implications should be planned carefully and the communication should be active. They expressed that they want the communication to be targeted well so that it is interesting and clear for the employees that receive the message. They expect the supervisors to take an active role in this and the participants highlighted that the practices and the communication should coincide. Thus, this strongly supports the research which stated that the millennials want the communication to be open, clear and frequent (Myers & Sadaghiani, 2010; Hershatter & Epstein, 2010). This also strengthens the arguments by Kataria et al. (2013, pp. 50) which stated that engaging internal communication considers the relevance of the message to the target audience and presents it in a customized form and in a logical and realistic way. The participants also expected to be informed on how the sustainability is managed in their foreign locations but, as stated in the theory by Hill, Schilling, and Jones (2014, pp. 389), the answers also here showed that there are differences based on the autonomy of one's unit as that impacts how relevant they consider the messages from the other units to be.

When considering the upward communication related to sustainability, there were expectations that the organization would take the first step in the discussion and that there would be other clear encouragements for the employees to share their views, especially when the topic is something that is not commonly discussed within the organization. They expect the organization to indicate what is important for it. Consequently, this follows the earlier researches where Hershatter and Epstein (2010) and Walden, Jung, and Westerman (2010, pp. 85) stated that the millennials want clear guidelines, elaborated expectations, and feedback for their work. Finally, as the theory already indicated (Walden, Jung, & Westerman, 2010, pp. 85; Adobe, 2016), also here the participating millennials preferred to communicate in-person although they expect there to be different technological opportunities for the communication as well.

## **8.2 Experiences**

The experiences that the participants had of the organizational sustainability management and internal sustainability communication were strongly interrelated. A majority of the participants said that sustainability management in their organizations feels distant and the communication related to it is not related to one's job and it is easy to ignore. Most of the participants were not aware of the sustainability strategies or key areas of sustainability in their organizations. This also applied to knowing how sustainability is managed in their foreign units. Some stated that they know "the big lines" but they were not able to elaborate on that unless the industry of the organization was related to sustainability. Only one participant stated that her direct supervisor has discussed with his subordinates about the sustainability aspect in their organization while the other participants figured that the sustainability-related messages come through other channels. Thus, as connecting the discussions to the theory from Cornelissen (2009, pp. 195-196), most organizations fail to conduct their management communication as it comes to the sustainability-related downward communication and they only focus on the corporate information and communication systems (CICS). This does not only have a risk of making the communication unilateral and not-related to one's job but it also ignores the

millennials' preferred way of communication, which was the in-person communication with the supervisor. Also, some of the participants perceived the sustainability in their organizations to have a lack of authenticity and concreteness, and they experienced there to be contradictions between the communication and the practices which made the sustainability management difficult for them to understand and evaluate. This seemed to frustrate the participants so it supports the view of Cornelissen (2009, pp. 198) where it was stated that the reliability of the information and the satisfactory amount of its impact whether the employees identify with the organization.

Also, the participants' experiences of the difficulties to understand the processes could be potential signs of organizational silence (see e.g. Cornelissen, 2009, pp. 199; Hunton-Clarke et al., 2002). The perception on organizational silence is also strengthened when further considering the upward communication. Most participants considered it to be easy to raise issues that are directly related to their own jobs. However, some of them indicated that they have negative experiences of whether their words will have any actual impacts, which affects their willingness to express their thoughts. And, as presented by Cornelissen (2009, pp. 199), the organizational silence occurs when it is easier or more appropriate to stay silent. What is more, except for one participant, everyone was still waiting for the organization to take the first step in the communication related to the other parts of sustainability. They experienced that this aspect is not visible for the employees in the organizations, which makes it feel difficult for them to discuss. They recalled that there had been some sustainability processes with external outcomes in their organizations but, even though the participants expressed that they value those, they did not feel involved with them.

In addition, the participants expressed that another reason for the lack of their involvement and initiative with the external outcomes of sustainability is the importance of the internal impacts which they prioritize higher at this point when communicating upward in the organizational ladders. The discussions showed that the millennials perceive there to be many things to improve in the internal practices and these improvements should

be done first. Hence, this reflects the Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1943) that was discussed in the theory; the physiological and safety needs are the most important ones whereas the esteem and self-actualization are the last ones. In addition, the discussions indicated that the different management practices are interrelated, which was also noted in the theory of sustainable HRM (Kramar, 2014). In other words, the perceived incompleteness of one aspect seemed to have an impact on the employee's overall view of sustainability in the organization. The participants also discussed that, for example, the perceived unsustainability of internal practices has an impact on their performance, which is in line with the research of Willard (2012) which showed that meeting employee expectations has an impact on employee performance.

When considering the international context, it was found out that five participants worked or had worked in an international team and all of these said that they feel communality with their international colleagues or at least with some of them. However, only three participants said that they feel proud of the entire organization, the other participants said that they feel prouder of their own unit or some of the units or some aspects or colleagues within their unit. What made a difference in these answers was that the two of those who felt proud of the entire organization had also worked in an international team and they had discussed about the cultural differences that there may occur, and one of these two also felt that there have been opportunities for informal discussions. Thus, these discussions showed that, in some of these organizations, the geographical distance has also led to the experienced lack of communality, which was also indicated by Marschan (1996) to be one of the risks in MNCs. Instead, creating international teams seems to have a positive impact on the sense of communality, which was also recognized by Marschan et al. (1997). Still, as advised in the theory by Gupta and Govindarajan (2000), it would be important for these organizations to invest more in the informality and openness of the communication as it appears to have a positive impact also based on these discussions. Further, the most participants expressed that they would be willing to know more about how the sustainability is managed in their foreign locations and, therefore, it would be valuable also for these organizations to, for

example, consider who is responsible for the communication at different levels and through which channels the communication takes place (Mead, 1998). In the best scenario, these efforts would contribute to their employees' experience of dual organizational identification, which was acknowledged to be advantageous for organizations by Pucik et al. (2016, pp. 150).

The theory of this thesis also presented the drivers for organizational sustainability. Based on the discussions with the participants, it could be remarked that the institutional environment and the stakeholder expectations have probably been the key drivers for also their organizations' sustainability-related activities. However, the participants' experiences of sustainability management questions whether their organizations have fully understood the large extent to which sustainability management is present for their key stakeholders, the employees. Based on these discussions, the millennials would like to be more updated on the sustainability aspect, potentially get involved with it if, and there are still expectations to be fulfilled especially with the internal impacts of sustainability management. All in all, the participants' experiences support the UN Global Conduct progress report (2019, pp. 14) which indicated that most organizations have not embedded sustainability across their operations, even though most of them have some policies and practices related to it.

### **8.3 Impacts on participation in sustainability-related objectives**

The participants' perceptions on the participation in the organization's sustainability-related processes reflected the views that they expressed in the former two themes. They considered sustainability management to be important to them and they discussed that they would be interested in participating in that to experience more meaningfulness at work. Thus, this supports the earlier research from Zemke (2001) and Wesner and Miller (2008) who implied that the millennials want to do something meaningful. Despite the participants' interest in getting involved, they also agreed that they do not necessarily expect to experience the sustainability-related meaningfulness at this point of their

careers because they do not have enough experience or competence to demand that. Right now, it is enough that the core of the business is sustainable. However, as indicated earlier in this thesis, there could be various advantages in supporting the employee participation in the sustainability-related objectives and these advantages would concern both the employees and the organizations. Based on the results of this thesis, the major barriers for the millennials' participation in the sustainability-related objectives in their organizations were the lack of communication and poor internal impacts of sustainability.

Very few organizations had managed to make the sustainability aspect visible and understandable for the employees. For example, the downward management communication related to some of the sustainability aspects was entirely missing in most of these organizations. Also, the same applied to the employees' sustainability-related upward communication (both the management communication and CICS). This did not correspond with the millennials' expectations and, according to Puusa et al. (2012, pp. 31) and Cornelissen (2009, pp. 194-195), a communication that exploits only downward messages does not lead to success and it has negative implications on the self-determination and creativity of the employees. The results support these theories and here, the implications of the unilateral communication could be seen as difficulties to understand the processes and as a passivity in sharing their views and participating in other ways in the organization's sustainability. Thus, there were signs of organizational silence, which prevents the organization from receiving the important information that the employees might have (see e.g. Hunton-Clarke et al., 2002).

The participants justified the importance of the internal impacts of sustainability by stating that the well-implemented and sustainable internal practices would make the sustainability feel more authentic and comprehensive to them. They argued that internal practices are the most important to them and after those are managed well, they might be more open and ready to participate in developing and supporting the other parts of organizational sustainability. Thus, if these results were applied to the literature on sustainable HRM presented by Kramar (2014), the participants' organizations could now strive for a sustainable competitive advantage through developing first their internal

practices that relate to the employee's experience of sustainability. All things considered, these results indicate the without putting effort into the sustainability of the internal practices, it is challenging to encourage employee participation in the long-term.

Further, the participants had varying opinions about whether the communication and relationships with the colleagues in other countries have an impact on their willingness or 'spirit' to reach together some shared organizational objectives. However, the discussions showed that for most participants, the communality and communication with the international colleagues would not be enough to encourage them to participate in a project, although they would be valued if there was an organization-wide objective. Most importantly, the participants want to see the big picture and see how the project would fit into their own goals and situation. Hence, this supports Kultalahti and Viitala (2015) who argued that the millennials value highly their personal career development. However, as indicated in the earlier section that examined the participants' experiences, considering the communication and communality between the overseas teams would still be beneficial as that can lead to dual organizational identification which in turn can result in a better performance.

All in all, with carefully implemented support and encouragement, there could be potential to increase the employee participation among the millennials. Despite the millennials' uncertainty about whether they can demand the experience of meaningfulness at this point of their careers, the results of this study indicated only one participant was satisfied with the meaningfulness that she experiences in her current job and organization. When applied to the model of Glavas (2012), this participant experienced embedded meaningfulness. The other participants stated that they either did not experience any sustainability-related meaningfulness through their jobs or organizations or they experienced the meaningfulness only through their organizations. Glavas (2012) would link these experiences of meaningfulness to the disengaged and peripheral models and the prevalence of this kinds of answers also support the description that the embedded experience of meaningfulness is the most difficult one to implement (Glavas, 2012).

Moreover, these participants particularized that, if they got to experience more meaningfulness through sustainability, they would prefer seeing that as a part of their job descriptions or as the central part of the organization's operations instead of only taking on some occasional projects for the external good. Thus, the discussions with the participants also strengthened the argument by Laszlo and Zhexembayeva (2011, pp. 38), which considered the embeddedness of the sustainability to be the best solution in the long run. In the discussions, the occasional projects were valued by the millennials but they realized that, at some point, those cannot be the only way to operate if the organization wants to be fully sustainable. When applied to the theory by Laszlo and Zhexembayeva (2011, pp. 38), the participants understood that there is a limit to how many "bolt-on" projects can be added in the long-term. Finally, the embedded sustainability would also comprehend the internal sustainability communication and the internal impacts of sustainability which are, based on this thesis, the key factors to determine how the employees perceive the organization's sustainability.

## **9 Conclusions**

This final chapter explains the theoretical contributions and practical implications of the study. Also, the limitations that should be considered are pointed out. Finally, suggestions and ideas for further research are presented.

### **9.1 Theoretical contributions**

The main contribution of this study is the increased understanding of sustainability management from the millennial's perspective in the context of an MNC. The results demonstrated what kinds of expectations and experiences the millennials have of the sustainability management and its internal communication in MNCs. Moreover, it was described how these affect their participation in the organization's sustainability-related objectives. The results support the earlier research on the characteristics of the millennials which indicated the importance of the sustainability for them, their interest in the global environment, their willingness to get the current information on the organizational updates and to get involved. Further, the results of this thesis contribute to the existing literature by indicating that the millennials' expectations for sustainability management and its internal communication do not entirely correspond with their experiences, which has a negative impact on their participation in the organization's sustainability-related objectives. They would like the sustainability to be more authentic and comprehensive. This includes especially the internal impacts of sustainability management. Also, they consider it to be of high importance that the core of the business is sustainable. As it comes to internal sustainability communication, the results suggest that there is a need to improve the visibility and understandability of sustainability as well as its relatedness to one's job. Finally, the results supported the importance of embedding sustainability throughout the organization.

## 9.2 Practical implications

*If employee performance can be increased by even a few percentage points, the impact on the bottom line is huge. In today's competitive marketplace, it might make all the difference for companies. In today's struggling society and ecosystem, it might also make all the difference for all of us. (Glavas, 2012)*

This study increases the understanding of sustainability management and its internal communication in MNCs from the millennials' perspective. The practical implications of this study can be used by organizations to improve employee performance, which may eventually in small steps impact the organizations' bottom lines as well as the global development, as argued by Glavas (2012) above.

Before anything else, the results of this study suggest that the organizations should pay more attention especially to the internal impacts of sustainability management if they want to meet the millennials' expectations. The external outcomes of sustainability management are also valued by the millennials but they are not necessarily expected and there were differences between the individuals in how much they value the external outcomes. Still, everyone agreed that the internal practices should be considered first and that the most important thing is that the core of the business is not unsustainable. The millennials were also interested in the sustainability of their foreign units and they considered it to be important that their employers do not use unsustainable business practices in their foreign locations either. Thus, this thesis advises organizations to carefully consider how they deal with these factors as it has an impact on how the millennials perceive the sustainability of the organization.

On top of that, the results indicate that most organizations should reconsider their internal communication related to sustainability. There is a need to improve the visibility and understandability of sustainability as well as its relatedness to one's job. Also, it looks like the upward communication related to sustainability does not proceed unless it is about the aspect that relates to one's job. To prevent the organizational silence, there

should be more communication and the communication processes should be supported in different ways to encourage the millennials to share their views. For example, it could be a good idea to invest especially in management communication. That would not only improve the visibility of the sustainability in the organization but it could also encourage the millennials to express their thoughts within that area as the communication with the supervisor was their preferred way to communicate upward. Moreover, the results indicated that, especially when an MCN has a centralized approach to manage its operations, the millennials want there to be sustainability-related communication across the country borders as long as the value of the communication for the target audience is considered.

All in all, it can be concluded that the millennials are willing to experience more meaningfulness through participating in the organizational sustainability-related objectives. However, if the organizations wanted to actualize that, they should first understand the employee expectations that need to be met to support the participation. These expectations include most of all the authenticity and comprehensiveness of sustainability and this is also a reason why the aspects above would be so important for the organizations to consider. And, even if the employee participation in the sustainability-related objectives was not considered as important by the organization or by its employees at this point of their careers, this study still supports the widely-acknowledged fact that the sustainability is important for the millennials and that is already a reason to regard the results of this thesis.

### **9.3 Limitations of the study**

This research is a master's thesis, which sets certain limitations to it. First, the scope is limited so, for example, the theoretical framework used in this study does not provide a full-scale understanding of the phenomena under research. It was compiled to best support the needs of this study. Also, there were only 10 participants and the interviews were conducted with a focus group method which limits the amount of the interview data. Also, the participants were all Finnish and some of them were even from the same

organizations, which makes them a rather homogenous group. Despite those limitations, the 10 participants were here enough to achieve the objectives and to provide the answers to the research questions of this study at hand. Finally, the researcher is a master's student with a limited experience from conducting a research process. This and the limited resources such as time and money make the insights derived from this research rather narrow.

#### **9.4 Suggestions and ideas for further research**

The novelty of the research topic and the limitations that this thesis has leaves many doors open for future research. For example, it would be interesting to further study the employees' or the millennials' participation in the organization's sustainability-related objectives and how that impacts their commitment to the organization. Also, it would be insightful to conduct a very similar study but from the managers' or the supervisors' perspectives; how do they perceive sustainability management and its internal communication in their organizations? Do they acknowledge the same challenges related to these areas as the employees did in this study? Further, the participants of this study were all Finnish so the study could also be conducted for example, within one organization by interviewing employees from different countries. This would provide a better understanding of whether the perceptions of organizational sustainability management differ somehow based on one's culture. Finally, as this is an emerging topic, it would be interesting to see what kind of results there would be to a similar study, for example, in five or ten years.

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## Appendices

### Appendix 1. The interview questions

#### 1. Sustainability management

- When you look for a new job, does your perception of the organization's sustainability and its management impact the employment decisions that you make?
- Are you aware of the sustainability strategy or the key areas of sustainability in your organization?
- What do you expect of the sustainability management inside your organization, including the sustainability related to your own employment relationship?
- What are your expectations of the external outcomes the organization's sustainability management?
- Is your organizational pride affected by how you perceive the sustainability management of your organization?
- How does the internationality of the organization impact your perception of the organization's sustainability management?

#### 2. Internal sustainability communication

##### Downward communication

- So far, how have you been communicated about your organization's sustainability management?
- Do you think that the sustainability-related messages have been useful? Clarification for the second focus group: useful **and related to your own job**
- What are your preferences as it comes to the channels of the organization's sustainability-related messages?
- Do you know how the sustainability is managed in your organization's foreign locations?
- Do you feel communality with your international colleagues? Please elaborate.
- Do you think that this (communication and relationships with the colleagues in other countries) has an impact on your willingness or 'spirit' to reach together with your international colleagues some organizational objectives? -> Clarification for the second focus group: ... some **shared** organizational objectives
- In overall, do you feel proud of the entire organization or are you prouder of your unit or some of the units?

**Upward communication**

- Do you think you have had an opportunity to take a part in the internal discussion and decisions that affect yourself in the organization?
- Which communication channels can you use to communicate upward in the organization?
- Have you made use of these internal communication channels or the communication opportunities with the supervisor as it comes to the communication about other factors in sustainability than the ones that are directly related to your own job?

**3. Employee participation in different sustainability projects and processes**

- Do you think that you, in one way or another, contribute to the sustainability through your daily job?
- Would you like to experience more meaningfulness at work? \*If the answer is yes:
  - \*Do you think that contributing to sustainability could be a way for you to get more meaningfulness?*
  - \*Have you been encouraged to participate in the organizational sustainability-related processes?*
  - \*What kind of encouragement would you like to get?*