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UNIVERSITY OF VAASA

Tommaso Anselmi

**Career Sustainability of Self-initiated Expatriates:  
The Role of Context**

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<b>Author:</b>	Tommaso Anselmi		
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**ABSTRACT:**

This thesis analyses the global career sustainability of Self-Initiated Expatriates (SIEs), skilled workers who independently choose to relocate abroad for professional reasons, without the structured support of a sending organization. In an increasingly international and flexible labor market, understanding how these individuals maintain well-being, satisfaction and employability over time is crucial to interpret modern career transformations. The study addresses two research questions: what impact self-initiated expatriation has on career sustainability indicators, health, happiness and productivity and how contextual factors influence such sustainability.

The research adopts the Sustainable Career Model by De Vos, Van der Heijden and Akkermans as a theoretical framework, interpreting career sustainability as the result of the dynamic interaction between person, context and time. The study uses a qualitative, interpretivist and abductive approach; data has been collected through eight semi-structured interviews with SIEs with diverse national, professional, personal and geographical backgrounds. They were then analysed using a hybrid thematic analysis, guided by the theoretical framework and the empirically identified themes.

The results show that self-initiated expatriation can foster professional growth, boost skill development, create greater autonomy, improve quality of life and give a sense of fulfilment to the expatriates. However, it can also generate stress, isolation, instability, underemployment, language barriers and integration issues. Career sustainability therefore depends not only on international mobility or on individual agency, but also on the degree of alignment between personal resources, institutional, organizational, social and family conditions over time. We conclude that SIEs' global careers are sustainable when international experience allows them to integrate well-being, meaning, productivity and life balance into an adaptive and coherent trajectory.

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**KEYWORDS:** Self-Initiated Expatriates; Sustainable Careers; Context; Health; Happiness; Productivity.

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# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Background of the study

Working careers are nowadays increasingly intersected with multiple aspect of life, such as work, leisure time and family. The traditional careers, rooted in the conditions of the Industrial State, are no longer feasible with the characteristics of the New Economy (Van der Heijden & De Vos, 2015). This is the result of a complex number of changes regarding emerging economies, organizational and societal trends, as well as to the technological advancements (De Hauw & Greenhaus, 2015). This, together with the increases in multinational corporations, the expansions of global markets and of business networks, has exponentially increased the number of international business travels during the past few decades (Brester et al., 2017). Moreover, the phenomenon of globalization has opened the possibility for individuals and companies to work with actors and organizations from all over the world, increasing interest toward career sustainability of Global Careers. The academic research has then evolved towards concepts such as the Boundaryless Career and the Protean Career, emphasizing the individual action over the organizational ones (Lawrence et al., 2015). These concepts emerged because the traditional careers have been substituted by less predictable and more dynamics careers, as substantial evolutions have taken place in the world of work. In this context, the four key dimensions that radically changed and are better defining the modern careers are Time, Social Space, Agency and Meaning (Van der Heijden & De Vos, 2015).

It is clear that the world of work has changed and so there is an emerging need for a new model that better explain the sustainability of careers and the new careers' fundamental dimensions. For this reason, in 2015 Van der Heijden & De Vos introduced the three key dimensions that define the modern careers sustainability: Health, Happiness and Productivity (Van der Heijden & De Vos, 2015). The authors explain that in order to have sustainable careers over the time, these three dimensions must persist throughout all the careers. Later, this foundational triad has been integrated into a comprehensive Process Model of Sustainable Careers by De Vos, Van der Heijden and Akkermans (2020).

This advanced framework proposes that career sustainability is not a static state but a dynamic process resulting from the interplay of three distinct dimensions: Person, Context and Time.

The core mechanism that connects these dimensions is the Person-Career Fit. A career is considered sustainable when there is a dynamic alignment between the Person (values, needs, skills) and the Context (career demands/opportunities) over Time.

This conceptual model of Sustainable Careers presented by De Vos et al. (2020) explains that the sustainability is not a static characteristic, but it is the systemic outcome of the dynamic interaction between the three fundamental dimensions: Person, Context and Time. Sustainability emerges when individuals are able to create a dynamic alignment between their aspirations and values (Person) and the demands or opportunities offered by the environment (Context), adapting to the changes that occur throughout life (Time) (De Vos et al., 2020).

At the core of this model there is the Person, defined primarily by the Agency (or decision-making autonomy). The individual is the architect of his own career, responsible for his own choices and of the development of his competencies. However, as underlined by Van der Heijden and De Vos (2015), the exercise of this agency is constantly influenced, enabled or constrained by the Context dimension. The latter comprehend multiple levels, from the work group and the organization to the private sphere and the national context.

Although this model can be applied to all workers, it is particularly relevant for Self-Initiated Expatriates (SIEs). Unlike Assigned Expatriates (AEs), who are sent abroad by their organizations, SIEs relocate to a country of their own choice on their own initiative and typically without a guaranteed job when they will come back (Suutari & Brewster, 2000). According to Cerdin and Selmer (2014), SIEs are defined by four criteria which must all be fulfilled at the same time: (1) self-initiated international relocation, (2) regular employment (intent to work), (3) intentions of a temporary stay and (4) skilled/professional qualifications.

The main distinction lies in the concept of Agency. As Suutari and Brewster (2000) notes, SIEs operate with a high degree of autonomy. They are the architect of their global careers, they are not forced or pushed by an organization, but they went abroad by their own desire of career growth or life change. This characteristic makes them the main subject to study the Person dimension of the sustainable career model (Suutari & Brewster, 2000). Given that they are motivated by a strong Agency, SIEs actively choose the location and the job in order to align them with their own values, increasing the chance to be satisfied (Suutari & Brewster, 2000).

However, this high autonomy comes together with some significant risks. Unlike the AEs, which benefit from organizational supports for accommodations, permits and intercultural training, the SIEs must navigate the foreign context autonomously (Suutari & Brewster, 2000). This lack of institutional support could create a resource gap that threatens the sustainable indicators such as the Health and the Productivity, undermining their mental health and their employability. Therefore, for the SIEs, the success and the sustainability of their careers strongly rely on the individual ability to balance their Agency with the constraints and the opportunities of the context during the Time (Cerdin & Selmer, 2014).

## **1.2 Research questions**

While the existing academic literature on this topic has already explored the SIEs in multiple contexts, there is an emerging need to specifically understand what kind of career sustainability experiences European / Italian SIEs have and how they navigate their career sustainability challenges. With this study, the aim would be to address this research gap by exploring how European/Italians SIEs perceive and manage their career sustainability using the Sustainable Career Process Model, while contributing to better understand the Person-Context interaction in the modern global labour market.

The research questions of this study are:

1. What impact does self-initiated expatriation have on the Health, Happiness and Productivity of self-initiated expatriates' careers?
2. How do contextual factors influence the career sustainability of self-initiated expatriates?

### **1.3 Definitions of key concepts**

#### **Career**

A career is defined as the sequence of work experiences that evolves over the individual's life course (Arthur et al., 1989).

#### **Sustainable Career**

A sustainable career is the "sequences of career experiences reflected through a variety of patterns of continuity over time, thereby crossing several social spaces, characterized by individual agency, herewith providing meaning to the individual" (Van der Heijden & De Vos, 2015, p. 7).

#### **Self-Initiated Expatriates**

Cerdin & Selmer (2014) define a Self-Initiated Expatriate (SIE) as someone who has these four characteristics simultaneously: (a) self-initiated international relocation, (b) regular employment (intentions), (c) intentions of a temporary stay and (d) skilled/professional qualifications.

#### **Health**

"Health encompasses both physical and mental health and refers to the dynamic fit of the career with one's mental and physical capacities" (De Vos et al., 2018, p. 4).

#### **Happiness**

Happiness "refer to the subjective elements of feeling successful or satisfied with one's career, yet seen from a broader life perspective" (De Vos et al., 2018, p. 4).

**Productivity**

“Productivity means strong performance in one's current job as well as high employability or career potential in the future or in other jobs and hence refers to the dynamic fit of the career with organizational human capital needs” (De Vos et al., 2018, p. 4).

**Person**

Person refers to the individual who is the central agent or "owner" of the career. This dimension encompasses personal agency, meaning, skills and the proactive behaviours necessary to navigate career transitions (De Vos et al., 2018).

**Context**

Context refers to a systemic and stratified dimension that comprehends the different levels in which a career is developed, including “work group level factors, organizational policies and procedures, occupational labor market factors and structural labor market factors” (De Vos et al., 2018, p. 8).

**Time**

Time is the dimension in which career processes evolve and in which sustainability emerges from the interaction between short-term and long-term dynamics. (De Vos et al., 2020)

**1.4 Structure of the study**

The paper is divided into five main chapters. The opening section introduces the relevance of this thesis, explaining the research questions (RQ) and offering a background of the topic and the necessary conceptual definitions. The second chapter focus on the theoretical background of the study, examining and profile of Expatriates, AEs and SIEs, integrating previous knowledge on the sustainability of their professional paths. Then, the methodology is described in the third chapter, which details the scientific approach, data collection and processing methods, as well as the criteria for validity and reliability

of the results. The fourth chapter report the findings emerging from the empirical interviews. In closing, the fifth chapter presents the concluding reflections, outlines suggestions for future research perspectives and presents practical implications from the study.

## 2 Sustainable Global Careers of SIEs

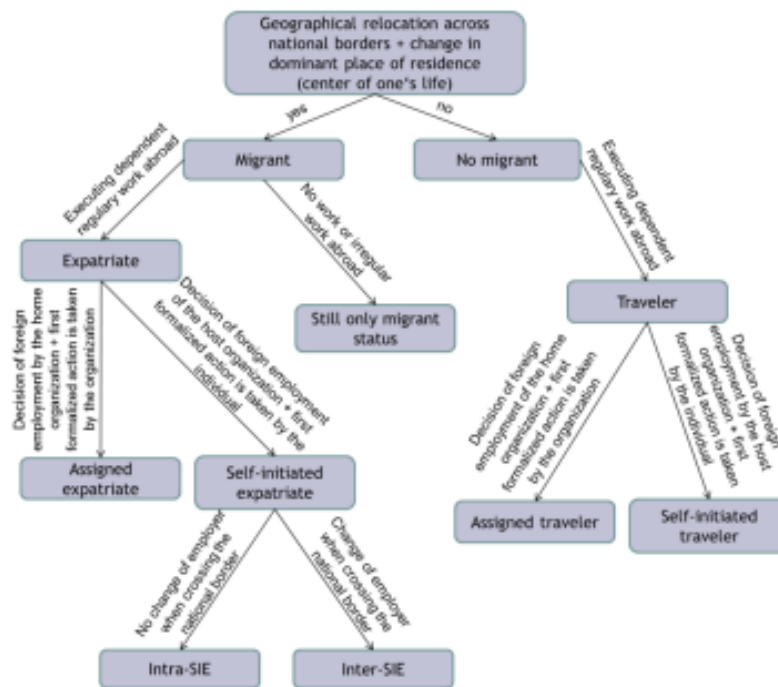
This chapter presents the concepts of expatriates from different perspectives and analyses the existing academic research on the topic. After that, the concept of Sustainable Global Career will be discussed and the Process Model of Sustainable Careers by De Vos et al. (2020) will be introduced. Consequently, the sustainable careers of SIEs will be discussed through the dimensions of this model. In conclusion, the theoretical framework of this study will close the chapter.

### 2.1 Expatriates

The concept of “expatriate” can be considered a subcategory of the broader term “migrant,” as it implies a process of transnational mobility that involves moving one’s primary residence from one country to another for professional reasons. (Andresen et al., 2013) In other words, every expatriate is technically also a migrant, but not all migrants can be defined as expatriates, since this latter definition presupposes additional elements linked to the temporary nature of the assignment, work motivation and often also a specific employment status (Cerdin & Selmer, 2014).

Recent studies throughout years in International Human Resource Management (IHRM) has highlighted a persistent lack of conceptual clarity regarding global mobility terms, as various authors have struggled to provide a singular definition, often leading to terminological overlaps between AEs, SIEs and migrants (Andresen et al., 2013). In 2013 Andresen et al. tried to give a clear literature-based definition of the terms, proposing a clear distinction between these concepts. Following this conceptualisation, a person is considered as migrant if: 1) he moves from a geographical point to another, crossing international borders and 2) if he changes his place of residence, also considered as the “center of a person’s life” (Andresen et al., 2013, p. 12). If, in addition to their immigration status, the individual also has an explicit intention to work abroad for a limited period, they fall into the more specific category of “expatriate”. The diagram below offers

a conceptual overview of the primary distinction within the category of business expatriates, namely between AEs and SIEs.



**Figure 1.** Decision Tree (Andresen et al., 2013).

This broader definition serves as a macro category encompassing different forms of professional mobility; however, for an analytical understanding of the phenomenon, it is necessary to distinguish the subcategories that operate within it (McNulty & Brewster, 2017). This taxonomy is mainly based on criteria such as the source of the transfer initiative, the type of employment contract and the degree of support provided by the organization (Przytula, 2015). Consequently, within the domain of business expatriates, the literature identifies two main configurations that, while sharing the professional purpose of staying abroad, present opposite managerial and motivational trajectories: the AEs and the SIEs.

### 2.1.1 Assigned Expatriates

AEs are workers, usually in relatively senior positions, that are sent abroad by their parent organizations to a branch or a foreign unit for a specified period of time (McNulty & Brewster, 2017). Their distinctive characteristic is that their international mobility is

started and managed by their own organization, configuring itself as a “business-driven” process (Cerdin & Selmer, 2014). Companies occur to sending AEs abroad for many different intentions, but mainly for three strategic reasons: facilitating the transfer of technical and management knowledge, ensuring coordination and control of foreign offices and promoting the development of global skills in the future managers (Suutari & Brewster, 2000). As also highlighted by Brewster et al. (2017), these reasons may also be the desire to coordinate organizational and cultural aspects of the subsidiary branches and to develop and test potential global leaders of the future or perhaps simply to provide industry experts to manage operational aspects of these subsidiaries, in situations where local labor is not able to do so.

From a resource perspective, AEs typically benefit from a high level of organizational support, which includes concessional compensation packages, expatriation allowances and logistical assistance for the relocation of the entire household (Suutari & Brewster, 2000). In contrast, SIEs embark on the journey abroad on personal initiative, often without a guarantee of employment or the support of a parent company (Cerdin & Selmer, 2014). While AEs typically maintain a contractual link with the home organization, SIEs tend to be hired under local contracts, personally assuming the financial risks and costs associated with the move (McNulty & Brewster, 2017). Nonetheless, there are still challenges and difficulties for AEs, despite all the organizational and logistical benefits provided by the parent company.

Among the main challenges faced by AEs is the need to achieve results in extremely rapid timeframes. In particular, when they are sent to fill skills gaps or in complex operational contexts, they find themselves having to generate added value immediately upon arrival at the foreign subsidiary, without a significant period of adaptation (Edström & Galbraith, 1977; The RES Forum, 2014). This high-performance pressure from the first few weeks can limit the ability to gradually develop local relationships or fully understand the new organizational and cultural context, thus increasing the risk of stress and compromising, at least initially, the sustainability of international experience (Brewster et al., 2017).

Another important aspect of the AEs' international experience concerns the process of adapting to the new work environment and living abroad. The adaptation, meant in its cognitive and behavioral components, represents a complex and sometimes critical phase of their life, often hindered by phenomenon such as the cultural shock or by some challenges in building effective relationships with the local team (Black et al., 1991; Haslberger et al., 2013). Previous studies have shown that family dynamics and the partner's career needs have an important impact on the quality of AE's adjustment, forcing the organizations to include and consider these variables in the support packages and in the international mobility management plans (Harvey, 1997). The administrative and logistical support provided by the organization during the initial phase of the assignment, including the family's relocation, directly impacts the amount of time and energy the AE can invest into the work activities in the first few weeks (Dowling et al., 2008). An efficient assistance during this phase enhances a productive start and reduces the personal management burden.

Although assigned expatriates are key figures in corporate internationalization strategies, their journey abroad is strongly guided and supported by the organization. In contrast to this top-down model, a form of more autonomous and self-directed international mobility has emerged in recent decades: that of SIEs, the subject of the next section.

### **2.1.2 Self-Initiated Expatriates**

Talking about international labor mobility, SIEs represent a different category of workers, who voluntarily undertake a work experience abroad, outside of an organizational initiative. Compared to AEs, whose movement is incentivized and managed by the parent company, SIEs voluntarily decide to move in a foreign country and to look for an occupation independently (Suutari & Brewster, 2000; Cerdin & Selmer, 2014).

In order to give a clear definition, in 2014 Cerdin and Selmer proposed four fundamental criteria to correctly identify a SIE: (1) the transfer abroad must be self-initiated, it must come from a personal initiative, (2) there must be an intention to carry out a regular job

in the host country, (3) the move must be temporary and (4) the individual must be professionally qualified.

In parallel, Doherty et al. (2013) helped to further refine the concept, highlighting how the SIEs represent a highly heterogeneous population. The authors propose to consider a series of analytical dimensions to understand the internal variety of the phenomenon, including: the level of expatriation planning, the degree of risk assumed, personal motivation and the type of support received. This orientation allows us to overcome a monolithic vision of the category and enhance the different individual trajectories that can lead to a self-initiated expatriation experience. The conceptual position of SIEs is also compatible with theoretical perspectives such as boundaryless careers (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996) and intelligent careers (DeFillippi & Arthur, 1994), which emphasize the importance of individual agency, voluntary mobility and the ability to build career capital through transnational experiences. The SIE is thus interpreted as a proactive actor who exercises control over their international career path, often in contexts not supported by formal organizational structures. Consequently, SIEs presents a higher degree of individual agency and proactivity than AEs, as they must navigate the international professional context by relying on their own career self-management skills.

Finally, what clearly distinguishes SIEs from other types of global mobility (such as international students or economic migrants) is the voluntary assumption of an expatriate professional identity and the intention to actively integrate into the local labor market in the host country (Andresen et al., 2013; Doherty et al., 2013).

While the definitional boundaries of SIEs are established, it is now important to understand the demographic and professional characteristics of this type of workers. On a sociodemographic level, SIEs are a heterogeneous group of people, even though they share some common traits that can be observed across several research. Firstly, they tend to be a middle-aged to young cluster of people, usually in the first half of their working careers and often possessing high levels of education, typically with university or

postgraduate degrees level of education (Andresen et al., 2013; Przytula, 2015). Their advanced educational level is often accompanied by a multicultural background or a previous interest in international experiences, which powers their propensity for independent mobility. Furthermore, SIEs emerge for their linguistic and cultural skills, sometimes developed through past experiences abroad or international academic activities (Przytula, 2015).

A particular relevant aspect concerns the gender dimension. Unlike AEs, traditionally dominated by male profiles, SIEs include a higher proportion of women, especially in those contexts where individual initiative reduces organizational barriers related to formal selection (Selmer et al., 2022). This makes the independent expatriation an alternative international career path even for women, which are an historically underrepresented in global mobility. Furthermore, SIEs tend to travel without a dependent family or accompanied by a partner, who is sometimes a citizen of the host country, which further facilitates the integration process (Selmer et al., 2022).

From a career orientation perspective, Biemann & Andresen (2010) highlighted how SIEs display a marked consistency in their professional aspirations over time, while AEs usually have an orientation that tend to change with age. These findings suggests that the decision to start an independent international career often the result of a long-term reflection, embedded in personal motivations and individual planning.

One of the key strengths of SIEs is their ability to easily adapt and function in culturally diverse contexts. Recent studies have shown that SIEs tend to possess higher levels of intercultural competence than organizationally assigned expatriates (Chen et al., 2024). These skills often come from personal motivations that drive individuals to voluntarily undertake an experience abroad, such as previous experiences of international mobility and a personal interest in intercultural interaction (Doherty et al., 2011).

The personal traits also play an important role in this. As highlighted by Tung (1981), individual characteristics like being open minded, the tolerance for ambiguity or the

adaptability influence significantly the job performances and the quality of the adaptation abroad. In particular, SIEs demonstrate a better predisposition to navigate in unfamiliar contexts without the structured support of an organization. According to Doherty et al. (2011), this proactive attitude leads to a smoother social integration process and a stronger psychological resilience, factors that are essential for the sustainability of an international career. Their ability to interiorize cultural expectations and to build effective relationships in the host context improves not only their personal well-being, but also their legitimation and efficiency in the workplace.

Despite these relational and cultural strengths, SIEs face significant challenges in terms of job instability. Unlike AEs, who benefit from stable contracts and from support from the headquarters, SIEs have to seek employment in local labor markets alone, which are often characterized by strong competition and lower predictability (Dickmann et al., 2018). Consequently, this autonomy involves concrete risks, such as employment continuity, limited career development opportunities and the fact that the access to benefits are usually more uncertain. In addition to this, there are even some legal obstacles, such as obtaining work permits or the recognition of professional qualifications acquired abroad, which can significantly impact the possibility of remaining in the country (Selmer et al., 2022). Considering that in many cases the validity of the visa is tied to maintaining a job, even minor job instability can compromise the sustainability of the expatriate experience.

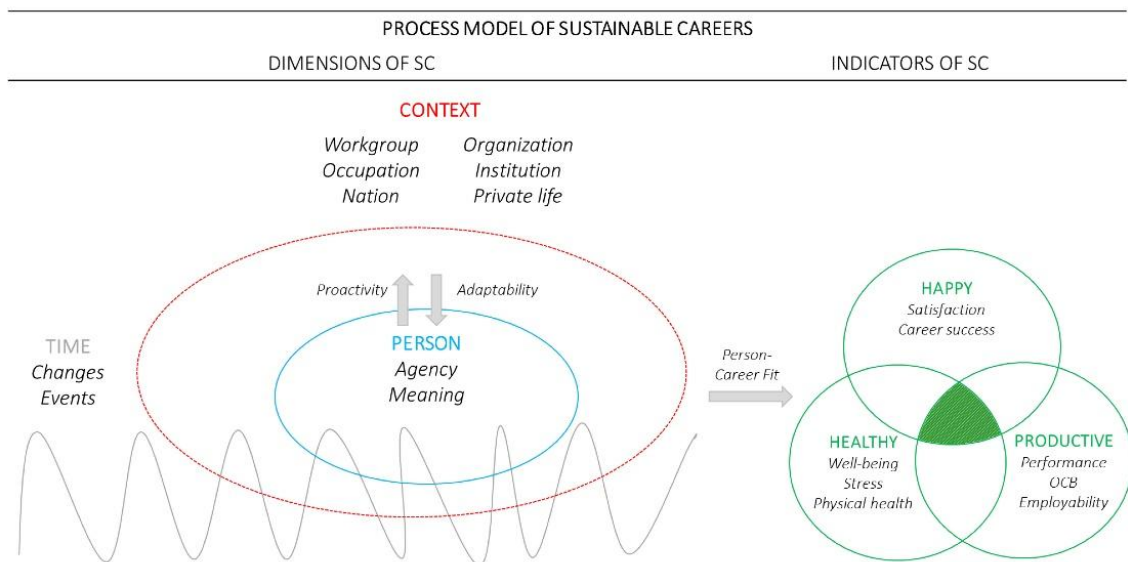
## **2.2 Sustainable Career Model**

Over the past two decades, the concept of career has gone through a significant transformation, reflecting the growing complexity and instability of the job market and the world of work. In response to these changes, a new concept of sustainable careers has emerged, proposing as an alternative paradigm to the traditional and more linear career paths (De Vos & Van der Heijden, 2015). Career sustainability focuses on an individual's ability to keep employability, well-being and meaningfulness throughout all the entire professional life, even through important changes and environmental challenges

(Akkermans & Kubasch, 2017). In this framework, career is no longer perceived as a static and determined path, but more as a dynamic sequence of experiences that develop through personal, contextual and temporal factors (Van der Heijden & De Vos, 2015).

One of the most solid definitions is the one proposed by De Vos et al. (2020), according to which a sustainable career can be defined as a “sequences of career experiences reflected through a variety of patterns of continuity over time, thereby crossing several social spaces, characterized by individual agency, herewith providing meaning to the individual” (p. 1). With this definition, sustainability is not seen only from an exclusively organizational sense, but also as a subjective and procedural condition that allows individuals to remain active and healthy in their professional career, as well as satisfied from their work experience.

The main theoretical model on career sustainability is the Process Model of Sustainable Careers from De Vos et al. (2020). The figure below illustrates the visual representation of this model:



**Figure 2.** Process Model of Sustainable Careers (De Vos et al., 2020).

This model identifies three fundamental dimensions: Person, Context and Time. The Person dimension represents the individual agency, the ability to actively manage his own career through autonomous choices and the development of its own identity (De Vos et al., 2009; Savickas et al., 2009), including also the ability to manage and to adapt to life transitions. The Context dimension refers to the social and the institutional environment in which a career is developed. It includes factors such as organizational support, HR policies, labor market conditions and family circumstances (Akkermans & Kubasch, 2017). Finally, the Time dimension highlights the evolutionary nature of a career, including critical events and transitions, together with long-term trajectories (Akkermans et al., 2018). It emphasizes that sustainability is not a static condition, but rather a process that develops and is evaluated over time.

Together with these three dimensions, the model identifies three main sustainability indicators: Health, Happiness and Productivity (De Vos et al., 2020). The Health indicator refers to physical and psychological health, together with the ability to maintain a work-life balance. The Happiness indicator is associated with the job satisfaction, meaning a sense of personal accomplishment and the alignment between values and the activities performed. Finally, Productivity measures the effectiveness in the role, the development of transferable skills and the maintenance of employability during the professional career (Van der Heijde & Van der Heijden, 2006).

One of the most innovative elements of the model is its dynamic and holistic nature. The indicators are not seen as static, but rather as signals that reflect the continuous interaction between the Person, Context and Time dimensions. A sudden change in the work context (e.g. a corporate restructure) can negatively affect the perception of happiness or impact the individual's health, forcing the individual to a personal activation of resources to regain a sustainable balance of life. These dynamics are well represented by the concept of career shocks, which identify unexpected or significant changes that can drastically modify a career path (Akkermans et al., 2018).

In addition, there are still many other factors impacting the sustainability of a global career. For example, a key aspect of a sustainable career is the harmonious integration between work and private life. Hirschi et al. (2020) highlight that developing a sustainable career requires actively considering non-work roles (family, personal life, community) and their relationship with work. By adopting a 'whole-life' perspective, the worker aims for satisfaction and effectiveness in multiple aspects of life, while making career decisions aware of the impact on family and other non-professional areas (Greenhaus & Kossek, 2014). Different studies confirm that conflict and the enrichment between work and private life affect the three fundamental indicators of a sustainable career, influencing, for example, the job satisfaction and the psychophysical health (De Vos et al., 2018; Allen et al., 2014). Consequently, the work-life balance is not an accessory element but a key and fundamental part of the career's sustainability. Truly sustainable careers allow individuals to follow their personal ambitious professional goals without sacrificing private well-being, family or community engagement (Hirschi et al., 2020; Hall et al., 2012).

Another important aspect about sustainable careers was introduced by Newman (2011), who brings in the concept of career renewal as a key component of sustainable careers. In order to be sustainable across all the work life cycle, the career must have moments of renewal, such as opportunities for change and growth, instead of following a rigid and stable linear path (Newman, 2011). In practice, career renewal can take the form of sabbaticals periods or transitions to new roles, skills updating or family breaks, which could lead individuals to more motivation and energy (Power, 2009; Hirschi et al., 2020). According to Newman (2011), sustainable careers have three interconnected characteristics: renewability, flexibility and integration. Renewability implies the ability to reinvent itself professionally and to adapt to new challenges, contributing to maintaining an individual's human capital, updating it instead of depleting it over time. Flexibility represents an adaptive attitude that allows someone to tolerate any periods of scarcity of fulfillment at work, while keeping a long-term vision and future growth (Newman, 2011). The integrative aspect concerns the coherence between an individual's personal values and the career path chosen, guaranteeing that the job remains aligned with the identity of the

person (Newman, 2011; Power, 2009). Taken together, these career renewal factors support ongoing employability and worker well-being, helping them maintain a dynamic fit between themselves and the professional context even in the face of changes and transitions.

Today, the concept of sustainable careers today represents one of the most relevant tools to understand career trajectories in global and transnational contexts. The theoretical model developed by De Vos et al. (2020) provides a fundamental basis for the analysis of individual careers in the long term, thanks to its multidimensional structure and also for its ability to connect personal, contextual and temporal factors that interact all together. In summary, a Sustainable Global Career can be seen as a international professional path that maintains a dynamic balance between health, happiness and productivity during time, while adapting to the personal and the professional transitions of life. In the following chapters, we will explore deeper these dimensions and indicators and then analyze how they manifest themselves in the global career paths of SIEs.

### **2.3 Sustainable Global Careers of SIEs**

Having introduced the concepts of SIEs and Sustainable Global Careers, it is now important to address the relationship between them. SIEs, as expatriates who have independently and personally decided to move to another country to work, are the individuals who most face challenges in terms of adapting, balancing and sustaining their professional careers. Lacking organizational support from any organization or institution, they are exposed to greater risks, which can compromise the sustainability of their careers both in the short term and, above all, in the long term.

It is therefore crucial to analyze the key factors that impact the sustainability of their careers. Numerous academic studies exist on who SIEs are and what their characteristics are and just as many on the sustainability of global careers, but few on the sustainability of the global careers of SIEs. For this reason, in this section, we will attempt to analyze

the intersection between SIE and their sustainable careers, examining the alignment between the dimensions of professional sustainability (person, context and time) and the attributes of SIE.

### **2.3.1 Person Dimension of SIEs**

The Person dimension of the sustainable career model (De Vos et al., 2020) refers to everything that concerns the individual: their decision-making ability, their values, their professional identity, their personal goals and the personal resources they use to build and manage their career. For SIEs, this dimension is particularly important because their path abroad depends largely on their personal initiative and their ability to navigate in new and uncertain environments. But the personal desire for adventure and discovery isn't the only factor driving these types of workers to seek employment abroad. As Chwialkowska's (2020) study presents, SIEs often settle for jobs in their home country that aren't compatible with their desires and that don't value them. This factor, also caused by a shortage of jobs, incentivizes these types of workers to pursue careers abroad, presenting them with personal challenges that require suitable and solid psychosocial characteristics.

In general, SIEs are often described as an active and autonomous individual who choose to move abroad to seek for a job voluntarily, without being sent by any kind of organization (Suutari & Brewster, 2000). This choice reflects the idea of a boundaryless career (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996), where individuals look for growth opportunities in diverse contexts, without following a traditional corporate path. In order to navigate this path, SIEs must be able to manage their own careers: Doherty et al. (2011) emphasize that they are often driven by strong personal motivation and clear goals, both professional and personal. Unlike AEs, who are supported by the company, SIEs must plan everything by themselves and face difficulties alone.

An important support for them comes from what is called 'career capital' (Inkson & Arthur, 2001), that is the set of skills and the relationships they need and use to build a

solid career path. Specifically, three main aspects matter when we talk about skills and motivation: what one can do (knowing-how), the reasons and values that guide their choices (knowing-why) and the people that someone knows who can help (knowing-whom) (Inkson & Arthur, 2001). But this is not always linear and true. Sometimes, the contextual factors can lead to a worse career capital over time for SIEs. For example, Rodriguez and Scurry's (2014) research on career progression in Qatar highlights how context-specific challenges can even reduce from the individual some of their career capital during the international transfers.

Another key quality is the adaptability in non-comfort zones, that is the ability to react and adapt to the changes and challenges of an international career (Savickas et al., 2009). Those who are more adaptable are more likely to perform well through uncertainties and challenges, stay motivated and maintain their well-being during time (De Vos et al., 2020). Together with adaptability skills, it is also important that SIEs must have a proactive approach to their career development. According to Talluri et al. (2022), proactivity and career adaptability are closely linked to career sustainability: those who demonstrate an active and flexible attitude tend to develop longer and satisfying careers. SIEs, precisely because of the uncertain nature of their career paths, often develop these skills significantly.

According to Kilic and Kitapci (2024), career developing strategies are associated with a better work-life balance together with greater employability and professional engagement. As highlighted by Dickmann et al. (2018), many SIEs also demonstrate resilience and strategic long-term thinking in building their own careers. These characteristics help them to remain competitive and satisfied, also in situations of uncertainty or lack of support.

Moreover, another element of the personal dimension concerns the concept of professional identity. According to Fitzgerald (2020), professional identity is constructed through skills, values, knowledge and self-recognition in a work role and thanks to the

developing over time through education and interaction with other professionals. Being that SIEs possess an autonomous nature of choices, often build a more solid and self-aware professional identity than the AEs (Myers & Thorn, 2023). This self-awareness provides a solid foundation for their sustainable career, enhancing well-being and job satisfaction in the long term.

However, there could still be some challenges or threats related to SIEs' personal dimensions sustainability over time. Sometimes, it can happen that SIEs encounter obstacles related to the employers' perception of their value. In research conducted by Moulai et al. (2022) it is highlighted that many SIEs experienced a conflict between the vision of their potential and the appreciation they receive in the organizational contexts by their employers and colleagues.

In conclusion, from a personal perspective, the sustainability of a SIE's global career depends on their ability to adapt, motivation, professional identity and individual initiative. However, even the most prepared and motivated individuals cannot build a sustainable career alone. We must also consider the external factors that influence their path, like organizational factors, labor market and the institutional support. Therefore, in the next subchapter, we will focus on the contextual dimension, focusing on the role of the environment in promoting or hindering the sustainability of SIEs global careers.

### **2.3.2 Context Dimension of SIEs**

As highlighted in the previous chapter, achieving a long-term, sustainable global career requires more than just strong motivation and personal resources. In addition to personal factors, contextual factors also come into play, including institutional and social factors and, more specifically, for SIEs, corporate and organizational factors. All these contextual factors have been subjected to very strong changes in recent years due to technological advancement, demographic changes and above all rapid globalization (Van der Heijden & De Vos, 2015).

One of the main obstacles to the sustainability of a SIE's career is related to the access to the host country's labour market. Being self-employed workers, who choose to expatriate, SIEs must face the bureaucratic and legal barriers associated with entering to work in a foreign country. The legal systems of the host country can significantly affect the adjustment and the expatriation process of SIEs. The most known and common challenges are the need for specific visa and work permit for foreign workers and the recognition of professional qualifications got in the home country (Crowley-Henry, 2012; Samarsky, 2022). All these elements can slow down or even prevent access to formal employment, creating a first layer of complexity to their career development.

In many cases, even workers that have high and skilled educational qualifications compatible with the local job market can struggle to find an employment that matches their skills. As highlighted by Chwialkowska (2020), it is not uncommon that SIEs could be excluded from suitable job opportunities, forcing them to accept lower skilled jobs, often far from their academic and professional career path. This can have negative consequences on their satisfaction and on sense of accomplishment, affecting the long-term sustainability of their careers. Another obstacle observed by Doherty et al. (2011) is the lack of a local professional network in the host country. The absence of contacts or an organization that works as a sponsor for the SIE, makes it difficult to easily enter the job market and access the same opportunities as the local workers or the AEs. This initial isolation can compromise growth opportunities, especially in the first few months after arrival. A study by Richardson and McKenna (2014) confirms that for SIEs the use of connections and networks it is crucial to facilitating further possible expatriations or relocation, allowing them to pursue their desire for international careers.

Another key element that impact on the sustainability of SIE's careers is the relationship that they create with the local culture and the host society, both in local society and working environment. As stated by Firth et al. (2014), it is quite obvious that the cultural adaptation part is a crucial step for the international experience of SIEs. Differences in the local working environments practices could positively or negatively impact on the

perception and satisfaction of the SIEs. For example, a study conducted by Pasamar and Cabrera (2013) showed that the length of a workday in Spain, usually around 10 to 11 hours, could create challenges in the work-life balance for some workers, while, on the other hand, following the Asian culture, spending several hours on the workplace is seen as a sign of strong job dedication (Chandra, 2012). Cultural contrast can be also seen in other two studies conducted in Korea and in UAE. In the study by Atay et al. (2024), some Eurasian expatriates have found consistent issues in the work-life balance, because of the Korean work environment, while in the UAE, thanks to the international environment and the spread knowledge of the English language, SIEs have had easier adaptation to the local sociocultural practices (Isakovic & Whitman, 2013).

When an expatriate arrives in a new country, he/she faces not only work challenges, but also a broader process of cultural adaptation. This aspect can be more or less easy, depending on the degree of acceptance and on the inclusiveness shown by the local community (Chen et al., 2024). An open society that respects cultural differences facilitates integration and can help the expatriates to feel at home. Unfortunately, it is not always easy to find these realities. Many SIEs face a real culture shock when they find themselves immersed in a new context, with values and habits different from those of their country of origin (Wang et al., 2014). This can lead to discomfort or a sense of exclusion, especially if there is no external social support to help them with these difficulties in the first few months. As Doherty et al. (2013) point out, developing intercultural skills and building relationships in their new environment is fundamental for SIEs. This process is also influenced by the host context disposition to embrace diversity. When the work environment or the local community is not very inclusive, the expatriate experience can become isolating and unsatisfying.

Intrinsically linked to this topic, there is also another critical aspect for the SIEs: the limited or completely absent organizational support by the company they work for. Unlike AEs, who receive training and logistical assistance packages by their parent organization, SIEs find themselves without any kind of structured assistance system (Suutari &

Brewster, 2018). This can result in difficulties in accessing the company's resources, with a lack of mentoring and training program designed to incentive and to ease the integration into the new work environment (Brewster et al., 2021). As also explained by De Vos et al. (2020), a lack of support from the organization can have a negative effect on the health, the happiness and the productivity of the SIEs. Without this kind of support, SIEs may feel inadequate, frustrated and stressed from the very beginning, with both psychological and performance impacts, reducing the sustainability of the career also on the long-term.

The contextual factors analysed, such as the bureaucratic barriers, the poor cultural inclusiveness and the limited or absent organizational support can hinder the sustainability of the SIEs careers, impacting on the three main indicators presented by De Vos et al. The issues in accessing the labor market can reduce Productivity, while the cultural isolation and the lack of support can increase the stress and the dissatisfaction of the workers, impacting on Health and Happiness. These obstacles can compromise the ability of SIEs to build a lasting and rewarding career path if persistent. Now, having considered the role of context, the following chapter will explore the third dimension of the model, the Time dimension.

### **2.3.3 Time Dimension of SIEs**

The sustainable career model underlines that Time is a crucial factor to value the sustainability of a career. A career must be in fact considered as a dynamic and longitudinal path in constant evolution: De Vos et al. (2020) describe the sustainability of a career as an aspect directly linked to the duration over time and to the ability to keep a continuity and a meaning throughout all the working life. In other words, a sustainable career is not measured in a single frame or in a single moment, but throughout stages and continuous adjustments.

In the case of SIEs, the temporal dimension takes on particular connotations. The career trajectories of SIEs are not usually linear but rather fluid, more like a flowing river than

a traditional hierarchical ladder (Crowley-Henry, 2012). In fact, SIEs often experience their career as a sequence of mobility cycles, moving from country to another and going through critical transition phases instead of following a single path (Lindgren, 2025). This inherently temporary and mobile nature of the SIE experience presents a challenge: the sense of temporariness. The typical horizon of a SIE is often limited to a defined period abroad, perceived from the beginning as temporary. As per definition, if a SIEs demonstrate the intention to remain in a country, he would automatically become an immigrant and so the nature of a SIEs would disappear (Doherty et al., 2013). In addition, a long-term planning for a SIE result very complex. Many SIEs start with short-term intentions, which can suddenly change over time, either extending it or ending it earlier than expected. Consequently, defining the temporal dimension is very difficult for these expatriates: their career decisions often happen sequentially, redefining them as new opportunities or personal needs emerge.

Stated that the temporal dimension of the Sustainable Careers model highlights how careers should be considered as a dynamic process, it is therefore mandatory to consider that SIEs must balance present needs and success with their future goals and to do so they must preserve and renew their resources along their career (De Vos et al., 2020). In the context of global careers, this aspect is even more relevant. The international experiences that the SIEs accumulate over time have an impact on the long-term sustainability of their careers, requiring a continuous adaptation throughout their professional life.

Concerning this, Fontinha & Brewster (2021) underline once again that the adaptation process of an SIEs is a continuous and dynamic process: the time factor, defined by Hippler et al (2015) as “the elephant in the room” because it is often ignored, should be fully recognized in studies on international adjustment (Hippler et al., 2015; Fontinha & Brewster, 2021). Only a few research adopts a longitudinal perspective, although the analysis of process during adaptation requires investigation along temporal dimensions. Unlike the AEs, SIEs tend to stay abroad longer and usually without a predetermined repatriation plan and consequently their adjustment process is gradual and supported

mainly by personal initiative, in the absence of the organizational support enjoyed by many traditional expatriates (Fontinha & Brewster, 2021).

Research shows that many expatriates prefer to take a gradual approach, making decisions step by step instead of than setting a rigid expatriation plan. This flexibility, necessary to face with the typical unpredictability of global careers, on the other hand create an inevitable boundary between a temporary experience and a permanent transition. The temporal dimension in the sustainable career model reminds us that sustainability must be built across all the professional lifespans. For SIEs this is even more crucial, forcing them to know how to manage a career made up of international stages and continuous adaptations, maintaining a long-term perspective notwithstanding a challenging planning process and the uncertainty of the global context.

#### **2.3.4 Health, Happiness and Productivity for SIEs**

In the 2.2 the Sustainable Career Model by De Vos et al. has been introduced and as underlined by the authors, this model offers a complete and comprehensive overview of the professional development of sustainable careers: three dimensions (person, context and time) incorporated together with the three indicators of a sustainable career, that are health, happiness and productivity. A sustainable career ensures that the individual's professional goals are met, but also that psychophysical well-being persists throughout the professional career. Health comprehends physical and mental well-being, happiness reflects the personal satisfaction and productivity the ability to reach relevant and significant results.

##### ***Health***

One of the most important aspects for the sustainability of a global career is the individual's psychophysical well-being. In the De Vos et al. (2020) model, Health does not only concern the absence of illness, but it also includes the balance between work and private life, together with the ability to face with job challenges and pressures. For SIEs this dimension can even be particularly fragile. Moving from the home country to a foreign

one, without the support of an organization, can create high levels of stress, anxiety and insecurity. The adaptation process to a new cultural and professional context requires strong cognitive and emotional effort, with the risk of consequences on mental health in the first months of arrival (Haslberger et al., 2013; Wang et al., 2014).

According to Doherty et al. (2013), many SIEs experience an initial phase of social isolation. The lack of colleagues or local networks makes them struggle to build relationships/friendships that can help in their adaptation process or that can give them emotional support. This can contribute to the feeling of loneliness, increasing the risk of not adapting to the context. Moreover, the culture shock is another relevant factor, being that living in a new environment with different values and practices from their usual ones can cause disorientation and loss of motivation (Wang et al., 2014).

Additionally, also the work-life balance is a critical aspect for SIEs. The lack of boundaries between work and personal time, along with the pressure of having to manage things on their own, can lead to a dangerous overlap between the two spheres. As observed by Greenhaus and Kossek (2014), the quality of work life is directly linked to the quality of life outside of work. For SIEs, this balance is often more difficult to achieve than for other workers, especially in countries where organizational practices are more rigid or with less flexibility.

However, the ability to strengthen themselves and to increase the resilience to these initial difficulties also depend mostly on the intrinsic capabilities of the individual. For example, as highlighted by Jannesari & Sullivan (2022), when SIEs are able to positively address their difficulties, they tend to strengthen themselves further, increasing their apprehension and growth curve. On the other hand, when they face significant challenges, they face a greater risk of withdrawal and poor stress management, negatively impacting their resilience. (Jannesari & Sullivan, 2022) This duality further highlights how the ability to manage stress and the intrinsic qualities of the individual are crucial to making their careers sustainable.

In conclusion, the health of SIEs does not only depend on personal factors, but it is the result of a continuous interaction between the three dimensions of a SC: the individual's ability to manage emotions and stress (the Person dimension), the type of support provided by the social and the work environment (the Context dimension) and the time needed to adapt and create a stable balance (the Time dimension). In a context without relationships or with excessive instability over time, the adaptation of a SIE can be compromised, generating burnout or depression (Akkermans et al., 2021). By understanding how these three dimensions interact between themselves, it is easier to manage and control the health sustainability of a SIEs' global career.

### ***Happiness***

While assessing the sustainability of a SIEs' career, it is fundamental to consider also the happiness element of the expatriate's life. The happiness indicator does not refer only to job satisfaction, but mostly also to the personal fulfilment of the worker, together with the alignment between individual values and professional activities (De Vos et al., 2020). For most of the SIEs, the decision to move abroad comes not only from an economic need, but mainly from a desire of having a meaningful professional and personal experience (Doherty et al., 2011).

Personal satisfaction comes often from the ability to be involved in a work with activities that align with the individual's aspirations and abilities. However, achieving this alignment is not always easy: some SIEs, even if they have high level of education, find themselves performing professional roles that are below their skills, leading to a sense of frustration and demotivation (Chwialkowska, 2020). In these cases, the misalignment between expectations and reality can lower the perceived meaning of work compromising the well-being of the individual, even if the initial motivation was strong.

Another factor that can affect the perception of happiness for an expatriate is, once again, the cultural context. Chen et al. (2024) underline that the meaning attributed to

the professional activities varies from culture to culture. If the SIE is able to integrate into the local context and understand its values, it will be easier to find satisfaction and to give a proper meaning to their experience. Otherwise, without proper cultural integration, the worker may feel isolated and misunderstood, reducing the overall career happiness. According to Savickas et al. (2009), the happiness related to professional life is stronger when the personal goals are reflected in the role played. This is even more important for SIEs, who often build their own career path independently and autonomously.

However, professional happiness is also linked to the work identity. Fitzgerald (2020) underlines that the feeling recognized in the working role, while developing significant skills and maintaining consistency the personal values are essential for work satisfaction and so for the individual's happiness. For this reason, the happiness indicator cannot be considered alone, but it must be analyzed as the result of the interaction between person, context and time, as in the model by De Vos et al. (2020).

### ***Productivity***

The third and last indicator of career sustainability is productivity (De Vos et al., 2020). This concept goes beyond short-term performance: it refers to the individual's ability to maintain high levels of performance and to remain employable on a long-term horizon. For a self-expatriate, sustainable productivity is a continuous challenge, as they often find themselves working in new unstructured or evolving contexts.

One of the main tools to face all the productivity challenges is the career capital, i.e. the set of resources that make a person effective and efficient in their career path. As Inkson and Arthur (2001) presented, career capital is made up of three elements: technical and professional knowledge (knowing-how), motivation and personal goals (knowing-why) and a network of contacts (knowing-whom). The lack of support of the parent company forces SIEs to build and renew this career capital autonomously in order to access new job opportunities or to maintain a high level of work efficiency and utility. A recent study by Mello et al. (2025) shows that work experience abroad can help SIEs to improve their

productivity, especially in the long term. This happens because living and working in new contexts allows you to develop your career capital and when the job performed is various and stimulating the SIE is able to adapt better, experiencing a useful personal and professional growth. This also increases the chances of finding new occupations in the future and maintaining good performance levels over time (Mello et al., 2025). This is a clear example of how the person dimension of the De Vos et al. (2020) model comes into play: proactivity and personal motivation are essential for investing in one's career capital. Context also plays an important role, as if the work environment is unstable or culturally different, it can represent both a challenge and an opportunity to strengthen transferable skills and adaptability (Dickmann et al., 2018). Finally, the temporal dimension implies that productivity must be maintained and built over time through a process of development and continuous learning (De Vos et al., 2020).

It is also essential that these skills should be transferable, meaning that they could be also used in different work contexts. This idea is explained by Van der Heijde and Van der Heijden (2006), according to whom a workers' employability is also based on the ability to adapt and apply these skills in different situations and job contexts. For a SIE, this means knowing how to work in multicultural environments, to also communicate effectively in uncomfortable contexts and to face complex problems efficiently.

To conclude, Suutari and Brewster (2018) highlight that SIEs, being their peculiarity to manage their careers independently, often develop a long-term mindset, that makes them active seeker of opportunities for growth and continuous learning. This attitude helps them remain employable over time and to maintain high level of performance almost everywhere.

One of the most innovative elements of the sustainable career model proposed by De Vos et al. (2020) is its dynamic nature. The three dimensions (person, context and time) do not operate separately, but they directly influence the three sustainability indicators (health, satisfaction and productivity). When one dimension changes, the indicators may

also vary. For example, an unexpected and sudden change in the work context (such as a corporate restructuring or an economic crisis) can affect an individual's motivation (Happiness) or generate stress and anxiety (Health), with a negative impact on performance (Productivity). This type of reaction has been described in the literature by Akkermans et al. (2018) through the concept of career shocks: unexpected events that can disrupt career continuity and that require multiple adaptations. In these cases, the individual's ability to react (Person dimension), the available support (Context dimension) and the stage of life in which the situation happens (Time dimension) become crucial factors in maintaining the career sustainability.

As Newman (2011) also observed, when various spheres of life come into conflict, such as, for example, between professional ambitions and personal well-being, tension can arise between career domains, compromising the worker's identity coherence and affecting the long-term well-being. This underlines that the sustainability of a career depends not only on the performances, but on a balance between internal and external factors, which influence each other.

This chapter analysed the literature on the career sustainability of SIEs, using as the theoretical basis the model proposed by De Vos et al. (2020). It emerged that SIEs face specific challenges but also develop unique resources to maintain the sustainability of their careers over time. This conceptual analysis gives the theoretical basis to investigate how these factors act in the real-life experiences of SIEs.

## **2.4 Theoretical framework for the study**

In the context of contemporary global careers, SIEs represent a more and more relevant type of workers. Unlike AEs, SIEs voluntarily undertake professional careers abroad, reflecting the dynamics of transnational and global careers (Suutari & Brewster, 2000; Baruch & Bozionelos, 2011). This phenomenon is incentivized by the increasing international mobility and by the new trends of autonomy and personal development among

the new generations. SIEs are seeking more control over their careers and for growth opportunities beyond the national borders (Richardson & Mallon, 2005). However, at the same time the choice to emigrate to find a job also involves unique challenges, such as the lack of structured organizational support and the need to adapt independently to new cultural and professional contexts (Howe-Walsh & Schyns, 2010; Cao et al., 2014). These characteristics make the SIE an emblematic case of a “boundaryless career”, in which individual agency and adaptability play an important role in the long-term success of the professional career (Inkson et al., 2012; Andresen et al., 2014).

For these reasons, the Sustainable Career Model by De Vos et al. (2020) was chosen as the theoretical basis for analysing the international careers of SIEs. This conceptual model provides a lens through which to examine the career sustainability of SIEs, both by individual and external factors and from a dynamic and long-term perspective. In particular, De Vos et al. (2020) propose three key indicators for assessing career sustainability and three analytical dimensions through which to interpret it (Van der Heijden, 2005; De Vos et al., 2020). These elements find correspondence with some emerging themes in the literature of SIEs. The person dimension emphasizes the role of the individual, recalling the high autonomy and the agency that distinguish the SIEs in managing their own careers (Suutari & Brewster, 2000; Tharenou, 2013). SIEs rely on their skills, values and intrinsic motivations to navigate their careers abroad, often displaying marked adaptability and personal resilience in the face of change (Jokinen et al., 2008). The contextual dimension, on the other hand, refers to the influence of the external and organizational environment: SIEs operate in new and multicultural contexts, without the traditional support of a home employer and must therefore build local social networks and alternative support strategies (Howe-Walsh & Schyns, 2010). Previous studies suggest that a lack of organizational support can compromise SIEs' well-being and career success (Cao et al., 2014), highlighting how the resources and pressures of the host context impact the sustainability of their careers. Finally, the temporal dimension recognizes that career sustainability must be assessed over time: international careers of SIEs develop through successive phases, including, for example, periods of initial adaptation, evolving

professional ambitions, possible returns or further geographical moves. This temporal element is essential to grasp the dynamic nature of SIE paths, in which successes and difficulties can alternate and impact the long-term course of a career (Van der Heijden & De Vos, 2015).

The adoption of the Sustainable Career Model appears therefore very suitable for interpreting the professional experiences of SIEs. First, the model gives the possibility to analyze the interaction between individual agency, contextual factors and temporal dynamics with respect to the health, happiness and career productivity of SIEs. This means that we can understand how the workers' strategies and decisions, like following opportunities or investing in training and networking, interact with the characteristics of the foreign context, such as the local culture or the labor market and with the changes over time in determining the individual's psycho-physical well-being and career satisfaction. De Vos et al. (2020) emphasize that the sustainability of a career is the result of a systemic balance between all these elements, where personal agency, contextual conditions and temporal variability contribute to shaping the sustainable professional path. Using this perspective to SIEs allows us to understand why some professionals manage to build long and satisfying international careers, maintaining high levels of engagement and employability over time, while others face challenges in the adaptation processes or have career burnouts that limit their foreign staying. In other words, the framework helps us to explain how and why a SIE's career can evolve in a "positive spiral" of growth and well-being or, otherwise, can be jeopardized by personal or environmental factors (Van der Heijden & De Vos, 2015).

From a theoretical point of view, the Sustainable Career Model allow us to merge the contribution of two lines of research: the first, referred to the expatriates' autonomous international careers and the second, focused on the career sustainability. This responds to the calls of different researchers who asked for a more systemic approach to career studies, capable of incorporating both individual choices and contextual factors and resources, as well as the longitudinal dimension of career trajectories (Inkson et al., 2012;

Akkermans & Kubasch, 2017). In particular, for self-initiated international careers such as those of SIEs, this theoretical model offers added value both analytically and practically. Analytically, it provides an interpretative framework for identifying the factors that contribute to the sustainability of a self-initiated expatriation experience. For instance, it allows us to explain how the alignment between an individual's personal values and their current job impact their happiness and also how the development of their new skills and their international social capital influence the productivity and the future employability. On the practical level, this approach offers useful insights for both individuals and organizations. On the one hand, SIEs can better understand the importance of balancing their personal well-being and their professional gratification in their career choices, adopting strategies for adaptation and continuous learning, that could help them to avoid issues in health or satisfaction in the long term. On the other hand, organizations can draw insights to more effectively support these self-directed careers, by providing guidance services or inclusion policies that can reduce the lack of formal support. Ultimately, the Sustainable Career Model by De Vos et al. (2020) stands as a solid theoretical foundation for this research as it allows for a dimensional analysis of SIE careers (person, context and time) and for assessing their sustainability through metrics that reflect both objective success and subjective well-being. This theoretical framework, in addition to filling a gap in the literature on independent international careers, also offers an innovative approach to understand and to stimulate long lasting, healthy and satisfying global careers for both the individuals and the organizations involved.

### **3 Methodology**

This chapter describes the research methodology used to analyze the career sustainability of SIEs. First, the methodological approach is presented, justifying its choice in relation to the study's objectives. Then, the research design and the specific method used are defined. The central section details the sampling process, data collection techniques and analysis procedures. The chapter concludes with an assessment of the research's validity and reliability, ensuring the transparency and scientific credibility of the findings.

#### **3.1 Philosophy and research approach**

According to Saunders et al. (2019), research philosophy represents the system of beliefs and values that guides the scholar in developing knowledge. This philosophy influences how the world is viewed, the types of questions asked, the chosen methods and how the results are interpreted.

The main dimensions of research philosophy are ontology, epistemology and axiology. Ontology is related to the nature of the reality studied; epistemology concerns the type of knowledge that can be considered valid and how to obtain it; axiology refers to the role of values and the researcher's subjective judgment in the research process (Saunders et al., 2019).

Another key aspect is the approach to theory, which can be deductive, inductive or abductive. The deductive approach starts from a theory to test it; the inductive one generates theory starting from observation; the abductive one tries to explain a phenomenon starting from surprising observations, with the aim of developing a new theory or adapting an existing one (Saunders et al., 2019)

The present study adopts an interpretivist philosophy, which places the individual subjective experience at the center. This approach is particularly feasible to understanding complex and personal phenomena, such as the sustainable careers of SIEs. According to

Saunders et al. (2019), interpretivism recognizes that reality is not objective and unique, but is constructed by the people through their perceptions and interactions in different life contexts. For this reason, each SIE constructs and interprets its professional experience differently.

Interpretivist philosophy is connected to the subjectivist view of reality, where meanings are generated by social interaction and are not independent of the individual (Saunders et al., 2019). This means that the professional identity and the career sustainability depend on how each individual perceives their own path, taking into account culture, context, life stage and personal preferences.

From the point of view of the theoretical approach, the abductive logic was the one feasible with this research. As suggested by Saunders et al. (2019), the abductive approach allows to start from theory to explore a phenomenon and to use the data to reflect on the theory itself while and enriching it. In this case, we refer to the theoretical model of sustainable careers by De Vos et al. (2020), which offers a useful framework for interpreting experiences, but also leaves room for the discovery of new insights emerging from the collected data.

This combination of interpretivism and an abductive approach is consistent with the research objective, which is not to measure predefined variables, but to understand in depth how SIEs experience and interpret the sustainability of their careers based on the model's three dimensions (person, context and time) and related indicators (health, satisfaction and productivity). Careers are therefore viewed as dynamic and personal processes influenced by a multitude of factors and understanding them requires methods that value the participants' perspectives.

### **3.2 Research design**

This study adopts an explanatory qualitative approach, aimed at gaining a depth understanding of the phenomenon of SIEs' international careers instead of testing predefined

hypotheses. This methodology is justified for a theoretical and a practical point of view: theoretically it allows a depth analysis of the individuals' subjective experiences; in practice it offers the flexibility needed to collect new information in a less explored subject. The phenomenon studied is characterized by its marked subjectivity: sustainable SIE careers strongly depend on individual perceptions of health, happiness and productivity, while also affected by the context and time span of the career. For this reason, the unit of analysis is on an individual level: each SIE is considered as a single participant, in order to highlight how each person interprets and constructs the sustainability of their own career.

The primary data collection tool is the semi-structured interview. This type of interview involves a set of predefined but flexible questions, allowing for the exploration of topics that will emerge during the interviews. This format allows the SIEs interviewed to describe their experiences in their own words, while ensuring consistency of content across interviews. The questions are deliberately broad and open-ended. The study aims for an exploratory-interpretative approach to career dynamics, consistent with the explanatory purpose of the investigation. In summary, the qualitative design, with semi-structured individual interviews, serves the purpose of capturing the career experiences of SIEs in a rich and nuanced way.

### **3.3 Data collection and analysis**

To collect the data required for the survey, it was first necessary to identify a reference sample. As defined by Saunders et al. (2019), a sample is a smaller group of people that “should represent the population from which it is taken in a way that is meaningful and which we can justify in relation to answering our research question and meeting our objectives” (p. 294). In this case, the reference population consisted of SIEs, i.e. individuals who voluntarily and independently chose to move abroad for work. However, given that this is a large population and not easily accessible in a systematic way, a non-probability sampling method was chosen.

As explained by Etikan and Kabiru (2017), the non-probability sampling means selecting participants based on the researcher's judgment or accessibility, not randomly. It is therefore particularly useful in qualitative studies where depth is fundamental rather than the generalizability. In this study, a combined approach of non-probability and snowball sampling was used. The non-probability sampling was used to select individuals who fit the characteristics of the phenomenon studied, also given the accessibility of the expatriates known. Snowball sampling was used to expand the number of participants, being that some acquaintances and some interviewees suggested other contacts with similar profiles relevant to the research.

The final sample of the study consists of eight SIEs, identified using codes A–H to preserve their anonymity. The research is part of a broader HRM group project on career sustainability; this thesis used a total of eight interview transcripts, four collected directly by the author and four conducted by other members of the research team. All transcripts were treated equally in the analysis, as each interview was considered equally relevant to answering the research questions.

Consistent with the qualitative and exploratory nature of the research, the sample was not constructed with the aim of achieving statistical representativeness, but rather with the intent of gathering diverse and relevant experiences related to the phenomenon studied. The sample includes three Italian participants and five non-Italian participants, from the United Kingdom, Malaysia, Syria, South Africa and Singapore. It is composed of six men and two women; the ages range from 26 to 50, while the age of one participant was not indicated. Participants have diverse professional backgrounds, including entrepreneurship, architecture, research analysis, engineering, content marketing, teaching and partnership/marketing management. The host countries are also diverse, including the United Arab Emirates, Australia, Switzerland, Germany, Iceland, Finland and Saudi Arabia. Some participants had a single primary expatriate experience, while others travelled across multiple countries during their international careers. This diversity allows us to explore the career sustainability of SIEs from different perspectives, considering the

influence of personal, contextual and temporal factors on career sustainability indicators. The following table provides an overview of the participant profiles included in the study.

**Table 1.** Profiles of SIEs

Code	Nationality	Sex	Age	Profession	Host Country
A	Italian	M	32	Entrepreneur	UAE
B	British	M	40	Architect	Australia
C	Italian	M	26	Research Analyst	Switzerland
D	Italian	M	46	Engineer/Entrepreneur	Germany
E	Malaysian	F	39	Content marketing strategist	Iceland, Finland
F	Syrian	M	33	Computer and control engineer	SA, UAE, Finland
G	South African	F	50	Teacher	UAE, Finland
H	Singaporean	M	?	Partnerships and marketing manager	Finland

The interviews were conducted between March and April 2026 via Microsoft Teams and lasted approximately 40 minutes to an hour, depending on participant availability and the level of detail given. Most interviews were conducted in English, while two were conducted in Italian and subsequently translated word-for-word into English to ensure linguistic consistency during the analysis phase. Before each interview, participants have been provided with a brief introduction to the research topic and objectives, together with the main concepts used, particularly those related to sustainable career theory.

The interviews were conducted following a semi-structured interview template, developed as part of the HRM group's broader research project on career sustainability. The use of semi-structured interviews is consistent with the goal of collecting rich and in-depth qualitative data, as it allows for a common thread to be maintained across interviews, while at the same time allowing participants to freely describe their experiences, perceptions and personal interpretations. The interviews were structured into two main parts. The first focused on the participants' international experiences from the

perspective of the sustainable careers model, with particular attention to indicators of health, happiness and productivity. The second focused on the contextual factors that influenced the participants' expatriation experiences and career sustainability. This approach allowed to collect data consistent with the study's research questions, while maintaining sufficient flexibility to explore specific aspects that emerged during individual interviews. Thanks to the Microsoft Teams features, the transcriptions were automatically made during the interview and then downloaded. Transcription is the process by which audio or video data is transformed into written form, making it suitable for qualitative analysis (Saunders et al., 2007). The transcripts were subsequently checked and corrected manually to improve the accuracy of the text and reduce potential errors generated by automatic transcription.

Data analysis was conducted through thematic analysis, an approach particularly suited to qualitative research because it allows for the identification, organization and interpretation of recurring patterns within the data (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). In line with the suggestions of Saunders et al. (2007), qualitative analysis does not aim to produce statistical results, but rather to understand language, identify patterns, interpret them and reflect on the meaning of the collected experiences. In this research, the transcripts were initially read several times to gain familiarity with the data. Subsequently, significant expressions, relevant experiences and recurring themes were highlighted. These elements were then coded and grouped according to the indicators and dimensions of sustainable career theory. At the same time, the analysis also allowed for the emergence of inductive themes not fully anticipated by the theoretical framework, such as language barriers, job instability, underemployment, entrepreneurship, remote work, family and adaptation processes. This hybrid approach allowed to combine a theory-driven reading of the data with greater attention to the subjective experiences of the participants, thus providing the empirical basis for the findings presented in the next chapter.

### **3.4 Validity and reliability of the study**

To ensure the quality of the research, aspects of validity, reliability and ethical considerations were considered. In a qualitative study, validity does not concern the statistical generalizability of the results, but rather the consistency between the data collected, the research objectives and the proposed interpretation. In this sense, validity refers to the extent to which empirical evidence credibly supports the interpretations formulated by the researcher (Creswell, 2023). In the present study, validity was strengthened through the use of semi-structured interviews, which allowed participants to recount their experiences in depth while maintaining a common structure across interviews. Furthermore, participants' background information was considered in the analysis in order to better understand the meaning of their experiences of self-initiated expatriation. The constant connection between the findings and the theoretical framework of sustainable careers also helped strengthen the study's interpretative coherence, as the data were analysed in relation to health, happiness and productivity indicators and the dimensions of person, time and in particular to context.

On the other hand, reliability concerns the consistency of the data collection and analysis process, that is the ability of the procedure followed to be sufficiently clear, traceable and understandable by other researchers (Creswell, 2023). In this research, reliability was supported by the use of the same semi-structured interview template for all interviews, thus ensuring a common basis for data collection. Before each interview, the main concepts and objectives of the research were explained to participants, reducing the risk of misunderstandings. The interviews were recorded, transcribed and subsequently manually checked for accuracy. In the case of the two interviews conducted in Italian, word-for-word translation into English was performed with the aim of preserving the original meaning of the responses and maintaining linguistic consistency throughout the analysis process.

Measures were also taken to ensure compliance with research ethics. Before the interviews began, participants were informed of the purpose of the study, how the data

would be used and the voluntary nature of their participation. Consent to participate and to have the interview recorded was requested and to protect their privacy, participants were identified using anonymous codes from A to H, avoiding the use of real names or details that could make them easily identifiable. The names of organizations were also omitted when not necessary for the analysis. The data collected were used exclusively for academic purposes and treated in accordance with general principles of confidentiality and fairness in qualitative research.

Finally, it is important to consider some methodological limitations of the study. The sample consisted of eight participants and therefore the results cannot be generalized to the entire population of self-initiated expatriates. However, the research goal is not to produce statistically representative results, but rather to provide an understanding of participants' subjective experiences. Furthermore, because the interviews were conducted at a single point in time, the study offers a cross-sectional perspective and does not allow for direct observation of long-term career development. Despite these limitations, the diverse sample, the use of a common interview template, the accurate data transcription and thematic analysis contribute to strengthen the research's overall trustworthiness.

## 4 Findings

This chapter presents the empirical findings from the analysis of interviews conducted with self-initiated expatriates. The chapter's goal is to understand how the experience of self-initiated expatriation influences the sustainability of international careers, with particular attention to indicators of health, happiness and productivity, together with the role of personal and contextual factors impacting these experiences.

The analysis is based on eight semi-structured interviews with participants who experienced international mobility that differs by country, career stage, professional sector and personal motivations. The collected data were analysed through a hybrid thematic analysis. On the one hand, the coding process was made with a deductive approach guided by De Vos et al.'s (2020) sustainable careers framework, specifically the Health, Happiness and Productivity indicators and the Person, Context and Time dimensions. On the other hand, the analysis maintained an inductive component, allowing other specific themes to emerge directly from the participants' narratives, such as language barriers, cultural adaptation, job instability, career transitions, the role of family, entrepreneurship and remote work dynamics.

The chapter's structure reflects this theoretical and empirical approach. The first section analyses the impact of self-initiated expatriation on three indicators of sustainable career outcomes: Health, Happiness and Productivity. This section addresses the first research question by examining how the international experience influenced the physical and mental well-being of the participants, personal and professional satisfaction and the perceptions of performance, growth and employability.

The following section focuses on the Context dimension, which emerges as a central element in the collected data. Since the interviews paid particular attention to contextual factors, this section analyses the role of the national, institutional, work, social and family contexts in facilitating or hindering the career sustainability of SIEs. Finally, section 4.3 considers additional evidence concerning to the Person and Time dimensions,

highlighting how individual agency, adaptability, personal values, career stages and non-linear trajectories contribute to building sustainable global careers.

The chapter concludes with a summary of the main findings and some recommendations for future research, following a structure consistent with the main objective of the thesis: to understand how SIEs build and maintain over time the sustainability of their careers through the interaction between individual characteristics, life, work contexts and temporal career development.

## **4.1 Sustainable career indicators**

### **4.1.1 Health**

The health indicator was analysed considering both physical and mental well-being of participants, in line with the sustainable career's framework of De Vos et al. Overall, the data show that the impact of self-initiated expatriation on health is not uniform, but varies according to the type of job, national and organizational context, career stage and individual adaptability. For some participants, the experience abroad resulted in improved well-being, primarily due to a better work-life balance, greater stability or improved quality of life. For others, however, expatriation resulted in an initial phase of stress, isolation, loss of routine or deterioration in physical and mental health.

A first theme that emerged concerns the impact of specific working conditions on health. Some participants described situations in which the type of work, rather than the country itself, negatively impacted their well-being. For example, C describes the work he did in Prague as physically and mentally unsustainable, primarily due to irregular shifts. The constantly changing schedules prevented him from establishing a stable routine and made it difficult to maintain a daily balance. He states that:

*"The shifts changed every week, your body never adapts. It's terrible for your health because you don't have a routine. "*

In his case, the work organization had a direct impact on his health. Similarly, E links the decline in her well-being to the intensity of the work culture. In describing her experience in Malaysia, she emphasizes how there was "no such thing as work-life balance," while her experience in Iceland is associated with a sharp decline in mental well-being:

*"No, my well-being was down the drain. So that's when I realized that, um, I enjoy the working culture in Iceland, where people are very ambitious, they're very driven, but it is not good for my mental health, I need the balance or that drive and also at the same time being able to have the calmness and the strength in planning of the Finns."*

A second pattern concerns the initial adjustment stress. Several participants experienced an initial phase of disorientation in the new context, often linked to a lack of support, language barriers or career uncertainty. For instance, for C starting to work in Switzerland was accompanied by severe stress because the role was new, the training was poorly structured and the work was initially carried out remotely. He describes feeling uncertain about the quality of his work and poorly integrated with colleagues, especially in the first few months. G also describes her first period in Finland as particularly difficult. The language barrier, the lack of job opportunities consistent with her experience and the need to accept lower skilled jobs led to a personal and professional crisis. In her case, moving abroad did not immediately lead to greater sustainability, but required a long process of adaptation and career reconstruction.

A third relevant element is the distinction between physical and mental health. The two aspects do not always move in the same direction. A, for example, clearly states that he was physically better in Italy. He describes a more active lifestyle, consisting of cycling, walking and increased daily exercise. After moving to Dubai, he says that he stopped exercising and gained weight, linking this change to the different nature of urban and professional life in the new context:

*"I was very, very healthy in Italy. I didn't have extra weight, you know, like I was fit. When I moved to Dubai, the first period of time I struggled A lot. I stopped*

*training, moving... So, I started gaining weight. I gained a lot of weight. And yeah, so it's not, it was not easy health-wise in terms of like being fit."*

However, this physical decline does not necessarily coincide with an overall negative assessment of his expatriate experience, as his career and entrepreneurial opportunities have significantly improved. This shows how career sustainability can involve trade-offs between different indicators and different dimensions of life. However, at the same time, his mental health increased:

*"But psychologically, I like mental health-wise, it was slightly better than Italy. I was better off than in Italy, I would say."*

In the same way, B describes an improvement, especially on a mental level, after moving to Australia. While acknowledging that physical health has also changed due to age related reasons, he associates the Australian experience with an increase in psychological well-being, thanks to the new experiences, lifestyle, the city of Melbourne and the personal and educational opportunities available in the new context. In this case, self-initiated expatriation appears to have had a positive effect on mental health, not so much because the work itself was more satisfying, but because the broader life context fostered a greater perception of well-being.

A fourth element concerns the role of flexibility and work-life balance in supporting health. F, speaking about Finland, emphasizes how the flexibility of his academic and work environments has had a positive impact on his well-being, especially considering the presence of family and personal responsibilities. He explicitly links flexibility, well-being and productivity, suggesting that a less rigid work environment, more oriented toward individual responsibility, can foster a more sustainable career:

*"Overall, I am happy and satisfied. The flexibility in here is great. Especially, when you have a family, when you have other duties to care about, it is not only to focus on your job and your tasks and such things, it is good for the wellbeing and that makes you productive as well."*

H also interprets the sustainability of his experience in Finland as having more time available, fewer family pressures together with a better quality of life compared to Singapore, while acknowledging that the Finnish market may offer more limited professional opportunities:

*“...the quality of the sustainability is much better. ... I have a fairly large family with six children. In Singapore it was a very high upkeep situation. So amount of resources that I had to put into to taking care of my family. ... In Finland there's a lot more space. A lot less to worry about. And a lot more availability in terms of time. And even the financial cost of the upkeep.”*

The case of D further confirms the connection between context, quality of life and well-being. He describes moving to Germany as an improvement both professionally and personally, highlighting how the quality of the public services, a better organization and better working conditions contributed to a more positive perception of his life and overall health. However, even in this case, well-being does not depend exclusively on career, but is linked with family factors, lifestyle choices and social cultures, factors that have pushed him to come back to Italy.

Overall, the findings show that the impact of self-initiated expatriation on health is dynamic and that it is not linear. Expatriation can improve well-being when it offers greater balance, security, flexibility and quality of life, however, it can also lead to stress, isolation, loss of routine or burnout, in particular in the initial stages or in a non-sustainable work environment. The health of SIEs emerges as the result of a continually renegotiated balance between job demands, contextual conditions, personal resources and the stage of their career trajectory. This evidence suggests that health cannot be interpreted as a static outcome of the international experience, but as a dimension that evolves over time and is constantly influenced by the interaction between the individual, the job and the context.

#### 4.1.2 Happiness

The happiness indicator was analysed by considering the participants' satisfaction with their career and their life in the context of their international experience. In line with the sustainable career's framework, happiness concerns not only job satisfaction in a strict sense, but also the way in which their career allows individuals to live a life consistent with their personal values, interests, relationships and expectations. Overall, the data show that self-initiated expatriation had an impact on participants' happiness, but this impact was not the same for everyone. For some, expatriation represented a source of greater satisfaction and personal growth, while for others, however, it generated periods of isolation, frustration, identity crisis or conflict between personal expectations and the reality of the new context.

A first theme that emerged concerns the search for greater personal and professional satisfaction as a motivation for mobility. In several cases, participants did not leave their home country because their situation was necessarily negative, but because they were looking for a more stimulating experience, a different lifestyle or greater growth opportunities. C, for example, describes his decision to leave Italy as being linked primarily to a desire to explore and have new experiences, instead of a state of dissatisfaction in his own country. He states that the choice was not based on "feeling bad" about working in Italy, but rather on the desire to experience something different and seize an international opportunity:

*"Yes, from a work perspective I never felt stressed or overwhelmed. My decision to leave Italy wasn't because I felt bad working there, it was more about wanting a different experience. I've always liked traveling, I had the opportunity and I took it."*

Similarly, B explains that leaving the United Kingdom was linked to a feeling of stagnation together with the desire to change his life, explore a new country and improve the quality of his daily experience:

*"I guess there's a lot of a few different reasons, really. Yeah, one was just... Uh, being a bit bored of life in over there I was feeling that I was stagnating there as well. And then, yeah and then there was just this kind of... It felt great to, I guess, look at this potential experience of going, travelling, going to Australia and that just, yeah, felt really exciting as well. So, there's a big pull there too."*

A second pattern concerns the role of quality of life in building happiness. For some participants, satisfaction after expatriation increased not so much due to the specific content of the job, but rather due to the broader life context. B, for example, links his improved happiness in Australia to the opportunity to live in a stimulating city, with a good climate, social opportunities, travel experiences and an environment more consistent with what he was searching in his personal life:

*"I'd say it's a big improvement just from all the experiences that I've had, like the travelling, the backpacking around, you know, experience a new country, a new city, meeting new people and yeah and all the fun, awesome stuff I've been able to do here in Melbourne and around Australia... good weather and to, you know, in an amazing city where there's good public transport. I can go, yeah, go and explore at the weekend or go to work in a nice, nice building. And yeah and there's all sorts of interesting people here, you know, from all around the world."*

D also describes Germany as a context that improved both professional and personal satisfaction, thanks to better working conditions, greater organization, more efficient services and a perceived higher quality of life compared to Italy:

*"You see the services you're paying for. In Italy, services do exist, but people don't really notice them. Compared to Germany, though, there's a clear difference, you can really feel where your money goes... The job wasn't easy at first, but I worked hard with motivation. It was a dynamic job, in a dynamic city, Hamburg welcomes foreigners much more than Genoa... So yes, both salary and personal satisfaction improved."*

In these cases, happiness emerges as the result of the interaction between career, urban environment, services, lifestyle and the opportunity to build a more satisfying daily life.

A third significant theme concerns the purpose and the alignment between work and personal values. Some participants do not define their happiness primarily in terms of

salary or hierarchical advancement, but rather through the possibility of having a work consistent with their sense of purpose. H clearly represents this pattern. He describes his career as built around contributing to society and the community, explaining that he would only accept a job if he could rationalize it in relation to his life goals and personal values:

*“Yeah, I feel very happy in my work because of the way also that I defined purpose having come into the blockchain industry from the start of the industry... my core purpose that I found value in and found meaning from is to educate the world about technology and how it works and what it means for them. This is very impactful which bring the value to the society. I think that is actually a very big factor for me to always at every moment that I am doing any work to know that there is a long-term high value. Your end call value alignment And this is a large part of what makes all my work sustainable”*

F also links his satisfaction to the possibility of following a path consistent with his long-term dream, namely continuing his studies and undertaking a PhD. For him, the transition from industry to academia in Finland represents a form of personal fulfilment, as it allowed him to transform problems observed in professional practice into research topics. In these cases, happiness appears closely connected to the perception of meaning and coherence in one's professional trajectory:

*“But my idea about life is something that you need to do what you like. If you can choose your life path and it is the best thing that you can do. During my life from when I graduated from Syria, like 2015, if I go back to there, my dream was to continue my studies, get my PhD... So, after I get my master's study in 2022, I started applying for academia again for PhD positions. So, I applied for a multiple position around the world. One of them was here in Finland, here in Vaasa. So why I changed that? Because this is my dream to get a PHD degree”*

A fourth element concerns the presence of frustration, stagnation or mismatch between individual expectations and context. E offers a particularly relevant example. Her experience in Finland and Iceland shows how happiness can vary greatly over time. On the one hand, Finland offered her stability, integration and professional opportunities, while on the other, the slower pace and lack of growth opportunities produced frustration:

*“So, moving to Finland initially felt perfect for me. It was like a good balance between nature and it was great. But eventually I really started to feel like I was retired at 24. I think it's just a slower pace in life. And then it started like once the honeymoon phase was over, it started getting frustrating in the sense that because I'm very ambitious and I'm very driven. And in Finland, people are just more like, yeah, laid back, you know, it's just more we'll take it slow, whereas I'm like now, we do it now. So that was where I started to feel the clash.”*

In Iceland, however, she initially describes a strong enthusiasm for the dynamism and ambition of the work environment, but this subsequently turns into exhaustion, instability and a loss of well-being:

*“Um, Iceland is very good in a sense where people have a can-do attitude. So they're always like, yeah, let's do this, yeah, let's do that. But they also have a bad habit where they'd like to leave things to the last minute because Iceland has a culture or a saying called that, which means that everything will be fine in the end... And then came the problem where Icelanders are not very good at long-term planning. They're terrible at long-term planning...So eventually it got exhausting because I had my first layoff in Iceland. It was almost like it was just an overnight decision where they decided to close down almost the entire marketing department where I was working at”*

Her case clearly shows how happiness does not simply depend on being in a context rich in opportunities, but also on the degree to which these opportunities are sustainable and consistent with personal needs in the long term.

A fifth pattern concerns the ethical and value-based dimension of satisfaction. G, for example, describes her time in the Middle East as professionally interesting and enriching, but marked by a growing difficulty accepting certain social and cultural injustices. Although she loved her job as a teacher and appreciated many aspects of the experience, she says she gradually perceived a conflict between her personal values and the social context in which she lived:

*“I realised that I was never ever going to be a local. I was always going to be an outsider with a different religion and that and I couldn't change the big things that needed changing, so I decided I'd done my bit there. So, there were a lot of*

*injustices that I couldn't change, but I also felt I couldn't accept them anymore. It was more about the injustices within the culture that I had been living for five years... I realised. No, I couldn't accept this anymore."*

This conflict affected her happiness and contributed to her decision to leave that context to move to Finland. Her case highlights that happiness is not just job satisfaction, but also the ability to live and work in an environment perceived as ethically acceptable and consistent with one's identity.

Similar to the last one, there was another theme, that was the role of a sense of belonging and social integration. A clearly describes how feeling "at home" in a new country takes time. After moving to Dubai, he explains that for the first few years, he often returned to Italy on vacation, precisely to rediscover a sense of familiarity and belonging. Only gradually did Dubai become a place he perceived as home, changing his overall satisfaction and relationship with his expatriate experience:

*"When you change places, you need a lot of time to start feeling at home. So, you can imagine for two years after that, every vacation I was going back to it just to, you know, feel like home. That's, that's, that's very, that's a very, that's the underlying element that nobody talks about, you know. I can relate to many, many expats that during their first years, they go back a lot to their home place and then slowly, slowly, once they start feeling at home where they are, they might start to go travel elsewhere."*

C also exhibits a similar aspect: remote working in Switzerland guaranteed him flexibility, but initially limited socializing and learning from colleagues, reducing his daily satisfaction. His subsequent move to Geneva therefore also addresses his need for greater professional and social integration:

*"From a work perspective, I'm very lucky. That kind of flexibility is rare. But socially, at the beginning it was tough. Moving to a new country and working from home, I didn't know anyone apart from my girlfriend. Staying alone at home all day didn't make me very happy. I would have preferred going to the office a couple of days a week, that's why I eventually moved to Geneva."*

Finally, the data show that happiness is also often influenced by family and private spheres. For some participants, mobility decisions were not exclusively driven by their career's goals, but sometimes related to relationships, partners, children and family in general. D, for example, while stating that he would gladly return to Germany, explains that staying in Italy is also linked to family preferences and the family's quality of life. In the same way, H similarly describes his move to Finland as primarily motivated by family reasons, although it still had to be compatible with the sustainability of his career:

*"The primary reason the primary driver for that move was a family reason. OK, but of course, everything else. Every aspect of that move also had to kind of make sense of work including the career transition...Yes, my wife is a Finn and this is her hometown that we are in right now. Although we got married, we lived in Singapore for the entire time 11 years after we got married, we lived in Singapore together, but eventually we decided for family reasons to move here, at least for a period of time"*

This confirms that SIEs' happiness cannot be understood by looking only at work conditions and career satisfaction, but it must include the relationship between career, family and private life.

Overall, the findings indicate that the impact of self-initiated expatriation on happiness is complex and dynamic. Expatriation can increase satisfaction when it allows for personal growth, improved quality of life, greater alignment with one's values, new experiences and a greater sense of accomplishment. However, it can also generate frustration when the new context leads to isolation, instability, a lack of growth, conflicting values or difficulties integrating. Happiness emerges as a highly subjective and relational indicator, constructed through the interaction between work, context, personal values, social relationships and family life. As already observed for health, happiness is not a static outcome of the international experience, but rather a dimension that evolves over time and is continually renegotiated throughout the career trajectory of self-initiated expatriates.

### 4.1.3 Productivity

The productivity indicator was analysed by considering not only participants' ability to perform their jobs effectively, but also their perception of professional growth, skill development, future employability and also the ability to contribute significantly to their work environment. In line with the sustainable career's framework, productivity is not limited to performance in the current role, but also includes career potential and the individual's ability to maintain professional value over time. From the data collected, self-initiated expatriation emerges as an experience that often supports productivity, but not always in an immediate or in a linear manner. In several cases, expatriation created new opportunities for growth, responsibility and development, while in others it led to initial periods of underemployment, uncertainty or mismatch between skills and role.

A first theme that emerged concerns the professional growth and career advancement made possible by international mobility. For some participants, leaving their home country represented a decisive step towards accessing professional opportunities that were difficult to access at home. A, for example, describes the decision to leave Italy as primarily a career-driven choice:

*“So it was a pure career decision, I would say. In Milan, it's basically my, almost my home. So it's one of my, the places in my comfort zone. I was making okay money with respect to my age back then and to my experience. So, I was considered to be doing well [...] The key point was the career, the career advancement. So what was worrying me is seeing... people that are really, really old who are just my managers. So what was worrying me is the time it would take me to actually reach places while staying in Italy. That's basically it“*

Despite having a relatively stable personal and professional situation in Milan, he perceived a limitation in his advancement prospects and feared that the path to higher positions was too slow. Moving to Dubai allowed him not only to progress professionally but also to subsequently develop an entrepreneurial career, leading to the creation of his own business with approximately seventy-five employees. Similarly, D describes the

move from Italy to Germany as a genuine promotion, from an operational role onboard a ship to an onshore role with greater responsibilities in managing naval operations:

*“I worked in Italy from 2007 until around 2016–2017. Actually, in 2014 I started working for a Costa company that allowed me to work onboard ships [...] Then in 2017 I moved directly from working onboard to Hamburg [...] I moved from an onboard team to an onshore team, managing ship operations, so a clear step up.”*

In these cases, expatriation appears directly linked to an increase in productivity, understood as growth, responsibility and consolidation of professional value.

A second pattern concerns productivity as the development of skills and the accumulation of career capital. F is one of the clearest examples. His career spans several contexts (Syria, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Finland) and each transition contributes to an expansion of his skills and responsibilities. In Saudi Arabia, moving from a local company to a multinational allows him to interact with international colleagues and clients, obtain promotions and manage teams. In the UAE, he takes on a broader role, responsible for multiple countries in the Middle East region. He explicitly links this phase to an increase in his productivity, stating that:

*“Also, at this point that I enjoyed the work in UAE especially I was dealing with multiple culture, background, people and event also with the multiple projects. So, I modified more to prove myself to prove my experience, especially when I got my master. So now when they introduce me to the new customer they say ok he has a master degree and blah blah. So yeah, I modified it more in UAE. And yeah, I got more power and more energy to prove myself on my skills and all. So, I can say I was way productive.”*

His experience shows how productivity can grow through an international exposure, increasing responsibility and cumulative learning.

A fourth pattern concerns the periods of reduced productivity or underemployment that can hinder the expatriation experience, especially in the initial stages or during transitions. G offers a relevant example. After moving to Finland, the language barrier and

issues accessing the local education system initially limited her professional opportunities. Despite having experience and qualifications as a teacher, she describes having to accept lower-skilled jobs and going through a difficult phase before rebuilding her career:

*“In Oulu, there wasn’t so many opportunities because I don’t speak Finnish. So then I went back to the university and did a master's degree in mathematics. [...] I couldn't get work because I didn't speak Finnish. I got work at the International School there and I was doing things like pouring coffee and packing the dishwasher. So, you know, you kind of had to, I had to accept some pretty menial jobs. Some very hard times.”*

Only through further training, including a second master's degree in mathematics, was she able to reopen opportunities consistent with her professional profile. This case illustrates how spontaneous expatriation can temporarily reduce productivity, not due to a lack of skills, but due to contextual barriers that prevent the full use of an individual's professional capital.

A similar experience emerges in the case of B, although in a different form. In Australia, he acknowledges working on larger projects than in the UK, but describes his role as more limited and less comprehensive. In the UK, he followed projects from start to finish, interacting with clients and seeing the tangible results of his work. In Australia, however, he works in larger organizations where his role is more specialized and limited to producing technical documentation. For this reason, while he acknowledges that he can be technically productive, he states that he doesn't feel as fulfilled or involved in the overall process:

*“In the UK I was running projects, so I would like, I would speak to clients and I would do the design of the building and all the drawings and then like oversee things during construction as well. [...] Over here in Melbourne, because I’ve just been working for bigger companies, I’ve been more of a role of just producing the drawings, the documentation... My role within that is very narrow... when I come on board the project, it’s already been designed and I’m just there to produce drawings [...] Whilst technically I’m probably just as productive in terms of how much work I get done during a day, but yeah, I don’t feel as fulfilled or like I’m actually doing as much.”*

This example is important because it shows that productivity, from a subjective perspective, also depends on the degree of ownership, significance and visibility of individual contributions. This also shows how sometime productivity might be affected by the level of autonomy, impact and meaning that the job has and that is not just a matter of quantity of output produced. For instance, H describes his productivity as the ability to contribute to society and generate value through his work. In his career, performance is linked to the ability to have a broader impact, for example, by developing educational systems in the blockchain sector and contributing to the dissemination of knowledge on emerging technologies:

*“My concept of what work and career means is productivity and usefulness to society. I want to be useful and productive to my society, to my community, to my people, to my family”*

In particular, when he decided to move from large companies to a smaller one, he emphasizes the desire for greater control and influence over organizational direction and that in a bigger organization he was not able to perceive a real impact through what he was doing:

**H:** *“The more I moved into the market leader role in a market leading company, the smaller I felt, my ability to change things was. [...] the organization has huge impact, but my role is relatively smaller. Maybe time to switch it back to small organization where in my role I have a lot of control over the direction that the organization takes*

**Interviewer:** *“Do you mean in the smaller company you have more autonomy or the space for you to make decisions and then you feel contribute more?”*

**H:** *“Yes, definitely, definitely that way”*

This suggests that, for some SIEs, productivity is not only linked to a vertical career path, but also to the ability to exercise autonomy, apply its own vision and to see a concrete and real impact from the job performed.

A fifth theme concerns the role of employability and the ability to maintain future opportunities. Some participants show high confidence in their international employability, while others perceive stronger constraints. H, for example, has high consideration for his future employability, because he works in a global and remote industry and believes he can access professional opportunities beyond the confines of the local Finnish market, stating as it follows:

*"I think my past experience has kind of proved to me that I can find it almost anywhere in a very large diversity of work environments in large diversity of national environments. [...] I do have more confidence now. That my mobility is good. It's transferable. It's portable and it can be found. So in a way I believe that anywhere in the world I go I can find that balance this health, happiness and productive."*

E adopts a similar logic by maintaining her own self-employment and simultaneously building skills in content marketing, cybersecurity and consulting. For her, when the organizational context doesn't offer the desired opportunities, the response is to create them independently: *"If I can't get it, I create it."* In these cases, productivity is linked to the ability to protect and expand one's employability through individual strategies, independent work, transferable skills in an international perspective.

Overall, the findings show that the impact of self-initiated expatriation on productivity is generally significant, but not always immediately positive. International experience can positively impact career advancement and skill development, allowing SIEs to gain greater autonomy and improved employability over time. However, in particular at the beginning of the expatriation, it can also lead to temporary periods of underemployment, reduced self-efficacy, difficulty accessing the labor market or a mismatch between skills and roles. The productivity of SIEs emerges then as a dynamic indicator, linked not only to job performance but also to the ability to learn, grow, maintain future employability and transform international experiences into professional capital. In this sense, self-initiated expatriation contributes to career sustainability when it allows individuals to convert mobility, adaptation and accumulated skills into new opportunities for professional development.

## 4.2 Context dimension

This section focuses on the context dimension of sustainable careers. The analysis shows that contextual factors played a central role in shaping the career sustainability of the self-initiated expatriates interviewed, influencing opportunities, constraints, well-being and mobility decisions. The section first analyses the national, institutional and labor market contexts, before moving on to the organizational, social, cultural, family and private contexts.

### 4.2.1 National, institutional and labour market context

The Context dimension emerges as one of the most relevant elements for understanding the career sustainability of self-initiated expatriates. In this section, the focus is on the national, institutional and labor market contexts, that is the set of macroeconomic and social conditions that influence participants' opportunities, constraints and career trajectories. The transcripts showed that the country context acts as an active factor that can facilitate, limit or redefine the sustainability of an international career.

A first theme that commonly emerged concerns the role of wage differentials and economic opportunities as drivers of mobility. For several participants, expatriation was perceived as a response to the economic and professional constraints of their home country. A clearly described his decision to leave Italy as motivated by broader career prospects and a perceived unincentivized tax and salary system. The moment in which, after a promotion, he finds himself with a lower net income due to moving to a higher tax bracket has been interpreted as a significant trigger in the decision to leave:

*“And the taxes’ structure was not helping. I was not an expert on that. I had to inform myself better before I leave because it was a decision, you know, like to look into. And actually that was one of the triggers that triggered me to decide to leave. [...] I exceeded a certain bracket, a tax bracket and when you exceeded the tax bracket, then you started paying like 45% or whatever taxes in total and then the net was lower. So I was actually getting less money after getting the raise.”*

Similarly, D identifies salary as the main factor that drove him to seek opportunities abroad. However, the comparison with Germany isn't just about salary, but also that despite still paying high taxes, in the German context he perceived a more tangible return in terms of services and quality of life:

**Host:** *“What were the main factors that pushed you to look for opportunities abroad?”*

**D:** *“Primarily salary. And once you move abroad, you realize the overall quality of life offered by employers is different too. [...] In Germany you still pay quite a lot in taxes—but you actually get something back. You see the services you’re paying for.”*

C also offers a very clear example of this gap: after his master's degree, he received an offer in Italy for an internship of around 500 euros per month, while the Swiss offer was incomparably higher, to the point of stating that *“you don't have much of a choice.”* These cases demonstrate how the national labor market can directly influence the perception of career sustainability, especially when individual skills and expectations aren't adequately financially recognized in the home country.

Related to this, other participant underlines the importance of the quality of the institutional system and public services. Some participants evaluate the foreign context not only in terms of wages, but also in relation to what the system gives back in exchange for taxes and contributions, as we saw in the case of D. H offers a similar interpretation when referring to the sustainability of his career and his life in Finland:

*“I would say it's narrower, but deeper. It's sustainable. Sustainability is narrower. [...] The quality of the sustainability is much better. I have a fairly large family with six children. In Singapore it was a very high upkeep situation. There's a lot more space. A lot less to worry about. And a lot more availability in terms of time.”*

He describes his Finnish experience as a "narrower but deeper" form of sustainability, that is, more limited in terms of local professional opportunities, but deeper in terms of

quality of life, family security, available time and social support. This suggests that a solid institutional context can compensate, at least in part, for a less dynamic labor market, contributing to career sustainability through more stability and welfare, even if with fewer pressures on private life.

A third theme concerns the relationship between open labor markets and career accessibility when seeking for international opportunities. In some cases, the new national context opens up opportunities not available in the home country. F, for example, left Syria during a period marked by war, instability and personal insecurity. Moving to Saudi Arabia therefore represented not only a career choice, but also a response to macroeconomic and social conditions that make it difficult to build a sustainable career in his home country. In Saudi Arabia, he found much higher salaries, larger companies, international standards and professional growth, things that were unavailable in Syria. Subsequently, moving to the United Arab Emirates allowed him to access a broader and more regional role, confirming how mobility between different contexts can progressively expand professional opportunities.

*“I would like to say I was satisfied because it's my country, but I'm not satisfied about the job conditions, including everything from starting from salary to productivity to the work culture [...] the value of our currencies go down [...] the salary was one problem and the safe personal safe is another problem. [...] I decided to go to Saudi Arabia, which is a more developing country than Syria and there is a lot of opportunities there and also... international companies, multinational companies. [...] my salary multiplied by 10 or 12 times between Saudi Arabia and my country. [...] it was... a higher position because I was responsible for more than one country. [...] I was handling multiple countries in Middle East including Saudi Arabia, UAE, Bahrain and Oman...”*

However, the data also shows that foreign labor markets are not automatically favourable, for example concerning the barriers to entry and the institutional constraints. B, who arrived in Australia on a working holiday visa, describes finding himself in a situation where his career path depended on his employer's sponsorship:

*“When I first came here, I was just on a working holiday visa, so I had to find work with a company. I was very lucky that I found this job and that day to get a visa to*

*stay here, I had to get them to sponsor me to stay here. But... once I found that, I didn't want to change companies because I didn't want to risk, you know, losing that visa and not being able to stay in Australia. I felt like I was stuck working with the same company for the whole time until I got my permanent residency visa, which"*

E also describes the link between employment and residence permit as a central element in Finland, particularly when accepting or keeping jobs that allow her to regularize her status, the first time she arrived in Finland but also when she came back from Iceland:

*"I was recruited to this company, it was through an AIESEC program and my salary at the time was 1500 euro [...] My former boss had increased my salary to 1800. So that was the time when I had to apply for my residence permit, the A visa and the immigration had actually called my boss and said that it's too low. And my boss had called me into his office and said today is your lucky day. I'm raising it to 2000 euros because immigration said it is too low and we need your services [...] But in hindsight, I was like, wow like, seriously. So then, um, it was during that time there were a lot of drama that was going on as well"*

And later, when she came back from Iceland before COVID-19, she had to accept a job in an industry that at the time she was not sure about, saying that:

*"At the time I was starting to get very tired of marketing, but I got into cybersecurity. So it was with a cybersecurity company. I've secured it. Unfortunately, at the time I was relieved because I needed the job to regain my visa, my residence permit. So that was its purpose because unfortunately I lost that job six months in because number one, I was on probation"*

These cases show how the national and regional context can act as a facilitator of productivity and career sustainability, while in other situations can hinder the freedom to change organization in the early years, as losing a job could have created issues to the ability to remain in the country.

Another particularly relevant factor is the language barrier, especially in contexts where the local job market requires knowledge in the national language. G is one of the clearest examples. Despite having extensive experience as a teacher, she initially encountered significant professional limitations in Finland because she didn't speak Finnish, limiting her access to roles consistent with her profile, as already presented in chapter 4.1.3. F, speaking about Finland, also emphasizes how language can be an obstacle for those who, despite having the required technical skills, want to access positions involving local projects or interactions with the national context:

*“If you come from outside to get your master degree here, you don't have that much time to learn the Finnish language or Swedish language. So usually when you graduate from the master's degree, if you have a basics will be good. But sometimes they ask for more than the basics, especially when you are dealing with local projects or something not in multiple countries or involve multinational companies. So, you need the language, the local language”*

Another example on how the career sustainability could be affected by context lies in the trade-off between stability and market dynamism. Finland, Germany and Switzerland are often associated with stability, efficient services and a higher quality of life, but not always with large or dynamic labor markets for foreigners. On the other hand, contexts such as Dubai, the UAE and Iceland are described as more dynamic and full of opportunities, but also more unstable or less predictable. A describes Dubai and the Middle East as highly business-oriented environments and more conducive to entrepreneurship than Italy, but also acknowledges the volatility of the regional market, which is highly dependent on government projects and broader economic conditions. While talking about the possible obstacles to his career potential, he stated that:

*“Definitely there are. One challenge is whatever we talked before, nobody gives you money in here. So the banks won't give you a loan if you cannot give a collateral. So if you're not already rich, you can't get rich. [...] That's number one. Number 2, the region is not the most stable. I'm not talking about the current situation.*

*I'm talking in general. So in the 12 years that I've been here or 11 years that I've been here, I've seen a lot of downtime or time where business is down. [...] Why? Because business is highly reliable in the region on government work. So if government has jobs, then everybody's happy and the economy is booming. If the government doesn't have jobs, at least in my industry. And then you're waiting or you're competing with 10,000 companies on small jobs which are not worth it. So in general, the market is more volatile with respect to Europe."*

E recounts a similar experience in Iceland: the market initially appears stimulating, dynamic and close to her ambition, but over time it also becomes a personal source of instability and job insecurity:

*"I enjoy the working culture in Iceland, where people are very ambitious, they're very driven, but it is not good for my mental health, I need the balance of that drive and also at the same time being able to have the calmness and the strength in planning of the Finns. [...] So I started with a lot of joy, but towards the end I was like no, it is to the point where like I'm never going back to Iceland. I'm never working in Iceland. And when now I have for example as a marketing consultant I have an Icelandic customer and I'm extra strict with them because I know how they work."*

These cases demonstrate that contexts richest in opportunities are not necessarily the most sustainable in the long term, especially if they do not guarantee continuity, security and personal health sustainability.

Overall, the findings show that the national, institutional and labor market context profoundly influences the career sustainability of SIEs. Participants evaluate countries not only in terms of salary, but also through a combination of professional opportunities, services, stability, bureaucracy, language, labor market access, cost of living and future mobility opportunities. Some contexts offer greater growth but less stability, while others offer security and quality of life but more limited markets. International career sustainability then emerges as the result of a continuous balancing between contextual

opportunities and constraints. In this sense, the national context act as a structural dimension that directly influences SIEs' ability to build and maintain a sustainable career over time.

#### **4.2.2 Organizational, social and cultural context**

A second level of the context dimension concerns the organizational, social and cultural context in which SIEs build their career experiences on a daily basis. While the previous section demonstrated how the national, institutional and labor market contexts can influence the access to professional opportunities, this section focuses on the more immediate conditions of the work and social experience: the type of organization, the support received, the work culture, relationships with colleagues and superiors, team integration, remote working and the cultural dynamics encountered in host countries. The data shows that these factors not only impact job satisfaction but also participants' ability to develop skills, maintain motivation, feel included and build a sustainable career over time.

A first theme concerns the role of organizational support, especially in the initial stages of the experience abroad. For some participants, the lack of structured onboarding or clear guidance made adaptation more difficult. C is one of the most obvious examples. During her first time in Switzerland, he described entering his new job as stressful, primarily due to the combination of a new role, a small company, remote working and a lack of formal training:

*“At the beginning I was very stressed. It wasn’t a job I already knew how to do, so I was worried I wasn’t doing things properly. It’s a small company, about 20 people, kind of like a startup. There’s no structured training, you just jump in and learn as you go. I probably would have liked more, but working from home made it harder. I was doing a completely new job remotely and barely talked to colleagues, so I was confused at first and didn’t know if I was doing things right.”*

Having to learn "as you go", without a clear support structure, initially reduced his sense of professional security and made integration into the new work environment more difficult. Then, the decision to move to Geneva and work closer to colleagues was a strategic move to learn more and grow professionally.

The theme of support also emerges in G's case, especially when comparing the different work contexts she experienced. In the Middle East, the participant describes a professional environment in which she was able to perform well and contribute positively to the lives of students, but at the same time, she faced cultural and organizational dynamics that were difficult to accept on a personal level. When speaking about the reasons who pushed her to leave Middle East, she told that it was based on personal misalignment with the local cultures and values, stating that:

*"For example, my head of department was I think she was an Indian lady and all the other ladies in the maths department were, as I said, Middle Eastern and because I was a white woman, I got a higher salary than them all. So, there were a lot of injustices that I couldn't change, but I also felt I couldn't accept them anymore. You know, so I thought, no, I'd rather go and study and see where life took me from there. So, it was more about the injustices within the culture that I had been living for five years. [...] that I couldn't accept what I was being forced to in a sense."*

In Finland, however, the initial difficulty wasn't the organizational climate itself, but rather accessing roles that matched her profile. Once she overcame underemployment and reconstructed her career path through further studies, the Finnish context became more conducive to career stability.

Their experiences showed us that career sustainability depends on how organizational and cultural contexts enable or limit, the recognition of individual skills and also that a work context can foster good performance but also become less sustainable when it conflicts with personal values and perceptions of justice. They also demonstrates that career sustainability depends on how organizational and cultural contexts enable or limit, the recognition of individual skills.

A second theme concerns the work culture and how it influences well-being, motivation and productivity. E offers a particularly clear example. In her experience in Malaysia, she describes a highly performance-oriented work culture, with little room for work-life balance. This context contributed to a perception of excessive pressure, especially in the early stages of her career:

*“It's very hard. It's really stressful. when I entered the market it was very difficult. So young people are expected to work long hours or you get OT without additional pay and it's just something that is expected of you. There is no such thing as work-life balance.”*

In Iceland, however, she initially appreciated an ambitious and dynamic work environment, but, as highlighted in the previous chapters, over time she recognized that this type of intensity was unsustainable for her mental well-being. Her experience highlights an important point: a stimulating and growth oriented professional environment can increase motivation and learning, but it can also become unsustainable if not accompanied by balance and support. In her case, sustainability seems to emerge not from maximum dynamism, but from a balance between ambition and working conditions that leave time to the personal well-being.

D also describes work culture as a significant factor. Comparing Italy and Germany, he emphasizes how the German context offered him greater structure and growth opportunities, despite some cultural rigidities and linguistic difficulties. The German

experience is associated with significant career advancement and improved overall satisfaction, but also with the need to adapt to a more regulated and less culturally flexible environment:

*D: "I felt good from the start in Germany. The job wasn't easy at first, but I worked hard with motivation. It was a dynamic job, in a dynamic city Everything progressed well, career, satisfaction, everything felt smooth"*

*Interviewer: "And culturally, did you integrate well?"*

*D: "Yes, but not so much with Germans themselves. They're quite reserved, especially at my age, closer to 40 than 30. I had many Italian colleagues, so we mostly socialized among ourselves. There wasn't much company-driven social interaction at the time, although I think it has improved now. You realize that northern cultures have different priorities. [...] Socially, there are differences too, Germans are more rigid, less flexible. That cultural difference is something you have to adapt to. "*

A third theme concerns the relationship between organizational size and the meaning of work. B, comparing the United Kingdom and Australia, shows how the type of organization and role structure can impact perceived productivity and satisfaction. In the United Kingdom, he worked in a smaller setting, where he had greater visibility on the project, more contact with clients and broader responsibilities. In Australia, despite working on larger and more technically relevant projects, his role became more restricted and focused on document production:

*"In the UK, I was able to have a much bigger role. I'm not sure if that's because I was working at a smaller company or if it was because the UK is different. [...] And just specifically about my role in the UK and my role here, I feel less productive just because in the UK I was like leading projects. So I got that one-on-one interaction*

*with the clients and I could see the project from the very beginning to the end. And there's something very worthwhile about that, you know[...] I don't feel as fulfilled or like I'm actually doing as much."*

This change does not necessarily reduce his technical productivity, but it does reduce his sense of contribution and professional fulfilment. B's case therefore highlights that the organizational context affects not only the quantity or complexity of work, but also the ability to perceive one's role as meaningful, complete and consistent with one's professional identity.

A similar point emerges in the case of H. His trajectory shows a shift from larger organizational contexts, where the role was prestigious but the perceived scope for influence was more limited, to smaller organizations where he could have greater control over the strategic direction and impact of his work:

*H: "The smaller I felt, my ability to change things was. And so I think it's also, I mean it's not to say I can't change things I can. OK, I have small power in a large organization. So the organization has huge impact, but my role is relatively smaller. OK overall maybe. Yes, I do address have a big opportunity. Still OK, but then. Maybe you know at the moment I just felt maybe time to switch it back to small organization where in my role I have a lot of control over the direction that the organization takes."*

*Interviewer: "Do you mean in the smaller company you have more autonomy or the space for you to make decisions and then you feel contribute more?"*

*H: "Yes, definitely, definitely that way. Yeah, it's a lot to do with the ability or your output the opportunities and whether you can apply your vision and your values in your work context."*

For H, career sustainability seems to depend not only on the position held or the sector, but also on the degree of autonomy, influence, impact and alignment between work and personal purpose. The organizational context, in this sense, becomes sustainable when it allows the participant to contribute in a way perceived as useful and meaningful, not simply when it offers status or stability.

Another relevant theme concerns remote work and its ambivalent effect on career sustainability. In C's case, remote work offers flexibility and allows for better personal life management, but in the initial phase it also leads to isolation and difficulties in the integration process:

*“Working from home has a lot of advantages, you can organize your life however you want. The company is very flexible: they don't care when you work, as long as you get things done and are available during the day. From a work perspective, I'm very lucky. That kind of flexibility is rare. But socially, at the beginning it was tough. Moving to a new country and working from home, I didn't know anyone apart from my girlfriend. Staying alone at home all day didn't make me very happy. I would have preferred going to the office a couple of days a week, that's why I eventually moved to Geneva.”*

Remote work can support health and work-life balance, but it can weaken happiness and productivity if it limits contact with colleagues, mentoring and a sense of belonging. In H and E's case, the possibility of working in digital or international sectors reduces dependence on the local market and increases career portability:

*“The mode that I was working in the blockchain industry was remote, fully remote. So, I was a fully remote worker. [...] entrepreneurship background also allowed me to establish a mode of employment, effective mode of employment that was neither employment in Singapore, in Finland for a company directly, so yeah. So, this*

*remote working mode helps to sustain my career even though I am physically in a location where I don't see anything close any kind of activity in that industry [...] My career is physically portable."*

H's case shows how working in a digital and globally oriented field can make career sustainability less dependent on the local labour market. His work in blockchain allowed him to live in one country while working in another, making his career more transferable and geographically portable. However, this flexibility also requires self-management skills and can reduce opportunities for social integration in the physical context in which one lives.

Overall, the findings show that the organizational, social and cultural context plays a central role in shaping the career sustainability of SIEs. While national and institutional conditions define the broader framework of opportunities and constraints, the organizational and social context determines how these opportunities are concretely experienced in everyday work. Organizations, teams, colleagues, superiors, work culture and social relationships influence not only the initial adaptation process but also the participants' ability to maintain well-being and productivity over time. Supportive, inclusive and internationally oriented environments can facilitate integration, learning, trust and professional growth, as evidenced by cases where participants benefited from multicultural teams, English-speaking environments, autonomy, flexibility or greater organizational recognition. On the other hand, limited onboarding, lack of training, professional isolation, overly restricted roles, excessive work intensity, instability, discrimination or cultural misalignment can undermine the sustainability of the career experience, even when the host country offers attractive economic or professional opportunities.

At the same time, data suggest that the effects of organizational, social and cultural factors are not uniform. The same contextual element can act as both a resource and a constraint, depending on the participant's career stage, expectations, personal needs and available support. Remote working, for example, can increase flexibility and

promote work-life balance, but it can also reduce informal learning, social integration and a sense of belonging. In a similar way, ambitious and dynamic work cultures can be stimulating and support professional development, but they can become less sustainable when they compromise mental well-being or leave little room for recovery. Organizational autonomy can also increase motivation and the perception of impact, but only when accompanied by a sufficient level of structure, recognition and support. Therefore, the sustainability of SIEs' careers cannot be explained only by the objective characteristics of the organization or the host country's culture, but by how these conditions interact with individual expectations, professional identity and broader personal life circumstances.

#### **4.2.3 Family and private life context**

The final level of the context dimension concerns the family and private context. The data clearly shows that the careers of self-initiated expatriates cannot be understood solely through professional, organizational or institutional factors. Decisions to expatriate, remain, return or move abroad are often interconnected with emotional relationships, family responsibilities, quality of private life, security, the desire for stability and the possibility of building a sustainable life outside of work. This aspect is particularly relevant because it confirms one of the central ideas of sustainable career theory: a sustainable career is not just about professional success, but also about the ability to maintain a meaningful balance between work, well-being and personal life over time.

The first theme obviously concerns the role of family as a direct or indirect driver of international mobility. H is one of the clearest examples:

*“The 2018 move (to Finland) that I said was for family reasons. Yes, my wife is a Finn. And this is her hometown that we are in right now. Although we got married, we lived in Singapore for the entire time 11 years after we got married, we lived in Singapore together, but eventually we decided for family reasons to move here, at least for a period of time”*

His move to Finland is strongly linked to the family dimension, particularly the presence of his Finnish wife and their six children. In his case, his choice of host country cannot be explained solely by professional opportunities or economic motivations. Finland is considered a family-friendly environment, offering more space, less pressure and greater time availability than Singapore. His experience therefore shows that career sustainability not only depends on the possibility of continuing to work, but also on the compatibility between career, family and overall quality of daily life.

D also demonstrates how family can influence mobility decisions. After his experience in Germany, his return to Italy was primarily due to family and private reasons. While describing Germany as a positive professional environment, associated with growth, satisfaction and better opportunities, when speaking about the decision to move back to Italy, D states that he would return to Germany immediately, but that his wife would not want him to:

***Interviewer:*** "Would you consider moving again?"

***D:*** "I'd go back to Germany tomorrow, but my wife wouldn't. She prefers warmer climates, somewhere Mediterranean."

This case highlights an important point: a career can be professionally sustainable in a given context, but become less viable if it is not also sustainable for the family unit. The decision to return or stay is therefore not strictly an individual one, but rather a negotiated one within private life and family preferences.

A second theme concerns family as a stabilizing factor in the host country. G, for example, links his stay in Finland to the need to provide stability and security for his son. Although the initial phase in Finland was challenging professionally, primarily due to the language barrier and limited access to roles suited to his profile, the family dimension helps make the Finnish context meaningful and sustainable in the long term:

**G:** *“Well, I teach not bilingual schools. I mean it. For me it was very difficult. Because I can't, I don't speak Finnish, so I can't teach in Finnish. And the opportunities for me are much smaller. [...] I adapted in that I taught at bilingual schools and then I worked really, really hard for many years to translate the documents that because I use the Finnish textbooks. So, I translated them into English and now it's just sick and nature to me. I've done it for so many years and I actually understand a bit, but.”*

**Interviewer:** *“So, at any point like did you regret the decision that you make that you should move to Finland?”*

**G:** *“Yes, it was. Yeah, I actually ended up staying here because I got pregnant and had a child. So, the reason I've stayed is for my kid.”*

In this case, career sustainability does not mean immediate progression, but rather the possibility of gradually rebuilding a professional position compatible with a stable and secure private life.

A also demonstrates a process of progressive stabilization. The move to Dubai initially began as a primarily career-driven decision, but over time, the host country also becomes a place of personal roots. The fact that A comes to describe Dubai as "home" suggests that the sustainability of the international experience is also built through a transformation of the relationship with the place where one lives:

*“You have to think about it also from another perspective. When you change places, you need a lot of time to start feeling at home. [...] I can relate to many, many expats that during their first years, they go back a lot to their home place and then slowly, slowly, once they start feeling at home where they are, they might start to go travel elsewhere. Yeah, like Italians, Italians who are here for 20 years, they don't go back to Italy on on Easter, they go to Bali, they go to whatever, you know, like they go they go around Asia, they go to the Maldives, they go, you know, they do they do different things.”*

Expatriation is not simply a career choice, but gradually becomes part of a broader personal and family identity. This shows how the private-life context can evolve over time and help make a global career more sustainable.

Another theme concerns the work-life balance as a bridge between career and private life. In several cases, the sustainability of an international experience depends on the possibility of having the time, space and resources to live outside of work. H describes Finland as a context that, while offering more limited professional opportunities than other markets, guarantees a deeper form of sustainability thanks to greater availability of time and less family pressure:

*“So for example, I have a fairly large family with six children. In Singapore it was a very high upkeep situation. So amount of resources that I had to put into to taking care of my family. Yeah, was very high and the availability of those resources. Trying to balance it with my career. Well, there is a very tight fit in the resource department. In Finland there's a lot more space. A lot less to worry about. And a lot more availability in terms of time. [...] I would say, definitely the national context. Commitment to a very socialist approach in terms of the governments and taxation, the way that society is run and organized. That provides the depth of sustainability that I spoke about earlier. Yeah, exactly. That's the primary contributor. It comes from that national value.”*

F, speaking of Finland, emphasizes the flexibility of the academic environment as a positive element for well-being and productivity:

*“The flexibility in here is great. Especially, when you have a family, when you have other duties to care about, it is not only to focus on your job and your tasks and such things, it is good for the wellbeing and that makes you productive as well”*

C also associates flexible work in Switzerland with better personal life management, while acknowledging that remote working can lead to isolation if not balanced by social integration and physical presence with colleagues. These cases demonstrate that work-life balance is not a secondary element, but a central condition for maintaining health, happiness and productivity over time.

In relation to this theme, some participants find themselves having to balance professional opportunities with personal or family needs. D clearly represents this trade-off: Germany appears to be a more career-friendly environment, but Italy better accommodates his wife's family and personal preferences. H, on the other hand, accepts a narrower professional environment in Finland because it offers a deeper level of sustainability in both family and private life. B finds a better quality of life in Australia, but experiences less professional fulfilment in her role. These examples indicate that career sustainability does not necessarily coincide with maximizing professional advancement. Instead, it often requires trade-offs between growth, stability, well-being, relationships and quality of life.

Overall, the findings show that the family and private-life context is an essential component of SIEs' career sustainability. Participants' international careers are not only built around salaries, roles, opportunities or professional advancement, but also around relationships, family responsibilities, stability, belonging, security and quality of life. Family can act as a reason for expatriation, a factor for permanence, a reason for return or a constraint on future mobility. In the same way, private life can strengthen or weaken career sustainability, depending on the degree of compatibility between work, place of residence and personal needs.

These findings reinforce the idea that a sustainable career must be understood from a broad perspective, not limited to the professional dimension. For SIEs, a career crosses national, organizational and personal boundaries and its sustainability depends on the ability to integrate these different life spaces over time. Health, happiness and

productivity are therefore influenced not only by the work itself, but also by the ability to build a stable, meaningful private life consistent with one's priorities. In this sense, a self-initiated career abroad becomes truly sustainable when it allows the individual not only to work and grow professionally, but also to live in a way that is compatible with one's relationships, family responsibilities and personal aspirations.

## 5 Conclusion

This chapter presents the conclusions of the study, which aimed to analyse the career sustainability of SIEs using the Sustainable Career Model. Specifically, the research examined the impact of self-initiated expatriation on indicators of health, happiness and productivity and the role of contextual factors in facilitating or hindering the sustainability of self-initiated international careers. The chapter then connects the main empirical findings to the theoretical framework presented in Chapter 2, discussing how the results confirm, extend or challenge the existing literature on sustainable careers and SIEs. The first section summarizes and interprets the study's key findings in relation to the research questions; the subsequent sections present the theoretical implications, practical implications, some recommendations and, finally, the study's main limitations along with possible directions for future research.

### 5.1 Key findings of the study

This section summarizes and interprets the main findings of the thesis in relation to the two research questions. Consistent with the research objective, the results are not discussed as a simple descriptive repetition of Chapter 4, but are organized around cross-sectional patterns that emerged from the interviews. This choice highlights the shared experiences among participants and connects them to the theoretical framework presented in Chapter 2. Specifically, the findings are interpreted through the Sustainable Career Model, according to which career sustainability is not a static condition, but a dynamic process that emerges from the interaction between Person, Context and Time and which can be observed through the indicators of Health, Happiness and Productivity (De Vos et al., 2020). At the same time, the discussion considers the specificity of SIEs, who build their international career through personal initiative, autonomy and adaptability, but without the structured support normally guaranteed to AEs (Suutari & Brewster, 2000; Cerdin & Selmer, 2014).

Regarding the first research question - *What impact does self-initiated expatriation have on the Health, Happiness and Productivity of self-initiated expatriates' careers?* - the findings show that the impact of self-initiated expatriation on the three career sustainability indicators is significant, but not uniform. International experience can generate professional growth, greater satisfaction, new opportunities and improved quality of life. However, it can also produce stress, isolation, underemployment, instability or a mismatch between expectations and reality in the host context. Consequently, self-initiated expatriation cannot be interpreted as automatically positive or negative. Rather, the findings show that the impact depends on how international mobility conditions the fit between the individual, work, social context, family context and the temporal trajectory of the career.

A first pattern that emerged concerns the dynamic and nonlinear nature of the impact of self-initiated expatriation on health, happiness and productivity. This finding is fully consistent with De Vos et al. (2020), according to which a sustainable career must be understood as a process that evolves over time and not as a fixed or unique outcome for everyone. Van der Heijden and De Vos (2015) also emphasize that sustainable careers develop through sequences of experiences that span different social spaces and are characterized by individual agency and meaning. The data from this research confirm this perspective, showing that SIEs' careers do not follow a linear trajectory, but are constructed through transitions, adaptations, compromises and moments of reconstruction.

This pattern is evident in several experiences. For some participants, such as A, F and D, expatriation represented an opportunity for professional advancement, increased responsibility, together with the development of new opportunities. A left Italy to overcome perceived limitations in career progression and forged a much broader entrepreneurial path in Dubai. F went across multiple national contexts, moving from Syria to Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and finally Finland, gradually building international career capital and new skills. D experienced the move to Germany as a clear professional advancement, moving from an operational role to an onshore position with

greater responsibilities. In these cases, international mobility had a positive impact, especially on productivity, understood as growth, responsibility and career potential.

However, other cases show that the impact of expatriation can be more ambivalent. C experienced a difficult professional phase in Prague due to irregular shifts, which compromised his routine and his physical and mental well-being. Subsequently, Switzerland offered him better economic conditions and greater flexibility, but also an initial phase of stress and isolation, with some learning issues related to remote working and the lack of structured training. G experienced a temporary reduction in her productivity in Finland, where the language barrier and the lack of immediate recognition of her professional background led her to accept jobs below her skills before rebuilding her career through further studies. E also experienced a nonlinear trajectory, alternating phases of enthusiasm, growth, instability, burnout and subsequent rebuilding through self-employment and entrepreneurship.

These findings are consistent with Crowley-Henry (2012), who interprets SIEs' careers as "rivers not ladders," that is fluid and non-hierarchically linear paths. Similarly, the concept of career renewal proposed by Newman (2011) helps us understand how career sustainability does not depend on absolute stability, but on the ability to renew, adapt, integrate and fit in new experiences into one's career path. The data from this thesis show that several participants maintained or rebuilt their career sustainability not by avoiding difficulties, but by transforming problematic phases into opportunities for professional redefinition. In this sense, the findings not only confirm the theory of sustainable careers, but also specify it in the case of SIEs: for these workers, sustainability is particularly exposed to disruptions and reconfigurations, because each international move can simultaneously alter work, legal status, language, social networks, family and professional identity.

A second pattern concerns the fact that health, happiness and productivity are deeply interconnected and, in some cases, conflict with each other. According to De Vos et al.

(2020), these three indicators represent complementary dimensions of career sustainability. However, findings show that they do not always move in the same direction. In some cases, the improvement of one of the indicators might lead to a deterioration or tension in another. This necessitates an interpretation of the sustainable career, consistent with the perspective of Greenhaus and Kossek (2014), according to which contemporary careers must be understood in relation to private and family life and with Hirschi et al. (2020), who emphasize the importance of a whole-life perspective.

A represents a clear example of this tension. His move to Dubai significantly increased his productivity, allowing him to develop a successful entrepreneurial career, but it also led to a deterioration in his physical health, linked to reduced physical activity and lifestyle changes. In this case, expatriation improved professional opportunities and entrepreneurial autonomy, but did not automatically lead to an overall improvement in all indicators. B also shows a similar trend, but in a different direction: Australia improved its happiness and mental well-being thanks to the quality of life, climate, city and personal experiences, but its professional role became more limited compared to the United Kingdom, reducing the subjective perception of contribution and professional fulfilment.

In the same way, E offers a further example of the complex relationship between the three indicators. In Iceland, the dynamic and ambitious work environment initially increased her motivation and sense of opportunity, but over time it became unsustainable for her mental well-being. This shows that a context can be stimulating for happiness and productivity in the short term, but might become negative for health if it fails to allow for recovery and life balance. C, on the other hand, demonstrates the ambivalence of remote work: flexibility in Switzerland favoured autonomy and work-life balance, but initially reduced social integration, informal learning, and a sense of belonging. H, on the other hand, highlights how Finland, despite offering a narrower professional market, can guarantee deeper sustainability thanks to more time, space and less family and overall pressure.

These examples confirm that a sustainable career cannot be measured by a single indicator. A career can be productive but unhealthy, satisfying but professionally limited or privately stable but more limited in terms of opportunities. The findings then support the holistic logic of the Sustainable Career Model, but at the same time highlight its empirical complexity. In the case of SIEs, trade-offs between health, happiness and productivity are particularly frequent because expatriation simultaneously impacts work, private life, social networks, identity and quality of life. Career sustainability therefore emerges not from the absence of tensions, but from the ability to manage and rebalance them over time, adapting to the social and professional environment.

A third pattern related to the first research question concerns productivity, which emerges in the data not only as performance in the current role but also as employability, career capital, autonomy, impact and the ability to generate significant contributions. This finding is consistent with De Vos et al. (2020), who argue that productivity includes both performance in the current job and future career potential. Similarly, Van der Heijde and Van der Heijden (2006) interpret employability as a central component of an individual's ability to maintain professional value across diverse contexts. In the cases analysed, a sustainable productivity does not simply mean performing well, but rather the ability to use, develop and transfer personal and professional skills over time.

F represents a strong example of the progressive accumulation of career capital. Through experiences in different countries and organizations, she has developed technical skills, intercultural capabilities, managerial responsibilities and an international orientation. This directly connects to Inkson and Arthur's (2001) concept of career capital, which includes knowing-how, knowing-why and knowing-whom. H also demonstrates a form of productivity based not only on position or salary, but on the possibility of being useful to society, the community, the organization and the family. His case suggests that, for some SIEs productivity is linked to the meaning and impact of work, as well as measurable performance. Similarly, B shows that technical productivity can remain high even

when the perception of contribution declines: in Australia, he works on larger projects, but the more restricted role reduces the sense of ownership, meaning and fulfilment.

G's case, however, demonstrates a different dynamic: expatriation can temporarily reduce productivity when the context prevents the full use of existing professional capital. Despite her background as a teacher, the language barrier in Finland limited her access to roles consistent with her experience, forcing her into a phase of underemployment before professional reconstruction through a new training program. This finding is consistent with Chwialkowska (2020), who argues that some SIEs may find themselves in positions below their skills due to contextual barriers. However, G's case also demonstrates a renewal dynamic, as the initial reduction in productivity is not permanent but has been progressively overcome through further study and adaptation.

In this sense, the findings confirm the literature on career capital and employability, but enrich it by showing that for SIEs productivity might undergo through temporary phases of loss, stagnation, unsatisfaction and underutilization. International experience can enhance skills and opportunities in the long term, as suggested by Dickmann et al. (2018) and Mello et al. (2025), but it does not do so automatically. Transforming mobility into career capital depends on the possibility of accessing suitable roles, professional networks, skills recognition and learning opportunities. For this reason, the productivity of SIEs must be interpreted as a dynamic process of building and rebuilding professional value, rather than as a simple immediate performance measure.

Regarding the second research question - *How do contextual factors influence the career sustainability of self-initiated expatriates?* - the findings show that contextual factors play a crucial role. Context does not act as a simple backdrop to international careers, but as an active dimension that can facilitate, hinder or limit job access, stability, well-being, integration, professional recognition and future development opportunities. This finding is fully consistent with De Vos et al. (2020), who define context as one of the three fundamental dimensions of a sustainable career. However, the data from this

research suggest that in the case of SIEs context takes on a particularly strong impact because these workers move without the structured support of a parent organization and must therefore directly address institutional, cultural, linguistic, professional and family constraints and barriers alone.

A fourth pattern that emerged concerns the fact that context acts as an enabler or as a constraint of career sustainability. At the national, institutional and labor market levels, participants evaluate host countries not only in terms of wages, but also in terms of taxes, services, stability, entrepreneurial opportunities, bureaucracy, language, residence permits, quality of life and future prospects. A perceives Italy as a limiting context for entrepreneurship and Dubai as a more business-friendly environment, while acknowledging market volatility. D views Germany as offering better wages, more visible services and growth opportunities, while F links mobility from Syria to Saudi Arabia and the UAE to macroeconomic conditions, personal security and the possibility of accessing more developed and international professional environments.

At the same time, the data show that foreign markets are not automatically favourable. B experiences a limitation on professional mobility in Australia due to the link between visa and employer sponsorship. E shows how the residence permit can influence career choices and create dependency on specific contracts. G and F highlight the role of language as a barrier to accessing skilled jobs in Finland. These findings are consistent with Crowley-Henry (2012) and Samarsky (2023), who emphasize the importance of the national context in the adaptation and development processes of SIEs. Furthermore, they confirm what was discussed in Chapter 2 regarding the fact that SIEs, unlike AEs, often have to independently address legal, bureaucratic and professional barriers.

The organizational, social and cultural context also strongly influences sustainability. C shows how the lack of onboarding and structured training without interactions with colleagues, can increase stress and reduce integration. B highlights how organizational size and structure can restrict roles and reduce the perception of contribution, even when

faced with larger projects. H, on the other hand, shows that smaller organizations can increase autonomy, influence and alignment between work and personal values. E demonstrates that an ambitious and dynamic work culture can be stimulating but become unsustainable for mental health, while G shows that a professional context can enable good performance but be less sustainable if it conflicts with personal and ethical values.

These findings support Cao et al. (2014) studies, which found that organizational support, career satisfaction and social networks influence SIEs' intention to stay. They are also consistent with Howe-Walsh and Schyns (2010), who highlight the HRM implications of self-initiated expatriation and the lack of formal support for this category of workers. The data from this thesis therefore reinforce the idea that SIEs' career sustainability cannot be explained solely through individual characteristics. Even motivated, qualified, determined and proactive participants can find significant obstacles if the context does not allow them to access opportunities, utilize skills, build relationships or maintain personal balance.

A fifth pattern concerns the relationship between individual agency, adaptability and contextual barriers. The literature describes SIEs as autonomous, proactive and self-directed actors (Suutari & Brewster, 2000; Cerdin & Selmer, 2014). This study confirms this perspective: participants often demonstrated high levels of agency and adaptability, with the willingness to rethink their career path. A left a perceived slow and limiting environment to build an entrepreneurial career abroad; E responded to the lack of opportunities through autonomous and entrepreneurial strategies; G responded to underemployment by returning to university and investing in new qualifications; F built her career through successive mobility, risk and cumulative learning; H developed a portable and purpose-driven career in the blockchain sector; D transformed the phase of COVID disruption into a transition to entrepreneurship.

These cases are consistent with Arthur and Rousseau (1996), who interpret contemporary careers as boundaryless and with Savickas et al. (2009), according to which adaptability is crucial for building career paths in uncertain and changing contexts. Talluri et al. (2022) and Kilic and Kitapci (2024) also link proactivity, career adaptability and person-career fit to career sustainability. However, the findings of this thesis remark that agency is necessary, but not sufficient. The individual ability to adapt or to seek opportunities does not avoid barriers such as language, visas, organizational instability, lack of support, discrimination, bureaucracy or the lack of recognition of skills.

This point is particularly relevant from a theoretical perspective. The findings support the representation of SIEs as autonomous actors, but challenge an overly individualistic interpretation of self-initiated expatriation. Participants are not simply self-entrepreneurs or individuals able to overcome any obstacle thanks to their personal ability. Their sustainability emerges when agency and context find a dynamic fit over time. When the context offers opportunities, networks, flexibility and recognition, agency can lead into growth and sustainability. However, when the context blocks access, mobility or recognition, even motivated and competent individuals can experience stress, underemployment, burnout or a temporary reduction in productivity.

A sixth pattern concerns the role of family and private life as a central component of the context. The findings show that decisions to expatriate, remain, return or future mobility are never exclusively professional. They are often interconnected with partners, children, family preferences, the desire for stability, quality of life, time availability and a sense of belonging. This finding is consistent with Greenhaus and Kossek (2014), who argue that contemporary careers must be understood through a work-home perspective and with Hirschi et al. (2020), who emphasize the importance of non-work roles in building sustainable careers. Hall et al. (2012) also highlight that career success cannot be separated from personal and family well-being.

H represents one of the clearest cases: the move to Finland is primarily linked to family motivations, to his Finnish wife and their six children. While acknowledging that the Finnish market may be more limited, he describes sustainability in Finland as deeper thanks to more time, space and less family pressure than in Singapore. D shows a different trade-off: Germany appears more favourable professionally, but the choice to stay or return is influenced by the wife's family preferences and the private context. G links staying in Finland to the birth of a child, showing how a development in private life can redefine the duration and meaning of the expatriate experience. B, C and A also show that a sense of home, relationships, daily life and social integration profoundly influence how the international experience is evaluated and perceived.

These findings reinforce the idea that a sustainable career spans different social spaces, as argued by Van der Heijden and De Vos (2015). In the case of SIEs, these social spaces are not only organizations and labor markets, but also families, cities, social networks, communities and places where a sense of belonging is built. An international career becomes sustainable not only when it offers professional advancement but when it can be also

integrated with a sustainable private life. This is particularly important for SIEs, because their mobility involves not only job changes, but often the entire structure of their personal lives.

Overall, the key findings answer the two research questions by showing that self-initiated expatriation has a profound yet ambivalent impact on health, happiness and productivity and that this impact depends heavily on contextual factors. Regarding the first research question, the data indicate that independent expatriation can foster growth, satisfaction, skill development and improved quality of life, but it can also lead to stress, isolation, mismatch, underemployment or trade-offs between various indicators. Regarding the second research question, the findings show that context influences career sustainability at multiple levels: national, institutional, work-related, organizational, social, cultural, family and private.

The main conclusion is therefore that the career sustainability of SIEs does not come from international mobility as it is and not only from individual agency alone. It emerges from the interaction between personal resources, contextual conditions and the temporal development of the career. Self-initiated expatriation can become a source of sustainability when it allows individuals to transform mobility, adaptation and learning into career capital, meaningful work, employability and life balance. However, when contextual barriers such as language, visa restrictions, instability, lack of organizational support, social isolation or family ties contrast with this fit, mobility itself can temporarily threaten health, happiness or productivity. Consistent with the Sustainable Career Model, the findings therefore show that a sustainable global career is a dynamic process of continuous adaptation and realignment between the individual, context and time.

## **5.2 Theoretical Implications**

This research offers some theoretical implications for the study of sustainable careers and the international careers of SIEs. Specifically, the findings contribute to the literature by demonstrating that the career sustainability of SIEs cannot be understood only through the perspective of international mobility or individual agency, but must be interpreted as the result of a continuous interaction between the individual, context and time.

A first implication concerns the applicability of the Sustainable Career Model to the careers of SIEs. According to De Vos et al. (2020), a sustainable career emerges from the interaction between Person, Context and Time and is observable through indicators of Health, Happiness and Productivity. The findings of this research confirm the relevance of this model, demonstrating that participants' experiences cannot be explained by a single factor. The sustainability of their careers depends on how personal resources, working conditions, national contexts, social relationships, family life and temporal trajectories combine over the course of their international experience. At the same time, the study shows that, for SIEs, this interaction is particularly complex, since independent

expatriation simultaneously changes work, country of residence, social networks, legal status, language, family and professional identity.

A second implication concerns the centrality of context. The literature on SIEs often tends to emphasize autonomy, personal initiative and the individual's ability to build a career beyond national borders (Suutari & Brewster, 2000; Cerdin & Selmer, 2014). This research confirms the importance of individual agency, but also shows that it alone is not sufficient to ensure career sustainability. The findings indicate that language barriers, visa restrictions, skill recognition, market instability, lack of organizational support, work culture and family responsibilities deeply influence the ability to transform international mobility into a sustainable career. In this sense, context does not act as a simple backdrop, but as an active dimension that can enable or limit health, happiness and productivity.

A third implication concerns the relationship between agency and contextual constraints. Participants demonstrated proactivity, adaptability and the ability to reconstruct their own career paths, confirming the portrayal of SIEs as autonomous and self-directed actors. However, the findings also suggest that agency should not be overestimated. Even motivated, qualified, hard-worker and resilient individuals can experience stress, underemployment or reduced satisfaction when the context limits access to suitable roles, professional networks or skill recognition. Consequently, the career sustainability of SIEs should be interpreted not as the result of individual initiative alone, but as the product of a dynamic person-career fit between values, skills, individual aspirations and opportunities offered by the context (De Vos et al., 2020; Kilic & Kitapci, 2024).

A fourth implication concerns the interpretation of career sustainability as a nonlinear and broader process. The findings show that SIEs' careers develop through transitions, trade-offs, moments of temporary loss of fit and subsequent forms of reconstruction. This is consistent with Van der Heijden and De Vos (2015), who argue that sustainable careers traverse different social spaces over time and with Crowley-Henry (2012), who

interprets SIEs' careers as paths more similar to "rivers" than "ladders." Furthermore, the research confirms the importance of the whole-life perspective: family, partner, children, quality of life, available time and a sense of belonging directly influence the sustainability of an international career (Greenhaus & Kossek, 2014; Hirschi et al., 2020). A sustainable global career therefore does not simply coincide with professional advancement or international mobility, but with the possibility of integrating work, well-being, employability, personal values and private life in the long term.

Finally, the study contributes to bridging two lines of research: sustainable careers and SIEs. The findings confirm the validity of the Sustainable Career Model, but also show that in self-initiated international careers sustainability is particularly influenced by mobility, lack of organizational support, cultural adaptation, institutional barriers, family responsibilities and the individual's ability to rebuild fit over time. In this sense, the thesis suggests that a sustainable global career does not simply consist from moving abroad or being proactive, but from the ability to integrate agency, context and time into a path that maintains meaning, well-being, employability and personal coherence over the long term.

### **5.3 Practical Implications**

The research presents practical implications for self-initiated expatriates, the organizations that hire them and the institutional actors involved in international mobility processes. The findings show that the career sustainability of SIEs depends not only on the individual decision to move abroad, but also on the ability to assess and manage trade-offs between professional opportunities, well-being, social integration, family life and host-context constraints.

For self-initiated expatriates, the findings suggest the importance of preparing for the international experience, going beyond salary, position or immediate opportunities. A sustainable expatriation decision requires a realistic assessment of factors such as language requirements, qualification recognition, labor market stability, visa constraints,

organizational culture, social networks and compatibility with personal life. Furthermore, SIEs should invest in developing and protecting their career capital by building transferable skills, local and international networks, intercultural capabilities and resources useful for maintaining employability over time. In conclusion, it must be taken into consideration that this process takes time, effort, moment of reflection, but most important requires a willingness to overcome them and the readiness to handle the possible difficulties.

For organizations, the findings indicate that SIEs should not be considered completely independent and auto sufficient workers just because they have chosen to relocate. Even light forms of organizational support can have a significant impact on their integration and productivity. Onboarding programs, mentoring, language support, clarification of role expectations, opportunities for socialization and regular feedback can reduce stress, isolation and uncertainty, promoting better integration into the workplace. Furthermore, organizations should leverage SIEs' international skills by offering roles that allow for autonomy, learning, visible contribution and career development.

For policymakers and host country institutions, the research highlights the importance of reducing barriers that hinder SIEs' access to roles consistent with their skills. Language barriers, visa restrictions, difficulties in recognizing qualifications and unclear labor market information can lead even skilled workers to underemployment or instability. Clearer pathways for skills recognition, language support, accessible information on job requirements and career integration tools could foster better use of international human capital.

Finally, the findings suggest that the career sustainability of SIEs should be considered from a whole-life perspective, not just from a work-related perspective. Family, partner, children, quality of life, available time and sense of belonging directly influence decisions to stay, return or relocate. Therefore, supporting SIEs means creating conditions that allow them not only to work and grow professionally, but also to maintain well-being, meaning, productivity and personal stability over time.

## 5.4 Limitations of the study and suggestions for future

As any qualitative research, this study has some limitations. The first concerns the sample size, consisting of eight self-initiated expatriates. While the sample allowed for the collection of personal and diverse experiences, the results cannot be generalized to the entire SIE population. Furthermore, the participants presented diverse profiles in terms of nationality, age, profession, host countries and career stages. The heterogeneity of the study enriched the analysis but also made it more difficult to isolate the specific effect of determinate factors, such as host country, professional sector, gender or life cycle stage.

Another limitation concerns the cross-sectional nature of the study. The interviews were conducted at a single point in time and are based on the retrospective experience of the participants. Thus, the research allows us to understand how SIEs interpret the sustainability of their careers but it does not allow us to observe the evolution of health, happiness and productivity over the long term. Furthermore, some past experiences may have been reinterpreted by the participants in light of their current situation, influencing the way events and career decisions were recounted.

Regarding future research, next studies could expand the sample by including a greater number of SIEs and focusing on more homogeneous groups, for example, by host country, professional sector, gender or career stage. This would allow for a better understanding of how specific contextual factors influence career sustainability in more comparable situations. Furthermore, future research could adopt a longitudinal approach to observe how health, happiness and productivity evolve over time, especially during phases of transition, adaptation, underemployment, return to the country of origin or further international mobility.

Finally, future studies could explore some of the themes that emerged as particularly relevant in this research, including the role of family and private life, the impact of remote work on global careers, language and institutional barriers and the relationship

between individual agency and contextual constraints. It would also be useful to compare the experiences of SIEs with those of AEs or other groups of international workers, to better understand which aspects of career sustainability are specific to self-initiated expatriation and which are more generally relevant to contemporary global careers.

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## Appendices

### Appendix 1. Interview layout

#### 1. Background questions

**Demographic details:** Age, Nationality, Gender, Level of education, Family details

**Details about mobility:** Countries, years of working, direction of movement (horizontal or vertical)

The object is to explore,

- What kinds of career sustainability experiences SIEs had during their moves?
- How are these experiences impacted by the context?
- How such experiences of career sustainability influence their international career mobility? (assignment by assignment)

#### A. First expatriation (In the home context before the first move)

- Experienced level of career sustainability: 3 indicator areas
  - Were you happy, healthy and productive in your career you had in your own country?
  - What were the explanatory factors (key issues that lead to your decision to move abroad)
  - To what extent such experience in these three elements influence your decision to work abroad? - key motives for the move (may be behind of HHP)

#### B. Sustainable career abroad (1st Assignment)

- What is the level of career sustainability in this new context?
  - In what specific ways?

- Health:
  - How is your physical health?
  - Level of stress?
  - What is your overall job/career wellbeing?
- Happiness:
  - Are you satisfied with your job/career in this new context?
  - What do you think about your overall career success?
- Productivity:
  - Do you think you are performing well in your job?
  - Have you adequately completed assigned duties during this movement? (performance)
  - Do you feel that you are able to (is it easy or difficult) get new job positions inside or outside the organizations? (perceived employability).
- What were the explanatory factors (key issues that lead to your decision to move abroad)
- At what point of time/why did you start to plan a new (2nd) expatriation?
- In which areas of HHP were you looking for a better fit?

### **C. 2nd Assignment onwards**

- Repeat the same above questions for each of the assignment

### **D. Future plans**

- Interests toward new moves (a comparison with the old self)
- Any challenges or limitations as a SIE in reaching the career potential? If so, what are those?
- Future ability to be employed (employability) as a SIE?